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NEW FORMS IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT. CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL
INTERVENTIONS IN THE LANDSCAPE OF THE ODER RIVER'S RIVERFRONTS
IN WROCLAW'S CITY CENTRE

NOWE FORMY W HISTORYCZNYM KONTEKŚCIE. WSPÓŁCZESNE
INTERWENCJE ARCHITEKTONICZNE W KRAJOBRAZIE NADBRZEŻY ODRY
W ŚRÓDMIEŚCIU WROCLAWIA

Abstract

The author analyses selected examples of contemporary built residential development projects in locations close to the historical city centre of Wrocław that create a new architectural frame around the waterfronts of the Oder River. The ambitious works of architecture, constituting a contemporary interpretation of the atmosphere and tradition of the place, introduce new values into the unique space of the waterfronts, remaining in accord with the new philosophy of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Wrocław, cultural landscape, contemporary architectural interventions

Streszczenie

Autor analizuje wybrane przykłady współczesnych realizacji inwestycji mieszkaniowych, w lokalizacjach usytuowanych w pobliżu historycznego śródmieścia Wrocławia, tworzących nową oprawę architektoniczną nadbrzeży Odry. Ambitne kreacje architektoniczne stanowiące współczesną interpretację klimatu i tradycji miejsca, wnoszą nowe wartości do unikalnej przestrzeni frontów wodnych, pozostając w zgodzie z nową filozofią dziedzictwa kulturowego.

Słowa kluczowe: Wrocław, krajobraz kulturowy, współczesne interwencje architektoniczne

Contemporary cities are subjected to a constant process of transformation – the adaptation of their spatial and functional structure to the changing needs and requirements of contemporary life. The elements undergoing transformation include transport systems and infrastructure, while the tissue of urban built-up areas is being infilled or replaced. Historical downtown urban complexes in cities with ages-old histories are characterised by the unique properties of their urban cultural landscape. The building substance of these complexes – both the individual historical buildings that are essential to the culture and identity of a place, just as the entire scope of the cultural landscape, are subjected to architectural conservation. However, in protected areas, as well as in their immediate vicinity, it is still possible to introduce contemporary architectural interventions – subjected to specific precepts of the design of the composition of urban tissue, conducive to the maintaining of existing qualities and the adding of new values to them.

Andrzej Tomaszewski in the chapter *The cultural landscape as a protected good* wrote: “Just as we have agreed with the fact that a historical city is a living organism and cannot be merely a relic of the past and must evolve, we must acknowledge that the cultural landscape is a living organism to an even greater degree”. He also further stated: This is about an intelligent compromise between the past and the present. Often a very difficult compromise...” [1, p. 85–86].

The economic condition of the country and a much great degree of affluence of many citizens provides development opportunities associated with European Union aid – creating potentially advantageous conditions for the creation of new values, which is particularly essential in the case of unique areas of the urban cultural landscape.

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Wrocław’s Oder River waterfronts increasingly attract real estate developers – the direct contact of buildings and their users with the river, the expansive views that open up thanks to this and that are not limited by the close proximity of other buildings – these are the great advantages of waterfront locations. The dense network of waterways within the city – the numerous branches of the Oder River and the Old Oder, the Oława, the Sailing Channel, the Opatowski Channel or the City Moat – have created sequences of numerous areas of various size that are surrounded by water, setting up the unique qualities of the urban landscape. Wrocław’s waterway node creates an original spatial and landscape structure that plays an important role in the shaping of the identity of the city [2]. The historical city centre, surrounded by the waters of the main channel of the Oder River from the north and cut off from the south by the City Moat, Wyspa Piasek and Ostrów Tumski – are areas of particularly precious cultural and spatial values. They are under strict protection due to their cultural value and historical architectural substance [4]. Numerous historical relics have been either preserved or rebuilt in the area after the destruction wrought by the Second World War. The attractiveness of areas in the vicinity of historical downtown areas for new development projects can constitute a threat to the urban cultural landscape. However, it can also be an opportunity to enrich urban tissue with new cultural values – both spatial and aesthetic.

In the views from the southern bank and the western tip of Wyspa Słodowa, as well as across the University Bridge, new tall buildings located on the waterfront of the Oder River in the vicinity of the Władysław Sikorski bridge near Podwale and Generała Sikorskiego streets – the Odra Tower and ATAL Tower buildings – were visible for a number of years in the panorama of the northern edge of the Old Town in the context of the historical buildings forming the frontage of the southern bank of the Oder River. The buildings visible in this frame on the first plane are historical structures – the Baroque Church of the Holiest Name of Jesus, which is currently a university church, as well as the grand, almost two-hundred-metres-long building of the Wrocław University, also from the Baroque period, near Grodzka street, which has a local landmark – the Mathematical Tower. On the subsequent plane in this view we can see the massing of the roof of the Gothic-period Basilica of St. Elisabeth of Hungary and the tall tower with a Renaissance-era dome that stands above it (91,46 m) [9]. Initially, the tower had a pointed dome from the middle of the fifteenth century, with a height of 130,5 metres, which made it the tallest building in Lower Silesia. This tradition is perhaps associated with contemporary yearnings and concepts of pursuing prestige for the city by constructing tall and high-rise buildings.

The view described above has been completely altered – the Odra Tower and ATAL Towers have been covered by a new complex of eight and nine-storey residential buildings with commercial spaces in their ground floors that are being built near the Pomeranian Bridge, on its western side, near the eastern tip of Kępa Mieszcząńska and near Księcia Witolda Street.

The second observation point from which the aforementioned buildings are visible in the context of the panorama of the Old Town is a short section of the southern waterfront of the Oder River below the intersection of Długa and Rybacka streets near the Romana Dmowskiego Bridge. However, from this spot we can only see the tower of the Basilica of St. Elisabeth of Hungary – which will still be playing the part of a well-exposed local landmark from this perspective. The remaining buildings of the Old Town, including the tower of the Town Hall, are obscured by rows of trees and existing buildings that are located between the site in question and the urban tissue of the Old Town.

The **Odra Tower** residential and service building, built in the years 2011–2013 (Generała Sikorskiego Street/Podwale, Wrocław – Old Town: developer – GNT Development from Legnica; designer – Biuro Projektów i Realizacji Inwestycji M.Z. Walas; completed between 2011–2013) [5], which is qualified as a high-rise building due to its height reaching 61 metres, was the first tall structure located at this site, at a relatively close distance away from the historical buildings of the Old Town – around 500 metres away from the tower of the Basilica of St. Elisabeth of Hungary when measured in a straight line and 700 metres away from the aforementioned Mathematical Tower of the university building. From the observation point located in an open public space on the western tip of Wyspa Słodowa, from which the Odra Tower building was visible in the context of the previously described historical buildings of the Old Town – it remained in good relations with them, preserving an appropriate scale, one that neither collided nor competed with the landmarks of the Old Town. It is unfortunate that this structure, although properly placed within the spatial structure of the city – accentuating





Fig. 1. ATAL Towers – Part I – eight-storey buildings, view towards the west from Generała Sikorskiego Street

the exit point from the Generała Sikorskiego Bridge – does not, however, introduce any new values into the cultural landscape.

The existing Odra Tower building was built in place of a previously planned high-rise – which was to have 35 stories and be 140 metres high [10]. Placed on a four-storey orthogonal base with an oval floor plan, its architectural concept was characterised by a dynamic massing with a contemporary expression. The different geometry of the form, one that did not refer to historical buildings, had probably been meant to ensure its neutrality. However, it appears that the placement of the planned building so close to the unique historical buildings and the disproportion in terms of scale would be detrimental to the perception of the downtown urban complex.

The construction of the **ATAL Towers** building complex (Generała Sikorskiego Street, Wrocław – Old Town: developer: ATAL S.A.; designer – AP Szczepaniak, Wrocław; design – 2014–2015; construction – part I (urban blocks I–II) – 2017; part II – 2018 [6, 12, 13] in the direct vicinity of the previously discussed building made it possible to create a waterfront frontage with better proportions and a contemporary architectural atmosphere. The complex is composed of two parts – to the west is part I (MW19) – with lower buildings featuring seven storeys, from the side of the Oder River, and eight storeys from the side of Generała Sikorskiego Street, with a floor plan in the shape of the letter “L” – along with the existing buildings at Sikorskiego Street, in accordance with the guidelines of the local spatial development plan (Resolution of the City Council of Wrocław No. IV/48/07, Official Journal

of the Lower Silesian Voivodship of the 26th of March 2007, iss. 80, pos. 911) [11] it forms an urban block with a relatively expansive internal courtyard and features service spaces on the ground floors. Along the course of former Sokolnicza Street a twenty-metre-wide belt was designed, attractively developed with preserved tall greenery, forming a pedestrian public space. It separates two compositionally integrated complexes of buildings which are being built as a part of this project. Part II of the complex (MWU 2) has also been shaped in the form of an urban block, cut open by a narrow internal courtyard, open towards the river. Two eighteen-storey (55 metres tall) towers have been connected from the side of Sikorskiego Street with a lower, five and eight-storey segment. There are service spaces on the ground floors, accessible from open public spaces. The underground part of the building includes parking garages. Vertical cracks – cuts in the towers divide them into narrower, more dynamic forms. The slight slants and deviations from the vertical direction, highlighted in the lower buildings by narrow, vertical belts of silvery openwork covers from cut and stretched steel sheets interchangeably connecting several storeys of belt-like terraces each, cause the architecture to become dynamic, as if it was in motion. The slender segments of narrow white towers with horizontal belts of terraces surrounding the buildings, encircled with the same openwork material, through subtle deviations of the facades from the vertical direction and black cracks – also participate in this dynamism as well.

From the side of the river a pedestrian promenade was created – attractively arranged, conducive to rest and recreation, with both low-lying and tall greenery, street furniture and



Fig. 2. ATAL Towers – Part II – eighteen-storey towers with a lower, eight-storey base, view towards the east from Generała Sikorskiego Street



Fig. 3. ATAL Towers – pedestrian zone at Sokolnicza street between Parts I and II of ATAL Towers, view from Generała Sikorskiego Street



Fig. 4. ATAL Towers – Part I – view of the frontage of Oder River’s riverfront with a pedestrian promenade above the river

five terraces over the Oder River supported by cantilevers. This project enriches the entire layout, introducing a contemporary, attractive atmosphere of architectural forms. The ATAL Towers complex meets the conditions outlined in the local detailed plan in terms of the principles of shaping space and the size of the buildings – by creatively adapting them (Fig. 1–6).

The close proximity of the historical downtown urban complex, particularly the possibility of placing a residential building in direct contact with water, attracts developers who are expecting high-standard projects to be successful. The prices of dwellings – apartments in such locations are sometimes many times higher, however, it is the market that will verify the economic success and rate of return of such projects. In terms of urban space, the possibility of building architecture with unique qualities and a high quality standard, one that blends in with original, modern design into a cultural landscape with such exceptional qualities – that has not yet been vandalised by standard commercial buildings that do not introduce any new aesthetic value to the unique spatial environment – is particularly valuable.

Completed projects with high aesthetic qualities undoubtedly include the residential and service **Rezydencja Piasek** building (Wrocław – Old Town, Wyspa Piasek, Staromłyńska Street; developer – Emmerson S.A.; designers – Pracownia Projektowa Dziewoński Łukaszewicz

Architekci S.C. and +48 Pracownia Projektowa; completion 2010–2015) [7, 14] – a four-storey apartment building that utilises the space of the attics and features a reception space and services on the ground floors and two underground levels with parking garages. The building is located near the northern waterfront of the Oder River and compositionally constitutes a continuation of one of the two surviving buildings of the former mill – which is currently awaiting adaptation. The preserved historical complex of buildings in the central part of the island, including the Gothic Church of Mary the Mother of God at Piasek and the Baroque monastic buildings – is a demanding neighbourhood of high cultural and spatial value, essential to the history and identity of the place. Another of the location’s advantages is the attractive development of the open green spaces of the island, with pedestrian pathways and a picturesque connection through its seven bridges with the Old Town and four other islands, as well as Ostrów Tumski. The contemporary, creative interpretation of the traditional form of the building with a gabled roof covered in red ceramic tiles and with red ceramic cladding on the walls criss-crossed by black belts of aluminium and glass facades with oriels, glass railings and the exotic timber cladding of the terraces and balconies – is the high standard that makes itself evident in the finishes and that announces the quality of the interior. As a result, the designers and the developer created a building that has achieved a unique form and contemporary expression, integrally connected with the historical context of the place (Fig. 7).



Fig. 5. ATAL Towers – Part II – residential towers, view from the pedestrian promenade



Fig. 6. Pedestrian promenade above the Oder River – ATAL Towers, with the Odra Tower in the background, at Podwale/Generała Sikorskiego streets, as well as Sikorskiego Bridge

The **Marina III** apartment building is also a completed project with exceptional spatial quality, while at the same time being placed literally “on the water” (Wyspa Pomorska, Wrocław – Old Town; developer – Topacz Investment sp. z o.o.; designers – Major Architekci – Pracownia Projektowa; design – 2014; completion – 2016 – 2018) [8, 15]. It is located on Wyspa Pomorska – on a narrow belt of land between the main outline of a branch of the Oder river and the so-called Śluza Mieszczańska – on the eastern side of the Pomeranian Bridge. The Marina III complex is composed of two buildings separated by a visual opening with a width of around 8–10 metres – which opens the view of the Mathematical Tower of the Wrocław University building from the Pomeranian Bridge and the eastern part of Księcia Witolda Street. The buildings occupy the entire surface of the eastern tip of the island, with a width of around 30 metres, providing an actual impression of living on water. The buildings are five storeys high (15 metres) – with a ground floor with commercial spaces (shops, gastronomy) and two underground levels with a parking garage. The two-hundred-years-old oak tree that grows right near the bridge was exposed from the direction of the entry hall leading to one of the buildings. The simple, geometric forms of the buildings covered with a flat roof feature transparent glass facades – which open up to views of the surroundings, primarily including the historical building of the Wrocław University. The glass facades are hidden beneath movable wooden blinds in the colour of black coffee, as well as the graphite black of a concrete grate, both of which constitute the “external skin” of the buildings, fulfilling both structural and aesthetic functions – creating the distinct climate of this architecture – which is peaceful, neutral and simultaneously immensely expressive. The mobile blinds dynamise the calm facades of the buildings. Marina III is an example of inscribing an architecture with contemporary aesthetic qualities into an urban space with unique, historical values in a good manner (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Rezydencja Piasek – view from the south



Fig. 8. Marina III – view from Księcia Józefa Street

An earlier project in the immediate vicinity of Marina III is the cameral, three-storey building with a gabled roof and distinct, two-storey oriels – the Marina I. It is a building that can also be presented as a successful project on a good scale, which also constitutes a contemporary interpretation of tradition. The building, with a residential function, offers services on the ground floor – restaurants, a coffee shop and a gallery. The public function, in combination with an accessible public space – the restaurant garden, with a jetty for yachts nearby – creates a good atmosphere of the place [3].

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The completed projects that have been discussed implement the postulate of shaping new aesthetic values into the spatial environment of Wrocław's urban areas to a varying degree, as defined in the text of the article. However, there are numerous places that still wait for successful redevelopment interventions. New structures that will fill the gaps in the waterfront buildings of the southern edge of Kępa Mieszkańska will have a decidedly important role in the perception of this urban landscape. In this location it is necessary to preserve the appropriate scale of the buildings that create the new riverfront, as well as the pursuit of a contemporary architecture that introduces new aesthetic values into the urban cultural landscape.

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