

CHALLENGES OF URBAN REVITALISATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE ReNewTown PROJECT PERSPECTIVE AND BEYOND

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The project with the title *New Post-Socialist City: Competitive and Attractive* (in short the *ReNewTown* project: <http://www.renewtown.eu>) was implemented through the Central Europe Programme co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund in the period April 2011 – March 2014. Its primary focus was on reduction of disparities and improved quality of post-socialist urban environment (not only by positive transformation of residential landscapes but also by improved quality and accessibility of public spaces, increased provision of cultural and social events, increased support of entrepreneurial initiatives, strengthened identity, creation of common values, etc.). To this end four pilot actions (project investments) were implemented in post-socialist cities of four different Central and Eastern European countries:

- ArtZONA in Kraków (Poland): <http://www.renewtown.eu/artzona-krakow.html>.
- Centre for small and medium enterprises in Prague (Czech Republic): <http://www.renewtown.eu/smes-prague.html>.
- Museum of socialist curiosities in Hnúšťa (Slovakia): <http://www.renewtown.eu/museum-hnusta.html>.
- Renovation of a public space in Velenje (Slovenia): <http://www.renewtown.eu/renovation-velenje.html>.

In parallel to implementation of the pilot actions, numerous model approaches to socialist urban heritage revitalisation were identified in the process of both desk and field research. The collected cases from all across Europe were organized in two openly accessible project databases:

- Database of good practices: <http://www.renewtown.eu/good-practices.html>.
- Database of initiatives: <http://www.renewtown.eu/initiatives.html>.

The core six models of socialist urban heritage revitalisation are those directly related to the *ReNewTown* project key areas:

- Improved provision of local cultural and social events.

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- Improved public spaces between blocks of flats.
- Provision of support for the development of small business operators in the area of blocks of flats.
- Improved attractiveness of buildings from the socialist period.
- Promotion of the local community involvement in events organized in its quarter.
- New functions for structures from the socialist period.

In addition to these, other models of socialist urban heritage revitalisation we managed to identify in the framework of the *ReNewTown* project focus on:

- Use of voluntary work to improve post-socialist urban environment.
- Improved awareness of the socialist urban heritage.
- Improved energy efficiency of buildings from the socialist period.
- Direct involvement of the local community in decision-making processes on urban development projects.
- Shared maintenance responsibility between owners and users of buildings (not necessarily built during the socialist period but neglected during that time).
- Improved attractiveness of buildings built before and intentionally neglected during the socialist period (1945-1989/1991).

Further to model identification, we were also brought to acknowledge the fact that sometimes demolition of existing structures needs to pave the way for revitalization efforts. The main issue in such cases is the challenge to assign the proper content to newly created empty spaces.

The project databases of good practices and initiatives served as the invaluable source of information for three core project publications. Each of them builds on the identified models; each from a different perspective, aiming at a different target groups.

The so-called *Handbook of Models* with the title *Post-Socialist City: A Role Model for Urban Revitalisation in the 21st Century* (Ograjenšek, 2013) was developed for institutions, groups and individuals interested in positive transformation of urban environment at national, regional, and municipal level. It features selected case studies of identified models' implementation from the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, along with valuable lessons learned. These were obtained in in-depth interviews with individuals directly involved in models' implementation processes within their communities. The interviewees were not only given the opportunity to describe the positive aspects of their achievements, but also to state what they would do differently were they to launch the same project from scratch. One of the more prominent examples from the *Handbook*, the story of the Slovenian post-socialist industrial centre Velenje, is further elaborated from the internal city marketing perspective in Ograjenšek & Cirman (2015).

In addition, the *Handbook* also contains a showcase of benchmark analysis comparing attitudes of people living in post-socialist cities (Slovenian cities of Velenje and Nova Gorica were used as illustrative examples) with the attitudes of adult population in a selected

country (in this case Slovenia) towards urban development (past, present, and future), trends in population and business development, as well as social responsibility, values, and happiness. A set of relevant questionnaires is available in the *Handbook's* Appendix. The benchmark data served as inputs into in-depth analysis of community satisfaction in post-socialist cities; both their factors and implications (Cirman & Ogriajenšek, 2014).

The *Transnational Manual for Urban Revitalisation* (Hlaváček & Cingl, 2014) targets people who live in post-socialist urban environment. It offers inspiration and practical step-by-step guidelines on how to initiate and plan revitalisation activities using the bottom-up approach, secure funding, and start implementing creative solutions for positive urban transformation.

The *Transnational Development Strategy for the Post-Socialist Cities of Central Europe* (Węclawowicz, 2013) is a comprehensive text containing proposals for new urban policies, whose implementation seems vital in the post-socialist cities of Central (and Eastern) Europe but might also be applicable in the 21st century urban environment anywhere in the world.

All three core project publications were presented and discussed at the *ReNewTown Final Conference* (<http://konferencje.ef.uni-lj.si/renewtown/>) which took place at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Economics in February 2014. The conference aimed to provide a broader perspective on the competitiveness and attractiveness of post-socialist cities in Central and Eastern Europe by establishing a forum for exchange between academic researchers, urban planners and decision-makers dealing with these issues in the framework of, and beyond, the *ReNewTown* project. At the conference, special attention was given new economic and social functions of post-socialist buildings, public spaces, estates and/or districts; identity of, and differentiation among, post-socialist urban settlements; as well as values, well-being and sustainability challenge in post-socialist urban settlements.

Some of the ideas and insights from the conference are included in contributions to this special issue of *Economic and Business Review*.

Tomi Deutsch (2015) analyzes the real estate market in Slovenia and selected Slovenian city municipalities in order to establish whether or not it is possible to use the Housing Price Index as an indicator of urban development.

Magdalena Szmytkowska and Klaudia Nowicka (2015) deal with the problem of degraded post-industrial areas which characterize many post-socialist cities; in particular they focus on waterfronts. In their paper, they evaluate the directions of waterfront development in Poland.

Christina Götz, Ian Cooper and Krassimira Paskaleva-Shapira (2015) explore the potential of small-scale projects for urban regeneration, thus contributing to the scientific exchange about projects that are being implemented on the local level, by tackling the so-

cio-cultural dimension of urban life. Their arguments are built upon selected case studies from Eastern Germany.

Naja Marot (2015) reveals the importance of the youth in the redevelopment process of any post-industrial region. The basis for her discussion are two surveys performed among the youth in the Slovenian Zasavje region and its central town of Trbovlje.

Last but not least, Jana Barvíková (2015) discusses the results of the qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with respondents in their thirties (who as children at the age of 2-3 moved with their parents into the Prague housing estate Jižní Město in 1977-1978 and spent their childhood and adolescence there) and with their parents. The dataset allows for analysis of phenomena and processes that have been typical of large housing estates across Central and Eastern Europe in the past thirty years.

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I hope you will find the special issue informative and inspirational.

Irena Ograjenšek
Guest Editor

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