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*Transformations of urban and architectural space  
of the market square in Leszno  
at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries*

*Introduction*

If we agree with the assumption that an architect and urban planner are the professions which enjoy public trust, then we cannot in our work resort to cultural patterns, social needs or ecological conditions. If, however, we egoistically assume that the most important thing is

individual artistic experience of the author, realizing their unrestrained vision of architecture or urban development, and its future users do not participate at all in this process, then we only build a monument of the author which is useless for local community.

There are a lot of examples of such egoistic activities in architecture and urban development. For instance the design of Brazylia in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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Fig. 1. View of Town Hall  
in Leszno located  
on the Market Square

which is admired by architects and rejected by the community and has been challenged by demographic problems or development of a Le Corbusier unit where few people want to live.

Assuming that at present in architecture and urban development we operate in a transition period from industrial to information civilization, then the subject of transforming market square spaces is especially interesting from the point of view of urban changes which have been taking place over the last twenty years in our country.

In this context the opinion voiced by Krzysztof Domaradzki [2] is especially pertinent; he defined the problem like that: *The rebellion against scenic axes, traditional squares and developments cannot mean that designing cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should contemptuously reject the whole classical art of space development. Knowledge should not be replaced with ignorance, and the skills developed over the centuries should not be replaced with their lack. Conservatism in space development of the city, (...) usually means proven solutions which have been verified by history as well as*

*by users who feel good in them and which they simply like.*

The post-war activities in Polish architecture and urban development seem to be searching for a new direction which would lead out of that dead-end street created at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by CIAM's modernism. They include efforts at restoring the significance of space with clearly defined boundaries. This does not exclude in any way the search for new means of expression in architecture and urban development. This includes the search for a new expression of public spaces which change in accelerated motion the needs of Polish cities. This search could be exemplified by the plan of modernization activities in the area of the old town market square in Leszno<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Koncepcja urbanistyczno-architektoniczna dla terenu rynku w Lesznie* – development plan commissioned in 2009 by the City Office in Leszno from a team of designers: Wrocław University of Technology, Professor Robert Masztalski, D. Eng., Arch., Ewa Masztalska, M. Eng., Arch., Paweł Pach, M. Eng., Iwona Olanin, M. Eng. and Łukasz Truchalski, M. Eng., Arch. [4].

### ***History of the market square in Leszno***

Leszno was designed in the middle of the 16th century on a plan of a slightly irregular grid with two streets going off each of the corners<sup>2</sup>. Its four-sided market square, with the dimensions of the sides 81 m × 91 m × 65 m × 90 m, was created at the crossroads of the major streets from Rydzyn

<sup>2</sup> This type of design refers to much earlier, medieval locations based on German law to the north and east of the upper and middle Elbe river basin [1, 5].

to Kościan and from Głogów to Poznań [5]. 6.5–8.5 m wide plots were marked around the market square [6]. The dominant and original function of the market square was connected with commercial trading. Apart from common Monday and Friday trade fairs held on the market square in Leszno on specifically designated days in the year there were also fairs which attracted merchants from Greater Poland as well as from more distant regions. The commercial function determined the market square development



Fig. 2. Elements of development of the market square in Leszno installed along its sides





Fig. 3. One of the market square sides separated from the market square space by “beer gardens”



Fig. 4. One of the structures enclosed in the “beer gardens”

full of sheds, stands and benches where goods were traded. From the very beginning the market square in Leszno also served representative functions. The houses around the market square owned by the wealthiest townsmen were usually the tallest and most decorated. The town’s most important secular administration and commerce building, the town hall, was located in the middle of the market square. The first masonry town hall was built in the middle of the market square in Leszno in 1639. Over the next years it was remodeled many times. The present town hall, which was built in 1707–1709, is one of the most valuable Baroque and classicistic buildings in Poland

(Fig. 1). In the late 1670s, the population of the city was about 5 thousand and over the next one hundred years it at least doubled [5].

Although most of the original buildings around the market square were gradually replaced, the function and the main elements of the market square development for centuries actually remained unchanged. The market square served its functions as the main place for commercial trading. The prestige of the city, and consequently of its market square, has grown significantly since the moment when in 1975 Leszno became capital of newly established Leszno Province.



Fig. 5. Pedestrian street mall between houses and a row of trees

In 1977, the Polish Central Harvest Festival was held in the city. The preparation to that festival greatly improved the appearance of Leszno. That improvement included for instance the cleaning of the facades of the town hall and of the houses around the market square. However, the most important modernization for the functioning of the city center was banning vehicular traffic from the mar-

ket square. Another important modernization of the center was conducted in the middle of the 1990s. Wolności, Leszczyńskich and Zielona Streets were converted into pedestrian streets, which was caused by the need to facilitate further development of shopping facilities along those streets. In the middle of the 1990s, the town hall was extensively modernized and renovated.

### *The market square in Leszno today*

The area of the market square today is the main public space in Leszno. In the representative building of the Town Hall, there are exhibition and conference rooms and a cafe. Most of the historic houses around the market square which were built in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the first quarter of the 20th century demonstrate high architectural qualities<sup>3</sup>. Most of their facilities on the ground floor are used for services mainly commercial. Over the last few years the services have been provided also on upper floors, replacing their residential use. The market square space is occupied by rows of trees growing along its sides as well as small architecture structures and technical infra-

structure. These elements have been located there over the last fifty years, generating a sense disorder of the market square space. Their location is often random and their style incoherent (Fig. 2). Their number and the size of some of them e.g. “beer gardens” make the space along the sides of the market square seem overloaded and overwhelmed (Figs. 3, 4). Unfortunately, the market square surface does not seem representative enough to reflect the ‘city salon’ either. Paved with gray granite blocks, the market square which was earlier used by cars now is surrounded by sidewalks whose surface covered with typical concrete blocks, going around the market square. The rows of trees and beer gardens going along the sides of the market square divide functionally and visually the space of the market square into a pedestrian street mall along the sides and the market square (Fig. 5).

<sup>3</sup> As many as 21 of them are on listed in the register of historic monuments, whereas the rest are on the list of protected historic monuments.

### *New vision of the ‘Old’ market square*

In 2009, the authorities of Leszno commissioned an urban and architecture development plan of the market square in Leszno from a team of Wrocław designers.

While conducting the plan the present state of the market square development was diagnosed and the following design objectives were formulated:



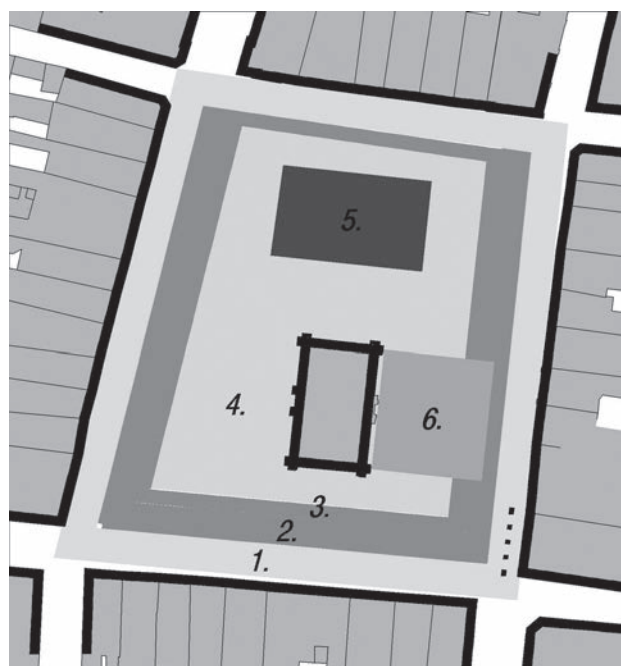


Fig. 6. Diagram of division of the market square space into functional zones: 1) Pedestrian mall along the market square side, 2) Seasonal temporary structures zone, 3) Green Zone, 4) "Free Space", 5) "Forum of Attractions", 6) Representative town hall entrance

- elimination of structures disturbing spatial order and diminishing the prestige of the place<sup>4</sup>;
- design of an attractive public space, emphasizing the valuable elements of the development;
- creation of places and attractions attracting citizens and tourists and emphasizing the prestige of the market square.

After the development of the functional utility program accommodating the modern needs of the citizens, specific urban functions were assigned in the space and the space functional division diagram was developed (Fig. 6).

The plan introduced in those zones specific elements of the development, suggesting and indicating a specific way in which this space would be used. According to the plan it was important for those elements not to divide the market square space visually but only by using adequately selected small architecture structures which would form subtle boundaries between spaces that serve different purposes. The restrictions assumed in the plan regarding the locations and sizes of temporary "beer gardens" and season's holiday stands should prevent the total separation of the pedestrian street mall from the rest of the market square. The shopping units and recreation elements which are admissible in this zone shall be located within designated distances, providing a possibility of unrestricted moving around in all directions on the market square, without blocking the view of

<sup>4</sup> The following elements were considered disharmonizing: building structures in the "beer gardens", sidewalk along the market square sides, "modernist" benches, flowerbeds and trash cans, waste segregation containers, some wall advertising items and signboards and elements of technical infrastructure.

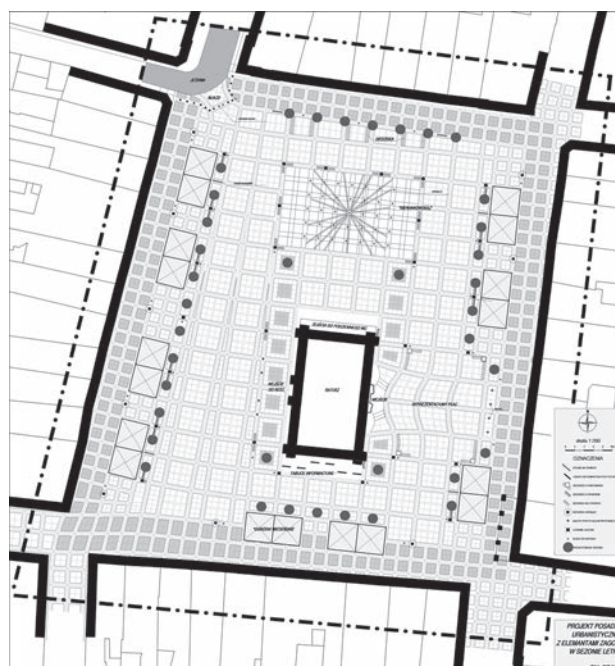


Fig. 7. Development plan of the market square in Leszno in the summer season

the town hall. Furthermore, the location and kind of trees to be located in zone 3 shall correspond with the idea of opening the view of the town hall and the houses around the market square. The development of the remaining area between the rows of trees and the town hall (zones 4–6) shall also match the functions and attractions provided there. The "Free Space" shall serve the pedestrian and exceptionally vehicular circulation, and that is why it should be minimally developed, unlike the "Forum of Attractions" which shall be designed as the most attractive fragment of the "remodeled" market square. The multimedia fountain to be installed in the market square surface and the signpost showing the main directions in the city shall be the magnet attracting both tourists and citizens to the market square. This is also where special events in the city life shall be held. Another section of the market square, located nearby the town hall main entrance, shall serve the more representative purposes. The broken orthogonal layout of the market square surface as well as the small architecture structures located there (benches, flag poles, lighting elements) shall emphasize the significance of the place and the prestige of the town hall.

It is important for the operation of the market square that the plan provides for different use of the market square in different seasons of the year.

In respect of transportation the plan provides for a restricted accessibility to the market square<sup>5</sup>. The new market square development shall revive the unused space around the town hall, which earlier was used by vehicular traffic.

<sup>5</sup> The market square would be accessible only for emergency vehicles, city maintenance vehicles and delivery trucks at designated hours.

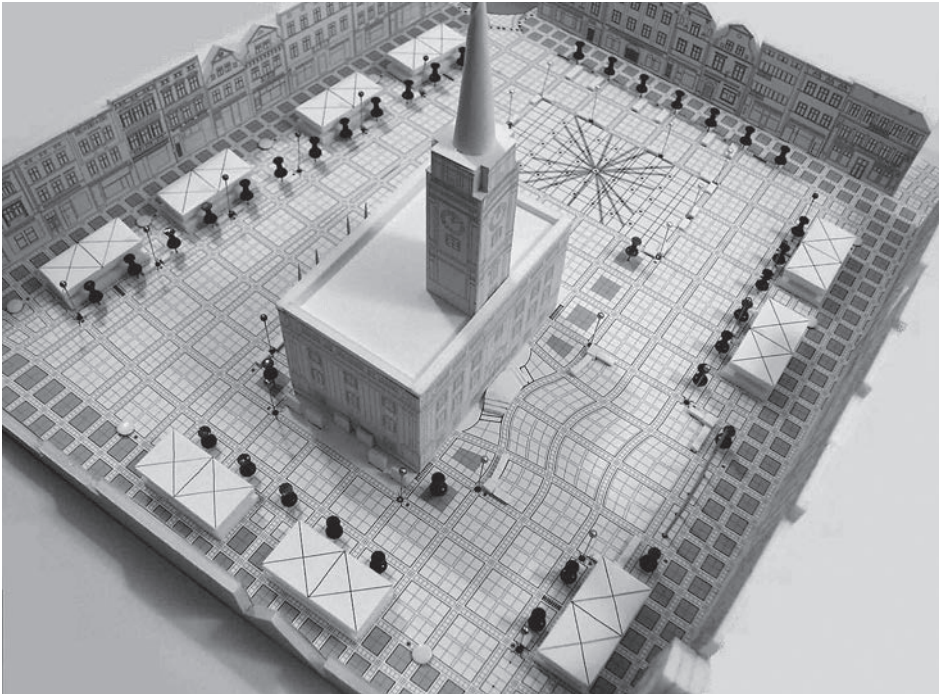


Fig. 8. Model presenting the new pattern of the surface and elements of the development in Leszno market square

### *Forms of development adequate to modern times*

The new market square development plan was supposed to address the modern needs of the citizens of Leszno and introduce the forms of development which would be adequate to the urban lifestyle of the 21st century information society. It does not mean that the plan breaks the bonds with history. On the contrary, the plan references to the history of the place are an important aspect of tourist promotion of the city and its architecture<sup>6</sup>.

It is important for the plan to attract to the market square people who in fact shall make the city center vibrant with life. For the market square space to be an attractive place of recreation, it must be adequately equipped. The location of all small architecture structures is the result of assumption that individual zones shall serve specific purposes.

At the request of the investor, one of the issues that needed to be addressed in the plan was a possibility of location of a monument on the market square. After conducting composition analyses it was found that at this stage it is impossible to indicate any specific location for any monument due to the lack of information of its form, size or style – features which greatly affect the context in which any monument could be designed.

The following principles were followed while designing the elements of small architecture structures: durability of used materials, unified style, functionality and prestige. Furthermore, it was considered important to support pro-ecological activities by providing selective waste collection containers.

<sup>6</sup> Boards have been designed to be placed on houses with information about their origin and history. Information about the development of the city of Leszno shall be presented on free-standing boards.

The plan assumes replacing the existing market square surface. The new one, referring to the historical orthogonal urban layout of the city, would be a matrix indicating the functional division of the market square. As a result of the assumed intensified pedestrian circulation on the market square, its surface was designed especially for pedestrian traffic. The surface emphasizes the zoning layout indicated by specific colors for specific functions. It introduces geometric order for the market square space, drawing attention to specific places e.g. the Town Hall entrance.

The plan assumed the introduction of new rows of trees along the market square sides, setting them back more than now. The selection of appropriate species of the trees in respect of the size of their crowns and root systems as well as the speed growth and resistance to city conditions shall assure their easier care and maintenance.

The plan allows for the location of so called “beer gardens” on the market square, however, it also provides certain conditions on which they can be located there<sup>7</sup>. The plan excludes the location on the market square of permanent stands or other roofed structures and it imposes the requirement to maintain a unified style. The provision of the conditions for the location of the gardens is an attempt at finding an appropriate form for the relatively new function of the market square as a recreation space. The adaptation of the market square space to changing lifestyle and spending time in public space is necessary to maintain its usefulness.

<sup>7</sup> Their location is possible only within designated spaces 6 m × 12 m.





Fig. 9. Visualization of the “Forum of Attractions” and small architecture structures



Fig. 10. Visualization of the “pedestrian street mall” along the market square sides

### *Summary*

The market square, as the urban organism heart, changes along with the changes of lifestyle of its citizens. Its development must address the citizens’ current needs. These needs change in time so it is only natural for the market square to follow the changes. The plan in question is a unique example of adaptation of the market square to the needs of modern citizens. The newly introduced functions increase the attractiveness of the market square as a recreation space both for its citizens

and equally important tourists. A modern market square is no longer only a place for commercial trading; it is primarily a meeting place for the citizens to integrate and have fun. The ‘city salon’ is also an ideal place for presentation of the city culture, its history, and tradition. Over the last few decades, the history of this place has developed in the market space in Leszno the functions contributing to creating there a cultural and entertainment center.

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### *Przekształcenia przestrzeni urbanistyczno-architektonicznej rynku leszczyńskiego na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*

Dynamiczny rozwój Leszna po drugiej wojnie światowej wiązał się ze zmianami sposobu kształtowania przestrzeni jego rynku. Rynek miasta średniej wielkości, jakim jest Leszno, będący częścią żywej, wciąż zmieniającej się tkanki miejskiej ośrodka o znaczeniu regionalnym, podlegał przekształceniom estetycznym i politycznym, które zdarzyły się na przełomie XX i XXI wieku w Polsce. Miasto, w latach 1975–1999 było stolicą województwa, co w znacznej mierze przyczyniło się do zmiany

wizerunku rynku. Historia tego miejsca w ostatnich kilkudziesięciu latach wyodrębniła w przestrzeni rynku leszczyńskiego funkcje przyczyniające się do tworzenia tu centrum kulturalnego i rozrywkowego miasta. W świetle owych przemian podejmowane współcześnie działania modernizacyjne rynku zdają się mieć jedynie charakter „kosmetyczny”, czyli wyłącznie porządkujący. Bardziej zdecydowane działania pozostają wciąż wyłącznie w sferze koncepcyjnej.

**Key words:** Leszno, market square, urban transformation

**Słowa kluczowe:** Leszno, rynek, przekształcenia urbanistyczne