

## **Down by the riverside**

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### **Everyone else is doing it – so why are there so few waterfront re-development schemes in Poland?**

Waterfront developments and re-developments have, over the last few decades, become a very popular tool for urban regeneration throughout the industrialized world.

Derelict warehousing and docklands that were once at the heart of a city can be transformed into thriving residential and public spaces through such schemes – and in addition thousands of jobs can be created. In the UK, the 2 most notable waterfront re-developments were those for the Albert Dock in Liverpool (now a UNESCO world heritage site) and the London Docklands – both projects costing hundreds of millions of pounds that have converted dangerous and squalid quarters of these cities into areas filled with exclusive apartments, plazas, galleries and restaurants. In the process, in Liverpool more than 22,000 jobs were generated and in London the figure exceeded 120,000 new jobs.

Follow the leader

The success of these schemes encouraged other British cities to follow suit, chief amongst them Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff and Newcastle – each of which had post – industrial waterfronts that had fallen into industrial decline. Now these cities are booming, and this is in no small thanks to canal, riverside and dockside regeneration. A similar trend can be observed in other countries, such in Sydney, Australia, with the Walsh Bay re – development completed in 2003 and with the project to regenerate Naples port that is now underway – these being but two out of many examples. In Poland, however, the story so far is very different. There are virtually no waterfront regeneration schemes taking place, despite the number of cities with major rivers running through them. At present there are a handful of privately financed projects in the pipeline which involve waterfront developments, such as the Odra Tower residential development in Wrocław from RE Investment, and a project to re – develop the Wyspa Spichrzów island in Gdańsk from Gray International. The latter project will involve the reconstruction of waterfronts that were damaged during WWII and have never been restored. Ryszard Leśniewski, the president of Gray International, outlines the

concept: "Considering the importance of the historical factor for any development in this part of Gdańsk, we feel that re-creating the canal that had already existed has a special meaning and lets us use the past as the creative force for innovative ideas."

You're the only one

The only scheme in Poland that bears some comparison to those mentioned in other countries is the Young City (Młode Miasto) project to re-develop the former Gdańsk shipyard. The concept for this is similar to that of Liverpool and London Docklands, in that the post-industrial land that was once the very hub of the city should be regenerated, thus creating a new city centre. This is described by Synergia 99 (the original owners of the land) as "a new waterfront multifunctional central district of Gdańsk." Covering around 1 mln sqm, the waterfront forms the key element in this project. Unlike similar schemes in other countries, Young City is privately financed, with a number of investment funds now owning the land. In the UK, however, the Merseyside Development Corporation and the London Docklands Corporation were both set up by the British government in 1981 for the Liverpool and London Docklands project. Both were financed from central government funds and from the sale of the development land. Although the government grants were relatively small, the ability of these corporations to sell the land, together with them being granted planning powers and the right to enter into business deals with interested developers ensured the success of the schemes. Additionally, central government also designated the areas as enterprise zones with tax incentives for investors. Herein perhaps lies the major reason why waterfront re-development has been slow to get off the ground in Poland – the failure so far of local and central government to appreciate the potential of such schemes and to organize themselves accordingly. The model provided by Liverpool and London is one possibility that could be followed. Get used to it

Ryszard Leśniewski puts this down to the novelty of the concept in Poland: "Waterfront development is quite a fresh idea in Poland. It surely requires a lot of innovation – the concept itself must combine technical feasibility with attractiveness. It is also the sort of development that privileges the public space and as so it demands a lot of cooperation with the authorities."

Re-developing post-industrial land requires a change in its

use, and therefore a local council with the will to push through new master plans for the area in question. This process is notoriously slow in Poland, although for Young City, Gdańsk is an admirable exception to the rule. There can also be questions raised over land ownership in Poland, which can seriously put off potential investors. Again, Gdańsk seems to have got its act together in this regard, and so Synergia 99 is able to boast the "transparent and legal ownership status of the development land." Co-operation between the public and private sectors would therefore appear to be a crucial factor in the success of schemes as legally complex as waterfront re-developments. In Ryszard Leśniewski's opinion: "The general problem emerges from a lack of understanding over how important is to find a structure and strategy to realize the plan step by step. In order to avoid the plan becoming a collage of different and incoherent atmospheres, a strong framework has to be implemented."

Mr Leśniewski adds that "we hope there will be more such developments in the future when Wyspa Spichrzów ends successfully." Indeed, there are many examples throughout Poland of cities that could be born again through a concerted effort by the public and private sectors to revitalize their neglected watersides, and if Young City and the few other waterfront developments prove to be a success, then let us hope that this idea will finally begin to take a grip on the imaginations of both town planners and developers.