

Article

Analysis and Evaluation of Historical Public Spaces in Small Towns in the Polish Region of Warmia

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Abstract: Public spaces play a special role in the social life, culture, and traditions of historical towns. Public spaces are defined by their urban layout and architectural design and they embody the unique identity of old towns. They integrate local communities and contribute to the formation of social bonds. Urban planning and architecture play an important role in this process. The historical character of public spaces is a prerequisite for social interactions. The aim of this study was to analyze and evaluate historical urban public spaces (market squares) in three small towns in the region of Warmia in north-eastern Poland. Architectural features, urban layout, and the composition of urban and architectural factors, which are largely responsible for synthetic perception of multidimensional space, were evaluated. These goals were achieved with the use of an interpretive historical research method based on original evaluation criteria. The results were used to identify public spaces that require revitalization. Revitalization programs help preserve or revive attractive locations by restoring the right balance between economic and social factors and cultural heritage. The study demonstrated that orderly and harmonious planning of public spaces considerably influences perceptions of space.

Keywords: small town; public space; revitalization; historical downtown; perception

1. Introduction

Public spaces have played a special role since the beginning of urban living by manifesting the identity and function of towns and cities. In this respect, public spaces have a unique and timeless value. Public spaces have been a constant element in the structure of cities/towns and the lives of urban communities beginning from ancient times, through the Middle Ages, and in the modern era [1]. European towns founded in the medieval period are particularly interesting in this respect. After the fall of the Roman Empire, numerous towns were established throughout Europe based on the antique principles of urban planning and organization [2]. The urban layout was adapted to local conditions, but many towns had evolved from the existing human settlements and Roman military camps or they were built *in cruda radice* (from a “raw root”). Towns were generally erected along or at the crossroads of major transportation routes and they formed a settlement network in the region. These towns had a regular network of perpendicular roads that separated densely developed districts, with a market square in the center [3]. Market squares were the hubs of trading and commerce and they were the most important public spaces in towns.

A similar urbanization pattern can be observed in Warmia, a historical region in north-eastern Poland. The region’s settlement network is based on twelve towns that had been granted charters of incorporation in the Middle Ages [4]. Olsztyn is the only settlement to evolved beyond the category of a small town [5]. Warmian towns followed a similar pattern of development due to similarities in location, function, and, above all, spatial attributes. They have a regular urban layout dating back

to the medieval period, but despite similar planning principles, considerable variations are noted between towns. The main differences are observed in the layout of transportation routes, the size and shape of market squares, and the location of public buildings. Historical buildings are the dominant feature in most towns and they constitute public spaces in downtown areas. The appearance and quality of these spaces are a testament to the dramatic events that took place in Warmia in the 20th century. At the end of World War II, Soviet troops embarked on a massive and premeditated campaign, aiming to destroy the historical architecture of Warmian towns. This political act served no military purpose, and it was undertaken solely to manifest the communist authorities' resentment towards the origins and political status of Warmia. After the war, Warmian towns were rebuilt in line with the socialist realism doctrine [6]. As a result, many historical town centers were deprived of their unique identity that had been shaped throughout the centuries. These historical facts set the directions for research into public spaces in Warmian towns. The functions of public spaces in historical market squares are evaluated in multicriteria analyses. These functions determine the quality of local life, which is influenced by the attractiveness of public spaces. The results of research studies are used to identify public spaces where revitalization measures are most needed to revive the economic, social, and cultural roles of downtown areas.

The absence of national and international standards for comprehensive evaluations of historical public spaces in small towns has prompted the authors to fill in this knowledge gap. The existing incidental reports usually focus on large cities and are adapted to their specific characteristics [7–9]; therefore, they cannot be used as reference material for evaluating public spaces (historical market squares) in the centers of small towns. The proposed method is dedicated to small historical towns, and it is adapted to their unique attributes [10,11].

The present study was conducted in three towns in north-eastern Poland where historical architecture has been preserved to a varied degree. The evaluated towns were Dobre Miasto, Jeziorany, and Reszel, which are members of the Cittaslow International network. The Cittaslow movement was founded to improve the quality of urban life by promoting harmonious and sustainable development. The Cittaslow philosophy advocates the search for a healthy balance between economic growth, social development, and the protection of local traditions and cultural identity [12–17]. These values are upheld and popularized by all members of Cittaslow International. The urban fabric plays a very important role in sustainable development, and public spaces testify to a city's attractiveness and its status on the regional scale.

The aim of this study was to analyze and evaluate historical public spaces in three towns in the region of Warmia in north-eastern Poland. The investigated public spaces are old market squares that are located the center of the studied towns. These historical landmarks shape the distinctive identity of Warmian towns and integrate members of the local community. Numerous factors determine the attractiveness of public spaces, their multifunctional character, and ability to satisfy diverse local needs, both material and spiritual. They include architectural factors (on the microscale), urban factors (on the macroscale), as well as the overall composition of these elements, which determines the esthetic and functional attributes of public spaces. The research goals were achieved with the use of a novel research method. The study involved multicriteria analyses and evaluations to identify factors that influence architectural design and directly stimulate the human senses. The results were used to assess the condition of public spaces in downtown areas (market squares) and to identify areas where revitalization programs are needed to revive community life and improve the functioning of public facilities. The study demonstrated that spatial order and harmonious urban development strongly influence perceptions of urban space, strengthen the local identity, and the architectural traditions of a region.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Public Spaces in Small Towns

Public spaces have been an inseparable element of the urban fabric since the beginning of urban development [18]. Greek agoras and Roman fora provide clear evidence that public squares were the centers of community life already in antiquity. Town squares were the focal points in urban planning in both medieval towns and modern cities [19]. Throughout history, their function continued to evolve from open areas where market stalls were set up for trading to representative centers of towns surrounded by the main public buildings. The form and architectural design of town squares also changed over the centuries. However, regardless of these transformations, town squares have remained a cornerstone of local identity to this day. Old town squares are the focal points of urban design, and they are a living record of the towns' rich history [12]. Public spaces represent specific historical and cultural values, which are embodied in architectural design, and they emphasize the significance of historical memory as a nonmaterial asset (the dramatic events at the end of World War II contributed to the stormy history of the towns evaluated in the present study). Public spaces play important social and sociological roles in the functioning of historical towns and they should be protected and preserved to satisfy local needs and promote a sense of local identity, attachment, and responsibility for one's place of residence [20,21]. Local communities have diverse needs, including a need for physical and mental wellbeing, meaningful human relationships, high standards of living, recreational activities, and a high-quality residential environment [22,23]. These factors contribute to the establishment and development of human relationships at the level of communities, social groups, or entire societies. Public spaces play a very important role by regulating sociological aspects in small towns [24–28].

In small towns, public spaces integrate members of the local community, strengthen human ties, and testify to the towns' rich historical past, which is embodied in their architecture and urban design [29,30]. Well-preserved historical public spaces are user-friendly sites that attract local residents [31,32].

The quality of public spaces in small towns is significantly influenced by architectural and urban design that instills visual order and spatial harmony, as well as by their functionality. Spatial order is linked with esthetic factors, which are directly responsible for the appeal of public spaces, as well as local development levels [33]. In small towns with a high proportion of senior citizens, interpersonal relations are more easily established, and the residents feel responsible for their place of residence and identify with their hometown [34,35].

In urban areas, in particular in small towns, strong interpersonal relations and the attachment to one's place of residence contribute to the "homeliness" of urban space [36]. Therefore, public spaces influence a town's appeal, popularity, functioning, and development. Revitalization programs are needed to enhance the attractiveness and promote the growth of small towns in north-eastern Poland [37].

2.2. Urban Revitalization

Urban revitalization is a complex and long-term process of restoring dilapidated buildings, mostly historical, in downtown areas [38]. This term does not apply to individual buildings but to entire districts or city blocks that have been deprived of their original functions or purpose as a result of economic and social transformations [39]. The objective of revitalization programs is to restore the functions of city blocks and public spaces by reviving social and economic activity, while protecting their unique cultural value [40–42]. In small towns, revitalization measures targeting public spaces, i.e., old towns, aim to:

- prevent further degradation of the urban fabric in the physical, economic, social, as well cultural dimension, which is referred to as the fourth pillar of sustainable development—an interdisciplinary approach,

- improve the attractiveness of urban space,
- preserve the unique cultural heritage of urban structures and architectural features,
- enhance the competitive advantage of downtown areas relative to other urban areas,
- transform downtown areas into centers of economic and social activity (new investments) and improve transport accessibility,
- improve local standards of living.

Revitalization is often mistaken for upgrading, modernization, revaluation, adaptation, conservation, or restoration [43,44]. These measures can be a part of revitalization but they do not replace it. Revitalization programs entail much more than technical repairs or building renovation schemes. In addition to spatial, esthetic, and functional concerns, revitalization projects also address issues such as convenience of use, improvement in local living standards, and creation of new opportunities for economic growth [45,46]. Revitalization programs should establish a framework for urban planning policies based on sustainable development principles and the protection of cultural heritage. In degraded downtown areas, such programs create new opportunities for improving the functioning of public spaces in historical districts. Revitalization is a highly complex process, which aims to resolve urban planning, economic, and social problems. Revitalization programs require an integrated approach, team effort involving professionals from various fields of expertise, including architects, urban planners, monument conservators, sociologists, and cultural researchers, as well as support from the local authorities. An interdisciplinary approach to revitalization accounts for various factors that influence the quality of public spaces [47,48].

Revitalization programs aiming to improve the functioning of urban areas can also enhance a town's appeal, increase tourist traffic, and attract new investors [49]. For this reason, these projects play a very important role in the process of transforming public spaces in urban areas [50].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

Three of out the twelve towns in the Region of Warmia in north-eastern Poland were selected for the study. Warmian towns are characterized by similar environmental conditions, location factors, functions, and foundation dates. Despite these similarities, historical areas and public spaces in Warmian towns have been preserved with varying degrees of success. Towns were selected for this study based on the present condition of historical downtown areas, mostly market squares, which were the central points of chartered towns in the Middle Ages. The analyzed towns were Dobre Miasto, Jeziorany, and Reszel (Figure 1).

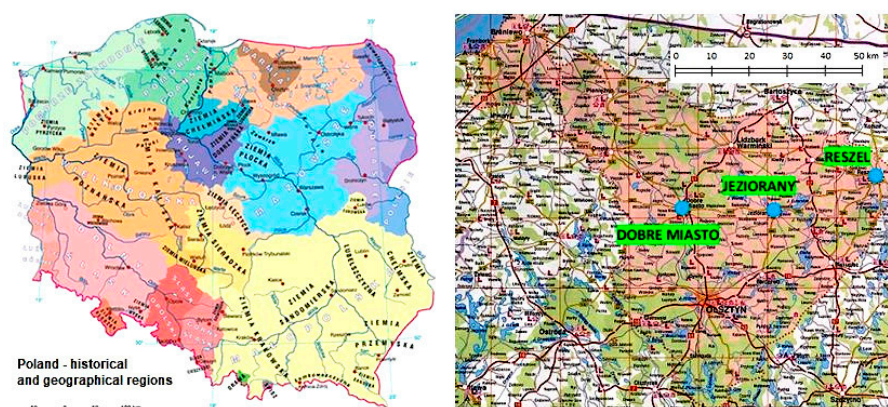


Figure 1. Historical and geographic regions of Poland (left), and the location of the analyzed towns in Warmia (right). Source: own elaboration based on [51,52].

The downtown area in Dobrze Miasto is practically devoid of historical features. The town was founded in the Middle Ages based on a strict grid plan [53], where the castle, the town hall, and the church (only the church building has survived to this day) were the dominant buildings. However, the original urban layout was lost over the centuries. The market square was replaced by a roundabout, and the existing buildings bear no semblance to the historical urban fabric (Figure 2). After World War II, the reconstruction effort in Dobrze Miasto broke with past traditions because it was subjugated to the socialist realism doctrine. As a result, the identity of old town buildings in Dobrze Miasto was irretrievably lost.



Figure 2. Dobrze Miasto—(a) aerial view of the historical downtown (a); collegiate church and the western frontage of the market square (b). Source: author.

A different situation is encountered in Jeziorany. This town was founded on a hill surrounded by the Symarna River on the northern and western sides [54]. In medieval times, Jeziorany featured a fortified castle that protected the inhabitants against enemies. Medieval towns were typically established in locations where natural barriers (hills, rivers) formed defense lines [55].

The old town square in Jeziorany is only a remnant of the original urban configuration with regard to its spatial layout, scale, division, and architectural style. Jeziorany does not have a town hall building, the rectangular market square is disproportionately large relative to the existing scale of development, and the architectural design of some buildings has no historical reference (Figure 3). Despite the above, the old town square has a distinctive ambience or, in architectural terms, *genius loci* [56–59]. Fragments of the original urban layout and historical buildings have been preserved in the old town square and they constitute protected cultural heritage.

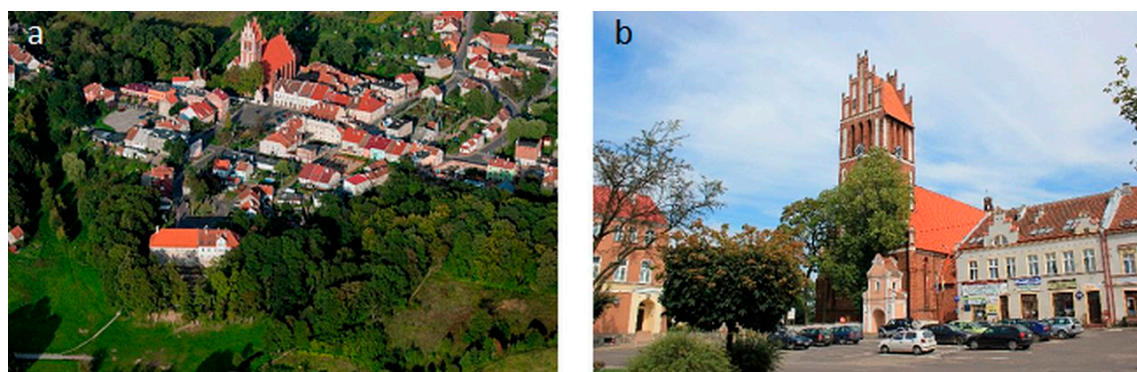


Figure 3. Jeziorany—(a) aerial view of the historical downtown (a); old town square in Jeziorany (b). Source: author.

Reszel is a Warmian town where the urban layout and architectural design of the historical town center have been most successfully preserved. The old town has the shape of a nearly regular rectangle,

and it is nestled within the winding bend of a river [60]. The grid street plan divides the old town into blocks composed of historical buildings (Figure 4). The size of the old town and fragments of fortified walls testify to Reszel's long history. The market square in Reszel constitutes the main public space, which is enclosed on all sides by historical buildings characterized by a uniform architectural style, balanced scale, proportions, rhythm, and level of detail. Reszel is one of the few Warmian towns where the three main types of public buildings—the town hall, the church and the castle—have been preserved to this day. These buildings and the harmonious architectural design of the old town enhance the quality of public space in the market square. The square is flanked by protected historical buildings on all sides.



Figure 4. Reszel—(a) aerial view of the historical downtown (a); southern frontage of the market square (b). Source: author.

The analyzed towns have undergone numerous changes and developments throughout the centuries. Their size and population have increased significantly, and the boundaries of historical downtown areas differ considerably from the original urban layout and are easily identified. The present-day area and population of the studied towns are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Population and area of the analyzed towns. Source: Statistics Poland [61].

No.	Town	Population ['000]	Area [km ²]
1.	Dobre Miasto	10.29	4.86
2.	Jeziorany	3.26	3.41
3.	Reszel	4.61	3.82

3.2. Methods

A multicriteria evaluation of public spaces in small historical towns requires a series of analyses of urban planning solutions, architectural features, and their ability to meet the needs and aspirations of modern communities. These attributes differed considerably in the analyzed towns due to variations in the condition of preserved historical buildings and urban structures. The configuration of urban and architectural elements that influence the historical townscape should be evaluated with the use of multiple criteria.

A synthetic compilation of the existing research methods was used to perform multicriteria evaluations of the analyzed towns. The applied methods had been previously used, but most of the assessment criteria were developed by the authors. The assessment was an expert evaluation conducted in its entirety by the authors.

The study was conducted in the following stages:

Stage 1—Multicriteria analysis of the spatial structure of small towns.

The aim of this analysis was to evaluate the extent to which urban layout and architectural solutions meet the needs and aspirations of public space users. An interpretive historical research method [62] was applied. The method relies on historical and iconographical sources, and it is used to interpret and systematize the cultural value of spatial planning components. The perceptions and functionality of public spaces are complex phenomena, and the adopted method offers a holistic approach to the studied problem by considering both material (historical data) and nonmaterial (esthetic considerations) aspects, including:

1. Founding date—iconographic sources and an analysis of the literature. German-language literature dating back to the 19th century was reviewed [63,64]. Urban planning solutions were analyzed in view of town founding dates to determine the presence of correlations between these two factors [65].
2. Topographic features—iconographic sources (maps, satellite images, etc.). The location of the analyzed towns was analyzed in view of the local landform, including the presence of hills, river bends, and river banks (Table 2).



Table 2. Correlations between landform and urban planning solutions. Source: own elaboration based on [66].

No.	Landform	Urban Planning Solutions
1.	Hill with steep slopes	- grid street plan, - dense urban network, - dense development resulting from space constraints.
2.	River bend	- grid street plan with various degrees of regularity, - uncontrolled urban development in the direct vicinity of the river, - urban expansion in a direction opposite to the river.
3.	Fork at the junction of two rivers	- grid street plan with various degrees of regularity, - uncontrolled urban development in the direct vicinity of the river, - constrained urban expansion.

Urban layout—iconographic sources (maps, satellite images, etc.). The urban planning solutions in the studied towns were analyzed in view of typical medieval town patterns.

Size and shape of municipal squares—maps and satellite images. The size and shape of market squares was dictated by the urban layout. The size of market squares was proportional to a town's area and economic status in the region. The studied towns were assessed for the size, organization, and quality of market squares (Table 3).

Table 3. Shape and size of market squares in the studied towns. Source: own elaboration based on [67].

No.	Shape of Market Square	Size of Market Square
1.	 square	The shape and relative surface area of the market square (ratio of market size to town size at the time of foundation) influence perceptions of urban structures. Market squares that are disproportionately large relative to the town's area tend to be perceived as neutral and harmonious. Such markets are generally elongated and some have a dominant architectural feature.
2.	 rectangle	

Architecture—iconographic sources, field surveys, and analyses of the condition of heritage buildings (Table 4). Architecture is the key component of urban space that determines the quality and attractiveness of public spaces. Architecture is largely responsible for the distinctive atmosphere of a place, which is based on subjective perceptions. The form, layout, scale, detail and architectural style of historical buildings, the type of building materials, and their texture and color are ambient-forming elements. Nonmaterial factors, such as founding date and historical events, are also powerful stimuli that generate positive perceptions of space. Historical buildings considerably influence sensory and esthetic perceptions. A town's architecture stimulates the senses and creates an esthetic experience.

Table 4. The influence of architecture on perceptions of public spaces. Source: own elaboration.

No.	Architectural Features	Perceptions of Public Spaces
1.	Architectural style and time period	- distinctive atmosphere, - sense of identity, - authentic historical experience.
2.	Architectural form, layout, and scale	- esthetic experience, - presence or absence of genius loci.
3.	Architectural composition, division, and rhythm	- enhanced/reduced esthetic experience, - presence or absence of genius loci.
4.	Building materials, architectural detail, texture, and color	- enhanced/reduced esthetic experience, - presence or absence of genius loci.

Stage 2—urban planning and architecture as the main determinants of the quality of public spaces in historical towns.

The influence of urban planning solutions and architecture on the quality of public spaces in historical towns was evaluated in the second stage of research. Attractive urban planning and functional solutions significantly contribute to the fulfillment of local needs. The material and nonmaterial aspects of architectural design are timeless carriers of cultural phenomena, construction skills, and esthetic intuition of medieval designers. Such analyses require a thorough knowledge of the history of architecture and urban planning. The following components of space were evaluated:

- Market squares as urban structures, historical architecture—cartographic sources, observations, and field surveys. The aim of this research stage was to evaluate the extent to which the original urban design (shape and size of market squares, street plan) and architecture had been preserved in the main public spaces. The analysis required a working knowledge of the history of urban planning and architecture.

The results were used to estimate the date of construction, identify the architectural style, and assess the authenticity of the analyzed buildings (Table 5). The authenticity of urban design was evaluated subjectively on the following scale: 0–35%—not preserved; 36–65%—neutral; 66–85%—partly preserved; and 86–100%—preserved.

Table 5. The impact of authentic urban design and architecture on the quality of public spaces in historical towns. Source: own elaboration.

No.	Component	Assessment
1.	Historical urban design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - analysis of cartographic sources, - field survey, - knowledge of the history of urban planning.
2.	Old town market squares	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - preservation of the original shape, structure and size, - degree of cohesion between urban structures and the overall urban fabric of historical towns, - attributes of urban space.
3.	Historical architecture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - analysis of iconographic sources, - field survey, - knowledge of the history of architecture.
4.	Evaluation of architecture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - preservation of historical architectural design, - preservation of historical buildings flanking market squares (structure, form, and style), - preservation of dominant structures and buildings in the immediate vicinity of public spaces (church, town hall, tower, and fortified structure), - quality of public spaces (architectural design and street furniture).

Preservation of historical components of public spaces. Historical elements play a very important role in the management of public spaces by contributing to the distinctive atmosphere of a place. The extent to which historical elements have been preserved in the analyzed towns was evaluated intuitively (holistically). Individual components of public spaces, including objects, buildings, town blocks, streets, and urban structures were analyzed in view of their present functions and heritage value (Table 6). The adopted criteria were evaluated subjectively on the following scale: 0–35%—not preserved; 36–65%—neutral; 66–85%—partly preserved; and 86–100%—preserved.

Table 6. Preservation of historical components of public spaces. Source: own elaboration.

No.	Subjective Evaluation	Preservation of Historical Components of Public Spaces
1.	Preserved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - town blocks preserved in original form, - historical architecture, - distinctive atmosphere of a historical town.
2.	Partly preserved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - minor modifications of historical components exert a negligible influence on the overall legibility of urban design, - foreign and modern architectural forms exert a minor effect on historical urban design, - the existing urban structure has a predominantly historical character.
3.	Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - considerable modifications of historical components significantly compromise the overall legibility of urban design, - a predominance of foreign architectural forms significantly detracts from historical urban design, - the structural layout of historical towns is difficult to identify.
4.	Not preserved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the legibility of the original urban design has been lost, - architectural design does not make a reference to historical conventions, - public spaces do not reflect the town's history.

4. Results

The results of the study are based on the criteria for evaluating the spatial structure of historical towns, described in Section 3. The results are presented separately for each stage of the conducted research, as in Section 3.

Stage 1—Multicriteria analysis of the spatial structure of small towns.

The study revealed differences in the spatial structure of the analyzed towns. Because the towns have similar founding dates (Dobre Miasto—1329, Jeziorany—1338, and Reszel—1337), any correlations between the date of the town charter and urban design would be difficult to find. The studied towns have a grid street plan, which was the predominant urban layout in the Middle Ages. In Dobre Miasto and Jeziorany, an analysis of historical records revealed traces of urban design patterns typical of Silesia. In Silesian towns, the long sides of the market square were intersected by additional streets (Figure 5a,b), which could suggest that the first settlers in the evaluated towns had originated from Silesia. The above pattern was not observed in Reszel (Figure 5c). These findings indicate that the administrative boundaries of regions and countries did not act as barriers in the development of architecture and urban areas.

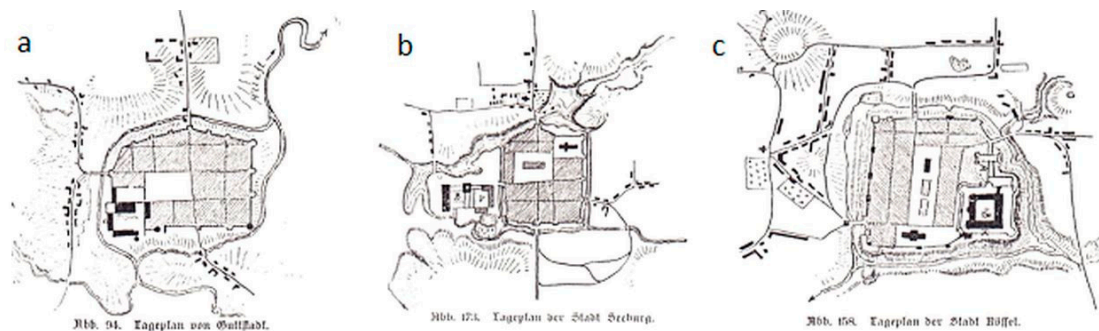


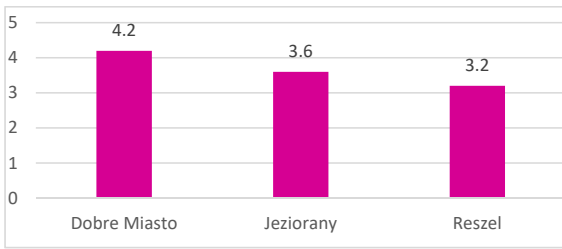
Figure 5. Town plans from 1826–1828: (a)—Dobre Miasto; (b)—Jeziorany; and (c)—Reszel. Source: [46].

Topographic features exerted a considerable influence on the urban development pattern. All studied towns were built in *cruda radice* (from a “raw root”) but they were developed based on the existing settlements or military outposts. The urban layout of the analyzed towns relies on different natural features:

- river bend—Reszel (33.3%),
- fork at the junction of two rivers—Dobre Miasto (33.3%),
- hill with steep slopes—Jeziorany (33.3%).

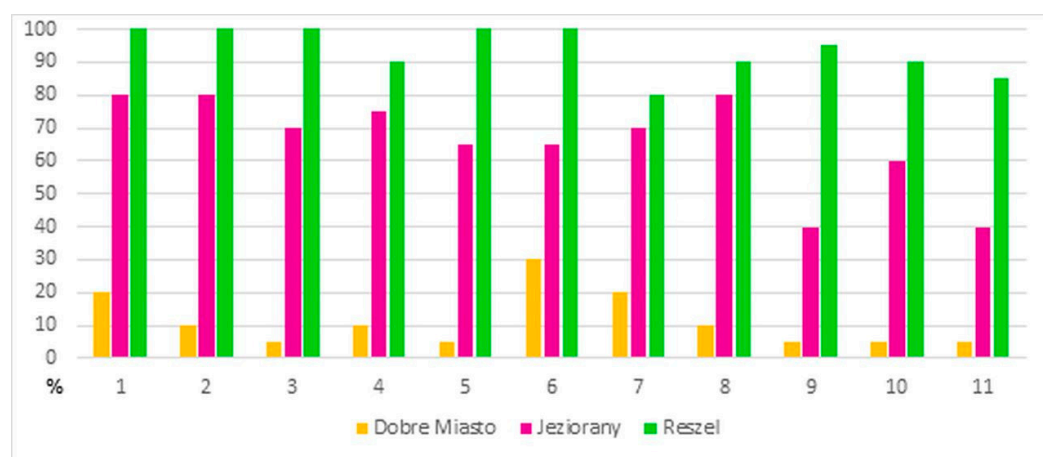
The urbanization process eradicated all traces of former settlements. In the Middle Ages, towns were established in areas with favorable terrain characteristics, which acted as natural defensive barriers to protect the inhabitants. Polish medieval towns were characterized by similar size, with the exception of large cities of strategic importance. The size of medieval towns reflected their economic status and technical capabilities. Considerable effort was required to build fortified walls, organize dense human settlements, and fulfill the basic needs of local communities. In successive centuries, economic growth led to the expansion of urban structures outside defensive walls. Despite the above, all towns have retained their historical centers. The territorial expansion of the analyzed towns is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Territorial expansion of the studied towns. Source: own elaboration based on cartographic resources.

No.	Parameter	Dobre Miasto	Jeziorany	Reszel
1.	Developed area at the time of foundation (PL)	6.0 ha	4.5 ha	6.0 ha
2.	Present area (PO)	25.2 ha	16.2 ha	19.2 ha
3.	Increase in developed area $(WWPZ = \frac{PO}{PL})$			

The data in Table 7 point to a considerable increase in the area of the studied towns over the centuries. The density and type of urban structures changed in line with new trends in urban planning and architecture. However, the historical character of downtown areas was preserved, and these public spaces constitute landmarks that are clearly separated from contemporary urban structures.

Historical urban design plays an important role in public spaces, and it starkly contrasts with contemporary planning solutions in other parts of the town. Medieval towns had a grid pattern with a central market square surrounded by blocks of dense development. The homogeneity of urban design was additionally underscored by a regular network of roads that have survived to this day. The extent to which the medieval urban fabric has been preserved is illustrated in Figure 6.

**Figure 6.** Preservation of historical urban fabric in the analyzed towns. Source: own elaboration based on cartographic resources.

Key: 1—grid street pattern; 2—transport accessibility in public spaces; 3—road network; 4—boundaries of historical market squares; 5—shape and size of historical market squares; 6—dominant structure (architectural form); 7—scale and proportions of frontage buildings; 8—structures and facilities characteristic of downtown areas (market squares as public spaces); 9—types of development in historical market squares; 10—building materials forming the surface of the market square and roads; and 11—green infrastructure (secondary factor).

Historical market squares have been preserved as the main public spaces in medieval towns, regardless of the rate at which these towns had developed or their territorial reach. Market squares

were the main trading places that contributed to the economic growth of medieval towns. Their shape and size had been designed to match the town's layout at the time of foundation. The market square in Reszel has the shape of a square (33.3%), whereas Dobrze Miasto and Jeziorany have rectangular market squares (66.6%). The area of the studied towns and market squares relative to the area enclosed by fortified walls (relative area of the market square) are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Area of historical market squares. Source: own elaboration based on cartographic resources.

No.	Town	Market Square Area [ha]	Relative Market Square Area [%]
1.	Dobrze Miasto	0.58	8.5
2.	Jeziorany	0.40	10.5
3.	Reszel	0.37	7.5

Key: relative market square area—ratio of market square area to developed area enclosed by fortified walls.

The main public buildings that dominated the townscape, including the church, the town hall (in the center of the market square), and the fortified castle, were erected directly in the market square or in its vicinity. Very few of these buildings have survived the region's turbulent history (wars, fires). In the group of the studied towns, all three buildings have been preserved only in Reszel.

In addition to public buildings and utilities, the quality of historical market squares is also influenced by the architectural style of the buildings flanking the square. Architectural factors influence esthetic perceptions of structures that define public spaces. The extent to which the original architecture of frontage buildings has been preserved is illustrated in Figure 7.

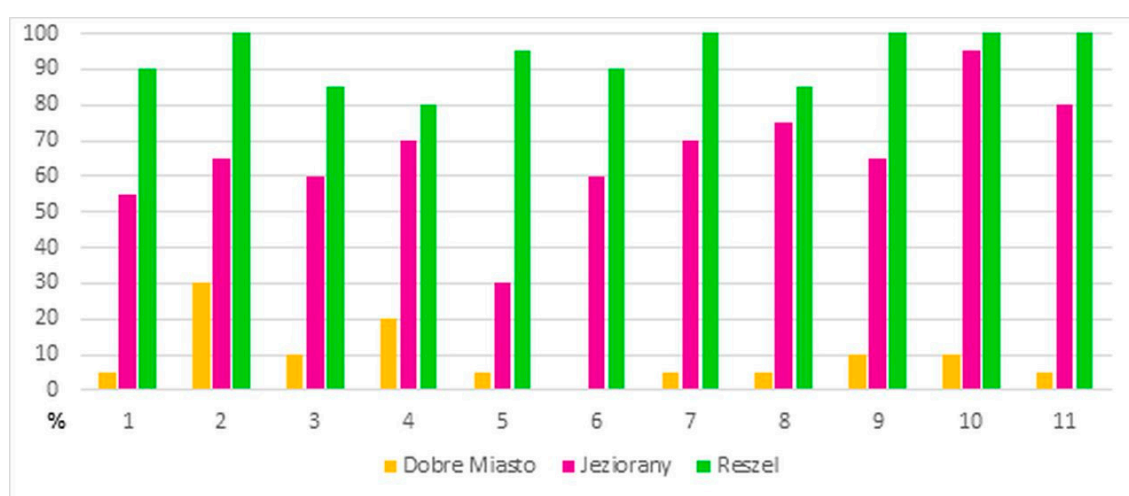


Figure 7. Preservation of the original architecture of buildings in public spaces in the analyzed towns. Source: own elaboration.

Key: 1—historical architecture (preserved original design); 2—dominant buildings; 3—form and layout of urban development; 4—scale of development; 5—architectural composition of frontage buildings (subdivision of land parcels); 6—roof design and roofing materials; 7—building materials consistent with historical design; 8—architectural details; 9—texture and color of building facades; 10—structures and facilities characteristic of downtown areas (services, commerce, housing); and 11—distinctive atmosphere (genius loci) of public spaces.

Stage 2—urban planning and architecture as the main determinants of the quality of public spaces in historical towns.

The extent to which historical elements of public space have been preserved in the analyzed towns was evaluated in the second stage of the study. The influence of urban planning solutions

and architectural features on historical market squares as the main public spaces was also evaluated, including the layout and area of market squares, historical architecture, and form and style of buildings flanking market squares. The extent to which the original spatial solutions have been preserved in downtown public spaces is illustrated in Figure 8. The adopted criteria were evaluated subjectively on the following scale: 0–35%—not preserved; 36–65%—neutral; 66–85%—partly preserved; and 86–100%—preserved.

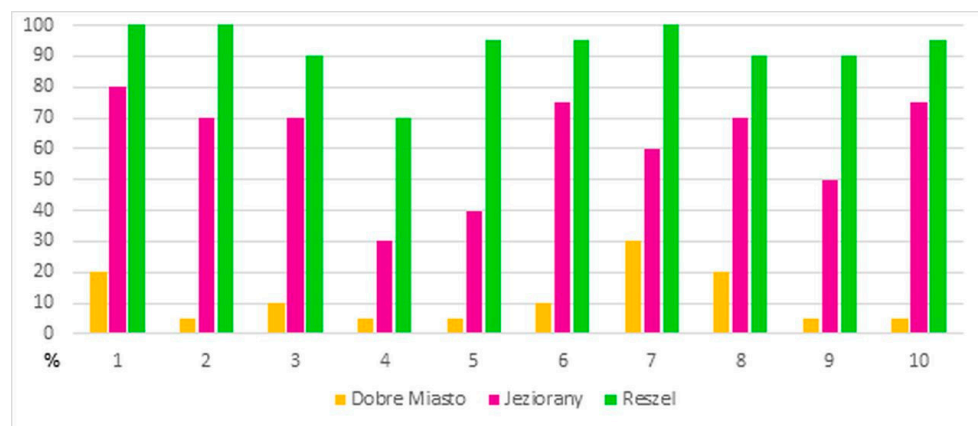


Figure 8. Preservation of the historical spatial solutions in the analyzed towns. Source: own elaboration.

Key: 1—urban layout; 2—legible road network; 3—transport accessibility (pedestrian and vehicular traffic); 4—pedestrian safety (threats posed by wheeled traffic); 5—types of development in market squares; 6—identity of historical market squares; 7—dominant buildings; 8—density of development; 9—architecture of frontage buildings; and 10—historical dimension of public spaces.

Historical urban design and architectural solutions determine the value of public spaces in old towns. These factors should be also taken into account when heritage sites are adapted to modern needs. Historical structures differ from modern architecture, and the material and nonmaterial value of heritage sites should be adequately preserved. The variability of historical townscape elements is illustrated in Figure 9. The adopted criteria were evaluated subjectively on the following scale: 0–35%—not preserved; 36–65%—neutral; 66–85%—partly preserved; and 86–100%—preserved.

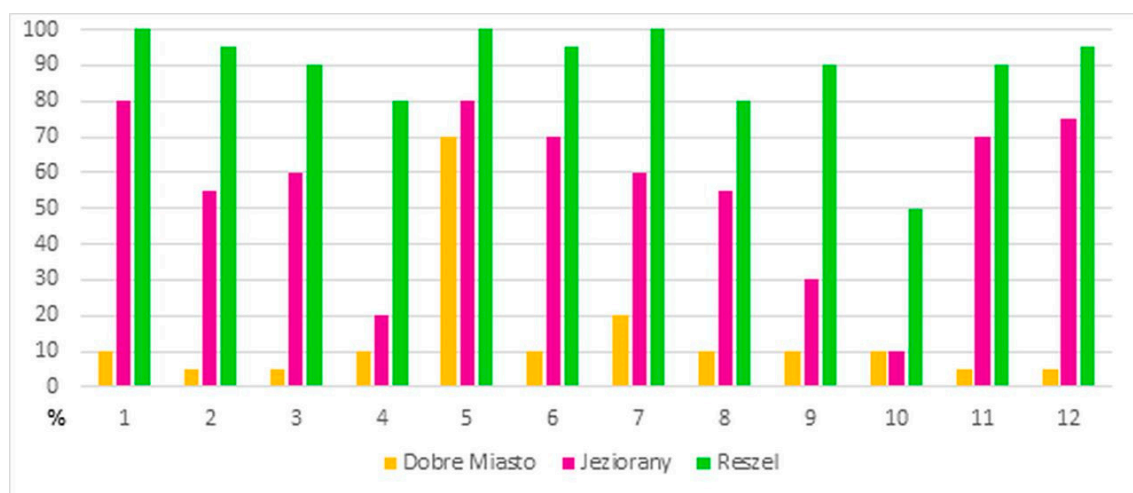


Figure 9. Historical urban design and architectural solutions in contemporary public spaces in the analyzed towns. Source: own elaboration.

Key: 1—distinctive atmosphere—urban layout; 2—distinctive atmosphere—architecture; 3—structures and facilities characteristic of downtown areas; 4—functionality of historical spatial solutions; 5—density of development; 6—spatial order (esthetic perceptions, authentic historical experience); 7—stylistic homogeneity of urban structures; 8—availability of information; 9—pedestrian access; 10—disabled access; 11—potential for future development; and 12—distinctive atmosphere (genius loci) of public spaces.

5. Discussion

The results of spatial analyses demonstrated that urban elements that testify to the historical value of public spaces have been preserved to a varied degree in the studied towns. The applied research methods supported assessments of the influence of harmonious public space design on esthetic perceptions and the attractiveness of downtown areas in small historical towns. Urban, architectural, and compositional factors that significantly influence perceptions of the multidimensional character of public spaces were studied. The present condition of historical elements was evaluated. The results were used to identify areas where revitalization measures should be initiated to restore the attractiveness of historical centers and promote sustainable urban, economic, and social development [68].

All three studied towns were founded in the first half of the 14th century. They were developed on a grid street plan, which was the predominant urban layout in medieval towns. The towns have a regular street pattern with a market square in the center. Different versions of the traditional grid pattern were encountered. The layout of Dobre Miasto and Jeziorany was visibly influenced by urban planning solutions typical of the region of Silesia in south-western Poland. The original elements of urban design have been preserved to a varied extent in the studied towns, and the degree of consistency with the historical layout was estimated at 5–20% in Dobre Miasto, 70–80% in Jeziorany, and 90–100% in Reszel.

Terrain characteristics played an important role during the establishment of medieval towns. These features acted as natural barriers that protected local inhabitants. The analyzed towns differed in this respect, and the predominant landforms included a river bend, a fork at the junction of two rivers, and a hill with steep slopes. These observations point to an individual approach to urban planning and a strong need for security.

The size of medieval towns was dictated by their economic status and technical capabilities. At the time of their establishment, the studied towns had an area of 4.5–6 ha. Their territorial reach continued to expand as their economic growth accelerated in successive centuries. Since their foundation, the analyzed towns increased three- to four-fold in size.

Market squares were the drivers of economic growth and social development in medieval towns. Located in the center, the market square was a hub of trade and commerce and the most important public space in the town. The market's central location influenced development in the remaining parts of the town, and its size was determined by the area enclosed by the fortified wall. Dobre Miasto and Jeziorany have rectangular market squares, whereas Reszel has a square market. The market squares in the analyzed towns have a similar area of 0.37 to 0.58 ha. They are still the main public spaces in the evaluated towns but their functions have changed over time. Today, market squares play representative and recreational roles and they are regarded as hallmarks of local identity. The size of medieval market squares was determined by population, economic factors, and the town's development pattern. In the analyzed towns, the average ratio of market area to town area was determined 8.83%, and it ranged from 7.5% to 10.5%. This observation confirms similar planning solutions in towns established in the corresponding period of time.

Continued economic growth increased the regional status and fueled the expansion of Warmian towns throughout the centuries. The area of Warmian towns increased rapidly in the 19th century when regional production plants such as brick factories, lumber mills, breweries, and flour mills were established in the region. The expansion of the railway network also significantly contributed to the economic growth and the territorial expansion of local towns [69].

The cultural identity of public spaces in the analyzed towns was evaluated based on the extent to which the original urban planning elements have been preserved. The damage inflicted on Warmian towns at the end of World War II and the reconstruction effort undertaken after the war in line with the socialist realism doctrine contributed to significant differences in the historical character of old town centers. Original planning solutions and architectural features have been preserved to a different extent in the evaluated towns. A spatial analysis (Figure 8) revealed that the historical urban fabric has been least well preserved in Dobre Miasto. The medieval church in the vicinity of the market square is the only remainder of the town's nearly 700-year-old history. The market square in Jeziorany has been more successfully preserved. The current conservation status of the original urban layout and architecture in Jeziorany was evaluated as average. The historical urban fabric has been most successfully preserved in Reszel, which was not damaged during World War II.

The region's history has directly affected the existing transportation network in the analyzed towns. Market squares are not closed off to vehicular traffic, and the market in Dobre Miasto is intersected by a main transit road to Poland's border with the Kaliningrad Region. Based on the National Safety Risk Map and the results of field surveys, pedestrian safety has been evaluated at 5% in Dobre Miasto, 30% in Jeziorany, and 70% in Reszel. The high score noted in Reszel indicates that historical planning solutions can be successfully incorporated into the modern urban fabric.

The historical value of public spaces is determined mainly by the architecture of old town buildings. This factor is chiefly responsible for the emotional perceptions associated with historical heritage sites. The original urban fabric has been preserved to a different extent in the evaluated towns, and it was determined at 5% in Dobre Miasto, 50–75% in Jeziorany, and 90–95% in Reszel. The town hall, the church, and the fortified castle were the dominant buildings in medieval towns and they are the most important relics of these towns' rich history. The conservation status and the impact of these structures on the contemporary townscape were evaluated at 30% in Dobre Miasto, 60% in Jeziorany, and 100% in Reszel. The extent to which the major buildings influence the historical identity of the studied towns was determined at 5–10% in Dobre Miasto, 75% in Jeziorany, and 95% in Reszel.

The value of public spaces is also influenced by their functional roles. Public spaces form the core of historical towns and determine their attractiveness for visitors. In the studied towns, the extent to which historical public spaces constitute the hubs of economic and social activity was determined at 5% in Dobre Miasto, 60% in Jeziorany, and 90% in Reszel. Dobre Miasto scored lowest in this respect because the market square is nearly entirely flanked by apartment blocks without retail or service outlets on the ground floor.

The results of the evaluation (Figure 9) were used to assess the historical value of public spaces in small towns. The distinctive atmosphere of a place, referred to as *genius loci* in architecture, is the most elusive and subjective criterion in evaluations of historical sites. Historical sites have individual characteristics, but they constitute functioning central areas that are the key manifestations of local identity. The identity-building capacity of public spaces in the analyzed town was determined at 5–10% in Dobre Miasto, 55–80% in Jeziorany, and 95–100% in Reszel. These results coincide with the conservation status of the historical urban fabric and architecture in the studied towns, which suggests that these two components exert the greatest influence on the perceived attractiveness of historical public spaces.

The evaluated spatial elements and their role in the evolution and functioning of public spaces support the identification of urban structures and complexes that require restoration and revitalization. The results of the study were used to propose recommendations for enhancing the quality of public spaces in the analyzed towns (Table 9). The solutions for improving the historical and functional attributes of public spaces in Warmian towns were formulated based on the key objectives of revitalization programs and the results of the current study.

Table 9. Proposed revitalization measures in the analyzed towns. Source: own elaboration.

No.	Criterion	Revitalization Measures			
			DM	J	R
1.	Urban design	- reinstatement of historical urban design	+	+/-	-
		- delimitation of the original market square	+	+/-	-
		- pedestrian access	+	+/-	-
2.	Architecture in public spaces	- restoration of buildings flanking the market square	+	+	+/-
		- technical upgrades in buildings	+	+/-	+/-
		- reinstatement of the subdivision of land parcels	+	-	-
		- restoration of original architectural design	+	+/-	-
3.	Economic factors	- reinstatement of the functions characteristic of downtown areas (retail and services)	+	+/-	+/-
		- increasing the competitive advantage of downtown areas	+	+/-	-
4.	Social factors	- conversion of public spaces into social integration hubs	+	+	+/-
		- creation of safe and user-friendly public spaces	+	+	-

Key: DM—Dobre Miasto; J—Jeziorany; R—Reszel; “+”—required; “+/-”—moderately required; and “-”—not required.

The recommended revitalization measures can be an important tool in the process of shaping public spaces in the analyzed towns. They can significantly enhance the towns’ attractiveness for tourists and investors. For this reason, revitalization programs should focus on restoring the historical urban fabric, creating unrestricted pedestrian access to public spaces, reinstating the subdivision of land parcels, restoring historical architecture, reviving and increasing investment into downtown areas, and increasing the attractiveness of public spaces as the hubs of social activity and integration [69]. Revitalization is a long-term process, which requires the participation of professionals from different areas of expertise who have a broad vision for future development. These efforts should also involve local community members because each town is a living and rapidly changing organism. Considerable research has been dedicated to the development and future outlook of historical towns. The open-design approach was implemented in Senigallia, Italy, to regenerate its historical urban heritage through the participatory design path [70].

The most extensive revitalization measures are required in Dobre Miasto. The damage sustained during the war and postwar reconstruction efforts deprived the town of its historical identity. The market square in Dobre Miasto resembles a traffic junction, and it does not meet the definition of a user-friendly public space. Its urban layout and architecture do not make a reference to the town’s history, and the centrally located church is the only relic of the former medieval town that once surrounded it. The historical urban fabric of Jeziorany has been moderately preserved, and repair and renovation efforts are required to some extent. Revitalization is least urgently needed in Reszel. Spatial elements have a favorable conservation status, which contributes to the town’s socioeconomic growth. Therefore, the scope of the necessary revitalization is limited. The results presented in Figure 9 and Table 9 indicate that historical urban layout and architectural design are the key determinants of the perception of public spaces in terms of their contemporary attractiveness and functioning. These strong correlations contribute to a sense of local identity and responsibility for one’s place of residence.

6. Conclusions

This article analyzes and evaluates public spaces in small historical towns in the region of Warmia in north-eastern Poland. The original layout of the studied towns has been preserved to a varied degree in the course of their turbulent history, but old market squares continue to play the role of central points in the contemporary urban structure. Transformations of the urban layout and architecture of small towns affect spatial order and are closely associated with the economic growth and social development of downtown areas. Public spaces in the centers of historical towns have many dimensions and serve different purposes. For this reason, various aspects were taken into consideration in the presented analysis, including esthetic, economic, social, environmental, and functional factors, as well as sentimental value, which is an inseparable attribute of historical sites.

The results of the conducted analyses revealed that the historical character of public spaces has been preserved to a varied extent in the studied towns. The conservation status of the original urban fabric was evaluated as negative in Dobrze Miasto, average in Jeziorany, and positive in Reszel. At the same time, a strong correlation was observed between the success of historic preservation and the contemporary functioning of public spaces in the examined towns. Dobrze Miasto and Reszel are the extreme examples. The market square in Dobrze Miasto has been completely deprived of its historical character and identity, and it no longer functions as a core that integrates members of the local community. In contrast, the historical urban fabric of Reszel has been largely preserved, and the town has a distinctive atmosphere that attracts both local residents and visitors. These observations provide strong evidence that medieval structures and architecture can be effectively incorporated into contemporary urban centers to accommodate local needs and the pace of modern life. The scope of the required revitalization measures differs in the analyzed public spaces. The results of this study can be used to identify areas that are in greatest need of revival and to define the extent of revitalization programs. The present findings also constitute valuable inputs for the local authorities and local communities in the process of prioritizing revitalization measures and enhancing the spatial value of historical centers in small towns.

In the future, the proposed method for evaluating the quality of historical public spaces will be validated based on the results of assessments conducted by other experts and local communities who are direct users of these spaces. These findings can be used to modify the presented methodological approach. This research study was motivated by the scarcity of global standards for evaluating public spaces in historical towns.

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