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GREGOR ČOK*, MARA ALEJANDRA CORTÉS LARA**, LAURA KOCHEL***, PRZEMYSŁAW KOWALSKI****, MIŁOSZ ZIELIŃSKI*****

Participatory activities that support social acceptance in urban space regeneration: case of Dobczyce

Abstract

This paper examines the role of early, informal participatory activities – particularly soft measures – as a preparatory foreground for statutory consultation procedures in urban space regeneration. Using the transformation of a local centre as a case study, the research combines a literature review with empirical investigation, including a residents' survey ($n = 204$), in situ observation, and two iterations of design workshops that generated 32 architectural and landscape proposals. These proposals were subsequently presented to the local community and discussed in an open public forum. The findings indicate that soft engagement performs three complementary functions: diagnostic, by revealing users' needs and identifying potential conflicts early; negotiating, by facilitating dialogue through visual concepts and reducing the cognitive distance between experts and residents; and legitimising, by building social acceptance for proposed spatial solutions. The study highlights the need for hybrid participatory strategies that combine digital tools with in situ activities and recommends formally including a soft engagement phase in the regeneration of the local centre, along with mechanisms to translate participatory outcomes into evaluation criteria and implementation decisions. The paper offers practical guidance for local authorities and designers and provides empirical support for staged, human-centred design approaches to regenerating small towns.

Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano rolę wczesnych, nieformalnych działań partycypacyjnych, określanych jako działania miękkie, jako etapu przygotowawczego do ustawowych procedur konsultacyjnych w procesach regeneracji przestrzeni miejskiej. Badania przeprowadzono na przykładzie przekształcenia centrum lokalnego. Zastosowano podejście łączące przegląd literatury z badaniami empirycznymi, obejmującymi ankietę mieszkańców ($n = 204$), obserwacje in situ oraz dwa cykle warsztatów projektowych, w wyniku których opracowano 32 koncepcje architektoniczno-krajobrazowe. Koncepcje te zostały następnie zaprezentowane społeczności lokalnej i poddane dyskusji podczas otwartego forum publicznego. Wyniki badań wskazują, że działania miękkie pełnią trzy komplementarne funkcje. Po pierwsze, realizują funkcję diagnostyczną, umożliwiając rozpoznanie potrzeb użytkowników oraz identyfikację potencjalnych konfliktów na wczesnym etapie procesu projektowego. Po drugie, pełnią funkcję negocjacyjną, wspierając dialog za pomocą wizualizacji koncepcji przestrzennych i ograniczając dystans poznawczy pomiędzy ekspertami a mieszkańcami. Po trzecie, realizują funkcję legitymizacyjną, sprzyjając budowaniu społecznej akceptacji dla proponowanych rozwiązań przestrzennych. Badanie podkreśla znaczenie hybrydowych strategii partycypacyjnych, integrujących narzędzia cyfrowe z działaniami prowadzonymi w przestrzeni rzeczywistej. Wskazuje również na potrzebę formalnego włączenia etapu działań miękkich do procesów regeneracji centrów lokalnych oraz na konieczność opracowania mechanizmów umożliwiających przekładanie rezultatów partycypacji na kryteria oceny i decyzje wdrożeniowe. Artykuł dostarcza praktycznych rekomendacji dla władz lokalnych i projektantów, a także stanowi empiryczne potwierdzenie zasadności etapowego, zorientowanego na człowieka podejścia do regeneracji małych miast.

Keywords: regeneration, revitalization, social participation, soft measures, forms of consultation, local centre, human-centred design

Słowa kluczowe: regeneracja, rewitalizacja, partycypacja społeczna, działania miękkie, formy konsultacji, lokalne centrum, projektowanie zorientowane na człowieka

*Gregor ČOK, Professor (Assistant), Faculty of Civil and Geodetic Engineering, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4649-3360>, e-mail: gregor.cok@fgg.uni-lj.si

**Mara Alejandra CORTÉS LARA, PhD Professor, Institute of Technology and Higher Studies of the West, Universidad de Guadalajara, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0971-9671>, e-mail: maracortes@iteso.mx

***Laura KOCHEL, PhD landscape architect, Department of Spatial Management, College of Economy and Public Administration, Cracow University of Economic, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8909-2444>, e-mail: klimczakl@uek.krakow.pl

****Przemysław KOWALSKI, PhD, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3547-569>, e-mail: przemyslaw.kowalski@pk.edu.pl

*****Miłosz ZIELIŃSKI, PhD arch., Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6476-3088>, e-mail: mzielinski@pk.edu.pl

1. INTRODUCTION

Social acceptance of spatial change is a major issue in spatial planning, architecture, and urban design, particularly in the context of sustainable urban development. Proposed solutions do not always gain public approval and may become a source of conflict. Increasing urbanisation and the intensification of car traffic in cities – including smaller towns – create substantial challenges for local communities in relation to the functioning of public spaces. This paper addresses the transformation of the urban landscape, focusing on the local centre and emphasising the importance of social participation in this process. It argues that designers should not rely exclusively on traditional competences in architecture and urban design, but should actively involve residents in the design process, drawing also on knowledge from sociology and social communication. Local authorities play an equally significant role: they should create conditions and instruments that enable real co-decision by the community, ensuring both effectiveness and social legitimacy.

In the face of dynamic social, economic, and environmental change, Polish cities require integrated strategic governance. Local governments, equipped with development policy tools, can shape directions of change through spatial planning and revitalisation processes. Both local spatial plans and municipal revitalisation programs, in line with legislative assumptions, require stakeholder participation during their preparation. The Act on Spatial Planning and Development of 2003 originally provided only for public display, public discussion, and comment submission (Articles 11 and 17). In 2015, the Revitalisation Act introduced additional forms of consultation, and the 2023 amendment to the planning act expanded them further. As a result, consultation shifted from passive document disclosure to active stakeholder involvement, including collecting opinions and ideas, educational and informational activities, and developing public dialogue.

In practice, a broad range of participatory formats is now used: meetings and design workshops, public discussions, exhibitions, study walks, surveys (online and offline), as well as prototype actions in the spirit of tactical urbanism (e.g. temporary solutions and urban installations), pilot projects, and spatial observation. Digital tools – such as consultation platforms, mobile applications, interactive maps, online forms, and social media – have become increasingly important, enhancing accessibility and transparency of the process (Table 1).

These forms of consultation fall under the broader category of soft measures, or soft engagement: often low-cost, reversible, participatory actions supported by communication and organisational tools used at the preparatory stage of spatial projects. Their aim is to raise awareness, collect users’ opinions, test solutions, and build social legitimacy for potential permanent changes resulting from spatial planning, revitalisation, regeneration, or other spatial interventions. Informal consultation formats have thus increasingly become official and institutionalised instruments. At the same time, the authors observe that statutory consultation

mechanisms, although considerably expanded, still largely reflect the logic of consultation rather than genuine co-decision or, even more so, partnership in the sense proposed by Arnstein (1969) (cf. Table 2). Therefore, this paper proposes complementing formal consultation procedures with a preceding process of informal participatory action to build social acceptance for urban space regeneration. In this article, this preparatory phase is termed the consultation foreground. The concept is operational: it links soft engagement with formal procedures and precedes statutory consultation mechanisms.

Participatory tools are expected to increase citizens’ real influence on spatial policy and strengthen stakeholder involvement. They become instruments for building trust and open dialogue between authorities and the community. They make it possible to understand local needs more accurately and invite residents into co-design processes, creating real influence over how space is shaped. Cooperation, in this sense, builds trust. Yet the question remains: how can cooperation between the local community and local government be effectively organised? How can a broad spectrum of expectations be captured so that new projects become more conflict-resistant and closer to people’s needs? This paper attempts to implement participatory activities that go beyond the statutory minimum by identifying needs and building social acceptance for a regeneration project.

In this article, regeneration is understood as a process of renewing and adapting existing urban areas to improve their functionality, aesthetics, and residents’ quality of life. The concept implies renewal rather than reproduction – the emergence of something new rather than the mere continuation of the old. Regeneration is a socially beneficial transformation, that is, development (Hausner and Markowski, 2025, pp. 11–12). It includes such actions as improving accessibility, upgrading infrastructure, introducing greenery, and creating spaces that foster social interaction and activity. Regeneration can therefore be seen as a physical correction of spatial quality – an important, though not the only, component of revitalisation projects (Hrabiec, 2010; Zieliński, 2011). Methods for regenerating urban tissue include point-based and area-based interventions of spatial-functional, social, and economic character (Warsza and Tomczak, 2021).

In 2024–2025, an experimental initiative was carried out with the participation of the local government, students of the Faculty of Architecture at the Cracow University of Technology, and residents, coordinated by staff of the Department of Landscape Architecture with the support of the international academic community. The starting point was a series of student design workshops devoted to the local centre. The resulting proposals, theoretical and academic in nature, became the basis for a public debate on the future of this space, illustrating a wide spectrum of possible solutions. The initiative aimed to initiate the regeneration process of the town’s central area. In this context, the following research question is central: what participatory approaches were applied, and what were the project’s outcomes?

Table 1. Overview of the forms of social consultation provided for in Polish legislation, by authors

Act on Spatial Planning and Development of 27 March 2003 (Journal of Laws 2026, item 538)	Revitalisation Act of 9 October 2015 (Journal of Laws 2024, item 278)
Article 8i(1). Forms of social consultation include: 1) collection of comments; 2) open meetings, expert panels, or workshops preceded by a presentation of the draft spatial planning act; 3) outdoor meetings or study walks organised within the area covered by the spatial planning act; 4) surveys or geo-surveys; 5) interviews, consultation points, or designer office hours.	Article 6(3). Forms of social consultation include: 1) collection of comments in paper or electronic form, including by means of electronic communication, in particular e-mail or forms published on the municipality’s Public Information Bulletin website; 2) meetings, debates, workshops, study walks, surveys, interviews, the use of representative groups, or the collection of oral comments.

2. AIM, SCOPE, MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the study is to verify the assumption that early, informal participatory activities – particularly soft measures – may serve as an effective preparatory foreground for statutory consultation procedures, increasing their effectiveness and reducing the risk of social conflict in the implementation of spatial change. This approach is analysed in relation to its role in supporting the construction of social acceptance for urban space regeneration, using the transformation of the local centre in Dobczyce as a case study.

More specifically, the objectives are: (1) to identify local spatial and social conditions, as well as landscape identity; (2) to diagnose key conflicts and the needs of public space users; (3) to employ design proposals as instruments of social dialogue and as a platform for negotiating directions of transformation; and (4) to formulate recommendations for a model of urban regeneration integrating architectural-urban design with social participation. The study's territorial scope is limited to the town of Dobczyce. The general time frame covers the years 2024–2025, when the research and design workshops were conducted.

The adopted method combines a literature review, a case study, survey research, and workshop-based in situ work. In the first stage, the authors reviewed literature on resident involvement in planning and design processes, social acceptance of spatial change, and best practices in urbanism. In the second stage, a detailed case study of Dobczyce was developed, focusing on the current condition of the Main Square as a local centre and on the challenges related to car traffic.

A social survey in the form of an online questionnaire was conducted among 204 respondents (approx. 3.4% of the population), including residents of both the town of Dobczyce and the urban-rural municipality. The methodology, sample size, and demographic diversity met the requirements of a representative sample for local-level inference. The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions to capture quantitative tendencies and open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. The survey focused on users' perceptions of urban space (Gehl and Svarre, 2021; Lynch, 2011), landscape features (Niedziecka-Filipiak, 2009), and place identity. A further objective was to identify potential conflicts, needs, and possible directions of transformation.

These data and their analysis formed the basis for developing several architectural and landscape proposals intended to illustrate possible responses to local needs. In the semester-long Integrated Design course for graduate students in landscape architecture, two iterations produced 20 proposals in 2024 and 12 in 2025 (32 in total). Students based their work on empirical research (survey findings and in situ analysis) as well as their own local investigations. These proposals then became the basis for public discussion with local authorities and residents. The process was carried out in two iterations (2024 and 2025). Subsequently, internal consultations within the municipal office examined the diversity of regeneration proposals, allowing the identification of potential directions of change. This became the basis for a public exhibition, presentation, and discussion with residents on the future of the local centre.

In the final synthesis, observations from the case study were combined with findings from the literature review, making it possible to formulate recommendations concerning effective strategies for engaging local communities in the planning and implementation of spatial change. This method enables a holistic perspective on the problem of acceptance of change, taking

into account both local conditions and the broader theoretical context.

The results are intended to serve as a starting point for further stages of involving residents in co-decision and participatory processes within the broader framework of community engagement.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social participation, defined as citizens' involvement in the governance of public affairs within a community, is a key component in the formation and functioning of civil society (Zieliński, 2013) and helps resolve social conflicts in an institutionalised manner (Gawroński, 2010, p. 145).

At the same time, not all forms of participation in public life contribute to democratisation (Sadura and Erbel, 2012). Sherry Arnstein's concept of the ladder of participation aptly captures the complexity of civic engagement (Arnstein, 1969; Arnstein, 2019). This framework distinguishes between instruments of genuine co-decision and those that merely simulate residents' involvement (Table 2). Polish experience shows that participation often oscillates between authentic inclusion and façade-like ritualisation or instrumentalisation (Bober et al., 2013). It should be noted, however, that under favourable conditions – especially where scale and context are appropriate, and the actors involved act professionally and responsibly – even lower levels of participation may produce positive spatial and social outcomes (Zieliński, 2016). This issue is also addressed extensively by Sławomir Hajduk, who systematises the existing body of knowledge, highlights the extra-legal determinants of participation, and calls for further studies combining institutional, qualitative, and quantitative approaches while assessing the real impact of participatory tools on local decision-making (Hajduk, 2021).

The literature discusses social participation in multiple contexts. Debates on social communication in spatial planning and revitalisation are rooted in participatory democracy (Uziębło, 2009; Bartkowski, 2011; Błażejowski, 2023), which is especially valuable amid contemporary challenges shaped by uncertainty across multiple dimensions (Marczewska-Rytko, 2023). At the same time, Alvarado Vazquez et al. (2024) compare traditional approaches with newer methods to find more inclusive and responsive solutions. In this perspective, social participation becomes a key instrument in shaping space and landscape, enabling the co-creation of solutions aligned with the needs and expectations of local communities (Pawłowska et al., 2010a; Parzysek, 2016). Another important factor is perceptions of physical space, which differ among user groups and therefore affect acceptance of proposed solutions (Pawłowska, 2008).

The literature also points to a shift from informing and consulting residents toward more co-decisional forms of engagement, that is, higher rungs of the participatory ladder, including local initiatives, participatory budgeting, and the co-creation of strategies and development plans (Augustyniak, 2014; Szlachetko, 2017; Drozda, 2019; Boryczka, 2015; Boryczka, 2022). Authors emphasise that this process requires not only appropriate institutional instruments but also a change in administrative culture and recognition of residents' knowledge and experience as an equal resource in planning (Karpiuk, 2017; Kikosicka, 2014).

Within this perspective, participation constitutes an important component of co-governance and local development programming, taking different forms depending on the adopted model (expert, expert-participatory, or participatory). Each model relies on different sets of tools, ranging from information and

consultation to more advanced forms of collaboration with stakeholders. Involving local actors in decision-making strengthens local governance capacities. At the same time, empirical studies point to numerous barriers that hinder the effective implementation of participation in development programming, resulting from both institutional and social conditions (Legutko-Kobus, 2018).

Territorial intervention instruments, including municipal revitalisation programs, now play a key role in managing the revitalisation process and enabling integrated and comprehensive action. Skalski (2004) had already signalled revitalisation in the context of spatial governance through operational instruments and ex ante assessment. At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the need to expand this approach by incorporating regeneration and integrating multiple perspectives on public participation. Support for local communities and cooperation between local governments and social partners are highlighted as particularly important elements of effective implementation (Noworól and Skalski, 2010; Szlachetko and Szlachetko, 2019). Research on participation also shows growing interest in its significance in revitalisation policy, where citizen participation is treated as a fundamental condition for an effective and broadly accepted process of shaping space (Szlachetko and Szlachetko, 2019; Ziobrowski and Jarczewski, 2010; Wójcicki, 2013). In this context, participation becomes not only a consultation technique but also a co-governance mechanism that enables lasting relationships between public administration and local communities. In spatial planning, scholars increasingly postulate a shift away from a purely technical approach toward a communicative model (Elbakidze et al., 2015), based on cooperation and collective action within socially diverse environments (Healey, 1997). There is a growing search for tools that allow residents to participate actively in urban regeneration processes (Skalski, 1996; Skalski, 2004; Skalski, 2009; Salaj et al., 2020; He et al., 2025). Attention is also drawn to civic education rooted in place identity, which strengthens residents' attachment to space (Toomey et al., 2020), and for which social participation may serve as an

important instrument. Equally emphasised is the role of education and consensus-building in relation to revitalisation, regeneration, and related transformations of urban space, ensuring durable and socially accepted spatial change.

Bottom-up initiatives are increasingly recognised as informal resident actions that often reflect sustainable citizenship more effectively than formal processes (Beza and Hernández-García, 2018; Hałat, 1996), including in the context of urbanism (Drozda, 2019). They function as instruments – both informal and institutionalised – in urban transformation processes, serving to collect opinions, generate ideas, evaluate solutions, and co-create specific proposals, that is, as soft measures.

This paper contributes to the broader search for effective solutions and improved tools in this field. The highest level of participation is commonly associated with including residents through co-creation methods. Lund (2018) argues that co-creation shifts away from a focus on power and formal rights toward the capacity to solve problems (output legitimacy), while also reducing the centrality of inclusiveness alone (input legitimacy).

Global challenges – climate change, public health, and population ageing – highlight the need for properly designed public spaces (Gehl, 2010). Contemporary research increasingly investigates which qualities of space actually produce public space quality and which require reinterpretation (UN-Habitat, 2015). Although the fundamental mechanisms of spatial perception remain relatively stable, the significance of specific design elements changes over time (Fejza and Čok, 2022).

Ecosystem services (Daily et al., 2000), implemented through green and blue-green infrastructure (Lamond and Everett, 2019; Langergraber et al., 2020), also play an increasingly important role in resolving spatial conflicts. It includes hydrological, environmental, and social functions, contributing to improved public space quality and greater social acceptance. These elements also form a significant component of the design proposals analysed in this study and are subjects of public discussion and consultation.

Table 2. Position of the analysed project within the scope and forms of residents' participation in public life, in relation to participation theory (Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation), its components, and implementation tools

Levels of participation according to Sherry Arnstein	Participation components according to Justyna Przywojska	Examples of implementation tools	Mode of action	Analysed project
Manipulation / Therapy	*	*	*	
Consultation / Information / Conflict mitigation	Informing and communicating public data	Access to public information under legal regulations	Asymmetrical, one-way, formal-legal	
	Informing the local community through channels other than statutory ones	• municipal service catalogue • notice boards • municipal bulletin • information desk at the municipal office • mobile information points • website and other social media • traditional media	Asymmetrical, one-way	
	Collecting residents' opinions	• residents' suggestion boxes • direct contact between local authorities and residents • resident surveys • frequently asked questions catalogue	Asymmetrical, two-way	
Partnership	Traditional social consultations	A systemic solution comprising the rules for the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of social consultations.	Asymmetrical, two-way, formalised	

Levels of participation according to Sherry Arnstein	Participation components according to Justyna Przywojska	Examples of implementation tools	Mode of action	Analysed project
	Inclusion of residents	Permanent formalised or informal multi-sector teams equipped with decision-making competences.	Symmetrical, two-way, dialogue-based	
Citizen power / Citizen control	*	*	*	

Source: author's own elaboration based on Arnstein (2019) and Przywojska (2016).

* Extreme levels were omitted: the lowest, as detrimental to participatory processes, and the highest, as utopian and unattainable in practice.

4. RESULTS

The empirical findings are presented in two parts: (a) findings related to spatial and social conditions and relations within the local centre, with particular attention to conflicts among pedestrians, car users, and shop owners; and (b) architectural and landscape proposals developed for the regeneration of the urban space.

4.1. SITE ANALYSIS AND LOCAL CONDITIONS (A)

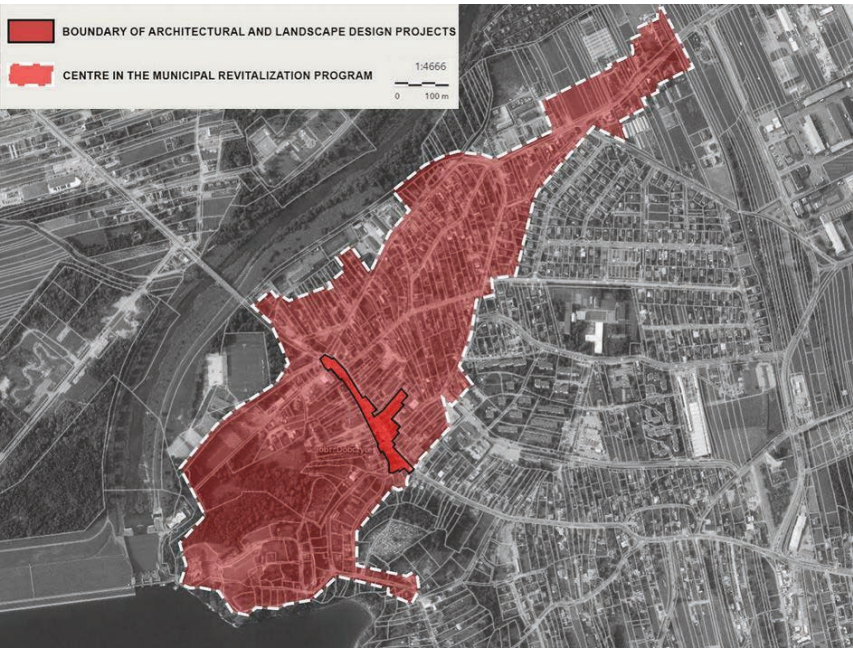
4.1.1. LOCATION AND SPECIFICITY

Dobczyce is a town and urban-rural municipality in the Małopolska region, located near Kraków (approx. 30 km to the south) on the Raba River. In December 2024, the town had just over 6,000 inhabitants. Dobczyce's spatial structure centres on several key elements: the Dobczyce dam, the semi-central urban area including the Main Square, and the castle hill with the ruins of the Jagiellonian castle, the old church, and a small open-air museum. Dobczyce's landscape is enriched by picturesque surroundings, including the reservoir, which, although it serves as a drinking-water source, is also a popular place of passive recreation, limited to visual enjoyment of the landscape rather than direct access to the water. The surrounding hills and green areas support outdoor activity, yet their development potential in urban terms remains underused. At the same time, development work is underway, including the construction of cycling routes and paths.

Residents see Dobczyce as a quiet, peaceful place to live. They value its small-town, intimate character; its historical and cultural heritage; its picturesque setting; and its proximity to greenery. They recognise the place's uniqueness and the local identity shaped by the reservoir and dam on one hand and the royal castle on the other, while also recognising that this potential has not yet been fully utilised.

The central part of Dobczyce affects the quality of life across the municipality by concentrating economic, social, and administrative functions. Rynek Street forms its main axis, lined with public institutions, shops, and services. Nearby, there are residential areas. The zone combines urban features – such as concentrated development, a street network, and mixed functions – with rural ones, including single-family houses, farmland, and gardens. Within the town lies the post-industrial area known as Charstek, formerly used as a service base for the construction of the Dobczyce reservoir dam; it is now undeveloped and included in the revitalisation process as an area with tourism, recreation, and economic potential. The analysed area lies within the revitalisation area designated in the Municipal Revitalisation Program as Area 2: Dobczyce Centre (Resolution No. XXXV/229/17 of the Municipal Council in Dobczyce of 10 March 2017 adopting the Municipal Revitalisation Program of Dobczyce Municipality). Analysis showed that this area recorded values above the municipal average for all four unemployment indicators examined.

III. 1. Aerial view of the town centre with the Main Square functioning as the main street. The map indicates the revitalisation area defined in the Municipal Revitalisation Programme of Dobczyce Municipality, as well as the area covered by the architectural and landscape proposals. Source: author's own study based on Google Maps, 2025.



4.1.2. THE MAIN SQUARE

The Main Square is the town's central public space; however, intense car traffic dominates its landscape, negatively affecting pedestrian comfort and safety. The square has an elongated, street-like form, widening slightly toward the south-east, with one main exit leading toward neighbouring settlements and a secondary exit toward the castle hill. Around the square there are several historic buildings, commercial and service premises, the municipal office, the church, a historic fire station, and a health centre, making it an important node of social life. Midway along the square there is an auxiliary plaza – an annex to the main street – commonly referred to as the small market, surrounded by small commercial pavilions and functioning partly as a car park and partly as a marketplace. Functionally, the square is dominated by retail and

service uses, mostly on the ground floors of frontage buildings, totalling about 100 business entities. The municipal office and the church are also important, as both generate substantial traffic. Nearly 80% of respondents said they use the Main Square for everyday shopping; around half cited official errands as a reason for visiting; 43% use it for leisure and free time; 31% meet friends and family there; and 5% identify it as their place of work. These responses align closely with in situ observations and confirm the space's largely commercial and service-based character.

The dominant functions include retail, gastronomy, administration, religious practice, and education. The urban interior is functionally dominated by a two-way carriageway carrying local traffic (the town has a bypass for transit traffic), while the frontage zones are occupied by cars parked on sidewalks, creating the image of a place dedicated more to cars than pedestrians.

Although respondents frequently mention the local atmosphere and character of the town among its valued qualities, the Main Square itself – with less than 1% of indications – does not emerge as a distinctive local landmark. At the same time, the square is perceived as visually attractive due to its human scale, characteristic proportions, and expressive vertical accents, while being criticised for the dominance of parking and insufficient greenery. Responses concerning the most valued elements of the square point, in order, to greenery, the church mass, and the historic fire station. Users also value what they describe as the atmosphere, citing its intimate scale, compact form, and characteristic elongated layout. The most pleasant place in the square was the widened area near the old fire station, with the figure of St Florian, an ice cream shop, and several mature trees.

The responses to the question "What bothers you most in the square?" are particularly revealing. By far the largest group concerns car traffic and parking, viewed as too intense, chaotic, and as making walking difficult or even impossible. The second most frequent category concerns greenery – this time pointing to its shortage, insufficient quality, and lack of shade. Together, these responses suggest that existing greenery is appreciated mainly in the sense that "it is good that there is any at all," while there is also a clearly articulated need to improve both its quantity and quality. Other negatively assessed elements include the absence of café terraces, visual clutter, architectural disorder, and too few places to sit.

The study clearly shows that a key problem in the Main Square is the conflict between car users and pedestrians. 70% of respondents said they arrived by car, while over 61% arrived on foot, suggesting many users are both drivers and pedestrians. Respondents reported leaving their vehicles in different locations, both within the square itself and in its immediate surroundings, depending on availability, although the most popular option remained parking directly within the square interior.

The proposed corrective measures focus primarily on greenery and the quality of public space. Users would like significantly more planting in various forms, as well as more places to sit and rest in a green setting. Particularly interesting is the synthesis of demands related to traffic and parking. On the one hand, respondents suggest reducing or even removing car traffic, as well as reducing, removing, or at least better organising parking spaces. On the other hand, they also expect the option to drive through the square to remain, and some call for more parking spaces, especially near commercial and service premises.

Business owners in the square see restrictions on traffic, especially the removal of parking spaces, as a major threat. Their objections stem from fears of falling turnover and even the



III. 2. View of the Main Square in its widened southern section, looking north. An ad hoc, modest public space surrounded by cars. Source: author's photograph by Miłosz Zieliński, February 2024.

potential collapse of businesses as a result of losing customers who currently arrive by car. Concerns were also expressed that restricting traffic within the square could lead to the decline of the area and create difficulties in transporting elderly people to the health centre and church. Interestingly, support for restricting traffic and parking in the square is balanced by opposition to such measures.

Against this background, responses to the question "Which statement best reflects your opinion on car traffic in the Main Square?" are especially important. More than 40% of respondents chose the answer that traffic should be limited not through legal regulations but through spatial design measures. More than 18% supported a complete traffic ban, almost 16% preferred limiting traffic by introducing a residential zone, and just under 18% wished to keep the current situation unchanged. Taken together, these responses indicate that most stakeholders support change in the Main Square. No clear consensus emerges on its exact form; however, the perception that spatial solutions could be effective opens an important field for conceptual work and public discussion.

4.2. REGENERATION PROPOSALS FOR THE MAIN SQUARE (B)

In the semester-long Integrated Design course for graduate students in landscape architecture, students developed 20 proposals in 2024 and an additional 12 in 2025. Students worked from the knowledge presented in the preceding sections of this paper, including survey findings, in situ analysis, and their own research into local conditions. The two iterations produced a substantial conceptual resource ready for presentation and analysis, particularly for confronting design visions with residents' perspectives. The proposals form a broad spectrum, ranging from highly conservative proposals to far-reaching transformations. Depending on the degree of intervention in the functional and spatial structure, the proposals can be grouped into four categories:

- Car traffic unchanged; pedestrian space corrected.
- Car traffic slowed down; pedestrian space corrected.
- Car traffic restricted; pedestrian space transformed.
- Car traffic partially excluded; pedestrian space transformed.

The first category includes the most conservative solutions – arguably also the easiest to implement in the short term. These proposals focus on improving the quality and accessibility of pedestrian zones without substantial intervention in the road system, especially regarding vehicular movement. The second category still focuses primarily on improving pedestrian space

but combines this with traffic-calming measures such as narrowed carriageways, changes in paving, chicanes, and greenery introduced within the roadway profile.

The third category goes further. Here, car traffic is restricted more significantly, allowing pedestrian space to expand. This is achieved through measures such as introducing one-way traffic combined with carriageway narrowing, converting the roadway into a plaza-type surface and creating shared space without a formal traffic ban, or transforming sections of the carriageway into publicly accessible square-like zones with greenery.

The fourth category includes solutions in which car traffic is only partially excluded, while pedestrian space undergoes substantial transformation. These proposals assume access only for residents and service functions, without allowing Rynek Street to function as a through route. Importantly, none of the proposals eliminates car traffic entirely. All proposals retained obligatory access to individual properties, even where the street lost its through-traffic role, while also seeking to provide more free space in front of commercial premises – either for deliveries or for café terraces and outdoor business zones.

The proposals also included numerous proposals to increase ecological value, especially through improved biodiversity and water retention by introducing more diverse forms of greenery and small-scale retention elements. These projects became the subject of exhibitions and accompanying in situ public discussions. This provided an opportunity not only to confront design ideas with the opinions of residents and space users, but also to collect further qualitative data from interested participants.

The discussion confirmed, on the one hand, a strong desire to transform the Main Square into a more attractive public space and, on the other hand, equally strong resistance to restricting car traffic, especially where access and parking for retail and service premises were concerned. By design, the meetings took the form of soft engagement, directed not primarily at immediate infrastructural intervention but at expanding knowledge, strengthening relationships and attitudes, and activating local actors.

One important indicator of success was the fact that the proposal selected during the exhibition as the community's favourite belonged to the fourth category – that is, to the group involving the most substantial reorganisation of car traffic – rather than to one of the least interventionist options. A similarly revealing example was a statement made by one resident who, although broadly supporting the retention of current traffic and parking arrangements, concluded the meeting by referring to a recent visit to Warsaw, where he had seen the regenerated Plac Pięciu Rogów – a space from which cars had been removed, returned to pedestrians, and enriched by tall trees. He regarded it as an excellent intervention.

These observations point to the positive role of soft measures as instruments for shaping opinion and building social consensus around spatial design challenges and the acceptance of proposed transformations.

The process also demonstrated that presenting a broad spectrum of alternative solutions in the form of student proposals – even despite the inevitable limitations related to the public's difficulty in reading design drawings and visualisations – significantly broadened local perception and openness, especially when supported by commentary and discussion.

5. DISCUSSION

The study set out to verify the assumption that early, informal forms of social engagement – particularly soft measures – can

function as an effective preparatory phase for formal consultation procedures, increasing their effectiveness and reducing the risk of social conflict during the implementation of spatial change. The analysis focused on how these activities build social acceptance for urban regeneration, using the transformation of the centre of Dobczyce as a case study.

More specifically, the study identified local spatial and social conditions as well as elements of landscape identity, diagnosed the main conflicts and needs of public space users, examined the use of design proposals as tools of dialogue and negotiation, and formulated recommendations for a regeneration model that integrates architectural and urban design with social participation. On the basis of the analysis, it may be concluded that the regeneration of the Main Square in Dobczyce should be grounded in a human-centred design approach – one that prioritises pedestrians and high spatial quality – implemented in a staged and pragmatic manner and supported by a clear and strong participatory component.

The process described here focused on participatory collection of pre-design data, preparing as broad a spectrum of proposals as possible, and using those proposals as the basis for discussion. Its purpose was to activate residents, encourage reflection on the issue, identify additional areas of concern, and potentially locate common ground. The process ended at the design conclusions stage; however, it would be highly desirable to continue by testing the solutions discussed. Pilot, time-limited implementations of reversible spatial and infrastructural changes, supported by low-cost prototyping, could generate particularly valuable results and additional data. Documenting and evaluating them would make it possible to assess real-world performance and ultimately inform decisions about permanent interventions.

The findings structure the role of participatory activities in supporting social acceptance of urban space regeneration into three categories: diagnostic function, negotiating function, and context-sensitive acceptance.

Diagnostic function: participatory formats such as workshops, meetings, and surveys revealed specific points of tension, especially the pedestrian–car conflict and the contradiction between commercial needs and public-space comfort. This confirms the hypothesis that soft engagement effectively identifies problems before they enter the legislative stage.

Negotiating function: visual design proposals reduced the communication gap between experts and residents, making it easier to negotiate functional and aesthetic priorities.

Context-sensitive acceptance: social acceptance depended strongly on whether proposals engaged with local spatial conditions and landscape identity. Context-responsive projects received more support than generic or universalised solutions.

The role of administration should also be emphasised. The effectiveness of the consultation foreground depends on local government's institutional capacity to absorb the results of soft measures. As the literature indicates, when administrative actors treat workshop proposals as substantive input rather than symbolic gestures, public opinion is more likely to translate into planning decisions (Pawłowska, 2008; Zieliński, 2013).

The study also has limitations. One concern is representativeness and scale: although the survey sample ($n = 204$) provides a valid basis for local-level reasoning, the results may remain specific to the small-town context of Dobczyce and may not be fully generalizable to larger cities.

A second issue is the possible experiment effect: the involvement of academic staff and students may have amplified the

participatory outcome; in settings without such institutional support, the effects could be weaker.

A third issue concerns the durability of acceptance. The study does not measure the long-term stability of social acceptance after implementation. Early support for proposed changes does not automatically translate into lasting support once they move into the realisation phase.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study confirms the usefulness of soft measures as an operational preparatory tool for statutory consultation in urban regeneration processes. However, for such a foreground to produce the intended results, three conditions are essential: (1) the actual incorporation of participatory findings and conclusions into the regeneration process; (2) clear rules for translating participatory outcomes into decision-making criteria; and (3) the strengthening of administrative competences in facilitation and mediation. In Dobczyce, the proposed human-centred design approach, staged implementation, and strong participatory component form a coherent strategy that minimises conflict and increases the feasibility of spatial intervention.

6.1. URBAN AND LANDSCAPE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOBCZYCE

a) Spatial measures

1. Functional priority. Transforming the Main Square from a car-dominated area into a multifunctional public space requires a combination of improved pedestrian space, traffic calming, and a substantial increase in greenery. As a first step, low-cost and reversible solutions – such as tactical urbanism and prototyping – should be considered as both functional and communicative tests.
2. Greenery and microclimate. Prioritise increasing the quantity and quality of greenery, including shade trees, structural planting, and multifunctional vegetation, and introduce retention elements and small-scale water infrastructure wherever possible. Green interventions should simultaneously calm traffic and create places to sit and rest.
3. Traffic and parking. Apply a combination of measures, including a central parking facility or peripheral parking, clear zoning of parking spaces (including short-term parking near services), traffic-calming tools such as one-way systems, chicanes, and modified street cross-sections, and testing models of time-restricted or paid parking. Develop all such measures in consultation with local businesses.
4. Programmatic integration. Spatial interventions should combine commercial, recreational, and cultural functions, including street furniture and event spaces, so that the Main Square may recover its role as a local service and social centre rather than functioning primarily as a parking area.

b) Governance measures

1. Phased strategy. A phased implementation model is recommended: Stage 0 – reorganisation of parking and designation of temporary zones; Stage 1 – traffic calming through narrowings, thresholds, surface changes, and parklets; Stage 2 – spatial reconstruction with pedestrian priority, plaza-type paving, and meeting spaces; Stage 3 – comprehensive integration of greenery and small-scale urban furniture. Each stage should include monitoring and user participation.
2. Participation and trial-and-learn. The design process should remain continuous – from diagnosis through implementation – with the active involvement of residents, businesses,

and administration. Recommended mechanisms include pilot projects, proposal exhibitions, workshops, surveys, temporary demonstrator installations, and evaluation phases. Communication should emphasise benefits for commercial functioning and accessibility, including deliveries and the needs of older users.

3. Implementation system and organisation. Establish an interdepartmental team or regeneration committee involving administration, residents, entrepreneurs, and experts to coordinate implementation stages, secure funding, and monitor outcomes. The use of digital tools for communication and data collection is also recommended.
4. Monitoring and adaptation. Introduce evaluation indicators, including modal split, user satisfaction, number of seats, share of greenery, and effects on local turnover, along with an adaptive mechanism based on observation and evaluation after each stage.
5. Education and consensus-building. Information activities that present successful transformation examples and pilot green infrastructure solutions may help reduce concerns among entrepreneurs and older residents about traffic restrictions.
6. Integration with local policies and strategic documents. Proposed changes should be embedded in local strategic documents and the municipal revitalisation programme in order to ensure continuity of funding and formal-legislative consistency.

6.2. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITIES AS A PREPARATORY FOREGROUND FOR FORMALISED PROCEDURES

a) Spatial measures

1. Iterative method: test → evaluate → adapt. Each pilot should have clearly defined objectives, indicators (number of users, length of stay, satisfaction, impact on local trade), and decision thresholds (stop / modify / scale). Decisions regarding permanent change should be based on pilot results.
2. Reversible interventions. Use pop-up plazas, movable street furniture, planted containers, temporary surfaces, and repeated activation scenarios to generate user data quickly and reduce resistance to change.
3. Facilitating acceptance among local businesses. Design parking and delivery solutions in parallel with spatial testing, including park-and-walk models, delivery zones, and short-term parking spaces. Communicate benefits clearly and consider temporary compensatory or promotional measures for local businesses during pilot phases. Scalability and funding. Transformation should begin with soft, low-cost interventions. Positive results may then help justify financial allocation for permanent stages such as renovation, reconstruction, paving replacement, and planting, and may support applications for external funding.

b) Governance measures

1. Prioritising soft measures. The transformation of local centres should begin with activation and participatory, low-cost interventions.
2. University–municipality–community cooperation. Consider a permanent cooperation agreement that specifies roles, responsibilities, rights to outcomes, and mechanisms for financing minor pilot costs.
3. Students as a practical resource. Student programmes – design studios, semester projects, student research

groups – may become a formal component of the process. They can generate proposals, document pilot projects, animate exhibitions and workshops, and provide consultation-related, pre-implementation material.

4. Continuous and multi-channel participation. The participatory process should extend from diagnosis through pilot testing to evaluation, combining offline formats such as walks, workshops, and exhibitions with online instruments such as surveys and feedback platforms, while ensuring accessibility for digitally excluded groups.
5. Communication and education. Use before-and-after visualisations, student models, and local case studies in communication activities. Information campaigns should start before pilot testing and continue throughout implementation. Document results in accessible report-infographic formats.
6. Monitoring and toolkit. Use simple, repeatable measurement tools, including short user surveys, traffic counts, and qualitative observation. A ready-to-use participatory toolkit – containing survey templates, checklists, and workshop

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scenarios – should be developed for other local government units.

7. Knowledge transfer. Promote the dissemination of student project outcomes and pilot results across municipalities as a low-cost way to scale up good practice.

Taken together, soft measures, the active integration of practical design education, and continuous, multi-channel social participation create an effective and low-risk path for the regeneration of local centres – from testing to durable spatial change.

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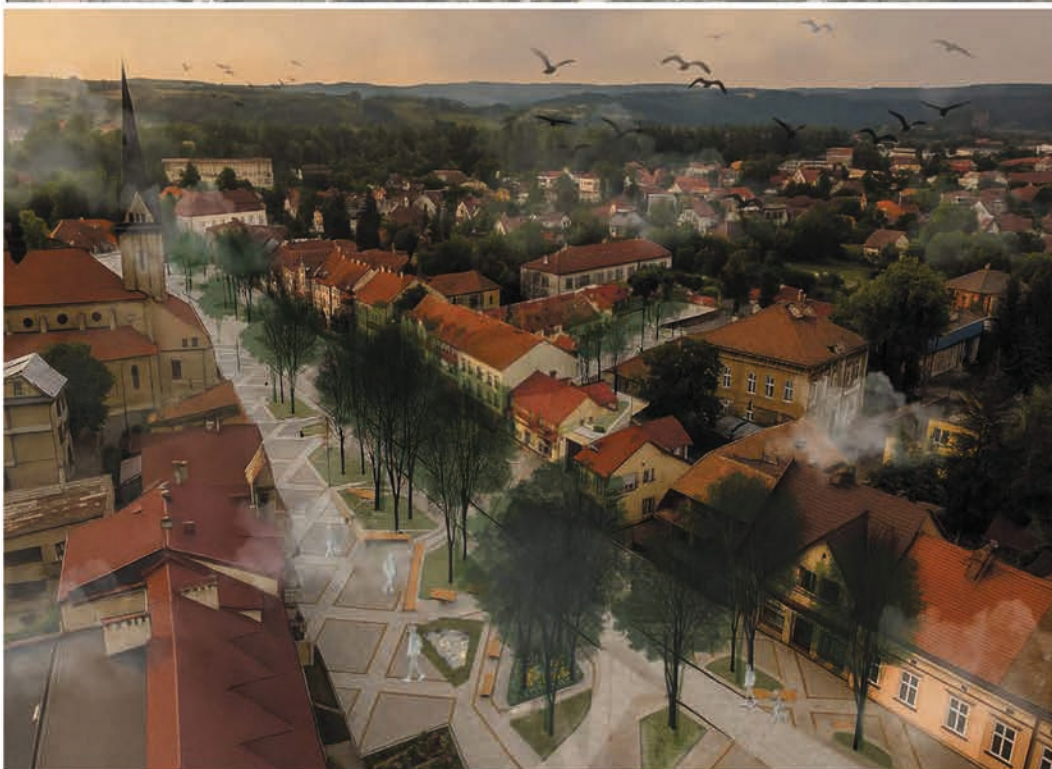
III. 3a–d. Plan (a) and three-dimensional views of Rynek Street in Dobczyce. The proposal focuses on improving pedestrian zones while leaving car traffic unchanged.
Source: student project by Aleksandra Jachymczyk, 2024



III. 5a–d. Plan (a) and three-dimensional views of Rynek Street in Dobczyce. A proposal representing the category focused on restricting car traffic and substantially transforming pedestrian space. Source: student project by Anna Orłowicz, 2025



III. 6a–d. Plan (a) and three-dimensional views of Rynek Street in Dobczyce. A proposal representing the category focused on partially excluding car traffic and substantially transforming pedestrian space. Source: student project by Karolina Michalec, 2024



III. 7a–d. Plan (a) and three-dimensional views of Rynek Street in Dobczyce. The proposal focuses on improving pedestrian zones while leaving car traffic largely unchanged, with only minimal narrowing of the carriageway. Source: student project by Joanna Okulska, 2025