Urban revitalisation and town centre management in Poland: Opportunities and challenges for the 21st century

Received (in revised form): 3rd October, 2008

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Abstract Urban revitalisation has been key to urban planning and the management of cities in Poland since the rebuilding of the country after World War II. It is only relatively recently, however, that strategic interpretations and practical applications of this concept have embraced its multifaceted nature beyond purely physical regeneration. Similarly, town centre management in Europe has evolved over the last 25 years from a reactive approach to the reinvigoration of urban areas increasingly under threat from global socio-economic trends to a strategic proposition with partnership working, competitiveness and sustainability at the forefront of its agenda. This paper briefly explores the parallels that exist in the historical evolution of place management and urban revitalisation within the Polish context and outlines a practical example of the development of one of Poland’s first fledgling town centre management schemes in the country’s second largest city, Łódź. Based on a bilingual analysis of current practice and published literature, this paper offers an insight into some of the opportunities and challenges facing the implementation of town centre management schemes in Poland as effective mechanisms for sustainable intervention at local level within the context of this country’s ambitious plans for urban revitalisation.

Keywords: Poland, town centre management, urban revitalisation, Łódź.
INTRODUCTION

Town centre management (TCM) and urban regeneration as multifaceted and multidisciplinary activities have enjoyed a growing level of interest in western Europe and North America from academic and practitioner communities over the last three decades.1–4

As former Eastern Block countries emerged from decades of under-investment in their towns and cities,5 a new dawn has emerged for urban revitalisation in countries such as Poland, where funding grants from the European Union (EU) have become available for large-scale physical and socio-economic development projects through the privatisation of spaces6 and large private–public partnership projects fuelled by a rapidly growing economy and major continental future sports events such as EURO 2012 — Europe’s premier football (soccer) championship of nations. Yet, in order to understand better the opportunities and challenges that this brings for foreign investors and local stakeholders, it is important to review the historical legacy of urban revitalisation in Poland. This paper provides a brief review of the concept of urban revitalisation in Poland, its evolution through time, and current debates regarding its future focus. It also explores the convergence that appears to exist between Poland’s strategic interpretation of urban revitalisation and modern European approaches to TCM. Building on previous published work in this field7 and a case study of a fledgling TCM scheme in Łódź, this paper investigates some of the opportunities and challenges associated with urban revitalisation initiatives and private–public TCM schemes in Poland, and attempts to offer an insight into the practical challenges ahead based on a bilingual analysis of sources in Polish and English.

TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT: TOWARDS A (CONCEPTUAL) DEFINITION?

In spite of the longevity of TCM as a research subject among academics and the fact that it has been practised following a variety of different models for over 25 years, a multitude of interpretations still exist as to the meaning of town (or city) centre management. In fact, a recent study of definitions of TCM carried out in conjunction with eight European country members of the Town Centre Management Europe (TOCEMA-Europe) network unveiled that no less than 35 definitions exist of this concept across Europe, with approaches that cover a wide spectrum of TCM partnerships.8 These may range from private-sector-led partnerships with limited formal legal structures9 to partnerships led and funded primarily from public funds by local authorities,10 including complex private–public initiatives with funding mechanisms inspired by the North American model of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).11 An additional layer of complexity has been highlighted by previous studies, which have shown that organisations’ interpretation of the role and goals of TCM can change considerably over time.12 Indeed, in the UK in 1991, TCM was seen more as a ‘a comprehensive response to competitive pressures, which involves development, management and promotion of both public and private areas within town centres, for the benefit of all concerned’.13 This definition of the concept had evolved by 2008 to a far more strategic and visionary approach proposed by the Association of Town Centre Management, the largest European national trade association of town centre managers, which sees TCM as
evidence would suggest that the management of towns and cities in Poland is not a new phenomenon at all.¹⁷

Historically, the first urban revitalisation initiatives started in Poland with the physical, economic and social rebuilding of the country following the end of Word War II. Although the concept was not known then as ‘urban revitalisation’, most of the interventions at local and regional levels would have been in line with today’s understanding of the concept. Nevertheless, the emphasis under communism was generally on functional urban planning, with little regard for local identity, heritage or aesthetics.¹⁸ This ‘quantitative’ approach to urban development resulted in much of the physical legacy of modern urban landscapes in Poland today, where infrastructure often dates back to the 1950s as a result of chronic under-investment by local authorities. The first integrated (physical and socio-economic) urban revitalisation interventions in Poland date to the early 1990s and were undertaken only tentatively by a limited number of cities. One such approach is that of urban revitalisation in Poland, which amalgamates elements of TCM, community planning and urban regeneration into a single integrated approach. It is through an understanding of this model, its historical evolution over time and its current practice and debates that a better understanding can be gained of the opportunities and challenges faced by emerging TCM schemes in Poland.

URBAN REVITALISATION IN POLAND: AN EVOLVING PARADIGM

Preliminary results of an ongoing study on conceptual interpretations of TCM among Town and City Mayors in Poland¹⁶ has shown that the majority of them do not understand what is meant by ‘town centre management’ or have never heard of the concept itself. Yet, historical and present practice-based evidence would suggest that the management of towns and cities in Poland is not a new phenomenon at all.¹⁷

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As the debate over the meaning and forms of urban revitalisation evolved, heritage conservation began to be recognised as a key element in urban revitalisation in 1999 as it became a ‘wide-ranging concept that encompasses various elements including heritage
sustainability and involvement of key stakeholders would appear to echo current strategic thinking and practice in TCM in Britain and many other European countries.

It is against this historical backdrop that present urban revitalisation initiatives exist today in cities such as Warsaw, Gdansk, Kraków, Lublin, Bielsko-Biała and Szczecin, among others, often supported by funding grants from the EU. A few of these have started making the operational transition from large strategic revitalisation plans to more localised TCM schemes. This is the case in cities and towns such as Łódź, Toruń and Bełchatów. As these fledgling schemes take shape and grow, it is becoming apparent that there are opportunities as well as challenges for various stakeholders, including local residents, visitors, local and national businesses, city councils or local authorities, urban development partnerships, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and management consultancies.

Although these will be explored and discussed generically at a national level further on in this paper, many of them are illustrated below in Łódź’s own transition from a city with visionary revitalisation plans centred around its historical heritage to one of Poland’s first public–private partnership TCM schemes.

**CASE STUDY OF TRANSITION FROM STRATEGIC URBAN REVITALISATION TO AN OPERATIONAL TCM SCHEME: ŁÓDŹ**

Łódź, the second largest city in Poland with a population of 767,628, is a city with a heritage shaped by migration and industry. Although it was granted ‘city’ status in 1423, Łódź owes much of its social, economic and architectural legacy to the textile industry, which dominated...
during Europe’s industrial revolution in the 19th century. In 1820, as the first textile factories emerged in Łódź, the city’s population grew from 25,000 to over 500,000 by 1910, with important ethnic German, Russian and Jewish communities. In fact, at the advent of World War I, 30 per cent of Łódź’s population was Jewish, and Łódź had become known ‘the Polish Manchester’ because of the textile mills and warehouses that dominated the city’s landscape, particularly around Piotrkowska Street, in the heart of today’s city centre. As the horrors of World War I and World War II ensued, these ethnic minorities dwindled, never to recover again, though they left behind a cultural mark that still forms part of the city’s identity today. Unlike other Polish cities, which suffered greatly during World War II, Łódź escaped relatively unscathed in architectural terms, as much of its urban layout from the 19th century remained intact. In spite of this, ensuing years of neglect under communism in terms of insufficient investment in infrastructure led to a progressive socio-economic decline, which often resulted in the demolition of many industrial heritage buildings and the progressive demise of the city centre, including Piotrkowska Street. Following on from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Poland entered a new geopolitical era in its history, as communist rule was replaced with a democratically elected government that sought to liberalise the country’s economy and attract foreign investment. In 2004, the country joined the EU, and large European funds began to target ambitious plans for urban revitalisation in Poland and other former Eastern Block countries such as Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. One of these initiatives was the (re)creation of Europe’s ‘longest shopping street’ in Piotrkowska, as the area was redesigned to include traffic-calming measures. Socially, this led to a progressive change in residents’ perception of the city, not only in terms of its liveability, but also in terms of their personal bond with the area.

Today, the initial impetus of revitalisation plans for Piotrkowska has stagnated somehow, and a new master plan is currently under development under the leadership of the City Council to address the area’s key problems, which include its dwindling sense of identity, poorly developed communication infrastructure, below-average safety record, lack of effective promotion and a need for more coordinated management. Thus, a special task force has been created by the City Council to provide innovative solutions to these problems. This task force, which has become known as ‘The Piotrkowska Team’, consists of city council officers and representatives of various stakeholder groups. The Piotrkowska Team has been charged with the task of exploring solutions that can be implemented into a place strategy document for Piotrkowska Street, focusing on a specific area — a 1.5-mile-long pedestrian section of the street. One of the main areas of concern remains the day-to-day management of the area and its links with future development plans. Following a review of different European models of urban revitalisation and TCM, the Piotrkowska Team has decided to pursue a TCM approach by hiring a manager, who will work initially in a coordinating capacity for a team of city council officers with the aim of implementing the recommendations put forward by the special task force group. As an interim measure, plans are currently under way to engage the services of various experts, who will work alongside the manager to provide technical support and know-how.
The final goal is that a decision-making structure is created that allows the day-to-day management of the area to be carried out by a not-for-profit private enterprise legally independent from the City Council.

These ambitious plans and opportunities are not without certain potential pitfalls. In spite of the general consensus that exists among stakeholders on the added value provided to the project by a manager, there is still uncertainty with regard to the implementation of these plans and the feasibility of a future management structure semi-independent in its decision making from that of the City Council. In fact, doubts still remain as to the actual level of decision-making autonomy and empowerment that the area manager will enjoy with respect to City Council officials in specialist departments (e.g. economic development, urban planning, environmental protection), particularly given that the City Council has been the main funding body behind Łódź's revitalisation projects. In spite of the private sector's growing involvement and financing of revitalisation initiatives over the last decade, current investment levels remain rather modest compared with those of real estate developers and local businesses in other European urban revitalisation initiatives (e.g. Sweden, the UK and Spain). Further concerns involve the future level of involvement of stakeholder representatives in the development and management of the Piotrkowska Street Partnership, which may jeopardise community engagement and, ultimately, stakeholders' sense of ownership over the entire revitalisation project.

DISCUSSION

In a country where the concept of ‘town centre management’ schemes remains relatively unknown among senior management officials in local authorities, cities such as Toruń, Łódź or Bęchatów would appear to be isolated examples of operational innovation not without their own challenges. Yet, these would appear to be representative of the country’s current situation and of mainstream thinking in many local authorities, where ambitious urban revitalisation plans and large-scale funding need to be translated into specific sustainable interventions on the ground. Hence, it would appear that, as TCM schemes begin to grow in one of their many (often hybrid) versions across Poland, local authorities will improve their understanding of these schemes and the crucial role that they can play in the local sustainability of larger-scale interventions through business engagement and community buy-in. In the UK, published evidence has shown that TCM schemes can offer important competitive advantages in terms of the robustness of decision making by bridging the abyss that often exists between large urban regeneration initiatives and effective community involvement.33,34 In spite of this, pitfalls may still exist in terms of the implementation of this concept in Poland, where many towns and cities continue to operate without an effective local economic development strategy or with an overall city strategy without a clear vision on promotion, management and development. Moreover, and in spite of improving standards of city marketing initiatives, many city promotion strategies in Poland have been criticised in the past for being “random and short-lived”36 or simply for an approach to marketing standardised in terms of content and devoid of any differentiating elements linked to place-specific uniqueness.37 As urban revitalisation in Poland finds itself at a crossroads in terms of development, it may inevitably stand at odds with its
partner of old — heritage conservation. Some authors have already foreseen this conflict and pointed out that perhaps the debate should be brought back to the very foundations of place promotion as a post-modernist reinvention of place identity where heritage is, at best, ignored in the name of progress and development.  

Although the answer to effective TCM in Poland lies, at least partly, in the country’s history, so do some of the challenges ahead. Several decades of communist rule have left a legacy at certain levels of local government that would appear to distrust the motives and/or ethics of private investors, thus making private–public partnerships an issue that the country is still trying to grapple with, though some cities, such as Wroclaw, appear to have found the right balance, partly through a clear strategic vision and political commitment from senior local government officials. In actual fact, evidence has shown that much of this reticence for effective cooperation between the private and public sectors can simply be the result of myths surrounding private–public partnerships rather than true unwillingness to cooperate.

CONCLUSIONS

Town centre management and urban revitalisation are concepts that defy a ‘static’ definition. There are a number of factors that may (partly) help to explain this. One the one hand, these multidisciplinary activities are commonly location-specific and provide solutions at operational and strategic levels to what tend to be local problems, even if they may be influenced by global trends. It would be a mistake to contemplate a standardised ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to TCM and urban revitalisation, even if there is a lot to be gained from examples of good practice worldwide. On the other hand, the evolving nature of cities, society, the economy and globalisation in all its inceptions will always affect professionals in TCM and urban revitalisation. The dynamic nature of the definitions reviewed here is a testimony not only of the legacy of these factors on the management of towns and cities but, more crucially, a forward-looking attitude by community leaders, city mayors and urban revitalisation professionals to anticipate change and adapt strategically in their search for competitiveness and sustainability.

Poland, like many other former Eastern bloc countries, faces a difficult dilemma: the need for (re)development of ageing infrastructures and city centres in light of decreasing levels of funding from central and local governments, coupled with a need for its cities to compete globally in terms of attractiveness to visitors and investors alike, while retaining suitable levels of liveability for its residents and local stakeholders. Even where funding grants for revitalisation initiatives are available from the EU and a good level of understanding of local issues and idiosyncrasies exists, the technical know-how, experience and investment levels of the private sector, often from foreign firms, can be key to the success of any revitalisation project. Łódź and many other cities in Poland are increasingly beginning to realise that it is not enough to tackle the complexities of urban revitalisation through comprehensive strategic planning. Much of the success in the implementation of master plans for physical and socio-economic development relies on the ability to engage key stakeholders and infuse them with a sense of real ownership over the interventions to be realised. TCM schemes can provide a successful mechanism to achieve this in a...
sustainable manner, particularly where public–private partnerships can be built and sustained over time. TCM, however, is not a panacea. Visionary leadership from a city’s senior officials coupled with a certain level of cross-party political consensus form an essential foundation for TCM schemes to develop, flourish and continue to provide an essential link between successful urban revitalisation and socio-economic sustainability.

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