

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE IDENTITY OF CITY CENTER STREETS AND URBAN ACTIVATION OF CITIES - ON THE EXAMPLES OF POZNAŃ AND WARSAW

Natalia Regimowicz

Ph.D.

Adjunct, University of Arts in Poznań

ul. Za Cytadelą 23

61-659 Poznań

natalia.regimowicz@gmail.com

+48 601839310

Faculty of Architecture and Design

University of Arts in Poznań

60-967 Poznań 9

Al. Marcinkowskiego 29

skrytka pocztowa 191

office@uap.edu.pl

+48 61 855 25 21

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Abstract

In many Polish cities we see the disappearance of individual features of city center areas which give way to more typified and repeatable. Modern urban complexes - often impersonal spaces with no unique character do not encourage maintaining interpersonal relationships that are key for our society. The humanistic aspects of architecture are becoming more and more blurred – the metropolitan structures developed today say nothing about the identity of particular areas.

Visual features of buildings, if carefully selected, may be key in contributing to the urban activation of city centers. It's the esthetics of the lower parts of the buildings that form spatial behavior of residents and shape emotional attitude towards the street. By understanding the pedestrians' preferences in this matter, the overall satisfaction of using the streets may be improved while those factors that discourage the pedestrians from visiting the city center may be eliminated.

Many studies have shown that careful selection of visual features of shop windows is an effective way of creating the "atmosphere" of the street.

In the current plans for urban revitalization of city centers the aspect of visual quality of commercial premises is ignored or brushed aside. The confrontation of good practices employed in many European cities with the lack of effective control of the public areas in Poland indicates the source of the problem. There is an urgent need for developing official guides for

shop window designs. Their aim would be to emphasize the unique identity of particular areas so that people can appreciate them more.

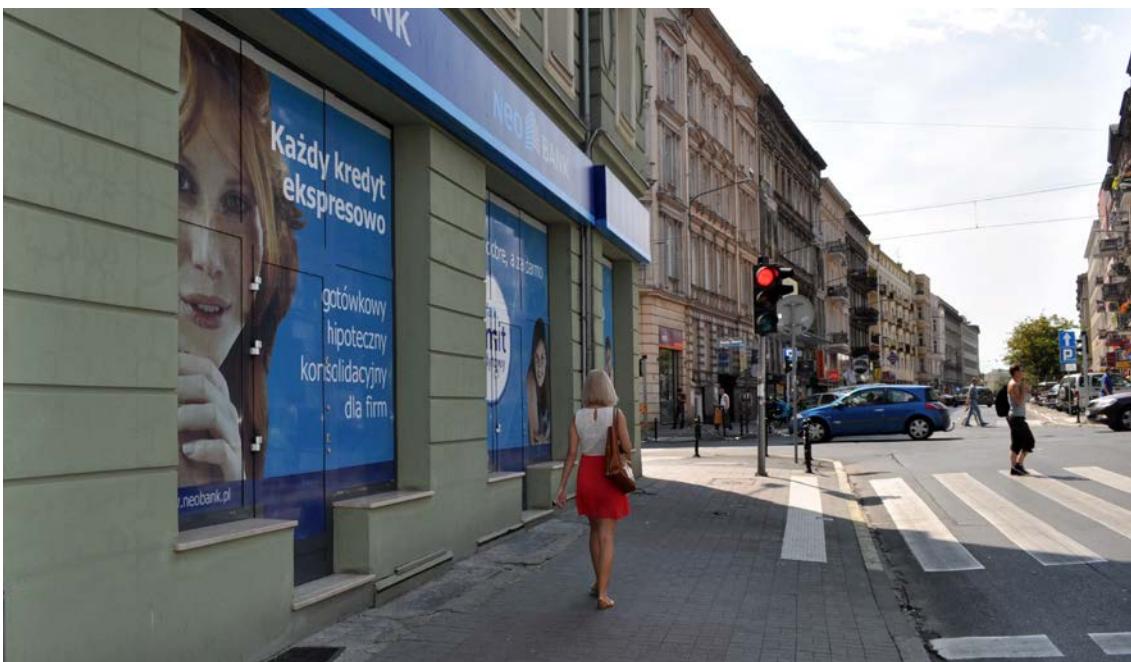
"The correlation between the identity of city center streets and urban activation of cities - on the examples of Poznan and Warsaw"

The rapid advancements in technology and science are key factors determining the modernity and ongoing change in our lives. The times we live in are marked by constant race and rush towards development. Globalization connects and unifies human activity in an irrevocable way. This phenomenon entails dangerous cultural consequences. Individualized behavior used to be a characteristic feature of social groups which came from specific geographic regions. Today, it's not history but access to technology shapes communities. Built through a long-lasting tradition, the habits of inhabitants in various areas are no longer an obstacle in absorbing global trends. An advantage of such social changes is the world-wide dissemination of knowledge that fosters increasingly higher living standards. Through those changes, regardless of natural barriers – climate and geography – the civilization advances, thus facilitating the development of communities.

Unfortunately, this fast spreading process has also negative effects: the world of today is becoming more and more standardized and deindividualized. The lines between cultural regions and regional diversities are blurred. The economic factors adversely affect the character of modern world depriving it of clarity and uniqueness. This ambivalent process concerns all aspects of human life, especially architecture and urbanism of modern cities. These are the domains whose transformations are easy to discern.

Several decades ago the diverse types of urban spaces and landmarks illustrated the lifestyle of city dwellers, reflected local climate and abundance of natural resources but also showed the skills of local designers and constructors. Such preservation of information on particular cultures and communities were clear for us and future generations.

When looking at the modern urbanized areas, it is difficult to see clear differences between the communities living there. The singular features of the urban environment are becoming blurred, giving way to typified and repeatable structures. Uniform design methods do not foster the creation of places "with soul" which we value so much in old cities. The humanistic features of architecture are disappearing. Modern urban complexes are often designed in a way that ignores the basic spiritual needs – empty, impersonal places with no unique character do not encourage maintaining interpersonal relationships that are key for our society. Recently, it is the newly built shopping arcades and courtyards that function as public spaces. Unfortunately, this trend is getting stronger and adversely affects the needs of the city and it does not help in bringing people to places of interests, to the contrary – it leads to isolation of certain groups and emptying of city centers. This, in turn, results in empty, boring and lifeless streets.

Figure 1 Ratajczaka street, Poznań

Source: Photo by Natalia Regimowicz

In urban planning, it was the city center streets that functioned as “the salon of the city”, i.e. a place to socialize, use various necessary services and to satisfy the psychological needs connected with the necessity to “show oneself in society”. As such, the streets may be treated as the basic factor shaping the phenomenon of cityness while the number of people present in the street at the same time as the basic quantifier for urban activation of city centers. The presence of pedestrians is the key element of city life – without it the city would be like a theater without actors.

The extensive knowledge of the relation between humans and architecture helps foresee what surroundings foster urban activation and integration of different social groups. Therakomen (2001) notes that the urban space encompasses not only the physical structures – buildings, street and squares – but also the people in them. The author examines patterns of pedestrian traffic connected with dynamic recognition of the urban surroundings as a combination of visual perception, motivation and social influence. He stresses the fact that in order to understand the behavior of the pedestrians we must look at the street as a place of transfer in terms of complex situational and emotional contexts. The effect of the buildings depends on the awareness and emotions of a pedestrian as well as the urban context. City spaces that serve their functions are those that ensure favorable conditions for movement and participation in social and leisure activities. Conscious urban planning helps to attract people and gather them in city spaces, which in turn leads to different events.

The willingness to participate in the city life largely depends on the ability to see and observe. City dwellers often move around familiar places without giving much attention to their visual quality. This does not show their limited perception but, rather accommodation to the space they

live in everyday. Psychologists and researchers in related domains explain that continuous stay in the same urban surroundings deprives us of the ability to observe them and assess them without emotion. It does not, however, diminishes the subconscious impact the surroundings have on our psyche. Even if we do not realize that, the unesthetic and wrong urban solutions are tiresome and discourage us from staying in such places. We avoid such places on purpose and are gladly go to places that ease out minds.

In terms of the psychological comfort, the most attractive places are varied urban routes, i.e. those where each stage provides different esthetic impressions that guarantee a satisfying spatial adventure – when walking, people focus their senses on the appealing “stops” on the way, which is why they are not bored by the length of their travel but rather feel satisfied with what they had experienced. Lower parts of the buildings draw most of the pedestrians’ attention, their esthetics shapes the spatial behavior of the inhabitants, stimulates identification processes and has impact of the emotional attitude to the street.

In this context, another problem comes to the fore, namely the visual chaos commonly occurring in the Polish city streets. Visual pollution is a term used to describe any anthropogenic elements that contribute to landscape depreciation. Aggressive advertising displays and signs, billboards, information boards, shop windows that compete with the architectural form of the historical townhouses are one of the many problem the city streets face today.

Figure 2. Visual chaos – vitrines and shop signs - general problems



Source: Illustration by Natalia Regimowicz

Figure 3. The Freedom Square (Plac Wolności) in Poznań

- Shop windows completely covered with aggressive posters.



Source: Illustration by Natalia Regimowicz

Figure 4. Wrocławska Street in Poznań

- Signboards are held too low or too high in relation to the architectural structure of the facade.



Source: Illustration by Natalia Regimowicz

Figure 5. Półwiejska Street in Poznań

- Information media (ads and signboards) placed at different levels



Source: Illustration by Natalia Regimowicz

Figure 6. Ratajczaka Street in Poznań

- Adjacent information media (ads and signboards) held at different levels; oversized 3-D advertising elements



Source: Illustration by Natalia Regimowicz

Neglecting the compositional integrity and the architecture-history continuum causes considerable degradation of historical districts. The relation between the newly created urban fabric and the areas with rich historical identity is key in determining the city image. Places of historical interest should be subject to strict preservation maintenance in order to prevent further irreversible action.

When developing urban plans, particular areas should be identified using professional methodical analyses. For the analysis of city centers with high historical value, one can use the DIVE method (Reiner, 2010). It is composed of four methodical stages:

1. *Describe*: historical uniqueness of the street, especially its evolution and features,
2. *Interpret*: historical significance of the street, interpretation of the historical elements in the context of the place's identity and preservation of collective memory,
3. *Valuate*: cultural value of the street, development potential, susceptibility to change,
4. *Enable*: possible room for intervention, variants of acceptable transformations with the key historical elements retained'

One important objective is to create the feeling of attachment to the street by improving access to sale and service points located in the buildings whose facades should be "open" to the street. From this perspective, the main goal of urban activation is to improve the standard of use of the streets by the pedestrians. A particularly interesting approach is one with focus on using street markets to rebuild local communities (Kent, 2008). The author thinks that such activation is positively influenced by:

- varied selection of goods offered by stores,
- "attention-grabbing" shop windows,
- cafes and restaurants with outdoor seating on the sidewalk,
- scale adjusted to a person's height, especially on the ground floor facades,
- narrow streets designated largely for pedestrian traffic rather than car traffic,
- squares adjacent to shopping streets,
- designated bike routes,
- proximity to public transportation stops.

It follows from the conducted analyses that urban activation of the city centers depends, to a large extent, on a well-developed shopping network accessible to pedestrians. The best way to attract pedestrians is to offer them open, inviting spaces such as patios, sidewalk cafes and restaurants as well as intriguing shop windows. Street-facing windows are an invitation to come inside a building – in stores they draw our attention with an interesting display of goods while in cafes and restaurants they show us how other enjoy their meals inside. Shop windows are important means of displaying specific aspects of business, industry, services and sometimes even political or social activities.

Figure 7. Nowy Świat Street, Warszawa

Source: Photo by Natalia Regimowicz

The link between the visual quality and emotions is well known to set designers, architects and urban planners. It is also reflected in literature with themes of emotional experiencing of city spaces. One theme worth mentioning is that of *flâneur* – “an unhurried stroller considered and observer and researcher of the big-city crowd flowing through the streets” (Żyłko, 2000). From this perspective, a stroller is a “reader of the streets”, an interpreter of street scenes, a judge of style and a pursuer of impressions experienced through admiring shop windows.

The visual quality of shop windows is linked to the passer-by on the functional, conceptual and emotional levels. Visual features of shop windows take on emotional and symbolic meanings in the eyes of the people walking down the streets, and, as a result influence spatial behavior – they can encourage or discourage walking down the street, they can motivate the decision to buy a given product.

In studies on perception and spatial behavior in the urban areas, it is assumed that people evaluate the surroundings with different level of criticism and notice their advantages and drawbacks. Many authors try to quantify the impressions connected with the perception of the surroundings, e.g. Bonenberg (2011) built a coherent system of evaluating emotions connected with the perception of the urban area and based on that he created first emotional maps of Poznań and Poznań’s districts, the first such maps in Poland. This analytical approach is firmly grounded in the research conducted by Bańko (2002), Lewicka (2012) and Merleau-Ponty (2001). Numerous applications implementing the results of the research mentioned above were developed – mainly within the area of emotional ergonomics. One example is a method of

selecting office furniture depending on the emotional preferences of the employees (Bonenberg 2013).

There have been studies which directly point to the fact that well-chosen visual features of shop windows are an easy and effective way of creating the "atmosphere" of a street. (Bonenberg W. *Architecture as a City Brand - an Example of Poznan Metropolitan Area*, Bonenberg W. *The emotional space: a study of spatial development of Poznań metropolitan area*, Regimowicz N. *Shop windows as a factor in street urban activation on the example of Poznań city center*).

The conducted research which included context analysis, in situ studies, internet search query, case studies, cognitive experiment on identification of emotional responses to visual stimulation and research by design indicate a relatively simple method, not requiring large funding, to activate city center streets. This method refers to two aspects of shop window presentation as elements shaping the image of public spaces:

- a) shop window presentation involving the display of goods in the shop window (display arrangement to attract the customers' attention). It basically refers to what is behind the shop window glass and is visible from the street.
- b) shop window as part of the facade of the building which should conform to specific rules of composition, match the facade and be in line with the local urban context.

Properly selected visual features of shop windows may constitute a key element of urban activation of city centers. Obtaining knowledge on the pedestrians' preferences in this matter may improve their satisfaction regarding the use of the streets and eliminate those aspects that discourage people from staying in city center and drive people away to shopping malls on the city outskirts. The appearance of shop windows influences spatial behavior of the inhabitants and tourists – it may draw people to the city center or scare them off, it may be a showcase of the street and "an invitation" to take a stroll along the buildings.

A detailed analysis of the results helps in distinguishing those combinations of visual features which mostly contribute to evoking certain emotional responses, such as:

- feeling impressed is (mostly) conditioned by *the expression of the visual message* (9.4 pts.), in connection with the need of being "en vogue" (following trends, 8.1 pts.) and *stylistic originality* (7.56 pts.).
- liking is (mostly) conditioned by *careful workmanship* (9.2 pts.), in connection with *thematic cohesion* (items in shop window form a collection, 6.9 pts.), and *literality* as well as *comprehensibility of the visual message* (6.7 pts., 6.48 pts.).
- surprise is (mostly) conditioned by *the expression of the visual message* (9.4 pts.), *stylistic originality* (8.4 pts.) and *dynamic expression of the display* (7.8 pts.).
- amusement is (mostly) conditioned by *stylistic originality* (6.72 pts.), in connection with *expression of the visual message* (7.52 pts.), *dynamic expression of the display* (7.02 pts.)
- feeling prestigious is (mostly) conditioned by *careful workmanship* (9.2 pts.), in connection with the need of being "en vogue" (8.1 pts.), *comprehensibility of the visual message* (7.2 pkt.) and *thematic cohesion* (6.9 pts.).

- curiosity is (mostly) conditioned by need of being “en vogue” (8.1 pkt.), in connection with *stylistic originality* (7.56 pts.), *number of display plans* (6.8 pkt.).

Based on these analyses we can diagnose the emotional states of passers-by and shape them accordingly (by changing the visual features of shop windows). For example, shop windows may inspire curiosity the passers-by or delight them, but also be boring, off-putting and irritating. Such emotions are responsible for the way we perceive a given street. Streets may be luxurious and prestigious, liked by the passers-by or attracting with its unusual, funny shop windows. On the other end of the spectrum we have streets that are boring, depressing and irritating. With properly selected visual features of shop windows we can easily and effectively create the “atmosphere” of the street. It is this atmosphere that determines how attractive the street is for the passers-by and customers (in the so-called target groups)

The need for urban activation also refers to other neglected streets in many parts of Poland. In this context, it is important to mention the problem of the visual quality of shop windows as well as signboards and ads. As research shows, in Poland this problem has reached the level of visual pollution.

In the plans for city center revitalization, the visual quality of sale and service points is disregarded or marginalized. Such an approached is adopted in many Polish cities, including the Revitalization Program of the Poznań City Center. A comparison of good practices used in many European cities with lack of an effective control over the public space in many Polish cities shows the core of the problem. There is an urgent need for developing an official guide for shop window designs in city center streets. With such a guide, it would be possible to highlight the identity of particular areas for better reception by the community. The guide would contain patterns dedicated to each district along with some theoretical guidelines, such as:

- the project should respect the architectural stylistics of the existing building and surroundings,
- a shop window should have a clearly delineated character and cannot be a result of ill-advised stylistic combinations,
- appearance of a business establishment should reinforce local visual identity or contribute to generating new appealing urban values,
- finishing materials should be selected to match the character of the façade,
- the type and amount of the materials used should be minimum, durable and easy to maintain,
- interesting architectural details should be used; if possible, any historical details should be preserved and restored if they contribute to the unique character of the street,
- the size, proportions of the frame, windowpane dividers and other elements should correspond to the higher parts of the building and be of similar character as the adjacent buildings
- large plastered areas and oversized signboards should be avoided,

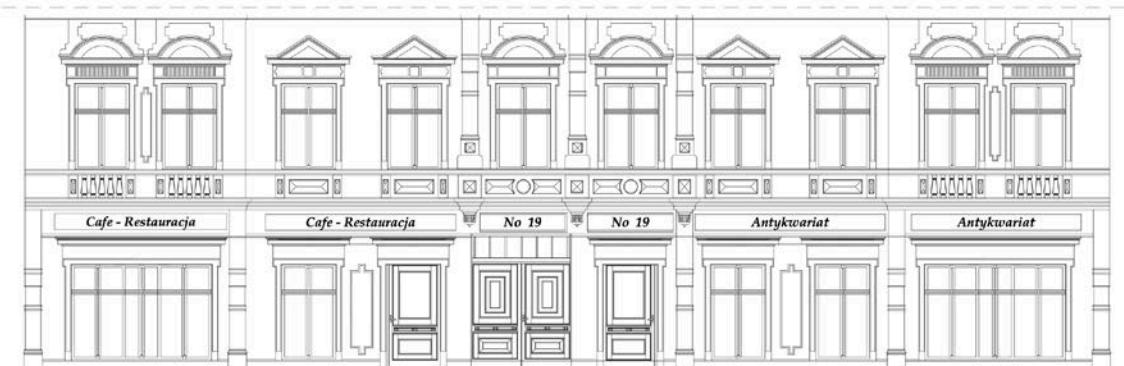
- the location of mechanical devices, alarms systems should be planned so that they are not disruptive but still perform their functions,
- the front of the shop window should include the name of the business or logo, inscriptions should be reasonably arranged and the their size should not exceed $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total area,
- the coloring of the inscriptions should correspond to the frame of the shop window and other elements of the window and facade,
- typography should be legible and uncomplicated,
- in the case of historical building or townhouse, displayed, glowing and blinking signs or symbols should not be used (it is recommended to use back lit 3D signs – the so-called signs with a halo)
- if it is necessary to have lighting in the shop window, a subtle outer frames should be installed, large floodlights should not be accepted,
- corporations and franchise points with one uniform pattern for shop windows should be asked to slightly modify their standards in order to match the style of their location.

Figure 8, Figure 9. Different look of the same franchise brand – „Żabka”, Poznań.



Source: Photos by Natalia Regimowicz

Figure 10. An example of patterns of shop windows for a townhouse located at Półwiejska Street in Poznań.



Source: Designed by Natalia Regimowicz

Summing up, it may be stated that urban activation of city centers by making the trading more presentable is a tested method used in many European cities. Actions taken by the city authorities are aimed at changing the image of neglected city center areas by redirecting the focus on business dealings. The idea behind this concept is make city centers more attractive for the highly-skilled, creative people (encouraging them to move to city center and find a job there), thus drawing more investors to city centers (Bonnenberg 2008). The key element in such approaches is giving access to a wide selection of business services. By doing so, the city authorities also support the comeback of city dwellers to places once forced to move from the city centers. This process often entails the gentrification of the city center areas. Three aspects of this process may be distinguished: economic activation, social activation and functional-spatial activation. As a result, the rise in real property process in the shopping streets of the city center becomes a quantifiable indicator of the urban activation.

The confrontation of good practices from the European cities with lack of effective control over the public space in Poznań points to the source of the problem. It also gives enough grounds to draw a major conclusion, that is, the city authorities should regain control over the image of the public places.

As the conducted studies show, there is an urgent need to develop an official guide for the shop window design for the city center streets in Poznań. Its purpose would be to highlight the character of particular streets so that people can appreciate them more. Such an approach is already implemented in those European cities that care about their brand, about maintaining the unique atmosphere of the city center.

Another important practical effect concerns the owners of shops located in the city centers. It has been shown that the elements of the arrangement of the visual display of the goods in shop windows may evoke positive emotions in passers-by, boost business in the city center and draw more customers. Various studies have indicated that this aim can be achieved by combining the following visual features of shop windows: the “en vogue” attitude, the expression of the visual message, careful workmanship and stylistic originality. Research results provided useful tools

for shaping the emotional conditions of the passers-by and building the “atmosphere” of the street.

Developing positive relations between complex city areas is a daunting task and requires a comprehensive knowledge and design awareness from the designers, local authorities and city dwellers as well. The function of architecture is not just to design space but also to foster the development of new hubs for human activity. The architect of today should be interested in the city from many different vantage points. Planners should strive for a harmonious cooperation of all the elements of the urban surroundings, otherwise the city becomes the source of problems, to the detriment of its inhabitants. People easily adapt to changing conditions and new experiences, both on the physical and psychological level. Deviations from the biological cycle, information chaos, environment pollution are just some of the negative aspects of the contemporary world that city dwellers must face. Overloads adversely affect our psyche and the biological and emotional needs cannot be suppressed in the long run.

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