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BRAND NEW OLD TOWN IN ELBLĄG – (RE)BUILDING ON THE AUTHENTIC ROOT OF RETROVERSION

After more than forty years of (re)building from wartime destruction, through the creation of modern townhouses, today's New Old Town is a testimony to the changes that have taken place over the years, with the accompanying compromise: contemporary needs versus the spirit of a bygone era. The New Old Town is a unique product because the intention was to create a new city, on a new root, to erase its origins. However, the root turned out not raw but marked by an old code of the place, impossible to be removed, hidden under a layer of soil for long years. Elbląg was lucky that modernist projects rejecting links with the historical plan of the city were never implemented, because the lack of reference to the past could have resulted in a complete loss of memory.

Keywords: Brand New Old Town in Elbląg, retroversion, Camel House

1. COMMUNITY THINK

The 21st century is characterised by a rapid receding of the past and a crisis of past-oriented perceptions. It causes a breakdown in the awareness of the past–present–future sequence. This affects the condition of the collective memory of modern societies, which becomes progressively fragmented and leads to disconnection from the present, triggering the need to fill the resulting void [Korzeniewski 2007]. “This need results mainly from the integrative function fulfilled by collective memory: it provides the ingredients necessary for the construction of both collective and individual identity. The necessity to care for the existence and stability of identity means that as soon as symptoms of a breakage with the past appear within modern societies, actions of a compensatory, substitutive nature emerge to fill the resulting void” [Korzeniewski 2007].

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The past encoded in the Old Town of Elbląg fills a deficit in the integration of contemporary local society, part of which expects more, namely the reconstruction of the façades of non-existent townhouses. What remains a dilemma is the authenticity of the façades intended for reconstruction – the façades once encountered and annihilated by tragic history. Reconstruction is a kind of falsification of reality, hiding an unwanted part of the city's history that led to the loss of the spirit of the place. It can either be imitated or revived without further fragmenting the collective memory.

During their existence, the townhouses have been subject to redevelopment. For example, in the cost estimate documentation for the rebuilding of the townhouse at Linki 4-5 in Elbląg, dated 1954, there was a recommendation to “correct the defects of the 19th century building”. It is a natural process to adapt a building to modern times, to improve it, to make it more functional. Therefore, in the method of rebuilding Elbląg's Old Town, one of the main assumptions is to develop architecture in a contemporary manner but with respect for the medieval layout of the plots and street grid. To give an idea of the splendour of this place, in its pre-war ambience, the reconstruction of several townhouses or their façades was permitted (importantly, not ordered).

Today, these two views clash within the space of Elbląg: the need for reconstruction of Old Town townhouses versus the construction of a Brand New Old Town. This contemporary trend is dominant, it is authentic, while it should be noted that “real” reconstruction has not yet taken place in Elbląg. However, there is value in the fact that part of the Old Town in Elbląg was erected on authentic roots, namely on medieval foundations. This was a long and complex process, preceded by “modern” concepts [Wiśniewska 2021].

2. ELBLĄG AFTER THE WAR

“Round gilded rosettes were apparently a favourite ornamental motif of Elbląg's medieval citizens. They used rosettes to decorate the walls of their houses, doors, windows, gables or stoops. Today, nature does the work for them: bright yellow stars of dandelions generously intersperse the dense greenery covering war graves of the once splendid Gothic and Renaissance buildings” [Czarnocki (ed.) 1956].

In this poetic manner, Kazimierz Czarnocki described the state of the ruined Old Town in Elbląg ten years after the war. Archival inventory descriptions from 1953 confirm such a condition of buildings, or rather their ruins. For example, the cost estimate for securing the building at Rzeźnicka 4 in Elbląg specified that the structure had been burnt down during the war and only the façade with its beautiful baroque gable and side walls remained. “With time, the gable also collapsed, and while falling inside the building, it smashed the preserved cellar vault” [Sierzputowski

1953]. The compacted, weathered shell of rubble around the building, estimated to be two years old, needed to be cleared away with pickaxes, and the tree trunks that had grown over that time within the rubble were 7 cm in diameter, testifying to several years of deterioration. One of the tasks included in the above-mentioned cost estimate was the “careful transfer and stacking of fragments of stone ornaments from the collapsed gable of the building in the cleaned basement” [Sierzputowski 1953].

It proved impossible to rebuild many of the remaining townhouses in Elbląg, which – as recalled by Bronisław Mieszkowski, the former Voivodeship Heritage Conservation Officer in the 1950s – required little effort or money to be saved. “(...) the Old Town in Elbląg, which was still standing after all, became completely ruined at the time”. Bricks were sent out for the reconstruction of Warsaw [Mieszkowski 1978].

Similar impressions are conveyed by photographs dating from the same period (Fig. 1), showing the ruins of the old townhouses in Elbląg, damaged by bullets, forming the background for crowds of Elbląg’s “new” citizens who came for the Corpus Christi procession and were to rebuild the city upon its ancient, broken roots.



Fig. 1. Corpus Christi procession in the Old Town of Elbląg; 1st half of the 1950s [photo: Stefan Hartman; source: private materials of Ms Anna Hazuka; permission to publish dated 26.01.2022]

Elbląg was not one of the towns conquered quietly by the Red Army in 1945, like Moraġ or Paśl k, without a single shot being fired. Those were not destroyed during the offensive. Quite the opposite, Elbląg was a fortress in which the remnants of the German armed forces defended themselves against the Red Army that caused enormous damage. It was only after the war, in the period between the

capture of the Prussian cities and their handover to Poland in May 1945, that the greatest wave of destruction occurred through looting and arson. Red Army soldiers were allowed to do whatever they pleased in Prussia, destroying towns and villages. Poland was supposed to receive “empty land” [Lubocka-Hoffmann 2004]. As documented in the film “Testimonies. Part 2. Post-war settlers – Elbląg” [Centrum Spotkań Europejskich... 2021], not all properties settled by new residents were destroyed. According to statistical documentation estimating war damage as of 1 May 1945, a few months after the Russians entered Elbląg, 5255 properties (60%) were destroyed or damaged, but the figures were higher in city centres, particularly in the Recovered Territories [Główny Urząd Statystyczny... 1967].

We will never know the value of the pre-war historic resources of destroyed cities, as no proper inventories were made and no heritage conservation inventories had been drawn up for the Elbląg area before the war, especially as the protection of historic buildings focused on medieval, renaissance and baroque landmarks, such as churches, town halls, palaces or castles. This picture was further distorted by later systematic demolitions and the lack of archival maps reflecting the extent of war damage within the Old Town.

The organised demolition campaign, which was caused primarily by the scarcity of bricks for rebuilding larger historical centres in “old Poland”, but also by the deteriorating condition of the ruins year after year, accomplished the work of destruction. In 1949, Elbląg’s City Council applied to the Voivodeship Heritage Conservation Officer for a loan to secure and rebuild several historic townhouses that could be saved and served as the only examples of old buildings, in particular at Wigilijna 3 and 4, Rzeźnicka 4, Linki 28, Masztowa 30 (the Camel House) [Sierzputowski 1948]. Unfortunately, the application was not approved, the remains of the buildings continued to fall into decline, their condition threatened safety and their appearance was discouraging. In addition, in the second half of the 1950s, improving the quality of life in the Recovered Territories became the focus of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, with an aim to eradicate all traces of the war. The Polish core of Elbląg was to be emphasised to such an extent that publications even expressed satisfaction at the destruction of post-German historical monuments, such as the symbolic Ziese Villa in Larch Park, which was supposed to be replaced with “a sign of our new times and our culture: a beautiful, representative building of a Polish school” [Czarnocki (ed.) 1956].

The Poles who settled the area after the Second World War had no knowledge of the past of these lands that became their new “little homeland”. Polish settlers navigated an area stripped of history, making do with propaganda slogans that had nothing to do with a “German” or “Polish” past. No reference was made to the remnants. Moreover, shortly after the war it was a politically and psychologically comfortable situation. The Polish population showed no interest in the German past of their new place of residence – they expected simple slogans referring to the eternal Polish heritage of the Western and Northern Territories [Mazur, Wagińska-Marzec 2021]. On the other hand, the new settlers could not be ordered to continue the

German cultural legacy. Efforts were made to erase that ancestry, and simplification combined with the promotion of the Piast dynasty ideas fulfilled public expectations [Mazur, Wagińska-Marzec 2021].

2. CAMEL HOUSE

In Poland, the years immediately following the Second World War can be regarded as a period of inventorying surviving monuments, combined with an attempt to reclaim what was Polish. The 1950s was a period full of desire to protect historical monuments or their remains, while the 1960s was an era of removal of monuments. In theory, the government programme of the 1950s looked safe and promising. Pursuant to specific regulations (e.g. Resolution No. 666 of the Government Presidium of 20.08.1955 on the planned action to remove the remains of war damage in cities and housing estates), lists of damaged buildings qualified

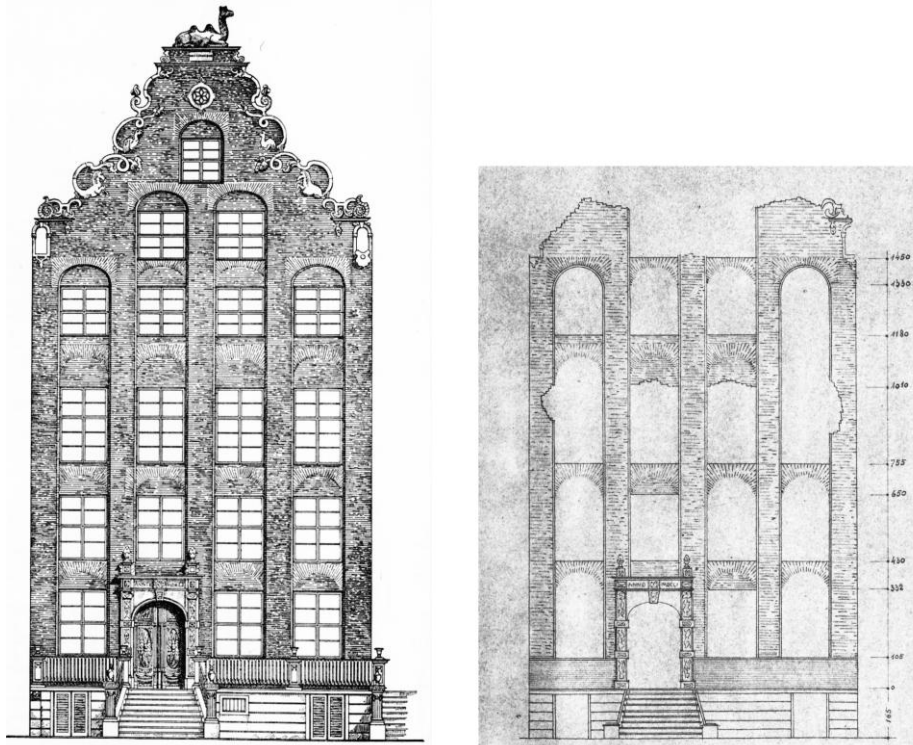


Fig. 2. Left: undated view of the Camel House gable [source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture in Elbląg]; Right: elevation of the Camel House, W. Sierzputowski, inventory dated 22.03.1952 [source: Archive of the Voivodeship Office for Historical Monuments Protection in Olsztyn, Elbląg Branch]

for reconstruction were to be drawn up, areas under heritage conservation supervision were to be indicated, where historic relics could be uncovered, and inventories were to be prepared. Professor Wiesław Anders, who was a student of the Faculty of Architecture at the Gdańsk University of Technology in 1953, doing his internship in the Old Town in Elbląg, remembers only rubble and burnt-out windows of townhouse façades (Interview with Prof. Anders on 04.03.2020, attended by: Katarzyna Wiśniewska, Adriana Ronzewska-Kotyńska, Władysław Gliniecki). On Masztowa Street, he had to pick out fragments of stone architectural decorations from the rubble. He does not know if it was the Camel House because there were a lot of bricks with collapsed, burnt wooden ceilings among them, and above them – window openings of townhouses still standing, their pediments incomplete. In the same year, the remains of the building known as the Camel House were also inventoried by Eng. Władysław Sierzputowski (Fig. 2).

Archival materials from 1952–1953 concerning the Camel House confirm that the demolition campaign aimed at obtaining bricks for the purpose of rebuilding the most urgent structures of the Six-Year Plan (Act on the Plan for Economic Development and Building the Foundations of Socialism for the Years 1950-1955), was quite spontaneous and lacked control. According to the detailed cost estimate for the rebuilding and redevelopment (not reconstruction) of the townhouse located at Masztowa 30, the intention was, among other things, to clean and lay out usable material obtained from the demolition, including bricks from the lime mortar walls, to repair partially crumpled, burnt-out or surface-damaged walls by removing individual bricks and laying new ones. What is interesting in the wider context is that there were plans to make stone ornaments framing the gables of the building,



Fig. 3. Front gable elevation of the Camel House; pre-1945 state [source: Registry of the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture in Elbląg]. Original decorative elements found on 06.03.2022 during archaeological surveys

the original fragments of which were found underground on 06.03.2022 (Fig. 3) during archaeological work preceding the commencement of construction of a new building on the historic plots. The artefacts were placed aside, covered with a tarpaulin and left to be possibly fixed in their original places on the façade of the building planned for (re)building or reconstruction over a 39 year period. One is left with an irresistible impression that the past reminds of its genetic code every now and then and claims its place in the present.

The reconstruction of the Camel House, planned at the end of 1952, remained a mere intention because as early as February 1953 the Gdańsk Industrial Construction Association concluded an agreement with the Presidium of the Municipal National Council in Elbląg regarding the commencement of demolition work in the Old Town area, in order to comply with the Ordinance of the Minister of Industrial Construction of 12.02.1953, the priority of which was a monthly plan for the recovery of bricks. However, after the Camel House was thoughtlessly demolished, the Presidium of the Municipal National Council in Elbląg suspended the demolition action on 10.04.1953, and made the recovery of bricks and the demolition work in the Old Town subject to arrangements with the Voivodeship Heritage Conservation Officer in Gdańsk, who designated historical buildings subject to statutory protection as soon as on 20.04.1953 (documents archived at the Voivodeship Office for Historical Monuments Protection in Olsztyn, Elbląg Branch). Incidents involving the demolition of historic walls were to be referred to prosecuting authorities, as the Voivodeship Heritage Conservation Officer Bronisław Mieszkowski mildly indicated in the aforementioned correspondence. However, for the Camel House it was already too late.

3. (RE)BUILDING THE CITY ON ITS ANCIENT ROOTS

Valuable fragments of one of Elbląg's most important townhouses, found in the 21st century under a layer of soil, unquestionably testify that the orders for clearing the area of rubble were aimed solely at tidying up the site and obtaining building material. The plan to tidy up the rubble areas was to be implemented by 31.12.1960, and the demolition material was to be used for new housing construction. In Gdańsk, for example, a Demolition/Rubble Removal Work Cooperative [Mieszkowski 1978] was set up and contractors were rewarded according to the amount of bricks obtained and rubble removed. The heritage conservation services had no time to react. Conditions for urban reconstruction were complex, modernity was approaching.

After the Old Town area in Elbląg was tidied up, it remained a vast square with historic spatial landmarks testifying to the city's origins: today's St. Nicholas Cathedral (the former parish church), the Market Gate and the post-Dominican church – the current Galeria EL Art Centre. Numerous attempts were made to graft

a new contemporary root into the space between them. The idea of rebuilding the Old Town in Elbląg in its former historical architectural substance was born among Elbląg's authorities as early as in 1946, when reconstruction of several dozen townhouses was still possible but never materialized due to lack of funds [Tomczyk 2000]. The notion of the *Polish school of heritage conservation* was abandoned after 1956, when the end of socialist realism in Poland was announced by the National Architects' Meeting and when functionalism was given priority in architecture. In line with that fashionable trend, attempting to wipe out the past and disguise reality, it was believed that the only solution for rebuilding was to develop a Polish concept of Elbląg – completely different from the previous ones. The idea was that to establish the city from scratch, with *new roots*, without returning to the past [Wiśniewska 2018].

Contemporary and then fashionable designs for the development of the Old Town in Elbląg were also developed by people who gave this area its current shape. Szczepan Baum, a modernist and member of the team that implemented the innovative development project for the Old Town in Elbląg in 1958 (Design team: W. Anders, S. Baum, J. Pasieczny, supervised by W. Czerny, 1958), argued that “there can be no compromise or intermediate phases between strict historical reconstruction and contemporary shaping of space” [Baum 1961]. This conviction is reflected in the above-mentioned design, which is similar in its essence to the reconstruction of the Old Town in Malbork, by the same author.

In 1972, the Municipal Urban Planning Studio in Elbląg, commissioned by the party and municipal authorities, prepared a programme and urban planning concept for the swift clean-up of the Old Town area, including the construction of several buildings as early as 1973-1975 [Municipal Urban Planning Studio 1972]. The design was co-authored by the later Plenipotentiary of the Mayor of Elbląg for the reconstruction of the Old Town in Elbląg, a long-term municipal urban planner, architect Jacek Bocheński. The first stage of the concept assumed the construction of large-area retail and service facilities in the quarter between Stary Rynek, Kowalska, Rycerska and Wigilijna Streets (Fig. 4.), which were located within the footprint of the former Kowalska Street, which was not in line with the general principle of the project, i.e. respecting the historical street grid. Covering the area with greenery, which survived in some sections for another 45 years, was ordered until the completion of stages two and three.

In 1974, an initiative was made (by the following participants of the Seminar: W. Anders, S. Baum, L. Dziurdziński, R. Semka) to discover traces of early medieval urban settlement hidden underground, which resulted in the *Study of the programme and guidelines for spatial development of the Old Town as an element of the city centre of Elbląg*. However, the ancient roots of Elbląg were only found underground in the 1980s, being – literally and figuratively – the foundation for the rebuilding of the Old Town, thus starting a redevelopment process that has been true to the spirit of the old and contemporary values of Elbląg's Old Town district.

Concepts to date have treated the “historic street grid” as the main premise for redevelopment – a surface root system.

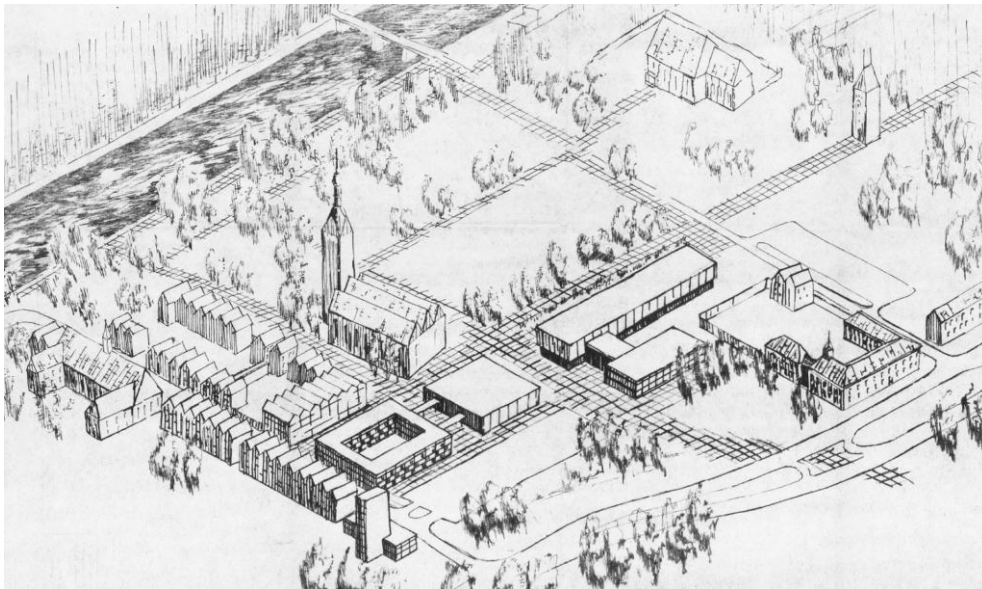


Fig. 4. Elbląg “Old Town” – rebuilding concept – stage 1-2 – axonometric projection
[Source: Archive of the Elbląg City Hall]

After the then heritage conservation officer, Maria Lubocka-Hoffmann, questioned all these redevelopment ideas in 1979 (and those were also included in the provisions of the *Detailed Local Development Plan for the Old Town Complex of Elbląg* [Anders 1996], none of the “urgent designs” was implemented and the redevelopment process could begin not on the basis of a revolutionary concept, but rather an elaborate method respecting the heritage of the place.

The heritage conservation-based method of redevelopment, called retroversion by its author, replaced the ideas of 1958, 1972, 1976, the local plan of 1978, which was the local law authorising the commencement of modernist projects, to make a turnaround after two decades and redefine itself in the 21st century into a trend-following retro-modernity, similar in assumptions to the contested innovative concepts [Wiśniewska 2021].

Retroversion, which is a heritage conservation approach and at the same time a programme for the redevelopment of the Old Town in Elbląg, protected primarily the authentic values hidden in the 13th – century town plan, with its layout of streets and plots, and the uncovered 14th – and 15th – century walls, on which many contemporary townhouses were erected. The excavation of the urban plan and the construction of new buildings on the old foundations were a fundamental element

of the redevelopment concept, alongside the historic landmarks that have continuously testified to the provenance of the place. Thus, through properly designed dimensions, retroversion recreated the historical scale and silhouette of the city, which was expected to shape a new landscape of the lost city and create the values identified with the image and atmosphere of old-town complexes [Lubocka-Hoffmann 2010]. A brand new Old Town on an ancient, authentic root.

At each of the stages mentioned, each idea of rebuilding the Old Town in Elbląg aroused resistance in part of the local community, as well as criticism of overly contemporary visions, which were regarded as an attempt to fill an identity void in the present disconnected from the past (as noted at the beginning of this paper).

Currently, the need for reconstructing the old façades is highly anticipated, probably because only one urban block is left waiting for reconstruction in Elbląg's Old Town area, and the list of buildings to be reconstructed [Barton-Piórkowska et al. 1981] is getting exhausted. The most recent amendment to the local zoning plan for the area at the corner of Św. Ducha Street and Bulwar Zygmunta Augusta [Planowanie 2022], which ordered the reconstruction of the façades at Św. Ducha 1-3 (for the first time in the form of a local law provision), responded to the expectations regarding reconstruction. Before that, it was only a decision of the heritage conservation services, based on a list of townhouses indicated for possible reconstruction. It is a question of the available iconography, the doctrinal approach to reconstruction as well as the technical and financial conditions, as the challenging present-day reality has proved. The planned reconstruction of the façade (or the entire building) of the above-described Camel House will also be a response to a socially anticipated return to the past.

4. FINAL OUTCOME

To conclude, let us use a quote from the Elbląg 2020+ Brand Strategy drawn up by an “outsider”, as it reflects the essence of the process of (re)building Elbląg's Old Town. Elbląg is “a city with an extraordinary identity, while the *Brand New Old Town* is becoming its face – a spectacular and internationally unique retroversion, an unusually rebuilt former medieval city centre, demolished during the Second World War. The *Brand New Old Town* symbolises Elbląg's persistence in pursuing its goal; it is a unique emanation of Elbląg's entrepreneurship and the city's exceptional aesthetics. Architecturally, today's Elbląg is one of the most interesting cities in Europe. The original, surprising and fascinating public space created in Elbląg is where the *real life* of the local community is moving to today” [Elbląg 2020+]. A similar opinion was published in the A&B magazine [Diduch 2021].

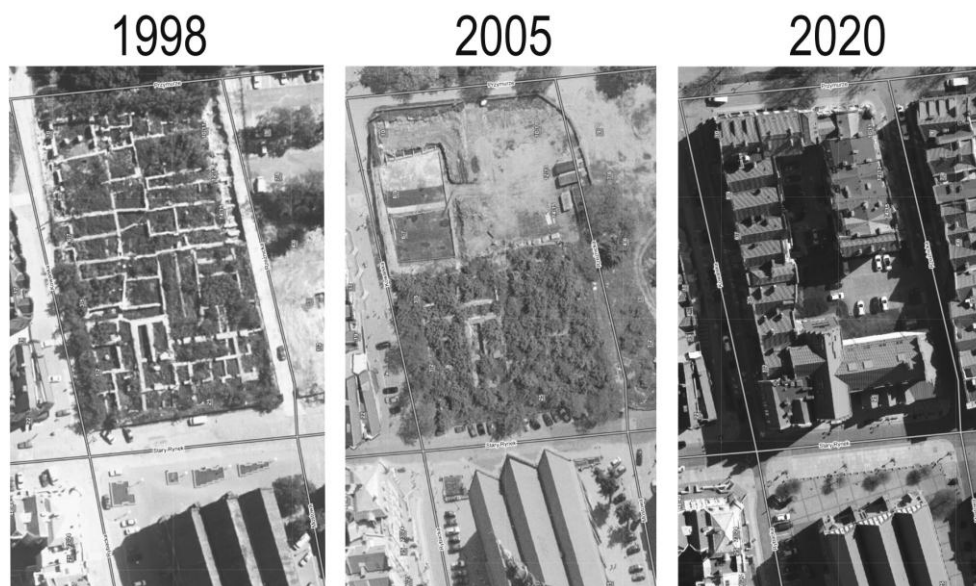


Fig. 5. Urban block delineated by Stary Rynek, Rzeźnicka, Przymurze and Kowalska streets

Elbląg has not wasted its opportunity and has developed, by design, methodically well, which is evidenced in the comparative aerial photographs presented below (leaving aside consideration of the workmanship of individual townhouses and their façades as well as the building and finishing materials used).

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**NÓWKA STARÓWKA W ELBLĄGU – (OD)BUDOWA NA AUTENTYCZNYM
KORZENIU RETROWERSJI****Streszczenie**

Dzisiejsza Nówka Starówka po ponad czterdziestoletnim procesie (od)budowy ze zniszczeń wojennych poprzez kreację współczesnych kamienic jest świadectwem zmian, jakie zachodziły przez wskazane lata, z towarzyszącym im kompromisem: współczesne potrzeby a duch minionej epoki. Nówka Starówka jest produktem specyficznym, ponieważ intencją było stworzenie miasta nowego, na nowym korzeniu, by wymazać jego przeszły rodowód. Jednak korzeń nie był surowy a naznaczony dawnym kodem miejsca, niemożliwym do usunięcia, ukrytym przez lata pod warstwą ziemi.

Elbląg miał szczęście, że modernistycznych projektów zatracających związek z historycznym planem miasta nie zrealizowano, bowiem brak odniesienia do przeszłości mógł spowodować całkowite zatracenie pamięci o niej.

Słowa kluczowe: Nówka Starówka w Elblągu, retrowersja, Dom pod Wielbłądem

