

MAKING PLACES

Projects that are destinations in themselves are springing up in Poland's biggest cities

BY ADAM ZDRODOWSKI





Vastint's Gdynia Waterfront project is scheduled to get under construction next year

A number of large mixed-use projects that will combine several functions and will transform entire neighborhoods are now under construction or in the pipeline across Poland. Such schemes are challenging, but their popularity is set to grow. By definition, these so-called place-making developments are meant to be kind of micro-cities, almost self-sufficient locations in which people can work, live and spend their free time, enjoying access to a broad range of amenities.

PROJECTS GALORE

Developer Vastint Poland will next year launch construction work on its Gdynia Waterfront project in the Tri-City agglomeration, which will be built in two phases and will transform an attractively located plot lying just next to Gdynia's prestigious President's Wharf. The scheme will combine a whole range of functions. Its first phase will consist of residential and office buildings, while the second phase will mainly comprise hotel and conference space, but will also include office, retail, entertainment and cultural areas.

The same investor is currently preparing a large-scale development in Poznań, which will revitalize a post-industrial site located in the center of the city that previously housed a meat processing plant. Up to 100,000 sqm of residential and commercial space will be built there. Several investments of this kind are now under construction or in the pipeline in Warsaw, where Liebrecht & wood's and BBI Development's Centrum Praskie Koneser has already regenerated a major plot of hitherto neglected post-industrial land in the Praga Północ district.

Capital Park is currently working on its Norblin Factory project in the Wola district, which will also see the renewal of a brownfield site. Approximately 40,000 sqm of office space and around 26,000 sqm of cultural, entertainment and retail areas will be built within

the scheme. Echo Investment is developing the Browary Warszawskie investment in the same district, a complex that will turn a historic brewery site into a mix of various commercial and residential functions and will include almost 16,000 sqm of new public areas.

Also in Wola, the developer is currently preparing its huge Towarowa 22 development, which will bring together almost all the possible functions; from residential, through resi for rent, offices and convenience retail to culture and entertainment. In Łódź, the company is building the Fuzja investment that will entail the redevelopment of 7.7 hectares of post-industrial land and will offer a total of approximately 90,000 sqm of residential, office and retail space. It will consist of 20 (including 14 historic) buildings.

BROWNFIELD BOOM

The notion of “place-making” was born in the 1960s in the US and it is only relatively recently – after the economic transformation of the 1990s – that it became popular in the Polish market, said Magdalena Frątczak, head of retail at CBRE in Poland. She explained that the notion denotes a multi-dimensional approach to planning urban space, managing public areas and activating local communities, and she noted that it has much to do with industry’s retreat from the centers of big cities in recent decades.

As factories moved to the outskirts or even beyond the administrative boundaries of big cities, they vacated large, centrally located areas with good transport connections and interesting buildings. Such sites offered a lot of potential for redevelopment and adaptation to new uses. Their attractiveness has become more evident of late as the availability of other plots of land in city centers becomes more and more limited and projects entailing the refurbishment of historic buildings become increasingly popular.



Polish cities still offer numerous post-industrial sites that can undergo revitalization processes

ADDED VALUE

The real estate market in Poland is maturing and the renovation and modernization of industrial properties, as well as the creation of projects that are meeting points, are the natural results of this, said Anna Górska-Kwiatkowska, a partner at Cushman & Wakefield. More and more often, developers are also building place-making projects from scratch, in cooperation with cities. “Cities should support the creation of such areas, as good public space means higher property values and a better quality of residents’ lives,” Frątczak argued.

Her colleague, Marcin Wołoszka, client solutions manager at CBRE Poland, pointed out that place-making schemes boost the image of the areas they are built in and help build local communities as residents identify with new high-quality public space. Such developments reflect the lifestyles of today’s city dwellers, the changing standards and expectations of employees and consumers. At the same time, place-making is seen by owners as a magnet drawing people to the places that they want to promote.

Big, neighborhood-transforming developments bring benefits for all the parties involved in them. Developers like to have an opportunity to participate in the creation of urban fabric on a large scale. Office tenants get access to unique, prestigious locations, which allow them to stand out from the crowd. Retailers appreciate the footfall that large-scale, mixed-use schemes generate and they get access to a group of clients that helps them achieve the desired level of turnover.

CHALLENGING SCHEMES

Admittedly, investors deciding to launch large-scale, mixed-use projects face serious challenges, especially when those schemes entail the renovation of historic properties in downtown areas or the revitalization of post-industrial

areas located close to city centers. Such developments are legally and technically complicated and time-consuming, and they require major financial outlays. Planning and dialogue are the key, noted Sylwia Wiszowata-Łazarz, an associate director at Cushman & Wakefield.

A number of analyses are needed to make sure that a given investment will not only look good but will also be functional. Mediation is often part of the investment process, as inhabitants want to have more and more influence on spatial policies in their neighborhoods. When a historic site is to be redeveloped, conservation officers are involved in the investment process, which usually makes the process longer. Obtaining all the permits required to start construction can take several years.

According to Wołoszka, it is imperative that the developer ensures a proper mix of functions that respond to a whole range of users’ interests and needs, and that the complex is properly managed so that it attracts and retains people and thus remains a vibrant place. Despite their complexity, more place-making projects are to be expected in the coming years. Polish cities still offer numerous post-industrial sites that can undergo revitalization processes in the near future, Górska-Kwiatkowska said. Much has already been achieved.

“Investments completed in recent years and those which are planned have been changing and will continue to change Polish cities into modern European metropolises where interesting contemporary architecture is intertwined with renovated historic buildings,” she argued. “Thanks to these positive changes, Poland has become a place that is not only attractive to inhabitants and tourists, but also to investors and companies interested in leasing prestigiously located office and retail space of the highest quality,” Górska-Kwiatkowska concluded. ●



Echo Investment's ongoing Browary Warszawskie (top) and planned Towarowa 22 (bottom) schemes in Warsaw's Wola district





'THE TIMES OF EASY PROJECTS ARE OVER'



Serious urban planning mistakes have been made in Poland in the last few decades, but things are improving as the country's real estate market matures and Poles' expectations with regard to the quality of public space grow, argue Marcin Sadowski and Izabela Leple-Migdalska, architects at the renowned JEMS Architekci studio

INTERVIEW BY ADAM ZDRODOWSKI



WBJ: Large-scale, place-making projects that feature a mix of functions and help revitalize whole neighborhoods are now gaining in popularity in Poland, but just a decade ago such schemes were rather rare in the country. How did the trend start?

Marcin Sadowski: Globally, one of the first impulses came in the 1990s from the US. In that decade it became obvious that the time of the typical American mall was over and that the centers of big cities needed new urban fabric and urban renewal, with Philadelphia having been one of the first American cities to launch the process of revitalization. Of course, urban planning mistakes were also made in many places outside America and they are often the negative effects of 20th-century modernism.



There was the belief that the free market itself would regulate everything, that it would shape cities in a natural way

In the 1990s and the 2000s, Polish cities saw the creation of entire districts with an office or a residential monoculture, which we are now increasingly seeing as examples of bad urban planning...

Izabela Leple-Migdalska: I would say that the roots of what we now view as examples of bad urban planning are mainly to be found in the US. It is in the big American cities that the clear division of urban space into office, retail and residential zones was first introduced on a big scale, leading to the process of suburbanization and the creation of monocultures. The idea of walking distance between one's home and one's workplace or shopping and leisure destinations basically did not exist there. In many European cities, these urban planning mistakes have never been made.

Sadowski: After the political and economic transformation of the 1990s, Poland began to copy many of the bad urban planning solutions. Some of them are still being copied in such places as the Middle East and China. On the other hand, at the beginning of the 1990s, there was hardly any proper urban planning in Poland. Instead of regulations, there was the belief that the free market itself would regulate everything, that it would shape cities in a natural way.

There was very little modern office space in Warsaw at that time and demand for offices was huge. Many developers only wanted to build offices as they gave them a very quick return on investment. However, that boom was not matched by the municipal authorities' investment in transport infrastructure and it soon turned out that the new office hubs in the city are hard to get to. It is hard to



blame developers or architects for what happened in places such as Warsaw's Stuzewiec. Most of the blame rests with urban planners and city officials.

What was the impulse that helped change the approach to urban planning in Poland?

Leple-Migdalska: The current trend towards building mixed-use projects shows very well how much has changed in Poland over the last three decades and how the expectations and needs of Poles have changed since the 1990s. Poles now travel a lot, visit European capitals and have a better idea of what well-planned cities should look like. The current generation of young people is interested in much more than owning an apartment and working in a glass office building. The quality of public space matters a lot to young people today.

Will the trend towards building place-making projects continue in the coming years?

Sadowski: If you look at recently completed and under-construction mixed-use, place-making projects in Poland, it seems that this is a concept that

has a great future. Developers do not seem to have any major problems with the commercialization of such schemes. Admittedly, they are usually developed by very experienced companies with the necessary know-how and sufficient financial resources. Importantly, nowadays many of these developments are built on land zoned for mixed-use projects, which means that cities want to have them.

Leple-Migdalska: Mixed-use, place-making projects will certainly remain popular with developers, tenants and apartment buyers in the coming years. However, today we cannot say with certainty that such projects are the ultimate urban planning solution, a winning formula that will be successful for decades. This is because today's world is changing so fast that we are simply not able to predict exactly how the current trends will evolve. It suffices to look at the labor market – who knows, maybe in the future people will not need offices at all?

What are the main challenges that you encounter while designing such projects?

Leple-Migdalska: Despite their large scale, such



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schemes are often built in just one or two phases and completed within a relatively short period of time. From an architect's perspective, one of the main challenges is making sure that a given complex looks as if it grew in a natural way, just like most cities do, rather than being designed by one person and built all at once. The complex has to be coherent, but its components should be differentiated.

Sadowski: We ensure this by assigning the particular buildings to different architects or teams within our studio.

You are now working on one of the biggest schemes of this kind in Poland – Gdynia Waterfront in the Tri-City agglomeration, which will be built by developer Vastint Poland. How advanced is the design work on the planned development?

Sadowski: The project is the result of an architectural competition organized by Gdynia City Hall and the developer, which owns a very attractive site located near Gdynia's waterfront. The scheme will be developed in two phases. We have finished designing its first phase, which has already got a building permit and construction is scheduled to begin in the first half of next year. We are currently starting design work on the second phase of the investment.

What will be built within the project?

Sadowski: The Gdynia Waterfront project will boast of a whole range of functions. The first phase will deliver residential (dominant function, approximately 75 percent of the total area) and office space. The second phase will comprise hotel and confer-

ence space as the dominant function and will also include office, retail, entertainment and cultural areas. The entire complex will be integrated with the surrounding urban tissue and will feature a publicly accessible square.

We believe in so-called "quiet presence," which is the rule which says that new buildings should not become too dominant in the areas where they are built, but rather fit in with the existing architectural context. We made sure that the scheme corresponds well with the nature of the neighborhood and respects its architectural, historic and cultural heritage. For example, it has been designed in such a way that it does not obstruct the view of the historic Polish Navy Command building. We will also preserve a historic fishermen's cross that stands on the plot.

How has the project been received by Gdynia's authorities?

Sadowski: We got a lot of support from Gdynia's mayor. We often talk to mayors of big Polish cities and we can see their growing interest in place-making projects and the quality of public space in general. However, the problem is that despite municipal officials' support for such schemes, it usually takes a lot of time before they can actually be launched. To be honest, this pertains to all kinds of real estate developments in Poland, irrespective of their location and scale.

The process of securing permits for the Gdynia Waterfront project was lengthy, but this has nothing or very little to do with the project itself or with the city of Gdynia. Unfortunately, there is still much room for improvement when it comes to the granting of building permits in Poland. The political will may be there, but when you start discussing detailed issues it often turns out that there are many systemic legal and administrative problems which are very difficult to solve. The whole process is still too complicated and too time consuming.

This does not seem to put developers off planning more and more ambitious projects...

Sadowski: We now have a situation in the market where competition is growing and most new projects have a similar technical standard. In order to stand out from the crowd and ensure successful commercialization of their investments, developers today need to offer something more, their developments need to bring additional value. The role of high-quality architecture in giving a competitive advantage is growing, even if this often means more work and higher costs. The times of easy projects are over. ●