

Public spaces in small and medium-sized towns in Podkarpacie. Contemporary trends in design based on planned investments in Dębica and Ropczyce

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, many Polish cities modernised their main market squares. The new squares did not meet the expectations of residents – urban greenery was removed and replaced with empty concrete spaces. In 2025, two towns in the Podkarpacie region – Dębica and Ropczyce – embarked on plans to redesign their town centres, using a different approach to the design process. The aim of this article is to examine contemporary trends in the design of public spaces and to assess their quality on the basis of planned investments in these towns. A comparison of design processes and concepts has made it possible to identify the leading trends in public space planning. The results show that there is a strong need to bring greenery back to cities and to provide places for social integration. The qualitative assessment of the projects may guide further actions in other cities in the region.

Keywords: Dębica, urban planning, public space, Ropczyce, main square

1. Introduction

Improving living conditions and the quality of urban spaces is an important issue today. It is a topic that has been raised many times in connection with the revitalisation of cities throughout Poland. The revitalisation processes that have been underway since the 1990s aim to transform city centres and create environments that cater to the needs of residents. In principle, such modernisation provides an opportunity to enhance the quality of urban spaces. However, we must ask whether satisfactory results have always been achieved.

The Polish precursor to green spaces was Krakow's Planty Park, which dates from around 1820 (Torowska, 2012: 7). One of the first of its kind, it became a model for other cities, particularly those in the Austro-Hungarian partition (Mencwel, 2020: 106). The popularity of gardens grew, and increasingly more were created at the end of the 19th century, partly thanks to the efforts of Henryk Jordan. Following the establishment of the Jordan Gardens Society in 1929, approximately 200 urban gardens were created throughout Poland. The creation of these new green spaces reflected society's needs (Jellicoe, 1991: 373). Thus, the concept of the green city is relatively recent in the context of urbanisation. The destruction caused by war provided an opportunity to reintroduce vegetation into cities, which entered city markets for the first time. Typical empty squares were transformed into lush green parks. The concept of establishing green spaces and urban parks emerged after World War II and was implemented on a large scale in Poland during the communist era. However, these initiatives often evoked negative connotations (Mencwel, 2020: 113). The remnants of the past needed to be eradicated. After numerous 21st-century transformations of market squares in small and medium-sized Polish towns, criticism from residents emerged. This controversy primarily stemmed from the introduction of 'concretisation', meaning the removal of city parks and their replacement with large, open spaces with little or no greenery. In this context, some revitalisation projects, such as those in Skierniewice, Cieszyn, Kutno and Leżajsk, gained particular recognition. City residents were reluctant to use the new spaces because they did not meet their needs. The trend of covering cities in concrete had to be reversed after strong public criticism put pressure on city authorities. Further transformations are currently taking place, with the aim of restoring greenery to public spaces, among other things.

2. Materials and methods

Many scientists and interdisciplinary research teams address the subject of public space design. The process of revitalisation is extremely complex, involving a variety of activities related to different areas of life. Therefore, cases should be studied from many perspectives, taking into account the social environment, historical changes and the aesthetics and quality of the space in question.

One of the most well-known works in public space research is J. Gehl's monograph *Life Between Buildings*. In it, the author analyses how users engage with public spaces, and the factors that make places attractive and functional for people. Gehl frequently emphasises the importance of designing public spaces that encourage social interaction. In his book *Cities for People*, Gehl discusses how to make cities more resident-friendly, providing concrete examples supported by studies of urban spaces.

Other important works in the context of spatial analysis include *Socjologia i przestrzeń miejska* by A. Majer and *Miasto i przestrzeń w perspektywie socjologicznej* by B. Jałowiecki and M. Szczepański, which address issues related to the social context of public spaces. From a sociological perspective, public spaces are places for observing community behaviour and needs. Despite changes in the development of squares, their social value resulting from the way they are created, used, and perceived remains significant

(Jałowiecki, Szczepański, 2002). The social context was also discussed in an article by the author of this article which presented residents' opinions on public spaces in their cities. Research conducted in 2021 largely confirmed the problems observed in the public spaces of small towns in Podkarpacie, including the prioritisation of car communication, the felling of tall trees and a lack of shade in squares. Residents positively rated places that allowed them to meet, integrate and relax (Raś, 2021: 187–204).

In the context of public space design, there are guides and manuals that outline certain standards within the Polish framework. One such publication is *Jak przetworzyć Miejsce? Podręcznik kreowania udanych przestrzeni publicznych*, which provides designers with practical recommendations and concrete examples for creating people-friendly spaces. The guidelines are supported by case studies. Another such publications are *Jak kształtować przestrzenie publiczne? Polskie standardy i dobre praktyki w jednym miejscu* (Górny, Salata-Kochanowski, 2021).

Regarding the modernisation and revitalisation of Polish spaces, there are a number of articles referring to large and cities. Examples include A. Zięba and M. Stangel's research on the revitalisation of Upper Silesia and J. Kazimierczak's work on the revitalisation of Łódź. Among the numerous studies addressing the issue of changes in markets and town squares in smaller centres, there are works of particular importance for understanding contemporary design trends in the Podkarpacie region and other regions of Poland. The research of J. Bański, D. Mazurek and A. Grzelak provides an up-to-date analysis of local government decision-makers' opinions on the development of small towns, emphasising the growing importance of sustainable public space development (Bański, Mazurek, Grzelak, 2025: 165–186). A. Dudzińska-Jarmolińska, A. Januchta-Szostak, A. Ogorzelska and S. Peplińska focus on adapting market and town square designs to climate challenges, highlighting the role of blue-green infrastructure and nature-based solutions (Dudzińska-Jarmolińska, 2024: 115–137; Januchta-Szostak, Ogorzelska, Peplińska, 2023: 243–260). An important contribution to the characterisation of revitalisation processes is made by the publications of T. Marszał and E. Masierek, as well as K. Mazur-Belzyt, which discuss both the effects of the revitalisation of central urban spaces and the specific problems accompanying these changes (Marszał, Masierek, 2021: 209–226; Mazur-Belzyt, 2016: 79–93; Mazur-Belzyt, 2012: 219–223). The works of D. Dymek and J. Jóźwik, as well as S. Bernat and M. Flaga, broaden the perspective of the research by analysing aspects of landscape and urban square design on the example of cities in the Lublin Province, which is also reflected in the analyses of Gorlice (Gajdek, Gargata-Polar, Kaspruk, 2022: 7–14) and the market square in Osiek (Ciepiela, 2021: 42–51).

This issue is supplemented by the research of K. Tomczak, P. Szumigala and K. Starzecka on the processes of degradation of public spaces (Tomczak, Szumigala, 2024: 36–49; Starzecka, 2020: 43–57). E. Korcelli-Olejniczak analyses the functional diversity of small towns in the context of depopulation (Korcelli-Olejniczak, 2020: 191–212). This is complemented by research by B. Olczak and P. Nowicki on the role of markets in building local identity and social activation of residents (Olczak, 2022: 21–23; Nowicki, 2020: 81–91).

There is significantly fewer publications address small and medium-sized towns in the Podkarpacie region. Nevertheless, several publications on this topic are worth mentioning. D. Kuśnierz-Krupa's research, published in *Revalorization of cultural heritage of small towns in Podkarpacie on the example of Sieniawa*, discusses the broad context of monument and public space revitalisation, emphasising the importance of local identity and the town centre's role in creating culture. The public spaces of small towns and villages in Podkarpacie are also the subject of contemporary research by A. Kobylarczyk. Articles on spatial analysis focus on the function of market squares and town centres in the Podkarpacie region. These articles address the current needs of residents and

the problems faced by the analysed spaces, as well as common areas in villages. These common areas have been defined as 'common goods' (Kobylarczyk, 2017: 329–340). The author highlights spatial issues that arise from the inappropriate management of public spaces, such as the presence of large car parks that encroach upon market squares (Kobylarczyk, 2012: 67–76). The study contains information on numerous towns, including Iwonicz Zdrój, Głogów Małopolski, Boguchwała, Nowa Dęba, Nowa Sarzyna, Pruchnik, Dynów, Sędziszów Małopolski and Pilzno. M. Rut's article addresses the potential for small-town centre renewal based on revitalisation projects in the Podkarpackie region. The cases of Kolbuszowa, Sanok, Dynów, Boguchwała, Nowa Sarzyna, Stalowa Wola and Nowa Dęba are discussed. These initiatives demonstrate improvements in residents' quality of life through investments, renovations, modernisations and the creation of new public spaces. The author emphasises that former historic market squares and transport hubs have been transformed into spaces for social gatherings and recreation (Rut, 2016: 69–81). M. Gargala, L. Lichotai and M. Pisarek also explore the topic of development directions for similar spaces in an article on the transformations of small-town markets, in which they identify primary spatial problems and trends stemming from revitalisation activities. They highlight issues arising from the improper maintenance of greenery and a lack of consideration for persons with disabilities (Gargala, Lichotai, Pisarek, 2014: 59–69). The summary of the above items shows a diverse approach to the issue of markets in smaller centres, combining the issues of revitalisation, climate adaptation, building urban resilience and social integration.

The selected research cities, namely Dębica and Ropczyce, have existing historical studies: *Dębica: Zarys dziejów miasta i regionu* (Buszko, Kiryk, 1995), and *Ropczyce: Zarys Dziejów* (Bonusiak, 1991). However, there is a lack of contemporary research that could significantly improve the quality of public spaces in these cities. In light of the current public criticism surrounding the modernisation and revitalisation of main squares in small and medium-sized towns, the author felt it was important to explore the subject of planned spatial changes.

This article examines two main markets in small and medium-sized towns in the Podkarpackie region which are currently planning further modernisation: Dębica and Ropczyce. A key issue was the analysis and comparison of existing and planned designs, as well as the identification of current design trends. Evaluating the measures taken can provide a valuable point of reference for guiding planned revitalisation initiatives in other towns in the region. The research was based on a literature review, as well as empirical and modelling methods. Several research methods and tools were employed during the study:

- ▶ historical-interpretative method: analysis of contemporary and archival data and photographs to determine changes in selected spaces, and comparison of the analysed market areas before modernization; the application of this method enabled the determination of the scope and nature of changes in the areas before and after redevelopment; the analysis of visual materials provided a unique, contextual view of functional transformations in the studied locations;
- ▶ qualitative research method: site visits, participant and non-participant observations, and analysis of usage patterns; qualitative assessment in terms of integration, accessibility, educational value, comfort, safety, aesthetics, and functional attractiveness; the research was conducted repeatedly between 2024 and 2025; it involved becoming acquainted with selected places through systematic participation in the social life of cities, as well as observing the environment from a distance;
- ▶ comparative analysis method: quantitative analysis (division of square areas and tree counts), followed by evaluation and interpretation to identify differences and similarities between the examined public spaces; the comparative analysis enabled an objective comparison and assessment of functional and spatial features;

- ▶ cartographic method: preparation of illustrative maps presenting the current and planned development of the selected marketplaces, together with an analysis of the spatial distribution, relationships and characteristics of their structural elements;
- ▶ case study method: a detailed analysis of two cities in the Podkarpacie region that underwent modernisation between 2000 and 2015, and are currently preparing for further changes to these spaces; an analysis of two models of project process management and published presentation materials was conducted, which facilitated the identification of discrepancies in approaches to market transformation and their design consequences.

3. Analysis of selected public spaces

3.1. Historical and interpretative analysis

The study of selected towns began with a historical analysis, paying particular attention to changes in market development over the years. Due to the multidimensional nature of these changes, the author focuses on transformations beginning in the post-war period. The town squares in Dębica and Ropczyce, for example, were transformed into green, leafy parks at that time. It is interesting to note the differences that already existed between these towns at that time. In Ropczyce, the greenery in the market square was mainly low and medium-height plants arranged in spacious green areas. The trees were regularly pruned so that they did not grow very large. However, they provided shade in many areas of the square and acted as a barrier, protecting the direct connection between the square and the main road on the north side. In Dębica, on the other hand, trees dominated the park landscape, creating a forest-like atmosphere and providing necessary shade and protection from high temperatures. The square located in the central part was the only space completely devoid of vegetation. Therefore, the starting point for the modernisation of the market squares, carried out in 2001 in Dębica and in 2012 in Ropczyce, was different in terms of space. It should also be emphasised that more than 10 years separate the two reconstructions. During this time, trends in the design of public spaces in Poland changed significantly.

3.2. Site visits and analysis of space utilisation

Following the modernisation of the market square in 2012, the centre of Ropczyce underwent a complete transformation. Much of the old vegetation in the square, commonly known as the Planty, disappeared and was replaced by a large paved area surrounded by landscaped green spaces with flowers and low-growing plants (Fig. 1). The main issue is the lack of tall vegetation, which causes the paving slabs to overheat in summer. This increases the ambient temperature. This is so noticeable that, during the hottest periods, the space remains completely unused except by passers-by. The vegetation is not very diverse, being limited to a few types of trees and shrubs. The tallest trees are located next to the car park, where they provide shade for cars, and in the northern part of the square, where they cast shade over the road. The amount of paving around the trees results in inadequate watering and the plants drying out. Therefore, the composition of the greenery has not been properly adapted to the conditions of use of the space.

The main square, located in the centre of the market, is used to organise many municipal and social events, and represents the city. However, the square's direct connection to the main road poses a safety risk for users of the space. During events, railings are erected to restrict access to the street.

Benches in the market square face in different directions: towards the open square, the parish church, the centre and the street. The northern part of the square has fountains which are currently out of operation and only serve as part of a low wall in the greenery. The public toilets are the only architectural feature on the square. Their subtle facade blends in well with the surroundings without dominating the square.



Fig. 1. Main Market Square in Ropczyce, viewed from the southern frontage. A parking area along the street and a large square with a monument are visible (photo by author)

The absence of direct access to services in the vicinity of the market is readily apparent. The square is encircled by a car park and a road, which obstruct unobstructed access. Pedestrian crossings and pavements are present, yet all services remain obscured by a substantial presence of parked vehicles, which are congregated in significant numbers during daylight hours. In the summer months a local restaurant is compelled to occupy several parking spaces in order to set up a gazebo. It is evident that the street located on the southern side is frequently rendered inaccessible for the purpose of organising civic events. This finding suggests a necessity for a re-evaluation of the utilisation of car parks, and potentially even their physical relocation. The implementation of such a measure would result in an increase in the activity of residents utilising services in the city centre (Gehl, 2011: 33). A similar problem has been observed in Dębica, however, the pavements surrounding the market square are wider, thus facilitating more efficient movement. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that car parks dominate both spaces along the frontages.

The educational and historical elements incorporated into the space are worth paying attention to. These include the historic Chapel of St John of Nepomuk, a bench featuring a sculpture of Józef Mehoffer and a statue of Father Jan Zwierz. By introducing such features, the city has sought to foster a sense of local identity among its residents. This is a positive factor when assessing the public space in question.

Following its most recent modernisation in 2001, Dębica's market square has retained a significant amount of greenery, particularly tall trees. These trees dominate the square and surround it on all sides, forming a gateway (Fig. 2). Rather than being a disturbing element, they harmonise with the historic tenement houses, creating an aesthetically pleasing combination. In the centre of the square is a large open space, and in the eastern part are a concert shell and public toilets. The layout of the square allows it to be used

freely for various municipal and local events, and its accessibility also allows gastronomic events with food trucks to be organised. Benches have been placed along the pavements leading to the main square and the green area. There is also a catering point with a summer garden, which is very popular. Fountains have been placed in the southern part of the square and their arrangement allows unobstructed views of the central square. Among the educational attractions, the monument and the historic well can be highlighted, although these are not unique to Dębica. Therefore, apart from the organisation of historical events, there is a lack of additional permanent elements in the space which could influence the local education of the community.



Fig. 2. Main Market Square in Dębica, view from the entrance on the western frontage. The large square is arranged for a local event; tall trees provide shade for part of the square and green areas (photo by author)

Through local observations, both as observers and users of the space, we were able to identify the behaviours and needs of residents. In Ropczyce, it was observed that most people do not spend much time in the market square during the day, treating this space as a thoroughfare. The exception is Sundays, when the urban community gathers in the square to sit on benches and chat, or walk around with their children. In the evenings, especially in summer, the square bustles with life as young people gather in car parks and on benches to socialise. However, observations revealed a lack of socialising spaces in the market square. Young people are forced to improvise, for example by sitting on the floor, on the monument or on walls. The situation is similar in Dębica. The market square bustles with life on summer evenings, but its layout prevents socialising. Apart from the catering facilities, there is a lack of typical meeting spaces. Spending time outdoors should be encouraged through a combination of density and diversity of greenery, complemented by small-scale architecture that enables rest, recreation, work, sport and other activities (Sim, 2020: 229). A few benches cannot replace a well-organised social space (Gehl, 2010: 75).

3.3. Quantitative analysis of surface area share

To supplement the empirical analysis, a quantitative summary of current urban market areas was also prepared. According to Table 1, the percentage share of biologically active area is almost twice as high in Dębica as in Ropczyce, and there are also significantly more trees there. Taking into account the height of this greenery, the perception of space will be completely different in each city.

Paved areas in Ropczyce account for as much as 80% of the total area, although it should be noted that this also includes roads and car parks. This indicates the priority of car communication. The share of pavement space (squares and pavements) is almost equal in both towns, amounting to 42% in Dębica and 47% in Ropczyce, respectively. The data emphasise that green space was not a priority during the first modernisation of the market square in Ropczyce, while in Dębica it was an important element of the development (Table. 1).

Table 1. Current shares of surface types in the Main Markets of Dębica and Ropczyce
(own elaboration)

	Dębica Total area of market square 14,269 m ²		Ropczyce Total area of market square 8,242 m ²	
Biologically active area – lawn, low greenery, flowers	4019.8 m ²	28.2%	1352.8 m ²	16.4%
Hardened area – roads	1961.9 m ²	13.7%	1482.4 m ²	18%
Hardened area – pavements	5989.4 m ²	42%	3882.7 m ²	47.1%
Hardened area – parking areas	1852.3 m ²	13%	1304.3 m ²	15.8%
Hardened area – total	9803.6 m ²	68.7%	6669.4 m ²	80.9%
Other area – buildings, monuments, fountains	446.3 m ²	3.1%	222.5 m ²	2.7%
Tree counts	69	–	38	–

3.4. Design process

In the context of the redevelopment of the town squares in Dębica and Ropczyce, a very important issue is the approach to the design process. Analysis of these processes has revealed initial differences in the designs. The town of Dębica announced a competition chaired by the IARP committee from Rzeszów. The specific requirements were to create a high-quality, representative space that would serve as a meeting place and a place for walks, as well as for social and ceremonial events. The design also had to emphasise the centre-forming qualities of the market square, which is dominated by the road layout (Konkurs na koncepcję przebudowy rynku miejskiego w Dębicy, 2025). A group of specialists evaluated the designs and selected the one that best met the criteria for valuable public spaces. The town of Ropczyce took a different approach to the design. They commissioned a project to modify the existing space. The main difference between the two projects is that in Dębica, the entire market square is being rebuilt, whereas in Ropczyce, only selected parts of the space are being modified (Więcej zieleni w mieście, 2025). Ropczyce announced public consultations with open internet access (Gmina Ropczyce modernizuje Rynek, 2025). The questions sought opinions on the reconstruction and elements to be included in the Market Square, as well as issues important to residents in the context of the planned modernisation. However, the questions were very specific, which limited the opportunity for critical evaluation of the presented concept. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a short comment box which did not allow respondents to express their individual opinions on all topics. There were also no questions about how residents currently use the market square, despite this seemingly being a particularly important issue in terms of how the space will function in future. Asking these questions would have made it possible to identify residents' real needs and find the right tools to shape the space in a way that meets their expectations. The consultation showed that

85% of respondents were in favour of redeveloping the market square, citing its current lack of functionality and user-friendliness. Respondents expressed their desire for more greenery and for the creation of a space conducive to socialising. Involving residents, disseminating information and encouraging people to complete the consultation form usually helps to establish further design guidelines (Kusińska, 2017: 85–94). Following the survey, plans were announced to modernise the fountain, plant new trees, improve aesthetics and provide relaxation areas (Ropczyce zmieniają serce miasta, 2025).

The competition for the redevelopment of the main market square in Dębica was announced on 29 November 2024 in the Public Procurement Bulletin (Konkurs na koncepcję przebudowy rynku miejskiego w Dębicy, 2025). As previously referenced, a series of requirements were stipulated that were to be fulfilled in the design concept (Załącznik 5, 2025: 2–8). A substantial modification is set to be the restructuring of traffic around the square, encompassing the implementation of no-parking zones. Furthermore, the introduction of bicycle traffic was emphasised, and the utilisation of traffic-calming measures, including woonerf, was proposed. It is imperative that as much of the existing greenery as possible is preserved, and that new multi-seasonal low and high vegetation is planted. The vegetation is to be used for the purposes of recreation. The essential components of small architecture, including a new fountain, benches, lighting and litter bins, were also emphasised. The configuration of the benches and designated rest areas is meticulously designed to promote interaction among residents (Załącznik 5, 2025: 2–8). Street furniture, akin to its application in living spaces, imbues urban environments with functionality and aesthetic appeal. This multifaceted instrument assumes diverse forms and functions, and, contingent on its specifications, fulfils a variety of roles.

The winning concept, devised by the design team from the RD Architektura Krajobrazu office, has been adjudged by the competition jury to respond to the contemporary need for change in Polish market designs. The solutions employed not only promote the building of social bonds, but also offer real opportunities to stimulate the activity of entrepreneurs running businesses in the square. It was also recognised for its contribution to the maintenance of a significant representative function, whilst concomitantly ensuring an augmentation in the extent of green space designated for recreational purposes. The selection of greenery, that is to say the design of the vegetation, with consideration for local conditions, was a pivotal factor in the evaluation process. This is of paramount importance for the subsequent maintenance of the greenery. The configuration of the green spaces will result in an agreeable location for leisure activities. (Wyniki konkursu na przebudowę Rynku w Dębicy, 2025) In the context of the design process, it is imperative to conduct comprehensive and exhaustive urban, contextual and historical analyses. The design that was ultimately deemed to be the most successful was informed by a range of analyses. A comprehensive array of spatial and historical elements was observed, including the identity of the place. Furthermore, it was imperative for the designers to adapt the urban interior to the human scale, as demonstrated in the diagram appended to the competition entry.

The initial concept for the redevelopment of the main market square in Ropczyce was published in March 2025 on the official website of the Ropczyce Municipality (Więcej zieleni w mieście, 2025). The planned redevelopment was referred to in the article as revitalisation. The primary objective of the project is to introduce an abundance of greenery and to establish shaded recreational areas. In addition, the construction of a new fountain and the introduction of small architectural features designed to promote relaxation are to be implemented. The leitmotif of the piece is a return to Ropczyce as the ‘city of roses’, as it was known before the redevelopment in 2012. The new square is to be designed to resemble a park, with a view to providing comfortable relaxation for the city’s residents. The concept is substandard in comparison to the competition design

from Dębica. The formal requirements of the contracting authority are not known, but it can be assumed that they were similar to those presented in the text of the main assumptions (Więcej zieleni w mieście, 2025). The graphics appended to the online article present aerial perspectives of the entire square, in addition to two visualisations from a human perspective, rendered with slightly greater intricacy. The illustrative views are not accurate enough to determine the type of vegetation designed in all locations.

3.5. Spatial and comparative analysis

The concept for the redevelopment of the market square in Dębica largely retains its functional and transport layout (Fig. 3), while introducing changes that affect the overall perception of the space. The redesign of the main square has been meticulously planned to facilitate the organisation of a diverse array of seasonal, urban and social events. The reduction in the size of the square has been shown to result in more harmonious proportions in the urban interior (Fig. 4). The configuration of the square permits the implementation of numerous functional layouts. Furthermore, the isolation provided by the



Fig. 3. Current site plan of the Main Market Square in Dębica (own elaboration)

surrounding greenery gives the events a distinctive character. The pergola, adorned with verdant flora, may serve as a natural barrier between the square and the green space. In addition to an evident augmentation in the proportion of biologically active space, substantial green areas have been conceptualised as shaded pocket parks, which engender an atmosphere of intimacy and proximity to nature. This has also been emphasised in the choice of flooring in these areas.



Fig. 4. Illustrative layout of the planned redevelopment of the Main Market Square in Debica (own elaboration)

Despite the increase in greenery around the square, effective communication from all directions is ensured. The primary pedestrian thoroughfares radiate from the market square, converging at its four corners. A notable feature is the wide opening from the primary communication route, while maintaining an abundance of tall greenery. This configuration is intended to facilitate convenient access to the square and ensure visibility from the main thoroughfare during local events. The market square is characterised by an abundance of greenery, which serves to complement the surrounding streets. Consequently, woonerf-style areas have been established in the vicinity of the square. The configuration of the road has been meticulously designed to temper the intensity of vehicular traffic, thereby ensuring that the designated space is not overpowered by the movement of vehicles. The area designated for parking is interspersed with areas of greenery, which include trees. In designated areas, a variety of space has been allocated for summer gardens.

A pivotal aspect of the concept under discussion is that of safety of use. The pedestrian and cycle paths are wide and comfortable, separated from fast traffic by strips of greenery of varying heights, ensuring adequate isolation. It is also noteworthy that the children's area is located in a quiet and safe place (the competition guidelines recommend moving it closer to the outdoor cafes in the south-western part) (Wyniki konkursu na przebudowę Rynku w Dębicy, 2025).

As indicated in municipal announcements, the primary objective of the redevelopment of the market square in Ropczyce was the introduction of increased greenery and designated areas for repose. The concept presented for public review is not sufficiently detailed to verify the type of vegetation introduced. The chosen theme will most likely be roses, in addition to other floral elements and ornamental grasses that are visible in the visualisations. Permanent deckchairs are to be placed on parts of the lawn. The subjects under scrutiny are to be found in the southern part of the square, in proximity to tall trees, and in the northern part, in front of the car park. In addition, the choice of tree species is worthy of consideration, with the design incorporating three species of tall trees. Furthermore, the visualisation displays pruned trees, which are not conducive to the provision of adequate shade and microclimate. It is evident that repositioning the subjects at the perimeter of the square will only result in the casting of shade upon the road. In this region, a wide variety of tree species can be cultivated, with a range of sizes and crown shapes available for planting. The diversity and abundance of their seasonal colouration, coupled with their slender or expansive forms, offers a unique opportunity to create spatial compositions that align with the surrounding architectural structures (Wejchert, 1984: 230).

The proportion of green space has undergone a substantial alteration in comparison with its current state (Fig. 5), whilst the composition itself and its connection with the functional layout have not been the subject of adequate



Fig. 5. Current site plan of the Main Market Square in Ropczyce (own elaboration)

consideration. Firstly, in the southern part of the square, the presence of greenery becomes increasingly dominant over the designated open space, which was originally intended for the organisation of municipal and local events. Restricting the organisational capacity of events has the potential to diminish the educational value of the space. The centre of the square shifts towards the busy main street, creating a space that is potentially unsafe. The absence of any isolation and the square's openness to the street have a detrimental effect on the spatial perception (Fig. 6). The urban interior maintains the original proportions and is excessively wide, thereby intensifying the perception of exposure (Wejchert, 1984: 157–159). Access to the square is restricted by the car parks that surround it. The restaurant garden, which was formerly located in the car park, is to be relocated to the market square. However, the precise location has not yet been determined.

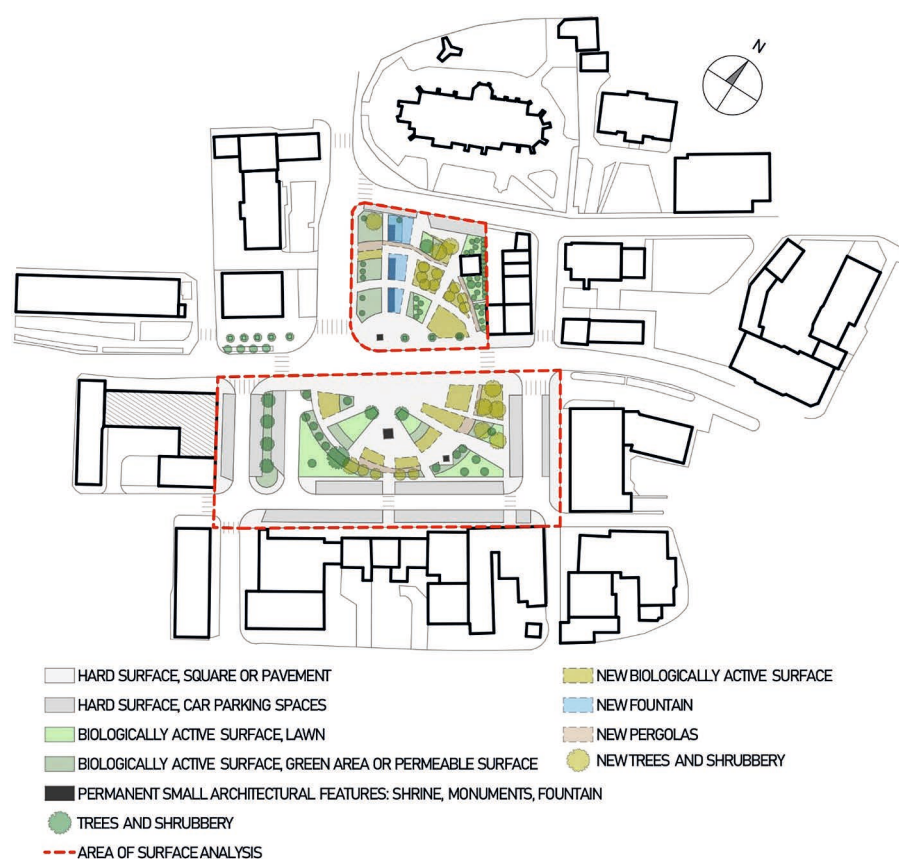


Fig. 6. Illustrative layout of the planned redevelopment of the Main Market Square in Ropczyce (own elaboration)

The overall perception of the space is further influenced by additional elements, including pergolas located in the northern part of the square and elaborate fountains. The water from the stone and small pots has been repurposed as water in the floor, which is likely to enhance the microclimate in the square. The implementation of simple pergolas could present a valuable opportunity to introduce climbing plants, thereby filling the interior of the square and fostering the creation of a more intimate atmosphere.

The newly composed arrangement evidently demonstrates that the designer based his work on the existing semi-circular layout of the pavement, without introducing spatial changes that could have a positive impact on the square. There is a paucity of relevant analyses that could assist in answering the question of how the market square functions. No changes have been proposed for the car parks and roads surrounding the market square, indicating an inability to recognise the problem of traffic overwhelming the space. The preliminary proposal for redevelopment is characterised by ease of implementation, attributable to the minimal interference with the space. It is evident that the

project under discussion is of a more limited scope than the redevelopment proposed in the competition in Dębica.

4. Results

An analysis of selected cities leads to the conclusion that the process of designing public space and the final design solutions are characterised by significant differences. The following table (Table 2) presents a comparison of the salient similarities and differences between the projects under discussion.

A historical analysis of urban redevelopment initiatives reveals that cities have historically adopted divergent approaches to the development of their respective projects. A salient positive element influencing the perception of the market square is the presence of tall trees in the square in Dębica, which, when properly incorporated into the new design, are of great value to the new space. The configuration of the surrounding roads appears to indicate that the traditional transportation infrastructure has been maintained. A comparative analysis of the areas revealed additional differences between the squares, mainly in terms of the proportion of biologically active space and the amount of tall greenery. The overview maps demonstrate the spatial and functional distinctions between the market squares. The configuration of the main squares varies: in Dębica, the square is situated at the centre of the square, in Ropczyce, it is located at the centre of the complex, adjacent to the primary thoroughfare. At present, both cities have similar urban proportions; however, the design of the market square in Dębica aims to improve these values, thereby promoting a positive perception of the space among users. The drawings also illustrate communication barriers and vegetation arrangements that affect the functionality of the squares.

Table 2. Similarities and differences in the redevelopment concepts of public spaces in Dębica and Ropczyce (own elaboration)

Similarities in public space designs	Differences in public space designs
▶ increasing the proportion of green space ▶ increasing the number of places to relax ▶ introducing more trees ▶ species diversity of low vegetation ▶ in-ground fountain ▶ pergola ▶ outdoor restaurant gardens	▶ design process ▶ design guidelines ▶ selection of concepts ▶ analysis of current public space ▶ priority of transport mode ▶ bicycle transport ▶ parking space development ▶ overall aesthetics of the concept ▶ type of small architecture ▶ use of environmentally friendly systems ▶ solutions promoting social integration ▶ diversity of tall greenery ▶ selection of flooring types ▶ location of restaurant gardens ▶ composition of the main square ▶ safety

The redevelopment concepts primarily present an alternative aesthetic. The design for the modernisation of the Ropczyce market square involves cosmetic changes compared to the redevelopment of the market square in Dębica, where the presented assumptions are bold, consistent and designed with the utmost attention to detail. The Ropczyce project involves the implementation of simple solutions, the utilisation of ready-made small architectural elements, and the introduction of new green areas in a random manner, with no alterations made to the area of road, pedestrian and bicycle traffic. There is a paucity of solutions that support social integration and ensure the safety of public space use. The primary square has undergone a transformation, with the conventional arrangement of green spaces now being replaced by a more haphazard distribution. It is challenging to ascertain the functionality of the square post-reconstruction and whether the financial

resources expended will be reflected in an enhancement of the quality of the space. Conversely, the Dębica project was preceded by a series of analyses, which collectively indicate that it is meticulously conceived and substantiated by empirical spatial observation findings. It is evident that meticulous consideration was given to the modification of traffic patterns, the reduction in the speed of car traffic, and the introduction of a designated bicycle path. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the prioritisation of pedestrians, which was a fundamental aspect of the design. The selection of small architecture and flooring has been chosen to create an atmosphere reminiscent of natural parks. The primary square has maintained its representative function, and its configuration and arrangement according to the market square plan facilitates optimal functionality in the future. The project was executed with meticulous attention to the user, showcasing solutions that guarantee safety of use and care for nature. These solutions include environmentally friendly approaches in the field of green and blue infrastructure, selection of appropriate vegetation, and use of natural materials. This is a rare solution in contemporary designs, yet it is of great importance in the era of climate change.

It is evident that both concepts proffer a plethora of solutions that have the potential to influence future solutions in the modernisation of market squares in neighbouring towns. These solutions include, but are not limited to, the following: increasing the proportion of green space (low and high greenery); introducing species diversity in vegetation; increasing the number of places for relaxation (small architecture in various forms, benches, deckchairs); introducing additional spatial elements in squares (pergolas); striving for multifunctionality of city squares; introducing complementary functions to the square (catering, summer gardens); and 'close to nature' solutions (water in the flooring, use of natural materials, green-blue infrastructure). Other issues, such as safety of use, prioritisation of types of transport, cycle paths, composition and proportions of squares, and the type of design process, are reflected differently in the cases studied.

5. Discussion

Currently, there are many activities underway in the public sector to improve the quality of small and medium-sized town centres. The projects analysed are reflected in spaces created throughout Poland. The example of Ropczyce shows that local governments undertaking the task of shaping public spaces resort to ready-made, non-invasive solutions, without making the effort to adapt the space to local conditions (Dymek, Jóźwik, 2021: 1–28). This is also confirmed by research on the modernisation of main market squares in other cities, where the pattern of using ready-made elements that are not specific to the region was often repeated (Starzecka, 2020: 43–57). The example of the project based on the competition in Dębica proves that this system is more effective and has influenced the quality of the solutions adopted (Ciepiela, 2021: 42–51).

The fundamental problem remains a lack of understanding of current climate issues and the repetition of flawed solutions that shape city squares into concrete spaces used only for organising urban events. This is confirmed by studies carried out in the Łódź and Wielkopolska provinces (Olczak, 2022: 21–23; Tomczak, Szumigala, 2024: 36–49). The multifunctionality of the square proposed in the design of the main market square in Dębica is a better solution, as it can be used not only for official purposes, but also for recreational and cultural activities (Masieriek, Przygoda, 2024: 63–85).

An important aspect, especially in view of the residents' priorities, is the amount of greenery in public spaces. The lack of tall, shading greenery in Ropczyce is a frequently repeated element of urban market development (Starzecka, 2020: 43–57). This results in faster surface heating, heat accumulation and drying out of vegetation. Studies confirm that the lack of tall greenery and biodiversity is

also not conducive to social activity (Januchta-Szostak, Ogorzelskia, Peplińska, 2023: 243260). In the cases analysed, however, we find solutions that improve these issues. Here, we should point to the green-blue infrastructure and the partial use of permeable surfaces in the town square in Dębica. Januchta-Szostak points to the important role of pro-ecological solutions in the process of adapting cities to climate change (Januchta-Szostak, 2020: 37–75). Various methods of rainwater management should be a common feature of contemporary public spaces (Dudzińska-Jarmolińska, 2024: 115–137).

It is also noteworthy that the small architecture has been integrated in a manner that fosters interpersonal interaction. Seating areas and places for socialising should be located not only along pedestrian routes, but also in quiet areas (Masierek, Przygoda, 2024: 63–85). The small architecture design in Dębica is informed by the prevailing naturalistic trend, with elements of wood (e.g. playgrounds and the facade of the public toilet building) and stone (Mróz, Pistelok, Salata-Kochanowski, 2023: 26, 27). The term ‘social furniture’ refers to objects designed to facilitate social interaction in public spaces, with the purpose of fostering social relationships (Królikowski, Rybak-Niedziółka, Rykała, 2017: 184–213). Consequently, it is a pivotal component in the formation of market space.

The most problematic issue in the context of the above analysis of the designs is circular traffic in public spaces. It appears that the absence of parking restrictions would result in the occupation of the central area of the market square by vehicles¹ (Wejchert, 1984: 106). Any endeavour to impose constraints on this arbitrariness is likely to encounter vehement opposition from drivers. Residents often comment negatively on such plans, comparing themselves to other cities or even nations: *We are Danes, not Italians (...)* (quoted in Gehl, Svarre, 2021: 163), *We are not Berlin, we are not Nantes, we are not Copenhagen. We are New York! It's impossible!* (quoted in Sadik-Khan, Solomonow, 2021: 12). However, history shows that this is achievable even in the largest cities in the world (Montgomery, 2021: 239–243). The question therefore arises as to why it is so challenging to implement this type of square in small Polish towns. It is important to note that Copenhagen was not always the global leader in cycling infrastructure and New York still faces challenges in achieving the status of a city that is friendly towards its residents. The capacity for effective social and spatial transformation is contingent upon the implementation of a consistent and comprehensive urban policy (Haupt, 2014: 61; Jagiełto-Kowalczyk, 2016: 127). Consequently, solutions that are oriented towards the minimisation of car traffic within the urban environment should be endorsed, and measures that promote walking and cycling should be accorded a high priority in public space initiatives. Urban squares, surrounded by streets, are not conducive to leisure and recreation. This is a common issue in small towns in Poland (Mazur-Belzyt, 2012: 219–223). The addition of small green areas and the planting of a few trees, as planned for the redevelopment of the market square in Ropczyce, is not sufficient to significantly change the character of this space (Alexander, 2008: 307–314). It is imperative to implement far-reaching modifications to the functional and spatial configuration, with the objective of ensuring that residents are able to enjoy their leisure time in a satisfactory manner.

The authors of the survey (Wyniki ankiety dotyczącej rewitalizacji rynku, 2025) conducted in Ropczyce did not appear to have taken care to educate the public or explain all the issues and concepts related to modernisation. The questions posed were biased, and there was no opportunity to ascertain the detailed position of the town's residents on the planned redevelopment. The author would like to emphasise one issue in particular concerning question number 5: *What problems do you see in the Market Square?* A total of 325 respondents

¹ In Brussels, during the permitted parking period, Grande Place (the main market square) was occupied by parked vehicles.

selected the response *insufficient number of parking spaces*². According to the respondents, this issue is considered to be the fifth most significant problem in the primary square in Ropczyce. It is important to consider whether this suggests a necessity for the design of additional parking spaces. This is evidently not the case – as asserted by the author, the current number of parking spaces in the market square is already excessive. A resident of a small town who uses a car for transport on a daily basis will recognise the need for increased parking availability, ensuring convenient parking at any time. Consequently, such opinions are inadequate for establishing the viability of potential design solutions. The survey should be prepared in a manner that facilitates the identification of residents' actual needs and opinions. Problems with the survey indicate that there was a lack of proven tools that could assist in revitalisation processes at various levels (Mazur-Belzyt, 2016: 79–93; Marszał, Masierek, 2021: 209–226).

A significant issue that remains to be addressed is the redesign of public space in such a manner that it is both straightforward to implement and, concomitantly, it delivers the intended results with reasonable expediency (Wyniki konkursu na przebudowę Rynku w Dębicy, 2025). It is evident that smaller and medium-sized towns may possess a more limited financial allocation for the undertaking of this particular type of urban redevelopment when compared to larger urban centres. However, it is important to refrain from attributing this decline to financial constraints. Instead, efforts should be directed towards the identification of strategies that facilitate the execution of creative endeavours (Łuszczek, Ptasińska: 79–81). The market square redevelopment project in Dębica meets these expectations, among other things due to the preservation of a large amount of green space and subtle but significant changes in traffic around the market square. Such conversions, which take into account the current needs of residents, can also be found in Poland (Gajdek, Gargala-Polar, Kaspruk, 2022: 7–14; Masierek, Przygoda, 2024: 63–85).

6. Conclusion

The concepts analysed for the redevelopment of the main market squares in Dębica and Ropczyce present a variety of styles, yet several trends can be identified that will shape future public space projects in Podkarpacie. The prevailing trend is the reintroduction of greenery to urban squares. This is a seminal issue in both concepts, giving hope that other cities will follow in the footsteps of the anti-concrete revolution. The importance of recreation in public spaces is also emphasised, with projects highlighting the role of small architecture in providing rest for residents. Tall greenery has been included in the design to accompany the relaxation areas, with the intention that it will provide shade during the summer months. The utilisation of eco-friendly solutions and elements composed of natural materials signifies a reversion to nature, a commitment to climate preservation, and a respect for the integrity of the local environment. Solutions have also been introduced to prioritise pedestrian and bicycle traffic in public spaces, slow down vehicular traffic, and organise it in such a way that it does not pose a danger to users of the square. The introduction of woonerf streets has the potential to address these challenges by facilitating the maintenance of traffic flow and the provision of parking spaces, whilst introducing elements of urban greenery. The potential for the development of local businesses and the enhancement of accessibility to services represent a commendable advancement. A square in public space plays an extremely important role, serving a representative and recreational

² Determining the proportion of respondents to this question is challenging, as it was formulated as a multiple-choice question.

function, and providing a venue for social, local and sporting activities. Consequently, it is recommended that space be allocated in the design of the market square for the organisation of such events, as they contribute to the development of the sense of community among residents.

In the face of civilisational and social changes, it is important to design squares with the user in mind. The optional activities of residents contribute to improving the quality of public space. The presence of people and their activities provide evidence for the integrative nature of the space. In the context of small towns, such places can play a significant role in the formation of local identity. In order for public space to fulfil its role as a social space, as opposed to being merely physical, it is essential that it fulfils the requirements of attractiveness. In this regard, it is imperative that people are able to spend their free time in a comfortable and safe manner outside of their homes. In light of the modernisation measures being carried out, the quality of the projects presented, which consequently affect the quality of public spaces, should be emphasised. A thorough analysis of the changes that have a chance of proving successful in the cases analysed may significantly influence the shape of future transformations in other small and medium-sized towns in the region.

The author's position is that the enhancement of public spaces in small towns can be achieved through the integration of architectural education, the promotion of public awareness, and the implementation of spatial modifications conceived by professionals specialising in urban landscape design. The trends presented, such as the increasing presence of greenery in urban areas and the focus on enhancing residents' leisure experiences, offer a glimmer of hope for a transformation in the image of the primary market squares in Podkarpacie. However, more ambitious solutions, such as the project in Dębica, should be implemented to ensure a fully functional, aesthetically pleasing and safe space.

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