Piotr Lorens, Łukasz Bugalski

Dealing with the complexity of industrial heritage. The case of Gdańsk Shipyard – a place where communism collapsed

Introduction

Gdańsk Shipyard – the birthplace of the “Solidarity” movement – is the unique example of a heritage site [1], facing ongoing reinterpretation of the historical and political importance of its multi-layered structure. Its complex history is well embedded in the rich heritage of the city, which includes periods of Polish and German rules, war-time destruction, and post-war politics-based rebuilding, economic stagnations, and development booms. Situated on the edge of the city center area, the site is also considered as the key large-scale urban regeneration project that was initiated over 25 years ago and is now in its implementation stage. At the same time, for more than 10 years the site is in the sight of the interests of the local community as a heritage area, and since 2018 – as a potential monument of the Solidarity movement. This evolution led to the application (by the Polish Government) for enlisting the site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Therefore, it is crucial to question a point of intersection between requirements and necessities related to both: the future development (including adaptive reuse projects as well as new development) and heritage preservation demands (including conservation aspects of tangible heritage as well as the social aspect of intangible heritage). The process of negotiating between the heritage preservation and urban transformation/development goals is not concluded yet, although already now the Gdańsk Shipyard can be presented as a very interesting example of this process. Simultaneously, it can be presented as the case facing the need of negotiating between an interpretation of various types of its heritage, both related to its tangible and intangible elements and parts represented recent and much more distant history.

The origin of the Gdańsk Shipyard’s complex heritage

Gdańsk Shipyard was born as a result of the need for the creation of a modern shipbuilding facility for the Kingdom of Prussia. The first halls and construction yards were created in the mid-19th century on the embankments of the Vistula River, just north of the historic center of the city. In line with the increase in shipbuilding needs, the size and structure of the site evolved, which included both enlargement and transformation of the original “Royal Shipyard” and creation of other shipbuilding plants (i.e., the so-called “Schichau Shipyard”) along with other industrial establishments. This was also accompanied by late-19th and early-20th century transformation and expansion of city structures, which was associated with the liquidation of the original city fortifications and the creation of the new urban layouts [Figures 1-2].

In the post-World War II times, the facility kept evolving, becoming widely known as one of the largest shipbuilding complexes in Europe at that time. But for the general public, the Gdańsk Shipyard is the place where the Solidarity movement was born in 1980. This is widely
understood as the first step in the process of bringing back the freedom to the nations of Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the communist domination, and – in the wider perspective – ending the Cold War. In recognition of this unique role, in 2014 the site of the historic Gdańsk Shipyard was awarded the European Heritage Label. The awarded site includes: the BHP Hall and the Shipyard Gate No. 2 – the most important scene of worker’s strikes as well as the pacification of the Solidarity movement; the Solidarity Square with the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers erected in 1980 to commemorate the shipyard workers killed by the communist police in 1970; the European Solidarity Centre – opened in 2014 to house the museum depicting the history of the Solidarity movement and worker’s strikes, as well as the road towards the collapse of communism in Poland [2].

However, the set of sites associated with the commemoration of the Solidarity movement is just a small section of Gdańsk Shipyard heritage [Figures 3-4]. The huge shipyard area (more than 120ha in total) includes various types of tangible heritage, mostly associated with the history of shipbuilding processes. These structures included both parts developed during the Prussian, German and Nazi rules (in-between 1844 and 1945) and under the Polish authority (after 1945). The importance of the particular types and pieces of this heritage is a subject of numerous studies and there are ongoing debates to what extend the more recent buildings and structures of little or no historical value should be considered as part of the future landscape of the site. This dispute is also fuelled by the fact that – paradoxically – most of the tangible heritage of the Gdańsk Shipyard that still exists on the site’s area relates to its pre-war period.

Different perceptions of the heritage

The complexity of Gdańsk Shipyard heritage is deeply rooted in a dramatic and intense history of Eastern Europe [3] that Timothy Snyder pungently described as a “bloodlands” [4], and its urban dimension – related to massive migrations forced just after WWII – that has been aptly presented by Maria Lewicka through current ethnic bias and further developed as “city of changed blood” concept presented in her subsequent book [5,6]. Although it is impossible to recognize the current Gdańsk Shipyard identity without its pre-war history, in both the collective memories and the official narration of the Gdańsk Shipyard there is little place for memories about the pre-war U-boat construction for German Kriegsmarine or one of the many strikes in the shipyard just after the Great War, carried out by the communist worker union to stop the French military supplies for Polish troops fighting with the Bolshevik invasion in 1920.

Most of the contemporary collective memories are associated with the history of the Gdańsk Shipyard as one of the most important industrial plants in the country in the post-WWII times. In its development peak, the shipyard itself employed approximately 20 thousand workers, not counting those who worked in accompanying plants. As such, it was the main employer of the region. As a result, the Gdańsk Shipyard remains deeply connected with the past of most Gdańsk inhabitants, who either worked there, have someone in the family who worked there, or know someone else who did in the past. In addition, for contemporary inhabitants of Gdańsk, it seems obvious to identify themselves with the Solidarity movement (its main memory referring to 1980 and 1981, as well as the liberation of Poland in 1989) which was originated by the Gdańsk Shipyard workers [7]. Therefore, the most popular narrative related
to this area (identified as the birthplace of the Solidarity movement) is incompatible with the material heritage of the area, which exists far beyond the current political dimension.

The complexity of the heritage to be dealt with

The complexity of the Gdańsk Shipyard heritage eludes typical theoretical frameworks. It seems to be a very specific variation of already very well-described concepts, such as dissonant heritage [8] or conflicting memories [9]. In the case of contemporary Gdańsk, it is almost impossible to construct one homogenous identity—understood as “invented tradition” and famously described by Eric Hobsbawm [10]. However, it is possible to oversimplify the circumstances surrounding the pre-war shipyard infrastructure (mainly its warehouses) becoming the scenery for the birth of the Solidarity movement. This tangible heritage is mainly protected as such with emphasis on its intangible characteristics [11,12]. Although the memory of the Solidarity movement is very strong among Gdańsk inhabitants, it is also an important political issue. At the same time, the memories related to the Solidarity movement are becoming obliterated by current changes after the Gdańsk Shipyard ceased to operate in the area due to economic reasons in the mid of 1990-ties. Moreover, for the contemporary public the value of the scenery (mainly pre-war architectural structures) has become more interesting than the intangible memories of a former generation and seems to invoke the memories of a seemingly forgotten past.

The shipyard as the aim of urban redevelopment efforts

Aside from the historical importance of the Gdańsk Shipyard, the site – from late the 1990-ties – is recognized as the possible and desired location of a major urban waterfront redevelopment project – the so-called Young City. This name refers to the medieval structure constructed within its borders and demolished a few decades later due to political reasons. The current project was conceptualized as a modern addition to the existing historic part of the city, involving various adaptive-reuse schemes of the historic structures as well as the development of new infrastructure as well as contemporary buildings and complexes. These were supposed to be blended with the historic buildings and structures, creating the unique identity of the site based on its complex history and heritage. Therefore, the Young City project is a unique example of a multi-layered brownfield redevelopment project, burdened by complex history, heritage, and memories that disable the creation of one homogeneous narration about its future.
**Figure 1.** The pre-shipyard period (pre-1840). Between the Vistula River and Gdańsk city center, there is a ring of an early modern fortifications system erected in the mid-17th century. Plan by the authors [1].

**Figure 2.** The pre-war shipyard period (1840–1945). The Schichau Shipyard (German: Schichau-Werke) and Imperial Shipyard (German: Kaiserliche Werft) were erected between the Gdańsk city centre and the Vistula River. The peak of this development occurred during World War II, just before the city’s siege and destruction. Plan by the authors [1].
Figure 3. The post-war shipyard period (1945–1989–1997). The pre-war infrastructure has been incorporated into a new industrial plant. Plan by the authors [1].

Figure 4. Recent transformations of the shipyard area (1997–2021). The process of urban regeneration is ongoing in almost the whole area of the historic shipyard. Plan by the authors [1].
Issues in shaping the urban future of the site

The site of the historic Gdańsk Shipyard, situated in the very center of the city, is of crucial importance to its future development [13]. The long process of urban regeneration project preparation has proven that this area is laden by several “dichotomies” which may lead to explaining the complexity of Gdańsk Shipyard heritage as a set of duality paradoxes:

- the site is considered as the “Solidarity” birthplace, but its tangible heritage is rather the collection of examples of pre-war industrial architecture;
- the scale and scope of the heritage site prove its value, but also defies its proper management;
- demands associated with varied concepts of this area reuse mode are in contradiction to postulates related to the strict needs of heritage preservation.

Although this list of “dichotomies” is far from being complete, it highlights the main conflicting points of view on how to perceive the site – is it a large-scale monument that requires proper conservation and finding a new land use for the entire 120ha of land, or is it a site of future urban expansion which has to absorb and reuse the most important parts of the heritage.

Those issues allow us to question the current attempt for the inscription of the site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Although the latest application [11,12] intends to merge both dimensions of the Gdańsk Shipyard: the socio-political dimension as the birthplace of the Solidarity movement, and the urban-landscape dimension as an industrial area lasting almost 200 years, it is still bereft of the answer about the future of the area of the historic Gdańsk Shipyard. The current conservation policy – referring to the concept of authorized heritage discourse which is dominated by “concepts of monumentality and aesthetics” and famously coined by Laurajane Smith [14] – hurts the whole process of any potential urban redevelopment of an area similar to Gdańsk Shipyard. But this theoretical perspective neglects the primary characteristic of every urban environment, the fact that the city is a living organism that evolves and has to be managed by various parties. Although this problem has been already well-recognized it seems still to remain outside the mainstream theoretical approach as well as practical actions.

Conclusions

In light of the above-mentioned complexity, we argue that the industrial heritage of Gdańsk Shipyard is not only in the very center of public interest, but it also represents a major difficulty according to its complexity. This complexity has to be recognized and dealt with within both conservation and redevelopment policies. The mechanisms and policies of categorization, safeguarding and management have to deal with its dualities. Finally, the complexity and duality paradox of Gdańsk Shipyard’s industrial heritage is a key challenge for urban regeneration processes, which are already initiated. Therefore, the main question remains: can we afford museumification of such a vast area as the historic Gdańsk Shipyard? Is it the best solution (most sustainable one) to limit the further development of the city center on its most valuable area on the waterfront? Is it not possible to reconcile the demands of heritage preservation and the everyday livability of our cities? Isn’t the theory of cultural heritage based on the power of the living over the dead? Never the other way around? However, due to the presented case study, we argue that the embroilment of ongoing discourse—both on the
heritage and political levels—as well as the related conflict of interpretation, overlaid by the scale of the whole project—according to both financial issues and social demands—forejudge the final urban and architectural decisions. Therefore, we believe, that the urban and architectural forms become secondary to the internal and external conditions of the area presented in the case study.

References