

From Philosophy to Practice: Città Slow and Green Space Planning in Small Urban Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophy and principles of the Città Slow (Slow City) movement, which promotes a mindful and measured lifestyle in small urban environments. It explores how towns worldwide adopt these principles to strengthen community identity, preserve local traditions, and support environmental awareness. The study focuses on the Supra-Local Revitalization Program in selected towns in the Warmia and Mazury region of Poland, highlighting public space projects aligned with the movement's values. Special attention is given to the role of greenery in urban planning, showing how green infrastructure improves aesthetics, fosters social cohesion, and enhances environmental resilience. The paper offers insights into the practical benefits of applying Città Slow principles for sustainable urban revitalization.

Keywords

Città Slow, sustainable urbanism, public space revitalization, green infrastructure, community identity, Supra-Local Revitalization Programme

Izvleček

Od filozofije k praksi: Città Slow in načrtovanje zelenih površin v majhnih urbanih skupnostih

Ta članek preučuje filozofijo in načela gibanja Città Slow (počasno mesto), ki spodbuja premišljen in uravnotežen življenjski slog v manjših urbanih okoljih. Raziskuje, kako mesta po svetu sprejemajo ta načela za krepitev identitete skupnosti, ohranjanje lokalnih tradicij in spodbujanje okoljske ozaveščenosti. Študija se osredotoča na nadlokalni program revitalizacije v izbranih mestih v regiji Warmia in Mazury na Poljskem ter izpostavlja projekte javnih prostorov, ki sledijo vrednotam gibanja. Posebna pozornost je namenjena vlogi zelenih površin v urbanističnem načrtovanju, saj zelena infrastruktura izboljšuje estetiko, krepi družbeno povezanost in povečuje okoljsko odpornost. Članek ponuja vpogled v praktične koristi uporabe načel gibanja Città Slow pri trajnostni urbani revitalizaciji.

Ključne besede

Città Slow, trajnostni urbanizem, revitalizacija javnega prostora, zelena infrastruktura, identiteta skupnosti, nadlokalni program revitalizacije



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1 Introduction

In an era marked by rapid urbanization and globalization, small cities around the world are facing mounting challenges in maintaining a balance between economic growth and the preservation of local identity, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability. These pressures often result in development strategies that prioritize modernization at the expense of social cohesion and ecological integrity. In response to these dynamics, the Città Slow (Slow City) movement has emerged as a counter-model, promoting an alternative, more deliberate, and community-focused approach to urban development. Originating in Italy in 1999, the movement has evolved into a global network of towns committed to improving the quality of life for their residents through locally tailored, sustainable, and participatory practices.

The Città Slow philosophy is rooted in the values of "slow living", an ethos that encourages cities to resist homogenization, value local traditions, support small-scale economies, and prioritize environmental stewardship. Rather than rejecting progress, Città Slow redefines it through the lens of human well-being, environmental balance, and place-based identity. These ideas are particularly relevant for small cities, which often possess unique cultural and spatial assets but lack the resources or political visibility of larger urban centers.

Despite a growing body of literature on sustainable urbanism and alternative urban models (see for example Kerbler, 2011; Kušar, 2012), there is still a lack of empirical studies that explore how Città Slow principles are translated into specific planning practices, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining the practical implementation of Città Slow ideas in selected small towns within the Warmia and Mazury region of Poland. The analysis focuses on the Supra-Local Revitalization Program (2015), which aimed to revitalize urban spaces in alignment with values such as social inclusion, ecological awareness, and local distinctiveness.

A central focus of the study is the role of greenery and green infrastructure in public space design, which is examined not only as a visual or ecological asset but as a strategic tool for reinforcing social cohesion and resilience in small urban communities. The paper thus aims to demonstrate how specific spatial interventions inspired by the Città Slow movement can become catalysts for broader cultural, social, and environmental transformations.

The main research objective of this paper is to analyze how the principles of the Città Slow movement are operationalized through urban revitalization initiatives in small Polish towns, with a particular emphasis on the planning and integration of green public spaces. Through this lens, the study contributes new insights into the adaptive application of global sustainability frameworks at the local level and highlights the potential of small cities to serve as laboratories for innovative, people-centered urbanism.

2 Literature review

The Città Slow (Slow City) movement emerged in Italy in 1999 as a grassroots response to the socio-spatial consequences of accelerated globalization, standardization of urban environments, and the loss of local distinctiveness. Rooted in the values of the Slow Food movement, it promotes a slower, more sustainable

lifestyle, emphasizing quality of life, environmental stewardship, participatory governance, and the preservation of local culture and traditions. The movement's holistic approach encourages towns to foster long-term resilience by balancing modernization with local identity and environmental responsibility (Farelnik et al., 2020; Zawadzka, 2017 Zielinska-Szczepkowska et al., 2021).

To be officially recognized as a *Città Slow*, a city must join the international network and meet a comprehensive set of criteria encompassing areas such as land use planning, energy policy, mobility, environmental protection, infrastructure, and social cohesion. According to Kaczmarek and Kaczmarek (2024), motivations for joining the network vary by region and context, but often include a desire to distinguish small towns from larger urban centers and to articulate a strategic development path based on sustainability and heritage.

Città Slow has been interpreted through various theoretical lenses, ranging from urban resilience and place-based development to critiques of consumerism and growth-driven planning. For instance, Amrhein and Hospers (2025) analyze whether the movement should be seen as part of a "degrowth" paradigm or as a tool for place marketing. Their case study of Artà (Mallorca) shows that while some implementations align with anti-growth values, others instrumentalize *Città Slow* as a branding mechanism for tourism and economic repositioning.

The social dimension of *Città Slow* is particularly significant. As shown by Küçükerşin et al. (2024), local support for the movement is often contingent on perceived social changes, including shifts in demographics, political priorities, or cultural values. Public acceptance may be encouraged by a sense of place and community identity, but discouraged if the movement is seen as elitist or disconnected from local needs.

In parallel, the movement's influence on tourism has become a topic of increasing academic interest. In their recent study, Ozer et al. (2025) demonstrate how strategic promotion of *Città Slow* values via social media can shape tourists' perceptions and behavioral responses, contributing to increased visitation and local economic benefits in smaller destinations. This suggests that the movement can be leveraged not only as a planning philosophy but also as a branding strategy, although tensions may arise between authenticity and commodification.

In the Polish context, researchers have explored both the motivations for joining the network and the practical implications for urban policy. Kaczmarek and Kaczmarek (2024) highlight that Polish towns often treat *Città Slow* membership as a strategic opportunity to enhance their development profiles, especially in regions with limited economic potential. Similarly, Jaszczak et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of integrating *Città Slow* values into regional and local planning frameworks to strengthen spatial cohesion and community resilience.

Revitalization efforts in *Città Slow* towns typically involve multi-dimensional strategies aimed at increasing both livability and sustainability. These may include:

- Enhancing public spaces - well-designed parks, plazas, and pedestrian zones that foster social interaction and inclusivity;
- Supporting local economies - promotion of local products, crafts, and services through business support and community initiatives;
- Promoting sustainable mobility - encouragement of walking, cycling, and public transport to reduce environmental impact and improve accessibility;

- Preserving cultural heritage - protection and promotion of local architecture, festivals, cuisine, and traditions;
- Encouraging participatory governance - citizen involvement in planning processes via consultations, workshops, and community forums.

As Zielinska-Szczepkowska et al. (2021) and Farelnek et al. (2020) note, the success of such initiatives depends not only on institutional capacity but also on deep civic engagement and long-term political commitment. Moreover, revitalization within the Città Slow framework is not merely about infrastructure renewal—it is about reinforcing the social fabric and environmental integrity of small urban communities.

Furthermore, comparative international research (e.g., from Italy, Germany, Spain, Turkey, and the Netherlands) confirms the global adaptability of the Città Slow model. Studies from Amrhein and Hospers (2025) and Ozer et al. (2025) underline how different socio-political and cultural contexts shape the implementation of slow principles, highlighting the importance of local interpretation of global sustainability narratives.

The growing body of academic literature points to the Città Slow movement as both a symbolic framework and a practical tool for sustainable urban transformation. However, critical perspectives remind us that implementation is highly context-dependent and may oscillate between meaningful reform and superficial branding.

3 Methods and study area

The study focuses on fourteen towns located in north-eastern Poland within the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (Figure 1). These towns were selected for analysis due to their membership in the Association of Cittaslow Towns in the region. Their shared geographical location, along with similar spatial, economic, and social characteristics, makes them a relevant case for study. Additionally, all these towns participated in a joint Supra-Local Revitalization Program (SRLP) launched in 2014 (Stowarzyszenie „Polskie Miasta Cittaslow”, 2015), which enabled them to apply collectively for project funding in their respective municipalities.

The analyzed towns include: Barczewo, Biskupiec, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Gołdap, Górowo Iławeckie, Lidzbark Warmiński, Lubawa, Nidzica, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, Olsztynek, Pasym, Reszel, and Ryn (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Location of fourteen selected Cittaslow Towns in Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, Poland
Author: Jaszcak, 2025

This study employs a monographic analysis to examine the application of Città Slow principles in the revitalization of small urban environments. The research focuses on the Supra-Local Revitalization Program and local strategies in selected towns within the Warmia and Mazury region of Poland, assessing how public space projects align with the movement's core values.

The monographic approach involves an in-depth qualitative examination of selected towns participating in the Supra-Local Revitalization Program. This includes a review of municipal documents, planning strategies, and policy frameworks that guide urban renewal efforts. Special attention is given to:

1. The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans,
2. The role of public space projects in fostering community identity and sustainability,
3. Strategies for enhancing green infrastructure and its impact on social and environmental resilience.

Data sources include official reports, urban planning documents, local policy guidelines, and municipal revitalization strategies, supplemented by literature on sustainable urbanism and slow city development. By combining these analytical approaches, the study provides a comprehensive evaluation of how small cities implement Città Slow values in urban planning and development. The findings offer insights into the effectiveness of the Supra-Local Revitalization Program and its contributions to sustainable urban revitalization in the Warmia and Mazury region.

4 Results

4.1 The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans

The research on the integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans, based on the SRLP, focused on the towns listed above. The majority of the towns involved in the revitalization process demonstrated a high level of awareness of Città Slow principles, particularly in terms of promoting local heritage, sustainability, and community-centered development. Several municipalities incorporated these principles into their urban and rural planning documents, though the degree of integration varied across the towns. Towns like Lidzbark Warmiński, Reszel, and Olsztynek were the most active in adapting the Città Slow ideals into their urban development policies. Six key issues regarding the connections between Città Slow principles and local development plans were identified during the research, including: heritage preservation and local identity, sustainable mobility, sustainable environmental practices, community involvement, economic and social revitalization, impact on regional cohesion.

The towns under analysis showed strong efforts towards preserving local cultural and architectural heritage, a key tenet of the Città Slow movement. Historical buildings, town squares, and local landmarks were central to revitalization plans. Barczewo, Lidzbark Warmiński and Górowo Iławeckie, for example, included heritage preservation as a primary focus of their development plans, with specific projects aimed at restoring and maintaining historical landmarks to enhance local identity. Many of the towns included plans for improving sustainable mobility, an essential aspect of Città Slow. This included prioritizing pedestrian zones, bike paths, and improving public transportation options to reduce reliance on private cars. Biskupiec, Gołdap, Lidzbark Warmiński focused on improving green transportation networks, making it easier for residents and visitors to move around in an eco-friendly manner. Several towns adopted environmental initiatives aimed at sustainability. For instance, the integration of green spaces, the promotion of local agriculture, and energy-efficient infrastructure were common in the revitalization strategies. Olsztynek and Lubawa stood out for implementing green energy projects and ensuring sustainable waste management systems were a key part of their local development.

The research also highlighted the importance of community involvement in the planning and decision-making processes. Città Slow emphasizes the need for local participation in the development of the urban environment. In towns like Biskupiec, Reszel, Dobrze Miasto and Bisztynek, there were notable efforts to involve local residents through public consultations, workshops, and initiatives aimed at fostering social inclusion and cohesion. Economic revitalization was a central focus for many of the towns, aligning with the Città Slow principle of fostering a high quality of life. The towns have increasingly focused on supporting local businesses, especially those that

align with sustainable practices. Additionally, there were efforts to diversify the local economy by promoting tourism and leveraging the region's natural and cultural resources. For example, Nidzica, Reszel, Lidzbark Warmiński, Barczewo and Nowe Miasto Lubawskie are focusing on cultural tourism, Biskupiec, Gołdap and Ryn on leisure tourism and Bisztynek, Dobrze Miasto and Górowo Iławeckie on rural tourism as a key driver of local development.

Despite the positive integration of Città Slow principles, challenges remain. The degree of implementation was uneven, with some towns facing difficulties in fully adopting the principles due to limited financial resources or resistance to change from local authorities or residents. Additionally, the lack of coordinated efforts across the towns sometimes led to fragmented development plans that lacked consistency. Issues with bureaucracy and slow decision-making processes were identified as barriers in some areas.

The overall impact on regional cohesion was positive. While each town had its own development strategies, the integration of Città Slow principles within the broader framework of the Supralocal Revitalisation Programme contributed to a more unified regional identity. Efforts to promote sustainable tourism, protect cultural heritage, and prioritize environmental sustainability have laid the groundwork for long-term regional development.

The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans for the Warmia and Mazury Voivodship has been successful to varying degrees across the towns analyzed. While some towns have made significant strides in implementing sustainable development, heritage preservation, and community-centered initiatives, challenges such as financial constraints, inconsistent implementation, and coordination issues remain. Moving forward, a more cohesive and regionally coordinated approach, supported by adequate funding and greater community engagement, is crucial for the continued success of these efforts (Figure 2).

4.2 The role of public space projects in fostering community identity and sustainability

Public space projects in the Città Slow towns of Warmia and Mazury played a significant role in fostering community identity and sustainability. These initiatives enhanced social inclusion, improved environmental sustainability, and contributed to local economic development. However, challenges such as financial limitations and the need for better coordination between stakeholders need to be addressed to ensure the continued success of these projects. Going forward, a more integrated approach to urban planning and greater community involvement will be key to achieving the long-term goals of fostering vibrant, sustainable communities in these towns.

The integration of public spaces in the revitalization plans of these towns has played a crucial role in fostering a sense of community identity. Many towns focused on preserving and enhancing their historical and cultural heritage through the renovation of public squares, parks, and cultural centers. For example, in Barczewo, Lidzbark Warmiński, Biskupiec and Reszel, public space projects incorporated local traditions, architecture, and materials, emphasizing the towns' historical character. These initiatives helped residents reconnect with their local heritage and take pride in their town's identity, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. Public space projects in Città Slow towns were designed to encourage social interaction and participation from all

segments of the community. In several towns, public spaces were transformed into multi-functional areas that serve as venues for events, markets, and community activities. In Biskupiec and Pąsym, for instance, new public squares and parks became hubs for social gatherings, fostering stronger community ties and promoting a sense of collective ownership. These spaces also offered a platform for local artists, artisans, and businesses to showcase their work, further enhancing the social fabric of these towns.

A key feature of public space projects in Città Slow towns was their emphasis on sustainability. Efforts to create environmentally friendly and energy-efficient spaces were evident in many of the towns. For instance, in Gołdap and Olsztynek, public spaces were designed with green infrastructure elements such as rain gardens and sustainable materials. These eco-friendly initiatives not only improved the environmental quality of public spaces but also raised awareness among residents about the importance of sustainable urban design.

Public space projects aimed to improve accessibility and connectivity within the towns, making it easier for residents to navigate and interact with their environment. The development of pedestrian zones, cycling paths, and public transport hubs was a priority in several towns, such as Lidzbark Warmiński and Lubawa. These improvements encouraged sustainable mobility and helped create a more connected, cohesive urban fabric, enhancing residents' overall quality of life.

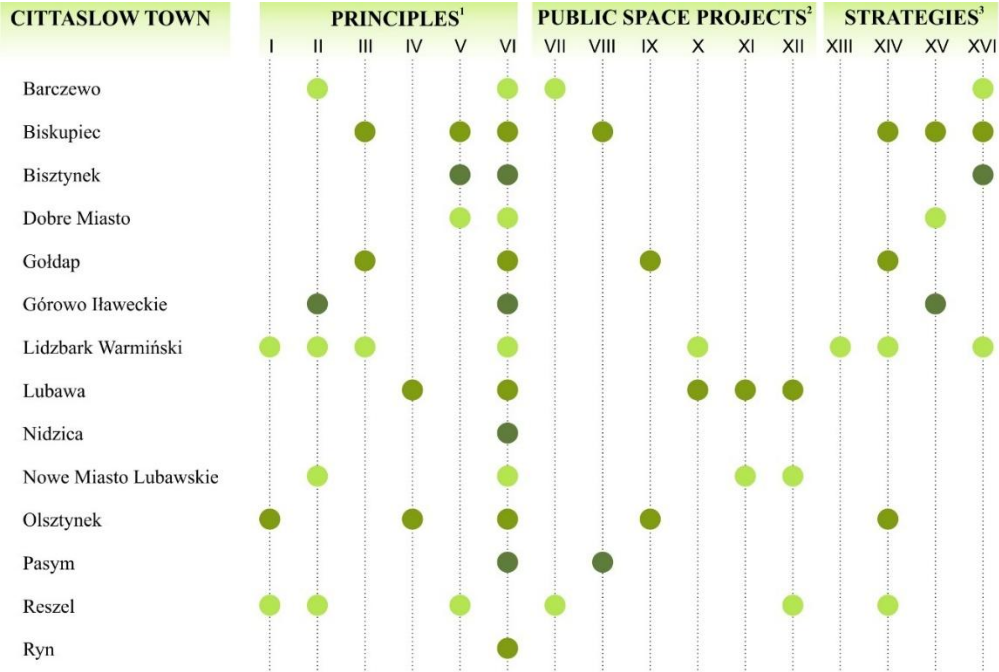
Public space projects were also instrumental in the revitalization of underutilized or neglected areas. In towns like Nidzica and Lidzbark Warmiński, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, previously neglected spaces, such as industrial zones or abandoned lots, were transformed into vibrant parks, plazas, and recreational areas. These revitalized spaces not only provided recreational opportunities for residents but also contributed to the aesthetic and environmental improvement of the towns, positively affecting residents' well-being and attracting visitors.

A central theme in the public space projects across the Città Slow towns was the integration of nature with urban design. Parks, green spaces, and tree-lined streets were designed to provide residents with access to nature, promote environmental sustainability, and improve mental and physical well-being. In towns such as Górowo Iławeckie and Dobre Miasto, the careful planning of green spaces allowed residents to enjoy nature without leaving the urban environment, helping to balance urban development with the preservation of natural beauty (Figure 2).

4.3 Strategies for enhancing green infrastructure and its impact on social and environmental resilience

The integration of green infrastructure strategies in Città Slow towns has significantly contributed to enhancing social and environmental resilience. These initiatives have improved public health, supported biodiversity, and strengthened climate adaptation efforts. However, continued investment, community engagement, and policy support are needed to ensure the long-term success of green infrastructure projects. Future strategies should focus on expanding green networks, fostering public-private partnerships, and integrating green solutions into broader urban development policies. Major strategy implemented in the towns was the expansion and improvement of urban green spaces, including parks, tree-lined streets, and green corridors. These initiatives aimed to increase biodiversity, improve air quality, and

provide spaces for recreation and relaxation. For instance, in Lidzbark Warmiński and Reszel, revitalization projects focused on restoring historic parks and integrating new green areas into the urban landscape, strengthening both ecological value and cultural identity. Many towns prioritized tree planting campaigns to enhance urban forests and mitigate the effects of climate change. Increasing tree cover helps reduce urban heat islands, improve air quality, and provide habitat for wildlife. In few cittaslow towns, extensive tree planting programs focused on both native and resilient tree species to enhance long-term ecosystem stability and contribute to a healthier urban environment. Green infrastructure was integrated into public spaces to create multifunctional areas that promote social well-being while supporting ecological sustainability. Projects in Biskupiec, Lidzbark Warmiński, Gołdap and Olsztynek involved the transformation of city squares and pedestrian zones by incorporating green areas and shaded seating areas. These enhancements provided aesthetic value, encouraged social interaction, and improved urban microclimates. Efforts to protect local biodiversity and enhance habitat connectivity were observed in towns such as Górowo Iławeckie, Biskupiec, Reszel and Dobrze Miasto. Green infrastructure strategies included the creation of pollinator-friendly gardens, wetland restoration, and the preservation of natural buffer zones around urban areas. These initiatives aimed to maintain ecological balance while fostering environmental stewardship among residents. A key aspect of green infrastructure development was the active involvement of local communities. Many towns launched educational campaigns and citizen participation programs to promote green practices. In Biskupiec, Lidzbark Warmiński, Barczewo and Bisztynek, residents were engaged in urban gardening projects, tree planting events, and ecological workshops to raise awareness about the benefits of green infrastructure (Figure 2).



¹ The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans.
² The role of public space projects in fostering community identity and sustainability, for the analysed Cittaslow Towns
³ Strategies for enhancing green infrastructure and its impact on social and environmental resilience
I. Awareness and Commitment to Città Slow Principles
II. Promoting Social Inclusion and Participation
III. Sustainable Mobility
IV. Sustainable Environmental Practices
V. Community Involvement
VI. Economic and Social Revitalization
VII. Strengthening Community Identity through Public Space
VIII. Promoting Social Inclusion and Participation
IX. Sustainability in Public Space Design
X. Enhancing Accessibility and Connectivity
XI. Fostering Local Economic Growth
XII. Integration of Nature and Urban Design
XIII. Expansion and Enhancement of Urban Green Spaces
XIV. Integration of Green Infrastructure with Public Spaces
XV. Biodiversity Conservation and Habitat Protection
XVI. Community Engagement and Green Awareness Programs

Figure 2: Matrix of Key Analyzed Assumptions in Relation to Cittaslow Town Plans, Strategies, and the Supra-local Revitalization Program.
Author: Jaszczak, 2025

4 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the transformative impact of the Città Slow movement on small city revitalization and public space design. By integrating sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement, cities aligned with the movement foster environments that are not only aesthetically appealing but also socially and environmentally resilient. The analysis of the Supra-Local Revitalization Program and local strategies in the Warmia and Mazury region highlights how strategic green infrastructure planning reinforces these principles, promoting inclusivity and ecological sustainability.

The implementation of *Città Slow* principles in Warmia and Mazury aligns with similar efforts worldwide. For instance, in Orvieto, Italy, one of the pioneering *Città Slow* cities, urban planners have prioritized pedestrian-friendly spaces and the promotion of local artisanal industries to maintain cultural heritage while fostering economic resilience (Knox & Mayer 2009). Similarly, towns in South Korea, such as Changpyeong, have leveraged traditional architecture and slow food initiatives to boost tourism and local engagement (Lee, C. 2011). These cases illustrate how the movement's tenets-prioritizing quality of life over rapid development-can be effectively applied in diverse sociocultural contexts.

A notable parallel can be drawn with the revitalization efforts in Aylsham, UK, where the town council implemented slow mobility strategies, including expanded cycling networks and pedestrian-friendly zones. This approach not only reduced vehicular congestion but also enhanced social interactions among residents, reinforcing the significance of urban design in fostering a sense of community (Heitmann et al. 2011). These examples illustrate that while each city tailors *Città Slow* strategies to its unique characteristics, the overarching emphasis remains on sustainable growth and place-based identity.

The global application of *Città Slow* principles offers crucial insights for urban policymakers. The integration of green infrastructure, as demonstrated in Warmia and Mazury, is a replicable strategy that enhances environmental sustainability while creating attractive communal spaces. Similarly, prioritizing local craftsmanship and cultural heritage, as seen in Orvieto, can bolster local economies and reinforce distinctive urban identities.

Moreover, fostering public participation in urban planning processes is essential. Studies have shown that community-led initiatives in *Città Slow* cities lead to higher levels of civic engagement and social cohesion (Mayer & Knox, 2006). As seen in Aylsham, providing opportunities for active mobility strengthens both environmental sustainability and social interaction, reinforcing the broader ethos of slow urbanism. The *Città Slow* movement presents a viable model for sustainable urban revitalization, particularly in small cities seeking to preserve their unique character while adapting to contemporary challenges. The case studies discussed illustrate the universal applicability of these principles, demonstrating how the movement transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. By prioritizing ecological sustainability, cultural authenticity, and inclusive public spaces, *Città Slow* cities serve as exemplars of mindful urban development. Future research should explore the long-term socioeconomic impacts of these initiatives, assessing their scalability and integration into broader urban policies. Ultimately, embracing *Città Slow* principles offers a pathway toward more livable, sustainable, and resilient urban environments.

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Povzetek

Ta študija analizira izvajanje načel gibanja Città Slow v štirinajstih mestih v vojvodstvu Varminsko-mazursko na severovzhodu Poljske, ki sodelujejo v nadlokalnem programu revitalizacije (SRLP), ki se je začel leta 2014. Teoetični pristop vključuje pregled občinskih dokumentov, razvojnih strategij in lokalnih politik, s poudarkom na vključevanju načel Città Slow, vlogi javnih prostorov in zeleni infrastrukturi v urbanem razvoju, pa tudi preučitev dejanskih projektov, izvedenih v okviru SRLP, ter njihovega vpliva na večsmerni razvoj teh mest.

Rezultati kažejo, da večina mest izkazuje visoko raven zavedanja načel Città Slow, zlasti glede ohranjanja kulturne dediščine, trajnostne mobilnosti, udeležbe lokalne skupnosti in podpore lokalnemu gospodarstvu. Javni prostori, kot so trgi, parki in rekreacijska območja, spodbujajo družbeno povezanost, utrjujejo lokalno identiteto in spodbujajo okoljsko izobraževanje. Vpeljevanje zelene infrastrukture, vključno s parki, zelenimi površinami in rekreacijskimi prostori, krepi ekološko in družbeno ozaveščenost. Kljub pozitivnim rezultatom so se nekatera mesta soočala z izzivi, povezanimi z omejenimi finančnimi viri, usklajevanjem ukrepov in odporom lokalnih deležnikov. Na splošno vključevanje načel Città Slow prispeva k boljši regionalni povezanosti, trajnostnemu razvoju in višji kakovosti življenja. To poudarja potrebo po nadaljnji krepitvi regionalnega sodelovanja in vključevanju lokalnih skupnosti.

