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A COOLTURAL RIVER IN THE CAPITAL OF CULTURE

COOLTURALNA RZEKA W STOLICY KULTURY

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Summary: Nowadays, making cities more attractive is becoming increasingly important. Cities are shrinking, which contributes to many other problems major cities are currently facing. Local governments try to mitigate their negative effects by making their cities more attractive to the young. One of the ways of doing so, is to utilize already possessed resources. In this short article, the author analyzes the promotion of the river Odra during the European capital of culture held in Wrocław in 2016 and compares it with river themed events organized during the previous year (2015). She also analyzes the river's attractiveness to the young, as they are the city's target group in terms of preventing Wrocław's shrinkage. She also concentrates on the phenomenon of shrinking cities. In conclusion, the article tries to prove that Wrocław's main river, the Odra, is utilized not only by governmental bodies but also private and individual initiatives. The young inhabitants of Wrocław see and acknowledge its importance to the city, and what is more, it has become a place for everyone, regardless of age, gender or hobby. However, its media presence should be emphasized more in the future, during international festivals or cultural events such as the European Capital of Culture.

Keywords: Wrocław, European Capital of Culture, river, Odra, shrinking cities.

Streszczenie: Zwiększanie atrakcyjności miast staje się obecnie coraz istotniejsze. Miasta ulegają procesowi kurczenia, co prowadzi do wielu problemów, którym obecnie muszą sprostać. Lokalne władze próbują amortyzować negatywne skutki tego procesu poprzez stworzenie atrakcyjnej oferty dla młodych ludzi. Jednym ze sposobów jest wykorzystanie posiadanych zasobów. W artykule autorka analizuje promocję rzeki Odry podczas Europejskiej Stolicy Kultury we Wrocławiu w 2016 roku oraz porównuje to do wydarzeń związanych z rzeką organizowanych w roku poprzednim (2015). Autorka analizuje również rzekę pod względem atrakcyjności dla młodych ludzi, których Wrocław powinien przyciągać, by zapobiec kurczeniu się miasta. Artykuł kończy się wnioskami, z których wynika, że główna rzeka Wrocławia, Odra, jest wykorzystywana nie tylko przez władzę, ale również w ramach prywatnych, indywidualnych inicjatyw. Młodzi mieszkańcy Wrocławia dostrzegają i doceniają jej wagę dla miasta, co więcej, rzeka staje się miejscem dla wszystkich, bez względu na wiek, płeć czy zainteresowania. Jednakże jej istota powinna być bardziej podkreślona i wypromowana w przyszłości, podczas międzynarodowych festiwali czy wydarzeń kulturalnych, takich jak Europejska Stolica Kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: Wrocław, Europejska Stolica Kultury, rzeka, Odra, kurczenie się miast.

1. Introduction – the phenomenon of shrinking cities

History shows that the formation, development and collapse of cities is a cyclic phenomenon. It refers to both: little country towns and great “metropolis” like Karakorum, Tikal or palaces on the Palatine Hill [Trębacz 2013, p. 84]. The fall of the Roman Empire or catastrophes like wars, fires, earthquakes and diseases led to the same phenomenon throughout history, with one difference: cities in the past seemed to have recovered shortly after these disasters, whereas the cities of today slowly, yet steadily shrink as their result [Schett 2011, p. 2].

Fundamental socio-economic, institutional and demographic changes took place at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. The rapid development of medicine (especially contraception), changing family patterns and social values, all had a bearing on the decrease of births rates, the aging of society and finally, the drop of the number of people living in cities. This process is also strongly related to suburbanization [Kryńska 2015, p. 175].

The number of people over 60 is rising by about 2 mln each year (nearly double the number from 3 years ago) in the European Union alone. The small population rise observed throughout the years within most of the European Union’s member states is rather a result of an influx of immigrants or migrants, as the birth rate is significantly lower from the inter-generational replacement ratio [Unia Europejska 2011, p. 15].

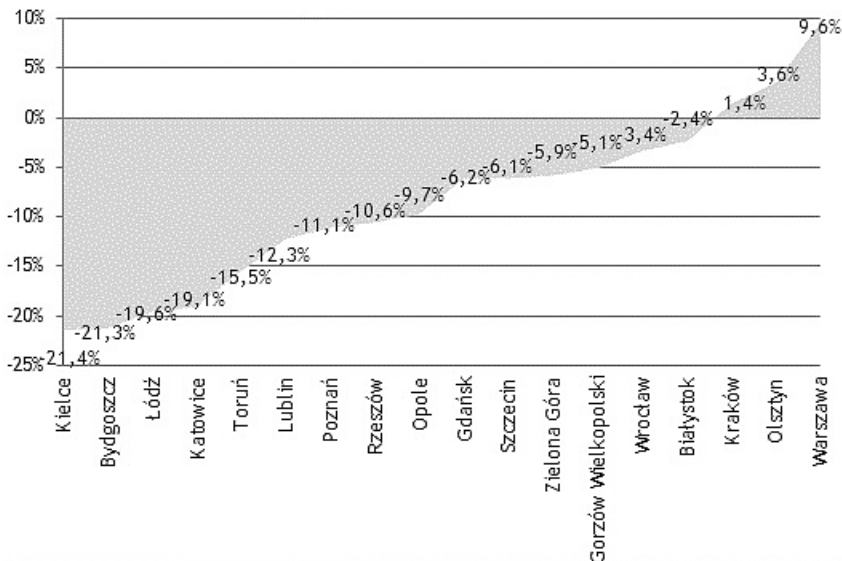


Figure 1. Forecast of changes in population rate between 2012-2035

Source: [<http://www.money.pl> (access 2.05.2016)].

“Shrinking cities” is a long-term phenomenon in which one observes a decrease in the population rate connected with local economy crisis and growing social problems. It is also associated with an increase of criminality, a drop in the market value of properties and a fall in the quality of life, coupled with the increased costs of public services [Hummel 2014, p. 398].

This problem has also reached Poland. According to a forecast concerning population changes, only three Polish cities will avoid the problem of “shrinking cities”. It is probable that the cure to this problem lies in the understanding of reasons behind it and consequences arising from it, that will help prepare counteractive measures, like making cities more attractive to young people.

The article aims to show just how important the river Odra is to Wrocław’s development and attractiveness, especially in its cultural aspect. The study uses Wrocław, the 2016 European Capital of Culture, as an empirical example. The author produced an analysis of the influence of international cultural events, such as the ECC, on the promotion of the river Odra in Wrocław, presenting how they made the city seem more attractive, making its image more recognizable in the world. The issue of how the increase of a city’s attractiveness mitigates the risk of future shrinkage foreseen by GUS in the 2030’s is a topic which deserves a separate study and thus will not be discussed in this paper. The paper was written using methodology: literature analysis, observation and questionnaire.

2. The utilization of already possessed resources

There are many way of mitigating the negative effects of “shrinking cities” called “interventions” [Damurski 2016]. However, the most evident policy is attracting people to the city. Young people are most desired in cities as they are responsible for their development. At the same time, they expect to lead high quality lives in them that enable to start families [Hausner et al. 2013]. Cities should not only ensure adequate and proper public services and amenities but also become places characterized by:

- openness to change and diversity,
- tolerance,
- rich cultural life,
- sustainable development.

City’s attractiveness depends on investing in innovations, new forms of culture, recreation, sports, as well as on utilizing pre-existing resources like rivers, seas, green areas or even the climate, in unconventional ways. The process should be holistically beneficial. For example, rivers can serve multiple purposes like: transportation, recreation, sport, tourism or culture. Coastal areas can be revitalized, rivers given symbolic meaning by organizing events related to them, broadening social awareness of their vitality to cities, for their multiple roles and functions. One

should remember that a river in a city is always considered an attraction but our actions can further make a river seem even more attractive.

A holistic approach prevents mistakes and lowers costs of future conceptional changes. A perfect case in point is the Dunikowski Boulevard in Wroclaw, where bicycle lanes and pathways were erected ignoring the terrain's natural proclivities. As a result, due to public outcry and protest, a 130-meter high wall built for safety reasons had to be lowered because it obscured the view of the river and the oldest part of the city – Ostrow Tumski for children and the handicapped [<http://www.tvn24.pl/wroclaw,44/mur-we-wroclawiu-ma-1-3-metra-przez-mur-nie-widac-odry,515387.html> (access 02.05.2016)]. The failed endeavor ended up driving up the costs of the investment as bricks and mortar had to be used and partial demolition work done afterwards.

3. A river in the European Capital of Culture 2016

Wroclaw has five main rivers the length of which come to about 84 km [Statistical Office] and a lot of smaller rivers.

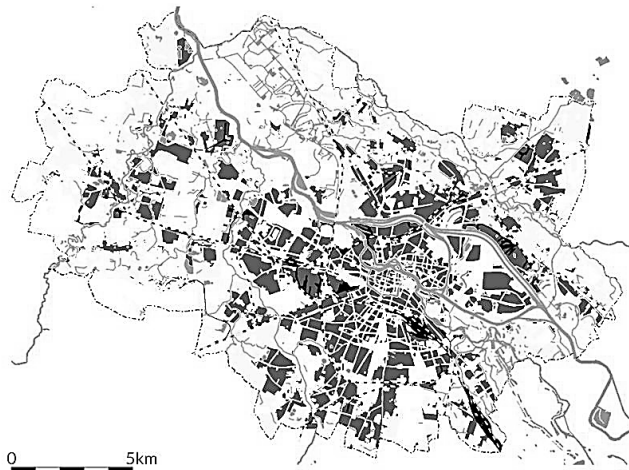


Figure 2. Wroclaw's river system

Source: own study based on [www.geoportal.wroc.pl].

Rivers should serve multiple purposes and Wroclaw's main river, the Odra, should become the city's symbol. Big events like the European Capital of Culture (ECC) can be a great opportunity to promote rivers. For the purpose of this study the author analyzed the role and promotion of rivers in Wroclaw during the ECC in 2016 and prior to the event. The events were thus divided into those that had the river as their theme (river themed) and those located either on or by rivers (location themed).

3.1. Rivers in 2016

River themed events in 2016

During the course of 2016 there were several lectures called “Big A”. Lectures were divided into three theme blocks: nature, society and architecture. One of them, nature themed, was “City on the river”. It comprised of a lecture led by a Belgian architect Julien de Smedt [http://www.wroclaw.sarp.org.pl/pl/duze_a/15/category/duze-a-natura (access 05.05.2016)].

Seven Wonders of Wroclaw and Lower Silesia was an exhibition of pictures related to the city and voivodeship. Ostrów Tumski (“Cathedral Island”) and The Odra were also featured [<http://www.7cudow.eu/pl> (access 05.05.2016)].

Jazz on the Odra, a cyclic jazz festival held in Wroclaw, in 2016 had a greater media presence and the number of events was also vast [<http://jazznadodra.pl/pl> (access 05.05.2016)].

The last river themed event was the movie “Wroclaw is placed on the Odra, 1964” screened during the film festival “Frames of Wroclaw: historical faces of the city” [<http://kadrywroclawia.pl> (access 05.05.2016)].

Events located on or by the rivers of Wroclaw

The centerpiece was “fiery” Slodowa Island during which special fire installations were erected, signifying the isle’s importance to the city [<http://www.wroclaw2016.pl/weekendotwarcia> (access 05.05.2016)].

Flow: “Sometimes friend, sometimes angry, the Odra is the liquid-like backbone to this ever changing city. The river Odra and its surrounding parks, streets, buildings and accompanying bridges, will be the centre of focus for a series of international events and performances which tell the stories of 20th Century Breslau/Wroclaw, and present creative reflections upon the themes of “diasporas, migrations, immigrations” and contemporary European identities” [<http://www.wroclaw2016.pl/flow-ecoc-2016> (access 05.05.2016)].

The outdoor cinema in Slodowa Island was yet another cyclic event organized during the spring and summer months in Wroclaw. However, its 2016 edition was again greater with bigger media coverage [<http://wyspa.wroclaw.pl/projekt/kino-plenerowe> (access 07.05.2016)].

Right before the ECC, Wroclaw also organized a game that promoted it as the “city of 100 bridges” [<http://www.wroclaw2016.pl/graj-w-mosty-z-esk-wroclaw-2016> (access 07.05.2016)].

Eight river related events organized during the course of the year might not seem that much; it should be compared with the previous year, before ECC was started.

3.2. Rivers in 2015

River themed events in 2015 and earlier

Wrocław's official websites: www.wroclawnadodra.pl (wroclawontheOdra) and www.wyspa.wroclaw.pl (isle.wroclaw) were created. It contains various information pertaining to places, events or activities taking place on or by Wrocław's rivers [<http://wroclawnadodra.pl> (access 07.05.2016)].

Year by year, the Association of Polish Architects organizes an event called "acupuncture of the city". In 2015, the main theme was "city flows" where many discussion panels, movies, exhibitions etc. related with rivers in the city were held.

There was also the 51st edition of Jazz on the Odra (like in 2016) [<http://jazznadodra.pl/pl/> (access 07.05.2016)].

In December the Hydropolis was opened. It is a big exhibition dedicated to water. One of its eight zones is about city and the water: *In this zone you will learn about the methods of water supply and sewage collection and disposal. You will also travel back in time to trace the development of Wrocław's water supply system. You will find out how global metropolises work and see the most impressive hydrotechnical facilities* [<http://hydropolis.pl/?lang=en> (access 07.05.2016)].

Wrocław organized its own civic budget where inhabitants could propose their own projects. This initiative showed how important rivers were to the people of Wrocław, as they actively participated in the consultative process regarding the restoration of an old apartment building located on Slodowa Isle.

There were also two exhibitions: "The Odra once and now" and "The wind and the water" held publically [<http://wroclawnadodra.pl/> (access 07.05.2016)].

Finally, the Odrarium – which opened in 2014 and is the most important place in Wrocław related with the Odra. It is part of Wrocław's ZOO – one of the biggest ZOOS in Europe: *The river will be represented by water reservoirs in which the visitors will be able to observe different animal species inhabiting various river sections. A passage will be built between these reservoirs and it will serve as an educational path informing about the history of the Odra, its use throughout centuries, about the environmental aspects as well as pollutions, and even about the way water filters work. The whole exposition will be covered with an aviary net, which will enable different species of birds to fly freely* [http://www.zoo.wroclaw.pl/index.php?strona=272&id_kat=549].

Events located on or by the rivers of Wrocław

During 2015, there were many events located on or by rivers. It would be difficult to list and describe all of them, but their plurality shows, just how important they were to the inhabitants of Wrocław. Here are just some of the most prominent events:

- free sailing lessons for children,
- an international helmsman motorboat course organized by WOŚP,

- New Year's Eve on kayaks and in the harbor,
- the Odra Regatta,
- the Odra River Cup,
- the Tumski Cup for dragon boats,
- the Red Bull kayak race,
- the University of Wroclaw's rowing team's initiative to row to the sea to help sick children,
- Slodowa Isle's outdoor movie screenings,
- Piaskowa Isle's sports town,
- Children's Island,
- Game Island,
- Slodowa Isle's outdoor library,
- Song Island,
- Lower Silesia's Odra Carnival,
- a throwing competition by the Odra,
- sailing gear presentations, fun and games for children, mini sailing boats' regatta,
- "Let's get together by the Odra" festival coupled with a photography contest,
- a light show by the dam,
- Midsummer Night by the Bystrzyca river,
- underwater Wroclaw,
- the Kaleidoscope of Cultures Festival with events organized by the Odra,
- Juwenalia by the Odra,
- a spring welcoming in Slodowa Isle,
- boulevard and quay revitalization,
- multiple concerts, cruises and regattas [<http://wroclawnadodra.pl> (access 08.06.2016)].

Some of the above mentioned events were state-organized and funded, others organized by sponsors or private initiatives. There was an event to be found for everyone: children, teenagers, students, adults and the elderly. One might even dare say, that Wroclaw's rivers became the most democratic and readily available places in the whole city.

4. Is the river "cool" enough for the young?

One question still remains unanswered. For all of their democratic and readily available character, are Wroclaw's rivers attractive enough for the young? Will they want to spend their free time on or by them?

There are many who claim that nowadays young people do nothing but play computer games. However, Slodowa Isle is occupied by students throughout the whole year. Every 21st of March, many college and high school students come by the rivers of Wroclaw to celebrate the first day of spring. Concerts, spectacles, an outdoor



Figure 3. “Students” Slodowa Isle

Source: [<http://wroclaw.naszemiasto.pl/tag/wyspa-slodowa-monitoring.html> (access 08.05.2016)].

cinema and picnics are organized [<http://www.wroclaw.pl/wyspa-slodowa> (access 08.06.2016)].

In July 2016, the author conducted an internet survey among the young inhabitants of Wrocław which were randomly selected. Out of 80 respondents, 96.3% were people between 19 and 30 years of age, 2.5% between 31 and 40 and one person aged between 41 to 50. The surveyed were asked to mark on a scale from 1 to 5 the river Odra’s importance to them. Over 57% of them marked either 4 or 5 on the



Figure 4. Official opening of the Dunikowski Boulevard

Source: [<http://wroclaw.wyborcza.pl/wroclaw/51,35771,19929558.html?i=2> (access 10.07.2016)].

scale, meaning that the river was either important or very important to them. The most commonly given reason for being by the river was to relax, either through strolling along the river bank, jogging, going bike riding or getting together with friends to grill for example. Among other things, the Odra has become a place where private, individual and municipal/state initiatives organize events that gather people of all age groups and interests. It has become a place to do sports, stroll, sightsee, listen to music, watch a film or just take in Wrocław's past and present.

There were many answers to the question, why people liked spending their time by the river bank. However, *being close to nature; it is beautiful here or this place helps me relax* were most frequently given. These responses prove that the Odra in Wrocław is a really "cool" place to be at, and important to young people. They enjoy spending their time there, as it gives them ample space and opportunities to spend time differently and perhaps productively. They see how vital it is to the city and understand why it has been coined the city of a hundred bridges (literally and metaphorically).

5. Conclusions

Making cities more attractive by utilizing already possessed resources, like the river in Wrocław, is really important in the age of a growing problem of city shrinkage. The shrinkage of cities is a widely observed problem nowadays, which is why more and more municipal authorities turn to investing in innovations, new forms of culture, recreation and sports, as well as utilization of already possessed resources, that make their cities more attractive for both the young and old. A holistic approach to the matter additionally prevents mistakes and lowers costs of future conceptual changes. Wrocław has five main rivers, the length of which come to about 84 km, and a lot of smaller rivers, which could be used to make the city even more attractive. It is the author's strong belief that the Odra should become Wrocław's symbol and big events are a great way of promoting it as such. During the ECC there were a lot of river themed events. However, there was more of them prior to the ECC, either state or privately funded. Future events, like ECC, should place a greater emphasis on the Odra and surrounding rivers by cooperating with people who organized river events in 2015 for example. The Odra has become an important meeting and recreational spot for the inhabitants of Wrocław. If well-promoted it could become a major tourist attraction, making Wrocław seem even more attractive, not only for tourists, but also those considering moving to a family and regarding it as an environmentally friendly place.

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