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OLD TOWN IN ELBLĄG – REBUILT, GENUINE, MISUNDERSTOOD

STARE MIASTO W ELBLĄGU – ODBUDOWANE, PRAWDZIWE, NIEZROZUMIANE

Abstract

This paper aims to reflect on the dilemma of authentic heritage conservation intervention focused on the architecture of Elbląg's Old Town. An ideological intervention on an area razed to the ground, which eventually created *this-place*. It also aims to manage *common* criticism of the effects of this idea and convey to a wider audience that the consistent rebuilding of the Old Town in Elbląg has been theoretically established for almost four decades, although the theory keeps evolving, adapting to contemporary reality decade after decade. The rebuilding programme has been implemented on the basis of the local law of 1997, and the very fact of its existence is an asset and an interesting phenomenon. The Old Town of Elbląg – not the same but new – is genuine. This is evidenced by the recorded and overheard views of the restoration's authors and their analysis in the context of local laws, building permits and photo documentation.

Keywords: Old Town, retroversion, identity, memory of the place, original

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest refleksja nad dylematem autentyzmu interwencji konserwatorskiej w architekturę elbląskiej starówki. Interwencji ideowej na zrównanym z ziemią obszarze, która stworzyła *to-miejsce*. Opanowanie *powszechnej* krytyki efektów tej idei oraz przekazanie szerszemu odbiorcy, że konsekwentna odbudowa Starego Miasta w Elblągu od prawie czterech dekad jest ugruntowana teoretycznie, choć teoria ta ewoluje, z każdą dekadą dostosowując się do współczesności. Odbudowa dokonywana jest na podstawie prawa miejscowego z 1997 r., i sam jej fakt to atut i fenomen. Stare Miasto w Elblągu – choć nie to samo, a nowe – jest prawdziwe. Dowodzą tego zapisane i zasłyszane poglądy twórców odbudowy oraz ich analiza w kontekście prawa miejscowego, pozwoleń na budowę i dokumentacji fotograficznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Stare Miasto, retrowersja, tożsamość, pamięć miejsca, autentyk.

1. INTRODUCTION

A miracle happened in Elbląg – one that is materialized but still has not been sufficiently popularized, promoted or documented.¹ This miracle is the new Old Town.

¹ Statement by Barbara J. Bańkowska, PhD Arch., during the 1st Retroversion Night held on 28 November 2018 in Elbląg at Galeria EL to mark the 35th anniversary of rebuilding the Old Town of Elbląg, organized by the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture (Elbląg City Hall) and Galeria EL Art Centre.

Almost forty years ago, an innovative and unprecedented process of Elbląg's Old Town restoration began, and its underlying idea fascinates many people around the world.

Despite the difficult political climate that prevailed at the turn of the 1970s and 80s in Poland, namely strikes, crisis at the heights of power, martial law – which led to changes both in the state economy and private enterprises – Elbląg experienced full mobilization and determination of open-minded people. Their desire was to rebuild the Old Town destroyed by World War II (Ill. 1).

Today, many people find Elbląg's nearly rebuilt Old Town inspiring. That feeling is strengthened by the knowledge of the context of restoration, the awareness of importance of archaeological studies, the understanding of urban concepts for that area, as well as the memory of efforts of numerous people involved in the undertaking.

The fact that the Old Town is a fundamental area for the development of Elbląg – for shaping its identity and landscape – is evidenced not only by planning documents but also by surveys conducted in 2011,² which clearly indicated that the Old Town is one of the most popular areas in the city.³ As studies have shown, Elbląg's residents are interested in the city's history which is an important factor positively influencing the shaping of urban memory. In Elbląg's residents' collective memory scheme, the war period is particularly important, especially the fact that the city became part of Poland after 1945.⁴ Hence the longing for an unknown Elbląg, the search for a source of attachment to one's place of residence and the need to recover the past image of the Old Town. It is a longing for an unknown *paradise lost*, nostalgia, lack of acceptance for a reality in which it is difficult to find oneself.

Breaking the bond between people and their place – treated as a basic existential relation, the essence of being human in the world – gives rise to increased anxiety and attempts to restore the *normal* state.⁵

Creating the feeling that the encountered reality is normal and genuine is extremely difficult in a city where the population has a migrant background and has no memories of the place, no roots, no previous generations to miss. A chance to build *truth in the place* and *normal* reality can be found in strengthening faith in the *myth of reconstruction*⁶ or rather, as in Elbląg, in the myth of rebuilding using the method of retroversion by promoting knowledge about the background of the Old Town restoration methodology. The architectural form of buildings is a derivative of the rebuilding process rather than the starting point. The authenticity of the place is not determined only by the material substance, but also by the prevailing climate, fuelled by the awareness of its multi-faceted pages of history. In a given space, it is possible to create a unique mood, atmosphere and character to give the impression

² *Badanie ankietowe na temat wartościowania przez mieszkańców przestrzeni swojego miasta*, Elbląg 2011, <http://www.planowanie.umelblag.pl/?q=ankieta> (access: 29.05.2020).

³ A. Foland, K. Wiśniewska, *Mapy psychologiczne Elbląga* [*Psychological Maps of Elbląg*], Elbląg 2011, p. 88.

⁴ M. Lewicka, K. Wiśniewska, *Pamięć miejsca i relacje z miejscem zamieszkania wśród mieszkańców Elbląga* [*Memory of the place and relations with the place of residence among Elbląg's residents*], Elbląg 2011, p. 3, <http://www.planowanie.umelblag.pl/files/color/raport1.pdf> (access: 29.05.2020).

⁵ M. Lewicka, *Psychologia miejsca* [*Psychology of the place*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2012, p. 22.

⁶ Phrase used in: Ł. Bugalski, *Kwestia odbudowy zabytkowych zespołów staromiejskich na Ziemiach Odzyskanych* [*Reconstruction of historic old town complexes on recovered territories*], *Przegląd Zachodni*, 2014, no. 3, p. 234.

of *continuity of the place*,⁷ a substitute for the values of a historical city, which – being fixed, shaping individual and collective memory – effectively build the identity of the place that is so difficult to grasp in the case of Elbląg's inhabitants.⁸ Besides, not all concepts related to architectonic forms – which have been introduced quite freely – have been accepted or understood. However, what is positive about the designs of local townhouses is that they bear visible traces of the architectural period in which they were created. The rebuilding process has been stretched over time and designers have developed or otherwise followed various contemporary trends. Investors are to a greater or lesser extent aware of the importance of aesthetics and art in public spaces. Yet, the entire rebuilding process is legible – not distorting reality, not causing confusion as to the period when a given urban block was created. The truth experienced while staying in that place evokes pride – in the case of Elbląg – that the rebuilding process has actually taken place. Similarly to Professor Wiesław Anders, I believe that this way is better than none⁹ (Ill. 10 and 12).

2. HERITAGE CONSERVATION EXCEPTION

“In order to finally remove the still existing traces of war damage in cities and their districts, to remove ruins and debris,”¹⁰ the Old Town was cleared of rubble in the 1960s and left aside on the margins of Elbląg, while other districts came back to life after World War II. This way, secondary destruction was effected, supported by the belief that there was no real prospect of reconstruction according to the principles of the *Polish school of heritage conservation*,¹¹ which was mainly due to priority being given to rebuilding Warsaw, Poznań, Gdańsk, Wrocław and Szczecin (Ill. 2).

In 1946, Jan Zachwatowicz, the general heritage conservation officer, argued that the sense of responsibility towards future generations demands the reconstruction of what has been destroyed; reconstruction despite a conscious tragedy of conservation falsehood, and the matter of historical monuments is a fundamental social issue, related to the nation's culture, to which we cannot apply unilaterally abstract theory, but must account for the needs of the present day.¹²

The expression *Polish school of heritage conservation* sounded pejorative due to the departure from generally accepted conservation principles, but “the understanding of the motives for action found its final understanding, as no conservation charter could foresee the enormity of the destruction of cultural heritage – and especially architectural heritage – that can be caused by war in large areas, and consequently create the need to take all possible measures to save and rebuild historical monuments in order to avoid their total destruction,

⁷ M. Lewicka, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 405.

⁹ Interview with Prof. Anders on 4.03.2020, attended by: Katarzyna Wiśniewska, Adriana Ronżewska-Kotyńska, Władysław Gliniecki.

¹⁰ Resolution No. 666 of the Government Presidium of 20.08.1955 on the planned action to remove the remains of war damage in cities and housing estates.

¹¹ Ł. Bugalski, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹² J. Zachwatowicz, *O polskiej szkole odbudowy i konserwacji zabytków [On Polish school of restoration and heritage conservation]*, Ochrona Zabytków, 1981, no. 34, p. 8.

even in contradiction to the standards applied in peacetime.”¹³ According to Zachwatowicz, the Polish school of heritage conservation is not a doctrine but an exception, because the guiding idea of heritage conservation activity is to preserve and properly maintain the monuments of national culture and to link them with the life of contemporary generations.¹⁴

3. THE IDEA BEHIND REBUILDING ELBLĄG

The idea of rebuilding the Old Town in Elbląg in its former historical architectural substance was born among Elbląg's authorities as early as in 1946, when reconstruction of several dozen townhouses was still possible but never materialized due to lack of funds.¹⁵ The notion of the *Polish school of heritage conservation* was abandoned after 1956, when the end of socialist realism in Poland was announced by the National Architects' Meeting and when functionalism was given priority in architecture. In line with that fashionable trend, attempting to wipe out the past and disguise reality, it was believed that the only solution for rebuilding was to develop a Polish concept of Elbląg – completely different from the previous ones. The idea was to establish the city from scratch, with *new roots*, without returning to the past.¹⁶

In 1958, a team of the Department of Urban Planning of the Gdańsk University of Technology – headed by Professor Władysław Czerny, composed of Jerzy Piaseczny, Szczepan Baum, Wiesław Anders – carried out a development project for Elbląg's Old Town. Young architects were fascinated by the fact that it was possible to design in reference to the early medieval layout of the city dating back to the 13th century, which existed for so many centuries but later was destroyed and eventually grass covered the rubble. At that time, there was no plan to build on the old foundations, because there had been no archaeological surveys – those did not take place until the 1980s. Before that, young designers only had a town plan drawn by Włodzimierz Sierzputowski, Elbląg's heritage conservation officer (Ill. 3).

Modernist Szczepan Baum argued that “there can be neither compromise nor intermediate phases between a strictly historical reconstruction and contemporary space shaping,”¹⁷ which is reflected in the 1958 Elbląg design, compared with the explicitly criticized Malbork restoration project (Ill. 4).

The then fashionable forms of block of flats, pavilions and tower blocks – not closely related to the historical layout or outlines of landmarks remaining after the war – survived in concept designs until the 1970s, as more and more residential buildings were erected in the outer downtown. What became apparent in the emerging new city was the lack of the actual city centre – this problem was attributed to the large undeveloped area of the Old Town in the central part of Elbląg.

1974 saw an initiative of a number of people familiar with the subject of Elbląg's Old Town who felt the need to uncover the remains of the early medieval urban settlement hidden underground. At that point, a dispute between Elbląg's authorities and heritage conservation

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁵ R. Tomczyk, *Bedeker elbląski [Elbląg Guide]*, Polnord Wydawnictwo Oskar, Elbląg 2000, p. 149.

¹⁶ K. Wiśniewska, *Elbląg od strony rzeki mógłby wyglądać zupełnie inaczej – studium przypadku [Viewed from the river, Elbląg could look completely different – case study]*, Studia KPZK, 2018, vol. 188, p. 339.

¹⁷ Baum, *Rebuilding of the Historical Complex in Malbork*, 1961, in: Ł. Bugalski, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

officers emerged over the shape of the city centre, involving the construction of an eleven-storey skyscraper and a commercial pavilion in the Old Town as features of the modern centre, which gave rise to work on reviewing urban concepts in the spirit of historical and contemporary values of the Old Town district of Elbląg,¹⁸ with a view to extracting *the truth in place*. Elbląg was lucky that modernist projects rejecting links with the historical plan of the city were never implemented, because the lack of reference to the past could have resulted in a complete loss of memory.

4. AUTHENTIC FOUNDATIONS OF RETROVERSION

Fortunately, Elbląg saw a return – retroversion – to the old image of the city. However, it was not understood as faithful reconstruction but something more creative, like real art. It is a return to the *spirit*, not the *letter* of the original.¹⁹

The first assumption of the conservation-based rebuilding programme referred to as *retroversion*, by Maria Lubocka-Hoffmann, was to protect authentic values. These included the 13th-century city plan with the layout of streets and parcels found underground along with uncovered 14th- and 15th-century walls. Excavation of the city plan and construction of new buildings on the old foundations were the first and basic element of the rebuilding concept. Another value seen as authentic was a group of preserved examples of monumental historical architecture, i.e. the parish church, Market Gate, fragments of the former Dominican monastery complex and Holy Spirit Hospital, as well as several old townhouses²⁰ (Ill. 5).

Elbląg's retroversion was distinguished by four characteristics, which – importantly – had not been present anywhere else.²¹ Firstly: interdisciplinary archaeological research as a starting point for formulating heritage conservation guidelines. Secondly: the principle of faithful reconstruction of the historical plan of the city while abandoning the reconstruction of historical buildings. Thirdly: the principle of building new townhouses on medieval foundations, where possible in terms of engineering. Fourthly: designing new houses in historical shapes and dimensions but with contemporary facades.

Thus, through properly designed dimensions, retroversion recreated the historical scale and silhouette of the city, which was expected to shape a new landscape of the lost city and create the values identified with the image and atmosphere of old-town complexes²² (Ill. 9).

5. PRELIMINARY STUDIES FOR REBUILDING

Several years before archaeologist Tadeusz Nawroński began his studies and before the conservation-based retroversion methodology was formalised, in 1974–75 teams of specialists supervised by Wiesław Anders developed a *Study of the programme and guidelines for the*

¹⁸ K. Wiśniewska, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

¹⁹ M. Lubocka-Hoffmann, *Elbląg. Stare miasto [Elbląg Old Town]*, Państwowa Służba Ochrony Zabytków – Excalibur, Elbląg, p. 29.

²⁰ M. Lubocka-Hoffmann, *Retrowersja Starego Miasta w Elblągu [Retroversion of the Old Town in Elbląg]*, Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture, Elbląg City Hall, Elbląg 2010, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

*spatial development of Old Town as an element of Elbląg's downtown.*²³ It was the outcome of works conducted by the Coast Branch of the Union of Polish Architects (SARP), commissioned by the Department of Culture of the Voivodship Office in Gdańsk, which was represented by Mirosław Zeidler, the initiator of the project. The programme and guidelines included in the Study were meant to be used to develop a concept of the detailed plan and the principles of shaping the buildings in the Old Town of Elbląg.²⁴ They served as a starting point for the rebuilding process, and nowadays they constitute its important element, because the projects executed in the recent years – hidden under the label of *retroversion* – are closer to the principles articulated in the Study. The magical power of the market and the evolving interpretation of local laws led to successive elimination of key elements of retroversion, meeting the following initial conditions formulated in the Study, at first sight identical to those set out in retroversion: 1) recreating Old Town's historical urban plan by maintaining the former development lines and main spatial divisions, 2) maintaining the character of buildings by limiting their height and maintaining rhythm in facade lines, 3) reconstructing selected townhouses characterised by high aesthetic and cultural values (where historical data and iconographic materials were available), 4) making the historic stoop lines visible in the area, 5) conducting archaeological research in the locations indicated in the plan (Ill. 9).

As a result of the preliminary studies undertaken, the *Elbląg Old Town development plan* was developed in 1976–1978 by W. Anders, S. Baum and R. Semka, which assumed the construction of five-storey blocks of flats forming street frontages on a street grid. The project contained, among others, original proposals for shaping building lines (Ill. 7 and 8).

Although in 1978 Elbląg's City Council recognized it as the *Detailed Local Plan of Spatial Development of the Old Town Complex of Elbląg*,²⁵ the rebuilding was not undertaken, and objections to the project, indicating differences between the assumptions of the Study and the conservation guidelines (only later called retroversion) were raised in 1979 by the voivodship heritage conservation officer, namely Maria Lubocka-Hoffmann – the author of retroversion. They concerned the question of the *truth* of the old town space, the relationship between old and new architecture, and the location of numerous parking spaces in the Old Town. It was a protest against the arbitrariness of design not preceded by thorough archaeological research.²⁶ The issues being questioned turned out to be the main elements currently reappearing in newly-executed projects (Ill. 11 and 12).

²³ Study prepared by the following participants of the Seminar: Chair of the Seminar: W. Anders; Taskforce for General Concept of Spatial Development: W. Anders (heading), S. Baum, L. Dziurdziński, R. Semka; Programme assumptions: T. Woronowicz; Taskforce for architectural history and heritage protection: J. Ciemnołowski, T. Piaskowski, J. Stankiewicz, M. Zeidler; Representatives of Elbląg authorities in the field of spatial management and urban planning: A. Barszczyńska, J. Bocheński, J. Niedziółko; Public transport: J. Góra; Urban engineering systems: J. Adamus; Secretary of the Seminar: M. Czernichowska.

²⁴ W. Anders (ed.), *Studium programu i założeń zagospodarowania przestrzennego Starego Miasta jako elementu śródmieścia Elbląga* [Study of the programme and guidelines for the spatial development of the Old Town as an element of Elbląg's downtown], Związek Architektów Polskich Oddział Gdańsk-Wybrzeże 3, Gdańsk 1975, p. 4.

²⁵ W. Anders, *Przywracanie ładu przestrzennego zabytkowego miasta na przykładzie miasta w Elblągu* [Restoring spatial order of a historic city on the example of the city of Elbląg], *Architektura*, 1996, no. 30, p. 91.

²⁶ R. Tomczyk, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

The 1980 *retroversion* guidelines added to the rebuilding assumptions formulated five years earlier in the Study, in terms of heritage conservation. This proves that various stakeholders involved in the rebuilding process headed in the same direction, namely to pass on the lost history to the generations in the most appropriate manner.

Admittedly, the Old Town area was successfully protected against the addition of buildings and developments blurring its historical layout; a need was established for reviving the cultural continuity of the Old Town through rebuilding based on the historical medieval plan and *in situ* reconstruction of a limited number of townhouses, and building developments were initiated using new architectural forms, undertaking a risky dialogue with historical forms but still referring to them in terms of scale and compositional principles.²⁷

6. THIS-PLACE

The myth of restoration – i.e. the shared memory of the effort of post-war rebuilding in its initial period as well as the effort undertaken by residents, heritage conservation officers, architects, designers and other involved individuals – already created a new identity,²⁸ a new memory of the place. The retroversion and the next stage of restoration observed today under the name of retroversion is not only about architecture, care for the authenticity of the matter, namely the preservation of the historical building substance but above all it means care about the authenticity of the urban landscape structure.²⁹ “It is worth noting that the value of authenticity in historical buildings is obvious, just as the dangers associated with the reconstruction of non-existent buildings are undeniable, but still emotional motives for restoration or reconstruction should be taken into account, instead of being guided only by concern for authenticity.”³⁰ “Old towns, including those rebuilt, should be recognized as complexes with authentic cultural values,”³¹ because such actions make it possible to maintain relations with the lost material heritage, since “a completely destroyed city is only seemingly unable to relate to the relics of its former structure,”³² as the Elbląg’s restoration process proves.

Elbląg has a new urban DNA,³³ unique and unrepeatable, which protected it from the annihilation of places, as is noticeable across the globe.³⁴ In *this-place*,³⁵ one cannot complain about the lack of adaptation to local specificity and superficiality of experiences it generates. The Old Town in Elbląg is *this-place*.

So, is there a need for a new programme of rebuilding Elbląg,³⁶ a redefined theory that has been an act of local law consumed for decades now? Although in each case the established local law is reinterpreted, it seems that the only right concept is to consistently finish the initiated

²⁷ Minutes of the conference entitled *Restoration of the Old Town in Elbląg – restoring spatial order while accounting for family-oriented development structure*, Elbląg 14.10.1994.

²⁸ Ł. Bugalski, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

²⁹ W. Ostrowski, *Historical complexes and urban planning*, in: Ł. Bugalski, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Zarębska, *Questions of cultural authenticity of a rebuilt city*, in: Ł. Bugalski, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

³² W. Ostrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

³³ M. Lewicka, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Cf. *no-place* used in: *ibidem*, p. 61.

³⁶ Ł. Bugalski, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

rebuilding process in the current formula, or to name its phases to order the chronology of thoughts and events. Nevertheless, the goal of restoring the city's old town climate with hundreds of townhouses of similar dimensions is gradually being achieved. From the bird's eye view, the Old Town resembles other old town complexes. Also from a pedestrian's perspective, the scale and proportions of buildings, architectural climate, communication solutions, street stone surfaces, traditional building materials, stoops – all that gives an impression of historicity of a rebuilt city.³⁷ This is what makes it truly authentic (Ill. 13 and 14).



- Ill. 1. Elbląg, Old Town, 1922. Source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture, Elbląg City Hall
- Ill. 2. Demolished Old Town in Elbląg. Source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture, Elbląg City Hall

³⁷ M. Lubocka-Hoffmann, *Retrowersja Starego Miasta w Elblągu*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.



- III. 3. City plan – 14th and 15th century. Source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture, Elbląg City Hall
- III. 4. Mock-up based on a conceptual sketch of a detailed plan of Elbląg's Old Town. Authors: W. Anders, S. Baum, J. Pasieczny, supervised by W. Czerny, 1958. Reproduction: K. Krzėpek, 1996. Source: Lubocka-Hoffmann 1998: 354
- III. 5. View of the archaeological site, 1986. Source: Lubocka-Hoffmann 1998: 362
- III. 6. Orthophotomap of the Old Town in Elbląg: <http://portalmapowy.elblag.eu/> (accessed on 10.10.2019)
- III. 7. Old Town development design, Sigismund Augustus Boulevard. Authors: W. Anders, S. Baum, R. Semka, 1978. Source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture, Elbląg City Hall



- III. 8. Fragment of Elbląg's Old Town development design – basic board and architectural solutions. Authors: W. Anders, S. Baum, R. Semka, Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk 1978. Source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture, Elbląg City Hall
- III. 9. Commemorative postcard issued by the Elbląg City Hall for the 1st Retroversion Night, held on 28.11.2018. Graphic design: A. Ronżewska-Kotyńska



- III. 10. Contemporary townhouses in Elbląg's Old Town. Photo: K. Wiśniewska 08.06.2020
- III. 11. Cafe Central: <https://www.portel.pl/dawny-elblag/dawno-temu-w-elblagu-krawiec-ranil-tokarza/63044> (accessed on: 09.06.2020)
- III. 12. Contemporary townhouse located on the former Cafe Central plot: <https://www.margopb.pl/kamienica-staromiejska/> (accessed on 09.06.2020)
- III. 13. Photo: Krzysztof Wysocki (Khorner) 24.04.2020
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