

Conclusions and recommendation Maria Konopnicka Place Workshop Suwalki, Poland 19th – 21st May 2010

Background:

Suwalki is similar to many other “edge” Cities and towns that are far from international or local airports and major communication links. Although the city has many qualities, including many historical monuments, natural areas and beautiful buildings it is not really considered attractive enough for major investment or as a place to move to or to attract sufficient Polish or foreign tourists. Young people have been and are leaving to study and work in other cities and countries and not enough are returning.

Place Marketing:

Modern Cities are products and those that will grow and survive - must be willing to accept this fact. Suwalki it seems has concluded that the City requires improvements. Investments in new major projects have been approved and are currently being built at the other end of the city centre to Maria Konopnicka Place. These include a major Water Recreation Centre, a large multi-level indoor Shopping Mall and new housing.

As a result of these developments it has been decided that Maria Konopnicka Place must also be improved to function better for the inhabitants and tourists as a public square.

The process to improve Maria Konopnicka Place as a public square

An architect competition was recently carried out and a winner proposal selected by the jury. However public opinion was against the plan and it was too expensive to construct. The city therefore decided to arrange an international workshop as part of their involvement in the Trans In Form (TIF) project to review the contents and design programme of the new square.

The Goal for the TIF Workshop:

Primarily this was to give concrete feedback and increase knowledge and insights into what are the critical issues that should be incorporated in the new “Programme for the Architect Competition” to be held in the autumn of 2010.

The TIF participants worked in national and cross-national groups. Their focus was to propose concrete solutions for the investments on Maria Konopnicka Place that would create a interactive place – and an outdoor Public Cultural Venue that would be : *a public mixed-use place/square which would be a vibrant attractive for all age groups – all days and all year round.*

“The Programme for the Architect Competition”: Conclusions and recommendations.

This note is a summary based on the main conclusions from that were presented at the Workshop.

The Process: The Workshop started with presentations from experts which showed trends from redesigning spaces and parks in many cities with a focus on transforming city markets into “Interactive public spaces”, “Light and Sound”, “Trends in Urban Design of public spaces in Poland” and “Upgrading medium and small sized towns by creative offensive”.

IMPORTANT ISSUES TO BE INCLUDED IN THE NEW ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION:

Heritage and Regeneration: Focus on reusing materials, trees and buildings.

- Renovation and re-use of existing buildings and structures.
- Integration of existing elements such as trees and vegetation into the new square.
- Historic elements such as the the original pre-War Market and Sheds, cobble paving and other structures should be considered as part of cultural heritage.

The square's modest scale makes walking and relaxing a pleasant experience; its lush, mature trees, historic buildings, with their small shops, florists and café/bars provide people with impromptu places to meet, stand and sit. These functions are important today and additional activities must not impair or reduce these activities.

The goal of the improvements is to encourage more people to participate in formal and informal outdoor activities in and around the square. To achieve this it is critical that known "success criterion for People Places" are noted as a check-list for the evaluation of the architectural competition.

Multi-disciplinary Architecture Teams:

Only teams that include professional, skilled members in their Teams should be allowed to compete in the competition:

landscape architects, architects, theatre/drama, light and sound specialists, artists/sculptors.

CHECK LIST: Success Criterion for Attractive Interactive Meeting Places .

- **Sitting** opportunities available– a wide "choice": benches, steps or raised edges, in the sun or shade, out of the wind. Comfortable benches with and without backrests as well as places and structures to sunbathe or lie down on and relax should be provided on paved areas as well as grass.
- **Trees** - create "room", shade and provide oxygen and green qualities. Approximately 50% of the trees should be removed. The remaining trees should be in groups or as single feature elements. They should be in a variety of places, in raised grass areas, "hard and soft" paving. New trees may also be planted. Trees along the busy streets should be kept.
- **Water** - to look at, touch or get wet. There is space in the square to create a large area with shallow water which can be drained to allow for other activities. The water area should be formed so that it encourages people to play, walk or cycle through it. Most of the time it will function as a visual focus, reflecting sun and lighting and calming and cooling for people and animals. It should be able to function as ice skating rink in the winter.
- **Food** - to buy or bring. Existing cafes and bars need to be encouraged to use areas on the pavement in front of their buildings. Pavements need to be widened where possible to ensure they do not block pedestrians. In addition a new modern café should be built in the square with tables, shade structures, comfortable chairs and gaslit heaters that will help to make cold days enjoyable
- **"Triangulation"** – an activity or structure/artwork that encourages people to talk to strangers and friends. A higher – or lower - stage area which can be used by musicians, actors and other performers could attract many people. The public should have the sun on their backs – while the artists/performers have the sun in their faces.

The stage should have a roof which may be removed when not required. A screen area that could be used for open-air films and artistic lighting. Art, craft and other exhibitions such as food, cars or furniture can also be provided.

- **Good lighting and street furniture** - these add a soft quality to our environment. Artistic lighting can be artistic and stimulating, add colour and highlight buildings and vegetation. Good lighting also helps to reduce crime. Furniture should be of a common, modern design. It should include items that are movable, flexible and interactive encouraging participation and a feeling of freedom of choice.

LOCATION: IMPROVE CONNECTIONS TO THE SQUARE FROM THE EXISTING PEDESTRIAN AND SURROUNDING AREAS:

“Location” is a vital criterion for public life in successful public spaces. The connections into the square must be improved to make it function better as the heart of the community. People need to be encouraged to be walking and cycling through and across the square to their daily activities elsewhere. Direct visually dominating paths, e.g. across the square, should be avoided as they encourage people to pass through and not stop. Research has shown that people will find the shortest path to their destinations anyway and must not be physically hindered. They can however be led around structures if they know where they wish to go to. Many opportunities to “criss-cross” the square from different points will make accessibility easier and the square safer.

The goal must be to physically and visually extend the pedestrian street across the road and into the square. This will connect people better to the bus station, market and surrounding housing areas. By reducing or moving traffic around the square, speed is reduced and the streets can become a safer and noise levels lower. The south and west facing building facades are sunny and beautiful spaces for people to relax and look into the square. These are ideal for sitting and for outdoor cafes and restaurants.

LIVING EDGES AND CORNERS:

It is critical how buildings meet the square and what activities and functions they have in their ground floors and how they can add life, activities and colour. Poor maintenance of the building facades is not necessarily a negative issue as old buildings with faded paint, brickwork, worn windows and doors can be very charming and historically original. This is important as a contrast to new, sterile shopping malls. A variety of old “genuine” signage and lighting can also add quality and charm. The square contains many local small businesses which sell specialist items and products that the local people need. Used clothing and hand-made or locally produced goods and food are important qualities. If the pavements and corners can be used to enable these businesses to survive restricted defined areas should be allocated for this function. These activities must however not cause public hindrance or barriers.

POPULATE THE BUILDINGS SURROUNDING THE PLACE:

People who live in or near the place can eliminate or reduce their dependence on cars. At night their lighted windows will give pedestrians a feeling of safety. New housing must be encouraged on the top floors on new buildings and these must be in ALL sizes and price categories, to encourage young people to live here. Students and other young people who commute to school or work on bicycles don't add to traffic congestion; on the contrary, their active presence, day and night, animates the place and city centre

NEW BUILDINGS:

There are opportunities for some new buildings around the square. These should of course follow the planning guidelines. These buildings will have to have activities that pay more/earn more per square metre than the old, existing buildings. Activities that generate extra turn-over and income should be encouraged as they will attract new customers to the square. Modern architecture and design within the planning guidelines could be a positive quality. Flats with balconies should also be encouraged in the 2nd and 3rd floors of these buildings.

MARKET STALLS:

Small movable Market Stalls should also be placed in the square. These can be rented by local small businesses and sell food, craft, antiques and second-hand items. These Stalls should have a common architectural style and be placed near to each other. One option is that these are located in the southern part of the square, near the existing taxi area and relate to the existing buildings in this area. Alternatively they can be placed along the pavement on the northern edge of the square where there is high pedestrian traffic today.

EXISTING BUILDINGS IN THE SQUARE:

The existing buildings in the square should be retained if possible. Their facades and signage can be improved. Removing and replacing them will cost a lot of money. It would be better for the public that this money is used to create activities in the square as well as better quality furniture and finishes.

SUFFICIENT PARKING

To enable the existing shops and new shops to survive it may be vital to keep existing parking capacity. The square must therefore provide parking bays on two sides. These bays should have time limitations so as not to be used for all-day parking.