

*Vitality of the open public space in small towns – diagnosis of the state and attempted model solutions*

**Research objectives.** Vitality of the open public space is conducive to the freedom, diversity and attractiveness of the proverbial “city life”. In this context, an important cognitive and applied challenge is constituted by guaranteeing an adequate level of vitality of public space. The proposed project refers in its basic theoretical prerequisites to the contemporary discourse in social geography, and also in spatial and town planning, concerning revitalization of the central parts of small towns and shaping of the space for leisure. The cognitive objective of the project is the diagnosis and assessment of the level of vitality, characterizing open public space in small towns, and the identification of factors, which contribute to the level of vitality. To this main cognitive objective, the methodological and applied objectives are subordinated. The methodological objective is to develop and verify the concept for measurement of the vitality level of open public space. On the other hand, the applied objective is to elaborate model solutions and recommendations, concerning the shaping and enhancement of vitality of the open public space in small towns.

**The scope of investigation.** In the project proposed attention shall be focused on these three elements of the open public space: 1) the central or market square, 2) places with leisure and recreation functions, and 3) multifunctional urban street. Case studies are envisaged in four urban centers of less than ten thousand inhabitants, located in four provinces: Świętokrzyskie (Chęciny), Małopolskie (Wolbrom), Mazowieckie (Łochów) and Lubelskie (Bełżyce). The choice of these towns resulted primarily from the assumption that they ought to be characterized by the diversity of economic functions. The selection of these towns was preceded by the study of the *Atlas of small towns*, which allowed for the detailed identification of the proposed urban centers. The project is divided into five main research tasks. Task 1 – *Management, administration, coordination* – shall be continuously carried out during the whole project execution, and its purpose shall be the technical and substantive coordination of the research work. Task 2 – *Analysis of the use of open public space* - the primary objective will be to analyze the forms of development and infrastructural equipment of the spaces considered, as well as the ways and intensity of its use. Task 3 – *Identification of factors shaping the vitality and assessment of vitality level* – shall have both cognitive and methodological character, as this results from the realization of the second detailed objective. Task 4 – *Indication of the model solutions and recommendation* shall have both cognitive and applied character. Task 5 – *Synthesis and dissemination of knowledge* will have the applied and popularizing character.

**Reasons for choosing the topic and expected results.** The proposed project gains a very distinct significance in cognitive, methodological and applied terms. Its output, namely, shall be constituted by the multifaceted, but, at the same time, synthetic identification of the level of vitality in a collection of selected small urban centers, which will enable an effective comparison and evaluation on the basis of the elaborated method of inquiry. Consequently, it will be possible to indicate the most advantageous solutions, increasing the level of vitality of the open public spaces, and to propose a set of respective basic recommendations for the town authorities. An important role shall also be played by the very elaboration of the method for evaluating the level of vitality, using a set of adequate metrics. Research, envisaged in the project proposed, shall also deal with the non-material aspect, trying to identify and systematize the processes, taking place in the relations of people with the urban space, which are difficult to measure. Thereby, the contribution of the project into the development of methodology of the inquiry into and the evaluation of the relations mentioned shall be really significant. Besides, it will be possible to apply the methodology elaborated in the framework of this project in other domains of social geography. The studies on the relations of urban dwellers with open public space offer both a chance for stopping the negative tendencies in the social and economic development of small towns in Poland and a support for the establishment of a basis for their renewal. One of the results will be constituted by a monograph, providing the most recent and objective information on the state of small urban centers in Poland, with particular emphasis on vitality of their open public space. It is also planned to prepare articles for the international journals, indexed in “Web of Science” and Scopus, disseminate and discuss the results from the project at the national and international scientific conferences, as well as in the social media (e.g. Research Gate, Facebook).