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**Ada Krawczak**

Pedagogical University of Krakow

## **‘Downtown mosaics’ in revitalisation district in Szczecin (Poland). Reflections on the project**

Before starting the ‘Śródmiejskie mozaiki’ (‘Downtown mosaics’) art project by OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association, there were many questions to be addressed: is it possible to change the perception of a place through art? How to engage people in the project? How to introduce change that will not be perceived as space appropriation? As Magdalena Piłat-Boruch writes in her book ‘Design, Designer and metamorphosis of the city,’ participation art perfectly fits the idea of civil society when an artist is working with the public to reflect on relation between the people and the space surrounding them. This article makes an attempt to present one of the elements of building new urban culture in revitalised area of Szczecin.

Szczecin is the capital city of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, in northwestern part of Poland, located 20-minute drive from the German border. Szczecin is more than a thousand years old, however its modern city centre has mainly been shaped by the 19<sup>th</sup> century urban transformation – from a fortress to the vibrant city with growing industry, especially shipbuilding. At that time new urban plan was created along with the new street layout and dense urban development. Main residential area was located northwest of the Odra river – with mostly four-storey tenement houses for wealthier citizens at the front, and much smaller outbuildings in the backyards. This is still characteristic for today’s Szczecin downtown area. Because of high density of the buildings, backyards are underexposed what makes them dark and filled with disturbing mood. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this area had been designed as a residential district, while the function of the ‘heart of the city’ remained in the old town.<sup>23</sup>

Szczecin (up to 1945 – Stettin) became Polish city at the end of World War II. Because of that, after the war German inhabitants had been forced to move to Germany,

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<sup>23</sup> Piotr Fiuk, *Miejska kamienica czynszowa z drugiej połowy XIX i przełomu XIX/XX wieku w przykładzie Szczecina; charakterystyka form i źródeł inspiracji z analizą możliwości adaptacyjnych*, [https://repozytorium.biblos.pk.edu.pl/redu/resources/26978/file/suwFiles/FiukP\\_MiejskaKamienica.pdf](https://repozytorium.biblos.pk.edu.pl/redu/resources/26978/file/suwFiles/FiukP_MiejskaKamienica.pdf) (Accessed: 29 July 2022).

while the Polish people – from all around Poland – were arriving in Szczecin. For many of them this was just a short stop on a much longer journey to other European cities, the USA, or on the way back to their home towns in eastern Poland. Undoubtedly, Szczecin was an attractive place for the newcomers looking for a fresh start in life. The Old Town was destroyed by aerial bombing attacks, but most of the tenement houses in the downtown area were saved in good condition and ready to be inhabited. Every newcomer, man or woman, could get a place to stay and job immediately upon the arrival. Nevertheless, for many of the new szczecinians this home seemed temporary for many years.

In the next few decades, the city was growing – powered by the industry like shipbuilding, steelwork and clothing production. The Old Town was not rebuilt for a long time, so city life was forced to move to the 19<sup>th</sup> century residential area. Wojska Polskiego (Polish Army) Avenue became the new shopping and meeting point for the locals. In 1959 new biggest Cinema called Kosmos – ‘The Cosmos’ in Polish – opened, and it quickly became a popular place to visit. In the 1970s Wojska Polskiego Avenue was covered with bright and sparkly neon signs. This boulevard was the apple of the residents and city hall eye – a true showpiece. In the same decade, city officials agreed to the downtown part of the avenue renovation and liquidation of the streetcar line that ran there since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After the change of the socio-political system in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wojska Polskiego Avenue kept its good reputation. A well known fast food chain restaurant opened its location there, Kosmos Cinema was still showing movies and attracted many viewers who after the show often visited many pastry shops located nearby.

When the new millennium began, Wojska Polskiego Avenue has started to degrade, fast foods restaurant left for better locations in shopping malls, and Kosmos Cinema could not keep up with the new big multiplex cinemas. Slowly this once prestigious alley was turning into grey, dirty and unpleasant road that everybody tried to avoid. The general mood in the city worsened, the shipyard’s competitiveness was significantly reduced, resulting in unemployment and decreasing number of inhabitants.<sup>24</sup>

Residents and city officials finally noticed that this beloved avenue lost its appeal. In August of 2017, the City Hall published a report titled ‘Diagnoza stanu istniejącego Miasta Szczecin’ (eng. Diagnosis of the current state the city of Szczecin). It stated that three downtown estates (in Polish: osiedla), namely: Centrum, Śródmieście-Zachód, Turzyn were those most degraded in the whole city. It means these areas encounter huge growth barriers, including a progressive pauperization, big deflation of the population. Many residents of those estates still remaining in need of social and financial aid, longtime unemployment, and high risk of crime. Lots of the shop premises were becoming deserted – the report also claimed that three shopping malls that emerged in the city center have contributed to the reduction of attractiveness of this part of Szczecin. These shopping malls were designed as closed public spaces, where many needs are easily satisfied, sucking the city life from the streets.

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<sup>24</sup> Urząd Miasta Szczecin (2006) *Memorandum Finansowe Miasta Szczecin* <http://bip.um.szczecin.pl/files/BF06C8843FFE42E48D32B274CFC0062F/02.pdf> (Accessed: 29 July 2022).

City officials developed a downtown revitalization plan focused on the redevelopment of the downtown section of Wojska Polskiego Avenue. The eyes of the inhabitants of the other districts looked mainly at the design of the social functions of the new avenue.<sup>25</sup>

The revitalisation process involves not only change of the physical space by carrying out renovation works (as is often the case), but should also focus on the residents of degraded neighbourhoods. Szczecin has been in a great need for creation of the new urban culture. As Magdalena Piłat-Borcuch writes, the urban culture involves three main elements: middle class values (e.g. subjectivity, respect for the common good), life-style values (e.g. spending time in common spaces), and creation of an urban narration (through art and culture). Until 2019 many municipal initiatives addressed to specific social groups were created in the center of Szczecin: senior citizens' homes, apartments for the young, green backyards and green front gardens.

In 2018, Szczecin City Hall officials together with OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association established ŚRODEK Śródmiejski Punkt Sąsiedzki (eng. MIDDLE The Downtown Spot for Neighbours) – a place that is supposed to support the commune self-government in the social aspects of revitalisation process in the downtown area. At that time, OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association was rather small and new non-profit organisation associating artists, designers and culture managers from Szczecin. They took the responsibility to create the spot open to the residents and implement a programme for strengthening commitment and integration of Szczecin inhabitants.

One year later, in 2019, ŚRODEK was already recognizable by szczecinians from all over the city, but relations with people from the closest neighbourhood have not been developed. However, true revitalisation can only happen when every social group is included and no one is left out. Because of different needs and competences of the representatives of socially excluded groups that live in the area, it was not reasonable to expect them to participate in different events or projects on the same terms as more privileged inhabitants. The Association has decided then – instead of forcing their neighbours to visit a strange place for them that ŚRODEK was – rather to meet them in the safe space – their backyards. One of few ideas was to create an art project to be implemented along with the neighbours. Participation art gives voice to the public and everybody can get involved the preferred way.

As Agnieszka Wołodźko writes in her PhD thesis '*Sztuka partycypacji w krajach skandynawskich w latach 1990–2010*', there are five different stages of the audience in the art of participation.<sup>26</sup> The first group coordinates and works on every mosaic project – this includes local designers, craftsmen and cultural managers. In the 'Downtown mosaics' project this group includes: Ada Krawczak, Patrycja Makarewicz, Tomasz Midzio, Paulina Stok-Stocka and Kinga Rabińska –team of the OSWAJANIE

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<sup>25</sup> Konferencja podsumowująca projekt Rewitalizacja obszaru przestrzeni publicznej i zabudowy śródmiejskiego odcinka alei Wojska Polskiego w Szczecinie [https://bip.um.szczecin.pl/UMSzczecinFiles/file/2\\_1\\_MRM\\_dzien\\_2\\_Jaroslav\\_Bondar-skonwertowany\\_\(1\).pdf](https://bip.um.szczecin.pl/UMSzczecinFiles/file/2_1_MRM_dzien_2_Jaroslav_Bondar-skonwertowany_(1).pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Wołodźko A. (2013), *Sztuka partycypacyjna w krajach skandynawskich w latach 1990–2010*. PhD thesis. Adam Mickiewicz University Available at: <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/9888/1/cal%C3%B9%202.pdf> (Accessed: 29 July 2022) p. 255.

SZTUKI Association. 'Cosmos' and 'Love' was made with collaboration of Patrycja Żyżniewska. The second group consists of the building administration representatives and – depending on a particular project – at least ten to twenty people donates old tiles or contributes their time and effort to make a mosaic possible. The third group includes those living close to the location of a mosaic – they decide which project will be implemented (always three proposals are designed). This group often joins the process of a mosaic laying or expresses opinions, sometimes sharing drinks and telling stories about the neighbourhood. An audience from all around the city forms the fourth group and have the opportunity to see a work during process of creation or they join the public opening, often sharing their thoughts and reactions on social media. The final recipients are people seeing the final work online. This way it is possible to engage different individuals without having too big expectations on neither of the groups.

The technical aspects of mosaic creation are not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about street art, but it seems the mosaic form is a progenitor of street art. As 'Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World' by Katherine M.D. Dunbabin states, the oldest mosaics were found by the river and seashore in Greece. When Poland was reconstituted as a communist state and named the Polish People's Republic (between 1952 and 1989), in Szczecin – similarly to other Polish cities – mosaic was popular technique of decorating public spaces. At that time mosaics were often commissioned by the state – it was well paid and wanted job by the artists.<sup>27</sup> Because of shortage of the materials, mosaics were usually made with leftovers, e.g. glassworks and old tiles. Kosmos Cinema – the one mentioned before – also was decorated with a huge mosaic on the front wall. This monumental work of art was made in late 1950s by the two artists: Sławomir Lewiński and Emanuel Messer. It shows people playing sports, reading books and playing with animals – the allegory of entertainment. Jakub Lewiński, son of Sławomir, recalls that part of the crushed tiles used in the mosaic on Cosmos came from the buildings demolished after war, nearby the city center.<sup>28</sup> The artists collected them and reused.

In recent years, interest in art created in the People's Republic of Poland has increased, and a wider audience has begun to rediscover it. There are many publications that archive the artistic and architectural achievements of that period, e.g. the previously mentioned publication 'Warsaw Mosaic' by Paweł Giergoń or 'Łódź Mosaics and Other Monumental Artistic Accents of the People's Republic of Poland' by Bartosz Stępień. Many objects from that period have been renovated, such as the Family monument by Jerzy Eugen Kwiatkowski – which regained its mosaic form during the Katowice Street Art Festival in 2016.<sup>29</sup> Some of the mosaics are saved from buildings that are to be demolished, such as the monumental mosaic by Franciszek Wyleżuch

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<sup>27</sup> Paweł Giergoń, *Mozaika Warszawska Przewodnik po plastyce w architekturze stolicy 1945–1989*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jakub Lewiński, [https://wszczecinie.pl/aktualnosci,pozostawil\\_po\\_sobie\\_wiele\\_ikonicznych\\_dla\\_naszego\\_miasta\\_rzezb\\_odwiedzamy\\_niezwykla\\_pracownie\\_lewinskiego,id-33538.html](https://wszczecinie.pl/aktualnosci,pozostawil_po_sobie_wiele_ikonicznych_dla_naszego_miasta_rzezb_odwiedzamy_niezwykla_pracownie_lewinskiego,id-33538.html) (Accessed: 29 July 2022).

<sup>29</sup> <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/pomnik-rodzina-w-katowicach-odnowiony-w-calosci-zostal-pokryty-mozaika-zdjecia/ar/10082851>

from 1969, once located in the building of the Mining Electronics Plant in Tychy and since 2018 it is standing in front of the entrance to the School Complex no. 4 in this very city. In 2007, the mosaic from the front of the Cosmos cinema was entered into the register of monuments of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.<sup>30</sup>

When OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association has started the first 'Downtown mosaics' project planning, this approach – reusing old and broken tiles – was adopted not only as far as financial aspects of the project were concerned, but mainly due to its environmental impact. By default, mosaics are much more lasting than murals – they do not pale, they are water resistant and much harder to destroy.

The process of a mosaic making always starts with finding the perfect wall. The search takes place two ways – by using social media platforms and by reaching out to people that live in the area of revitalisation. This is also a good opportunity to inform people that the new project will be carried out and it will be possible to contribute to a mosaic by making or donating materials. When a specific space is found, it is important to contact the formal owners in order to secure required permissions. When this is done, the local community is invited to decide on the final mosaic design. Three proposals are presented, each of them takes this particular place as an inspiration – its history, surroundings and what people living there would like to look at every day. The most important part is to create an opportunity for the residents to vote for their favourite mosaic design – this is when the creators interact with them for the first time and can explain the project framework and participation options. At the same time, this stage is the most difficult, because of the fact that usually the local community – due to its experiences in the neglected area – is rather distrustful, not willing to open up to strangers. Sometimes it is necessary to leave notes on the community boards. The vote takes few days and after finding out the results, it is time to start to prepare the materials for the chosen design. As mentioned before, all the tiles are recycled, often donated by the local home-improvement and construction stores. Individuals contribute by bringing old tiles left from home renovation or broken ceramics like plates and bowls.

Before COVID-19 pandemic the whole process took place at the mosaic location, but in 2020 it was necessary to make part of the work in ŚRODEK on vinyl mesh.

Process of laying a mosaic can take 2–3 weeks – depending on the number of people that work on it and size of the wall. Because big part of the process takes place outside, the best time to do it is during nice weather. Up to now, five mosaics have been completed in the revitalised downtown area, and three of them are located nearby Wojska Polskiego Avenue.

Mosaic: KOSMOS (COSMOS)

Place: B. Krzywoustego 6a (Śródmieście Centrum)

September 2018

The first mosaic was KOSMOS – named after the cinema nearby. Backyard of the apartment building on Bolesława Krzywoustego Street 6A is connected with the backyard

<sup>30</sup> <https://wkz.bip.alfatv.pl/strony/11.dhtml>

of the old cinema. Few years prior, the City Hall had sold the place in front of the Kosmos to a private investor who built an office building that veils the front wall of the cinema and its monumental mosaic. That investor also changed a small park behind into a parking lot and closed the shortcut path to Wojska Polskiego Avenue. Now, people are left with a small backyard that is full of cars. Children have no place to play and their closest surroundings are empty and left out, what creates a perfect spot for the homeless people to squat. The chosen mosaic design presents the universe with planets on dark blue sky. The locals emphasised that this project reminds them the good times when Kosmos Cinema was the centre for cultural life of the city. Many neighbours participated not just by bringing old ceramics, but also were not afraid to get their hands dirty.



Fig. 1. Kosmos, October 2018, private archive.

Mosaic: MIŁOŚĆ (LOVE)

Place: E. Bałuki 17 (backyard; Śródmieście Centrum)

Spring 2019

This backyard has been found thanks to the local youth community centre, run by a non-profit organisation. It needed some improvement, so kids (that mentioned youth community take care of) would eagerly go out and play there. It was their safe place,



however neglected, dirty and not interesting. One of the ideas for the mosaic was to create a floral motives with a big central sign: LOVE, so the neighbours could see what this space needs the most – a bit of love. This mosaic is the Association's most known work, also among the tourists. Its positive message attracts newlyweds to make wedding photoshoots there. It is necessary to add that a year after this work has been shown to the public, the building owners decided to close the gates to the backyard. Now it is not longer available without permission from the residents.



Fig. 2. Opening of Miłość, May 2019, fot. Grażyna Iłowiecka.



Fig. 3. Mosaic detail, the backyard, November 2019, fot. Grażyna Iłowiecka.

### Mosaic: PODWÓRKO (BACKYARD)

Place: interior of the quarter between Krzywoustego St., Bohaterów Warszawy Ave., Pułaskiego St. and Śmiałego St. (Turzyn)

Fall 2019

The mosaic shows simplified forms of a tree, a dog and a cat – common elements of backyards landscapes. The biggest mosaic that is made yet. This location has been found by the OSWAJANIE SZTUKI's friend – he was the resident there and wanted to do something for his closest community. This quarter is one of the biggest in Turzyn Estate and relatively spacious, but is divided by fences and supervised by different administrators, and there is just a small corridor that all the residents have to go through when they want to get to Pułaskiego St. That is where PODWÓRKO is. When the project was starting it was easy to notice that this part of the backyard was no man's land.



Fig. 4. Residents on opening of Rejs, September 2020, fot. Grażyna Iłowiecka.



Mosaic: REJS (CRUISE)

Place: interior of the quarter Wojska Polskiego Ave., Jagiellońska St., Monte Cassino St., Piłsudskiego St. (Śródmieście Centrum)

Summer 2020

REJS came into being in a big quarter that is densely covered with outbuildings – dark, with no green spaces and with empty walls. One of these walls was perfect for the mosaic. The design of this work was heavily inspired by the sgraffito showing Koga (kind of sailing ship) that was once on the side of the marine technical college. The local residents chose this proposal perhaps due to sentimental reasons related to times, when Szczecin was known for its shipyard, or maybe because they recognised the sgraffito. This was the first mosaic created in the pandemic. The neighbours often came, cheered the creators team and said that they are really grateful for the mosaic. They also admitted that the backyard needs more greenery and they want to start a small renovation on their own.



Fig. 5. Czytelnia, December 2021, fot. Grażyna Hłowiecka.

Mosaic: CZYTELNIĄ (READING ROOM)

Place: wall of a garage on Mazowiecka St. (Śródmieście Centrum)

Fall 2021

CZYTELNIĄ is the only mosaic that is not inside the old tenement quarter, but on the wall of the garage between two apartment buildings from the 1960s. In this garage an unofficial antique bookshop is located. The design was chosen by the garage owner (because of the pandemic it was necessary to resign from the usual vote). ŚRODEK was used as a working space – only three to five people were working at the same time due to the pandemic restrictions.

These mosaics have been made without contribution of any cultural institution. In comparison to the traditional public art, they appear in rather unusual spaces that need to be discovered or take the city explorer by surprise. They hold simple messages, easy to encode, it is not necessary to have any kind of art knowledge. They make people smile, feel better when leaving home or heading back. They are supposed to help the local community remember that they can make their nearest space better by working together, and motivate them to introduce further changes.

Another completed mosaic project in the revitalization area can be seen in Wrocław's Nadodrże district, where hand-made ceramic tiles have been arranged in the heart in the backyard. In Kielce, a mosaic of waste plates with painted hands was created, to symbolize Kielce institutions, associations and residents of the city.

They attract people from other parts of Szczecin to visit the city centre. They have become popular not only in our city, but caught the attention of many nationwide online magazines as well. They are often documented on social media. The music group called Anieli and singer Katarzyna Nosowska used different mosaics in the music video to their song 'Jaśniejąca.' MIŁOŚĆ mosaic is a popular photo location for newlyweds.

Everytime the new mosaic is being created, local residents are afraid if the work is going to last. Four years after the first one, none of them got destroyed and they are in good technical condition. It can be assumed they were accepted by those living in the area.

OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association is now well known in Szczecin, implementing many projects creating various opportunities for participation for the local communities – from a huge street festival called 'Rajski Dzień na Rayskiego' (Paradise day on Rayski Street) where thousands of people come to celebrate the city life, to intimate movie shows or concerts in the backyards of the quarters.

The process of revitalisation takes a lot of time and effort of different actors, but szczecinians (people of Szczecin) are starting to come forward. They demand changes and want to participate in the making activities. They want to be proud of the place they call home and want to build a strong bond with space they live in.

In 2023, the OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association changed its name to OSWAJANIE MIASTA and continues its activity in Szczecin.

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### Abstract

One of the most degraded areas of Szczecin is the city center with its three housing estates: Centrum, Śródmieście Zachud and Turzyn. The City Hall has been running a revitalisation program for this area since 2017. OSWAJANIE SZTUKI Association, which has been running the ŚRODEK Śródmiejski Punkt Sąsiedzki since 2018, located in the area covered by revitalisation, is implementing the artistic and social project 'Downtown mosaics.' The aim of the project is to create art objects in a degenerated semi-public space and to improve the attractiveness of places that the inhabitants of the area consider unattractive and/or dangerous. Mosaics are created in cooperation with local artists, urban activists and city residents in the courtyards of tenement quarters, outside the main walking trails. Designers present proposals for three mosaics, but the final choice is made by the residents of the nearest residential buildings or the direct owner of the facility. So far, five mosaics have been created on various topics – from 'Cosmos' behind the former Kosmos cinema to 'Reading room' on the garage wall of the owner of an informal antique shop. In addition to actively joining the mosaic, the residents can provide the material for the mosaic – e.g. tiles left over from home renovation. The mosaics became an attraction not only for the closest residents, but also met with a very positive reception from all Szczecin residents who began to visit the dark corners of the city center. The article presents the process of creating neighbourly mosaics in the spirit of participatory art.

**Keywords:** Mosaic, Szczecin, participatory art, revitalization, street art

**Ada Krawczak** – graphic designer, culture animator. She's graduated from Academy of Art in Szczecin in 2014 with a degree Master of Art. From 2020 works in Institute of Information Science at Pedagogical University of Krakow. She specialises in lettering, publishing design and branding. Since 2017 she is associated with Oswajanie Sztuki association in Szczecin. [ada.krawczak@up.krakow.pl](mailto:ada.krawczak@up.krakow.pl)

