

# 06

REGAINING GDAŃSK'S WATER SPACES  
*CULTURAL PROJECTS FOR*

# URBAN REGENERATION

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Can cultural projects be a support tool for the urban regeneration process as well as highlighting architectural heritage? The article presents a unique insight into processes of regaining the role of water through cultural projects based on the urban concept of connectivity. It reveals in what way the heritage of water can be identified, preserved and transformed into present urban conditions, in the situation when existing planning tools seem to be insufficient.

## GDAŃSK AND THE MEANING OF WATER AS HERITAGE

Gdańsk is a city whose history of urban development has been closely related to water – from the East and the South surrounded by the fens of Żuławy, located at the junction of Motława and Vistula rivers. Already in the Middle Ages the depression areas of the Vistula's Delta region started to be transformed into a polder with assistance of the settlers from Frisia, the Netherlands and Flanders.<sup>1</sup> Gradually a landscape criss-crossed by canals with a system of locks and water pumping windmills emerged. The medieval Gdańsk was an integral part of this landscape. Motława's water passed into moats dividing parts of the town; it also flowed across the town into a larger canal, where a port and shipyards were located.

At the beginning of the 17th century a monumental ring of Dutch type fortifications embraced the whole city. It consisted mainly of earth bastions, double moats and defence gates including a unique southern water gate – the Stone Sluice. As part of the same concept a network of drainage canals was built in the eastern part of the city, based on engineering solutions known from Dutch towns.<sup>2</sup>

In the 17th and 18th century the water system development in Gdańsk reached its zenith (*Fig. 1*). New drained areas emerged, re-defining the location of the old ones. The city was crossed by numerous minor canals with dozens of bridges, locks, and even a spectacular wooden aqueduct carrying the water of one river over another one. Canals were outlined like streets with narrowings, openings and sudden views to groups of monumental buildings. Gradually the harbour of Gdańsk has been moved north, to the mouth of the Vistula River.

### Notes

1. **Lipińska, B** 2007 'Vistula River delta – constructed water landscape', in Nyka, L and **Szczepański, J** (eds.) *Bridging the city. Concepts for water in urban spaces of Gdańsk*. Gdańsk: Faculty of Architecture, 17-20
2. **Bukal, G** 2006 'Fortyfikacje Gdańska 1454 – 1793', in Bukal, G(ed.) *Fortyfikacje Gdańska*. Gdańsk: Nadbańtyckie Centrum Kultury, 20-47



Fig.1



Fig.2

In the 19th century the northern part of the bastion fortifications were torn down to locate one of the most modern European shipyards there – the Imperial Shipyard.<sup>3</sup> Despite these constant reconfigurations the water was still the core of Gdańsk's urban structure and the centre of its operating programmes.

*Fig.1: Water systems: port, mill and drainage canals, moats and rivers in Gdańsk, 1640, by J. Szczepański, P. Unczur, K. Wabnik. © Jakub Szczepański*

Centuries-old processes of bringing the natural element of water into the city, steering its flow by human coordinated efforts and using it for functional and military purposes, have not only created sites with a rich history but have also defined Gdańsk's urban form (Fig.2). Similarly, as in other Hanseatic cities the main streets of Gdańsk lead towards canals and even today the memory of old shipyards has remained in the street's names, where others retain their names from the numbers of consecutive causeways.<sup>4</sup> A characteristic type of buildings with footbridges leading directly to the entrances of houses can be still seen sometimes, although in a reduced form.

*Fig.2: A view into the main water-square in Gdańsk. photo: L. Nyka. © Lucyna Nyka*

However, due to the almost total war destruction and fragmentary nature of post-war reconstruction the relation between the city and the water was disturbed. It happened so because only one part of historical Gdańsk, the Main Town, was reconstructed within its original network of streets and preserved old urban forms. Unfortunately, adjacent areas were cut off from the city centre and filled with extensive modernist developments. Separated by dual carriageways, they became degraded. The Motława canals lost their pivotal function and became city's edges, deserted and deprived of intensive life – as such they lost their power to create connections. As a consequence, many historical sites have been pushed aside and became forgotten places. Additionally, due to a major exchange of the city population, the memory of urban public spaces and their previous use became tarnished. The heritage of the city, which had been gradually growing around water, was dissolved both in a material and also in an intellectual sense: it did not continue to exist in the local resident's minds and memories.

## CULTURAL PROJECTS FOR URBAN REGENERATION

The existing situation changed due to the political and economic transformations during the 1990s as well as the withdrawal of the industry from the city centre. Growing desire to regain isolated areas started to correspond with new lifestyles: the need for a more extended cultural offer and higher expectations toward public spaces. One of the first decisions, implemented in the city's cultural policy, was to relocate several cultural institutions "to the other side of the water".

### Notes

3. Lorens, P 2001 'A brief history of development and planning efforts, in Lorens, P (ed.) *Large scale urban developments*. Gdańsk: Gdańsk University of Technology Press, 209-220
4. Szczepański, J. 2007 'Water in the development of Hanseatic towns', in Nyka, L (ed.) *Water for urban strategies*. Weimar: Verlag der Bauhaus Universität, 74-81

Thus, on Granary Island many buildings used as galleries emerged and on Olowianka Island an old power station building has been transformed into concert hall and home of the Polish Baltic Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra. In a few granary buildings, situated along the Motława canal, a branch of the Maritime Museum was established and linked with the historical old Crane by a ferry boat connecting with the other side of the river. In farther areas, branches of academic centres and art institutions have been founded.

The fact that, almost from the beginning, the regeneration processes of the post-shipyard areas were supported by activities of artists invited by a private owner of the land was quite remarkable. In the post-industrial environment, working within a so-called artists' colony, the artists themselves created a theatre and many informal studios and galleries. The Gdańsk Shipyard, with its immaterial and material heritage, as well as its present vulnerable status, became an endless source of inspiration.<sup>5</sup> (Fig.3). Artists not only referred to the industrial past of that area but also to the workers' strikes and the process of reclaiming political freedom that has

began there and finally changed the image of Central and Eastern Europe after the years of the communist regime. Post-shipyard areas gradually became a legend which was however difficult to experience, as they remained inaccessible for the visitors.

*Fig.3: Mural on the shipyard's fence by Iwona Zajac, photo: L. Nyka.  
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What kind of impact did these first cultural interventions have and what did they change? Firstly, the most valuable buildings of the 19th century Imperial Shipyard are listed monuments. However numerous traces of the past are omitted from the official documents – as such they are prone to vanish. These are slopes and other land-water constructions, patterns of crane railways found in the pavement, or cranes themselves which have been a part of the Gdańsk panorama for many years. The artists revealed this heritage, explored it, and made it visible through creative art, re-branding the image of the abandoned shipyard. Still today they are involved in saving parts of the post-industrial structures. It should be stressed though, that artists' ideas

appeared to be too dispersed to create a real political power that could actually influence urban transformation processes of these areas. Finally, refusing to create any kind of joint, established organisation that could be a “growing seed” for the “cultural hub” in a future as happened in the NDSM shipyard in Amsterdam or Creative Factory in Rotterdam, they had to simply leave the area.

On the other hand, the cultural institutions “on the other side of the water” which were to play the role of urban attractors appeared to be too hermetic, both in spatial and social terms. As a result, they were not able to encourage the flow of the pedestrian traffic towards the area and only to a small degree could break the isolation and improve connectivity of disjointed public spaces. However, their impact, supported by a favourable economic climate, helped to carry out new investments into Gdańsk's post-industrial quarters, especially those located by the water. Very soon it appeared that, dominated by economic targets, they filled the void, but often interfered with the city's history.



Fig.3

### Notes

5. **Sebastyański, R** 2010 'Artistic colonization of Gdańsk's shipyards' in, in Nyka, L and Szczepanski, J (eds.) *Culture for revitalisation – revitalisation for culture*. Gdańsk: Laznia Centre For Contemporary Art (to be published)

After all, it became clear that new developments should be confronted with the need to preserve heritage and be more subordinate to the broader vision of the city. Unfortunately, shortcomings of the official planning system created by planning authorities – submissive to investors, too concentrated on isolated areas and neglectful of the role of water in favour of land values – were dramatically revealed. A two-metre strip of public access to the canal required by a planning law does not suffice for recalling continuities identifying the city or transforming sites of robust history into a part of urban experience. The outcome of this situation was that often forgotten and undisclosed areas started to disappear, giving place to new developments. This situation initiated discussions that gave rise to the idea of reinforcing water-based connections of public spaces by means of temporary cultural projects – *passages through the city*.

### STROLLING, WALKING, FLOATING...

The idea of walking through the city as having a key role in understanding, experiencing and portraying it is not new. From the first 19th century “*flaneurie*” to other explorations of the practices of motion of Gordon Cullen, Edmund Bacon, Michael de Certeau and many others looking at the city from the perspective of different disciplines, it is still an important way of interpreting urban spaces. Allowing for incorporation of the role of direct experience it has always emphasized the value of sensorial qualities of the urban environment, giving insight into the most ineffable manifestations of social life, peculiar atmospheres and memories. Following this tradition, the Gdańsk walks were equally aimed at reclaiming water-related connectedness of public spaces, integrating urban geography, and reaching for dispersed places that contribute to Gdańsk’s identity. Thus, since 2004 several projects, such as *Lessons of Gothic, Fortifications and Dutch builders of Gdańsk*, have been implemented.<sup>6</sup>

In each case a starting point was to set a path of circulation which would offer an interesting and so far unknown perspective on reading and experiencing the city. In particularly important areas, where connections of public spaces were poorly defined, a role of temporary established attractors was played by art and media installations, exhibitions, open concerts and lectures – very often developed in cooperation with local residents and institutions to affirm authenticity and a long term sustainability of their effects.

Up to the present day, several thousand people have participated in these events. Printed maps with indicated walking tours, pedestrian path & routes as well as guidebooks allow for a different perception of Gdańsk, giving both awareness and sensibility to the great, unique narrations forming its past. The routes are leading through the old river shipyard on Motława, the complex of the unique water gate to the city (Fig.4), through the polder area transected by canals and once drained by windmills. They reveal walled-in entries to houses straight from the canals, that still illustrate the ways of living in the historic city, traces of drawbridges or faded away riverside boulevards once

joining river markets. Discovering the archaeology of water in the remnants of the old canals, finding the logic of autonomies and convergences of different water systems forming Gdańsk’s peculiar topography, their role in urban growth – all this disclosed a better identified and more interesting city.

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*Fig.4: Bastion Zubr with the Stone Sluice entrance, photo: L. Nyka. © Lucyna Nyka*

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In these artistic journeys, understanding the role of water-related places and histories went far beyond daily rationalism, referring as well to the collective memory and emotions. An important role in this process was played by art. One of the most powerful artistic projects was *Odys-SEAS*, implemented within the SEAS programme, co-ordinated by Intercult Stockholm and the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre in Gdańsk.

### Notes

- Projects’ author and curator: **Bronisława Dejna** – Baltic Sea Culture Centre in Gdańsk. Cooperation: L. Nyka, J. Szczepański, G. Bukal, S. Flis



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6

Participants of the Odys-SEAS started their travel on a boat that took them from a city centre boulevard to the post-shipyard areas. In the scenery of dilapidated interiors of the production halls and the narrow streets of the 19th century Imperial Shipyard the participants were continuing their movement through urban spaces, reconstructing Odysseus' journey. References to history and to destiny, to travelling across mythical places – both Ithaca and shipyard – were created by experimental choreography, performances and soundscapes (Fig.5).

*Fig.5: Odys-Seas performance by R. Rumas and L. Bzdyl, photo: L. Nyka. © Lucyna Nyka*

*Fig.6: The floating gallery route. © Lucyna Nyka*

The passages – cultural walks through the city – brought into common perception not only so far invisible places, but also introduced a new logic of connections into urban visions and strategies. Today, both residents and city planners are involved in a discussion on the quality of future transformations. In the meantime, a new question arose – whether temporary projects attracting people towards water can be supported by something more tangible and revealing other more distant sites and contexts. As a result, the idea of a *floating gallery* emerged.

The floating gallery is going to serve educational and cultural purposes. It will move along Gdańsk's canals, moats of bastion fortifications and further along the Dead Vistula River to the unique Wisloujście Fortress and Westerplatte peninsula (Fig.6). It is planned to be a venue for workshops, concerts, exhibitions and open-air performances (Fig.7 & 8). By stimulating Gdańsk's waterway public spaces, it will re-connect distant districts, breaking their spatial, social and cultural isolation. Another aim of the floating gallery will be to link Gdańsk with the landscape of the Vistula Delta.

Seeing Gdańsk in the broader context of the polder region cut by canals, old Mennonite churches and cemeteries as well as a rich technical infrastructure of locks, culverts, draining windmills and causeways will give the capacity to discern the true nature of the city which has always been a part of this landscape.<sup>7</sup> The floating gallery, using other waterways, could reach the city of Elbląg, historically one of the biggest Hanseatic ports in the southern Baltic, to float to the Vistula Lagoon and Żuławy Loop and even visit Antwerp, Berlin or Kaliningrad, which are linked with Gdańsk by inland waterways currently being restored.

Christopher Tilley in *A phenomenology of landscape. Places, paths and monuments*, a book which has been influential for many disciplines, argues that only through the narrative experience of landscape is it possible to achieve comprehension of a place in a wider sense.<sup>8</sup> It is the dynamically approached Gdańsk viewed from the canals leading to the city, from the line of bastion fortifications where monumental earth masses emerge from the polder; that make one aware that the form of the city was never just given, it was negotiated in the landscape and it is inexplicable without it. On the other hand, this creative linkage will also enrich the city's peripheries.

**Fig.7:** The floating gallery study project by K. Bedra, supervised by L. Nyka.  
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**Fig.8:** The floating gallery study project by E. Morawska, supervised by L. Nyka.  
© Gdansk University of Technology

Projects that aimed at re-establishing urban connections and highlighting historical and heritage sites in fact have brought considerably more.

### Notes

7. Nyka, L 2010 'Re-thinking the city in the context of suburban landscapes. The case of Vistula River delta water-landscapes and urban transformation processes in Gdańsk'. *Geoscape* 5, January 2010 (to be published)
8. Tilley, C A 1994 *Phenomenology of Landscape. Places, paths and monuments*, Berg, Oxford, p 219



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10

Indeed, they revealed much broadly understood heritage taking part in the ongoing discussion on the authenticity of the rebuilt city.<sup>9</sup> They made one aware that this authenticity manifests itself not only in the preserved built structures but also in the remnants of stairs descending to the water and in the continuously renewed engineering constructions that steer the water flow at the entrance to the city. It can also be seen in the outlines of canals that are still directing axially towards spectacular groups of historical edifices. This kind of heritage does not materialize in the forms of buildings, but it shows a way of understanding and experiencing the city by whole generations – it unveils continuity understood in an early-modern sense, evoking Alois Riegl's theories introduced one century ago.

### Notes

- In 1998 Gdańsk was negatively evaluated (lack of the authenticity of the built structures) as a site proposed for inclusion in the UNESCO list of World Heritage. This initiated discussion of the authenticity of the rebuilt city; opinions of ICOMOS professional advisors, art historians, architects are included in: Cieltkowska, R. (ed.) 2001 *The identity of the rebuilt city. Authenticity-integrity-continuation*. Gdańsk: Gdańsk University of Technology Faculty of Architecture



## FROM CULTURAL PROJECTS TO URBAN REGENERATION STRATEGIES

A remarkable fact is that, at some point, transitory cultural projects started to exert an impact on official strategies of urban transformations. Traces of water archaeology revealed in the *Dutch builders of Gdańsk* project were an impulse for delineating sites where the memory of old canals could be restored in the Spatial Development Plan for the district of Dolne Miasto. Water will be regained there either in the literal or the metaphorical way, through artistic projects that are to be developed within the framework of the Outdoor Gallery programme – the Laznia Centre For Contemporary Art initiative. Public walkways of the West Entrenchment Park in the revitalised district of New Port are to lead towards water and the floating gallery stopping place; as such they will also link this district together with the Wisloujście Fortress located on the other side of the river. The floating gallery integrating disconnected areas is a part of a *Freedom of Culture, Culture of Freedom* strategy of Gdańsk as the European capital of culture 2016 candidate city programme.

Such positive feedback would not happen without several factors. Most important is the fact that the projects were developed by interdisciplinary teams and despite their cultural character were based on urban strategies of connections and aimed at restoring Gdańsk's heritage and identity. Secondly, at some point so called "hard" official institutions became receptive to the values of "soft" projects, which seems to be of strategic value for culture-led regeneration processes. This interdisciplinary and trans-institutional approach is being tested now in the framework of the *Sensing the City – Designing Urban Experience* international project focused on retrieving Gdańsk's urban characteristics amidst transformation processes (Fig.9 & 10). It should be noted that the cooperation between urban and cultural projects is facilitated nowadays by changes in architectural and urban concepts that could be depicted as evolution from structures to landscapes. An urban landscape became a powerful notion presenting a city as an experiential environment, where social processes, environmental systems, economies, various material and immaterial elements – natural and constructed, modern and referring to the

past – cannot be separated. Arts projects – the exciting means of revealing and enhancing this heterogeneous reality and steering the movement of people through streets – are at the same time urban planning projects.

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*Fig.9 & 10: Gdańsk Shipyard's post-industrial landscapes – retrieving Gdańsk's identity amidst transformation processes. Images developed in frames of Sensing the city – designing urban experience Erasmus IP project. Gdańsk 2009. © Gdansk University of Technology*

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## CONCLUSIONS

Gdańsk's experiences prove that cultural projects may effectively support urban regeneration strategies. Indeed, they gave an initial impulse for ongoing processes of restoring the water-based connectivity of public spaces and made the linkages with the surrounding landscape evident. Equally important is their role in changing the perception of the city, revealing the messages imprinted in the remnants of built forms and conveyed by multilayered archaeologies of water. It should be stated though, that the potential of cultural projects will remain unfulfilled without working out effective methodologies of integrating them with sustainable urban development policies. Accordingly, along with studying the characteristics of projects themselves, the procedures enabling such integration need to be developed, based on mutual understanding and acceptance of new values emerging on the permeable borders between traditional disciplines and professions.

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