

## Development of small historic riverside towns: Implementing the Cittaslow idea in the Czerwińsk nad Wisłą

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### Highlights

- Influence of natural and historical resources on the development directions of small towns
- Town planning with regard to authenticity and spatial values in the spirit of the Cittaslow concept
- Improving the quality of life of the inhabitants and the identity of Czerwińsk nad Wisłą
- Crisis areas and interventions in the social, economic and spatial-landscape sphere
- Recommendations for the spatial-landscape development

**Abstract:** The origins of small towns in Poland date back to the medieval period, with most of them being established in the 13–14<sup>th</sup> centuries. This late medieval heritage defines their identity and *genius loci*. The landscape of a small town is always shaped by natural elements, residential characteristics, or its location near watercourses, as well as the historic structures that emerged as a result of human settlement and adaptation of the landscape.

Opportunities for the development of small towns should be sought in: proper recognition of internal and external conditions, the ability to diagnose and leverage development stimulators. To adapt to new circumstances, small towns require a strategy or development concept. Modern urban planning approaches, particularly those emphasising sustainable development and respect for authenticity and residential conditions, can provide a remedy for the challenges. The aim is to determine the directions of changes and to indicate factors that should stimulate the development of Czerwińsk nad Wisłą (Czerwińsk) while preserving its natural values in the spirit of the Cittaslow movement.

This approach offers an optimal solution for a city with a rich heritage and local identity. The idea of the Cittaslow network aims to improve the quality of life in small communities, allowing residents and visitors to enjoy the authenticity and traditional values of these small homelands.

**Keywords:** Cittaslow, historic resources, implementation sustainable development principles, modern urban planning trends, spatial and landscape values, urban development strategy

### INTRODUCTION

In Poland, since the 1960s, threats to the landscapes of small towns have been growing. The progressive degradation of their resources and the lack of a coordinated spatial policy have become the main reasons why Polish scientists have been dealing with this

problem for years (Adamczewska-Wejchert and Wejchert, 1996; Gzell, 1996; Bernat, 2021; Gajewicz, 2021; Przesmycka, 2021).

Because of their human scale, small towns are sensitive to the changes that manifest themselves in their landscape. The population declined, the post-war nationalisation of the economy, and the subsequent systemic transformation, contributed to the

socio-economic crisis, leading to the degradation and decline of many towns. This gave rise to a new research problem – the economic revitalisation of small towns. A significant part of these towns experienced marginalisation in the structure of the settlement network after 1989, and the progressive depreciation of their urban and architectural fabric (Figlus, 2011). The loss of the unique character of urban landscapes, the disappearance of historical architectural details, the replacement of traditional architecture with new one, the encroachment of randomness and mediocrity in place of regional identity are the most common problems according to Balińska (2000) and the authors of the reports "Architectural policy of Poland" (Chwalibóg (ed.), 2011) and "Life space of Poles" (Paszkowski, Schneider-Skalska and Węclawowicz-Bilska, 2014). Contemporary global processes strengthen the dominance of metropolitan centers at the expense of small towns, which are absorbed by large cities or, if they are located peripherally, become depopulated and impoverished as a result of migration (Antrop, 2004; Swaffield and Primdahl, 2006).

The Polish settlement network and cultural landscape, i.e. spatial and cultural identity, are expressed in small towns, which constitute the foundation of the urbanised environment. Therefore, maintaining the local and historic architectural and urban character of these towns is of great importance. The historical tissue is a trace of the past, proof of our continuity, tradition and awareness of values – especially today, when the speed of life, mobility, dynamic changes and evolution threaten the memory of roots, ancestors and the sense of attachment (Ritzer and Liska, 2004; Szulińska, 2010).

Lack of coordination in spatial development can lead to loss of value, structure of cities and housing estates, which are integrated with the surrounding landscape (Adamczewska-Wejchert and Wejchert, 1986; Gzell, 1996). Opportunities for the development of small towns should be sought in the proper recognition of internal and external conditions, as well as in the ability to diagnose and use development stimulants. An effective remedy for the problems of small towns can be the implementation of modern urban concepts (Batyk and Woźniak, 2019).

In response to globalisation and homogenisation of space in developing metropolitan centers, contemporary philosophies have emerged that oppose this lifestyle. These approaches focus on authenticity, tradition, endogenous values of cities, promotion of local identity, local products and activation of communities, are in line with the principles of sustainable development (Kılıçaslan and Malkoç True, 2016; Farelnik, Stanowicka and Wierzbicka, 2020).

This trend particularly resonates with the experienced and shaped generation of so-called "millennials". They live locally but think globally. Emphasising individuality, they choose safe, peaceful, and authentic places with picturesque locations to reside. They seek a healthy lifestyle, local products, clean air, and pure water sources, free from noise, smog, and excessive control. This shift in worldview, coupled with economic factors at the turn of the century, has driven the rediscovery of small towns (Brodziński and Kurowska, 2021). Contemporary concepts try to meet the challenges of small cities and are consistent with the expectations of users. When stimulating the development of small cities, it is worth considering the following six key development trends: 1) new urbanism, 2) compact city, 3) smart city, 4) green city, 5) city-event, urban acupuncture, 6) Cittaslow (Tab. S1).

New Urbanism, which promotes smart and modern development through compact, multifunctional and accessible cities (CNU, 2000; Trudeau, 2018), is popular in American cities, supports racial and income diversity. However, according to American researchers, it leads to gentrification (Trudeau and Kaplan, 2015).

Compact City focuses on planning densely built cities, avoiding tall buildings, which improves social conditions and optimises the use of urban space. This approach strengthens social bonds (Węclawowicz, 2020), protects against harmful interference from local and state authorities. It provides for multifunctional districts that reduce distances to services, schools, factories and hospitals, reducing car traffic and encouraging the use of public transport. As emphasised by researchers (Solarek, 2011; Twardzik, 2017; Pilch, 2019). Adapting it to existing small cities requires significant financial investments, organisational changes in spatial planning and redistribution of urban functions (OECD, 2012).

Sustainable transport is also one of the priorities of Smart Cities, alongside waste reduction, water conservation, environmental monitoring and green infrastructure. In the case of smart cities, energy efficiency is a key aspect (Bibri *et al.*, 2024) to create more environmentally friendly and liveable places while supporting economic growth. Smart cities increasingly emphasise the role of technological advancement and scalable data-driven solutions in promoting sustainable development practices (Sutherland and Cook, 2017; Mishra *et al.*, 2022). By integrating technology with environmental protection, smart cities aim to create greener and healthier living environments (Haque, Bhushan and Dhiman, 2022).

In the Green City concept, it is crucial to maintain the right balance between built-up areas and green areas (Pilch, 2019). Green cities offer a high standard of living, providing residents with easy access to biologically active areas (Szulczeńska, 2002). Lehmann (2010) and Bilbri (2021) emphasise that a Green City is a settlement unit striving for environmental balance (Bilbri, 2021). Minimising the ecological footprint and supporting harmonious relationships between people and nature are key features of eco-cities. Their priorities include: 1) the use of renewable energy and reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, including energy self-sufficiency, decentralised energy sources and local energy production, 2) reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, 3) water management, reduction of consumption, rainwater storage and ecological design of buildings, 4) implementation of solar energy technologies for buildings, 5) energy efficiency, renewable energy sources, waste reduction, green areas, sustainable transport and resource saving. The ultimate goal of eco-cities is to develop resilient, low-emission and environmentally friendly urban spaces that contribute to a more sustainable future (Rapoport and Vernay, 2011; Jong de *et al.*, 2015). Polish small towns have the advantage of having natural landscapes, environmental resources and proximity to rural areas that provide access to high-quality food products.

Urban acupuncture refers to the treatment of the city as an event city. It is a theory of urban design based on the assumption that small interventions can have a significant impact on the overall space of the city (Lerner, 2014). The underlying idea is locality in action. The approach is based on participatory design principles, ensuring that solutions are implemented where a critical mass of responsible, committed and local users has already developed. Acupuncture is a strategic approach to

intervention, with challenges that may include managing participant expectations within time constraints. Effective implementation of urban acupuncture requires micromanagement (Hoogduyn, 2014). A similar perspective applies to event city strategies, as described by Klauser (2011) in relation to the 2008 FIFA World Cup.

The last concept considered in this study is Cittaslow. It is dedicated to small cities (population – to 50,000) that for decades remained outside the mainstream of urban research and did not play a significant role in urban policy (Arbrey, 2005). Cittaslow is one of the few concepts that has been institutionalised and established operational rules as a network (Cittaslow Polska, 2001). It has the advantage that it has been widely discussed in academic literature, both internationally (e.g. Mayer and Knox, 2006; Miele, 2008; Rådström, 2014; Ball, 2022) and nationally (e.g. Gruszecka-Tieśluk, 2013; Szelągowska, 2014; Mainet, 2015; Farelnik, Stanowicka and Wierzbicka, 2020). The Cittaslow concept places endogenous development factors above external factors, placing particular emphasis on local resources, in particular natural environmental resources and cultural heritage.

When taking action, it should be remembered that the city is not stylistically uniform (Stangel, 2013; Twardzik, 2017). In order to adapt to new conditions, small towns with historical resources need a development scenario, which is offered by the Cittaslow idea (Tab. S1). This approach holistically integrates the principles discussed earlier, dealing with economic growth, quality of life and historical, climatic and social conditions.

The aim of this study is to create a map of recommendations – stimulants for a small town with historical values, taking into account its potential integration with the Cittaslow network. The authors try to answer the questions:

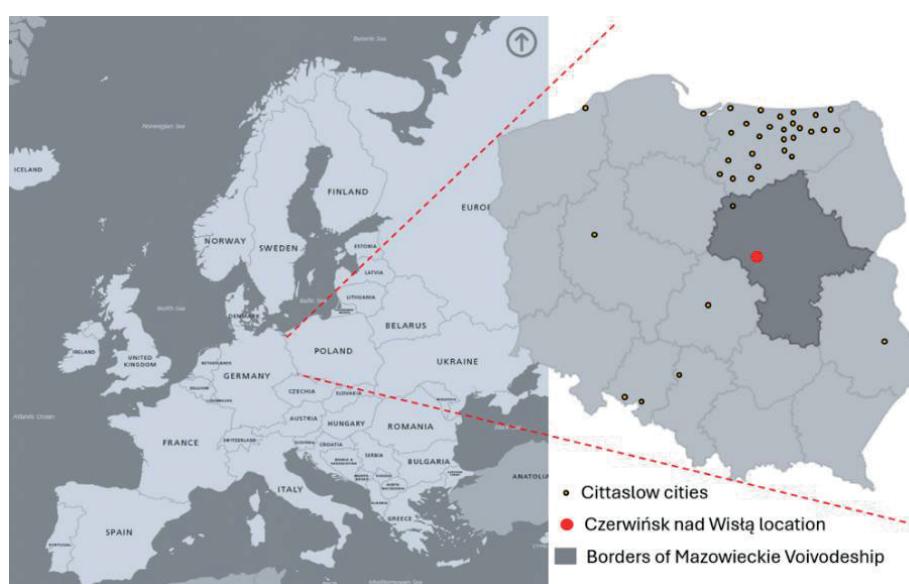
1. Is the Cittaslow trend an optimal development path that respects the natural settlement conditions and local identity for small towns with historical heritage?
2. What distinguishes small towns with historical heritage on the example of Czerwińsk?
3. How can the development of cities be stimulated while maintaining spatial and environmental values?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### STUDY MATERIALS

The research area is Czerwińsk nad Wisłą – a small town commonly considered as “fallen”, but with a rich heritage. It has an urban layout entered into the register of monuments and a sacral complex, which has a profound influence on its development. In addition, it is shaped by three classified spatial forms (Zemło, 2003): agoral, ludic and sacral spaces. It is characterised by a defined spatial identity (Gzell, 1996), with a clear boundary marking the city and open areas used for agriculture, as well as forests, meadows and pastures (Adamczewska-Wejchert, 1986). A strong carrier of local identity emerges from the unique topography of the city, the proximity of the river and outstanding forms of vegetation. Czerwińsk boasts agricultural traditions (cultivation of soft fruits – strawberries, raspberries and blueberries), as well as trade, water, rafting, shipbuilding, pottery and basketry heritage. However, it is best known for the 12th century basilica and monastery complex, which have been present since the beginning of the city's existence. The city's aspirations are reflected in the names it was given – “second Kazimierz Dolny” or “Jasna Góra Czerwińska” (Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie, 1933). Czerwińsk is located in the Masovian Voivodship (Fig. 1) and has 1,033 inhabitants (GUS, 2021). The town is located in a picturesque place on the Vistula escarpment, with a distinct urban layout integrated into the diverse topography. This area is characterised by three visible hills, ravines and gorges, which significantly affect the urban structure and provide natural values. The abbey in Czerwińsk has been a significant centre of religious life since the 17th century, famous for the veneration of the miraculous painting of Our Lady of Consolation.

The significance of the church was confirmed in 1967, when Pope Paul VI granted it the title of minor basilica – an honour reserved for churches of historical, architectural or pastoral significance (Nowiński, 2013). The landscape of Czerwińsk is permeated with sacral symbolism, with commemorative ele-



**Fig. 1.** The location of Czerwińsk nad Wisłą in relation to Europe, Poland, and the well-developed network of Cittaslow towns in Poland; source: own elaboration

ments – the degraded Kościuszko Mound, chapels, plague crosses, cemeteries and statues of saints. This character is complemented by its physiographic location on many terraces in the Vistula valley. The city is of particular importance to the Masovian region and national culture – as emphasised by the Spatial Development Plan of the Masovian Voivodship – unfortunately its potential remains untapped. In 2021, by decree of the President of the Republic of Poland on April 19, 2021, Czerwińsk was recognised as a monument of history under the title "Czerwińsk nad Wisłą – former Abbey of the Regular Canons". This recognition includes the historically shaped space of the abbey, featuring the church dedicated to the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the monastic wings, the rectory, the bell tower, the former stable and coach house, as well as the garden (Fig. 2).

Czerwińsk has always been a small, intimate town, deeply rooted in Polish history. In the 19th century it was stripped of its city rights for supporting the January Uprising, but despite this loss it remains a place of great heritage value. Its monastic complex, designated a monument of history by the President of

Poland in 2021, attracts pilgrims and tourists, fostering the town's continued development.

The lack of modern urban factors (supra-regional crafts, industry, processing or trade) and the construction of new road infrastructure caused the town to distance itself from modern freight transport. As a result, it was forgotten and fell into economic stagnation, which affected its spatial development. Since 2020, Czerwińsk has been classified as a town of historic value, restored to the status of a city (Fig. 3).

## STUDY METHODS

Multifaceted research into the potential of the town, along with an analysis of factors characterising contemporary trends and developmental preferences in urban planning, formed the basis for efforts toward the town's accession to the Cittaslow network (Fig. 4). To this end, the town's potential was assessed according to Cittaslow principles, identifying strengths and weaknesses in urban management as well as areas in crisis requiring support.

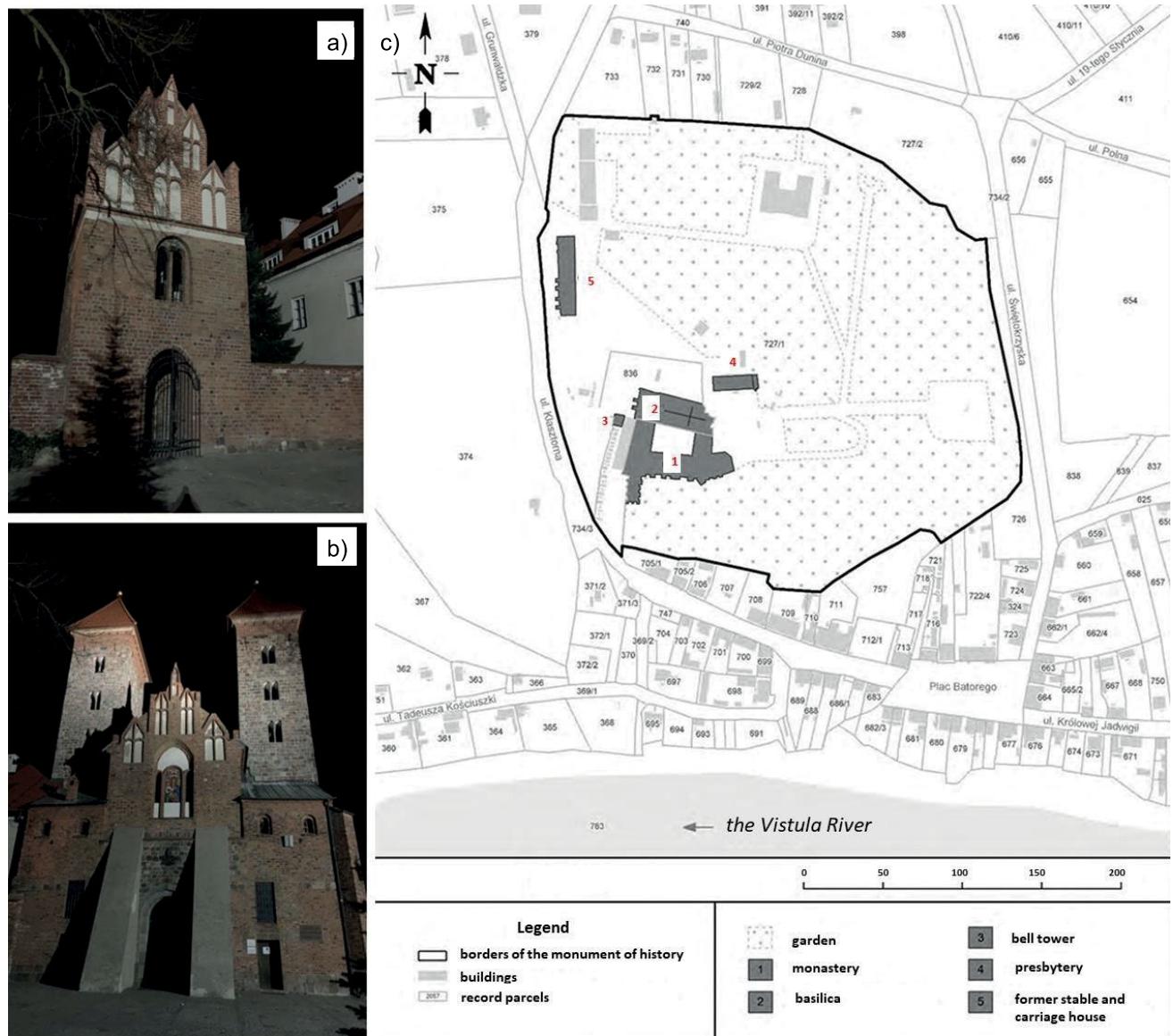


Fig. 2. The Czerwińsk Basilica with its accompanying monastic complex; a) the Abbot's Gate, b) the basilica towers, c) documents confirm lands a monument of history; source: own elaboration (photos: E. Kosiacka-Beck)



**Fig. 3.** Plan illustrated boundaries of conservation areas within the town; a) view of the town square and monument of history, b) panoramic view of the Vistula River from the church towers, c) urban layout of the lower town; source: own elaboration (photos: A. Dlugozima)

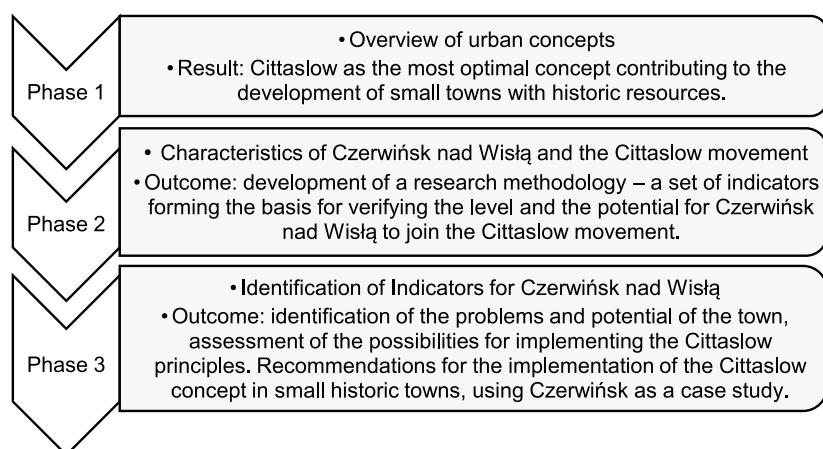
Based on fieldwork, interviews, and an analysis of available source materials, a certification process was conducted for the town across seven indicators. These included assessments of environmental, energy, and infrastructure policies, as well as the quality of agricultural, tourism, and artisanal policies, and factors related to residents' quality of life, hospitality, awareness, and education.

Data for assessing the certification potential was sourced from the Kaszubska (2016), GUS (2021), Urząd Miasta i Gminy w Czerwińsku nad Wisłą (2021), Uchwała (2023).

#### Optimal development path with respect to natural settlement conditions and local identity for small centers with historic complexes

In the search for the optimal solution for Czerwińsk, an assessment was carried out covering seven criteria (Tab. S1):

- 1) scale,
- 2) local character,
- 3) diversity,



**Fig. 4.** Research methodology diagram; source: own elaboration

- 4) adaptability,
- 5) quality of public spaces,
- 6) openness of the system,
- 7) quality of the environment.

The comparison shows that the Cittaslow concept is the most interesting cognitively and practically of the mentioned concepts. It is dedicated to a group of small towns that for decades remained outside the mainstream of urban research and were not a significant subject of urban policy (Arbrey, 2005). This concept, as one of the few, has undergone institutionalisation and development of principles of operation as a network (Cittaslow Polska, 2001). This concept, as one of the few, has undergone institutionalisation and development of principles of operation as a network (Cittaslow Polska, 2001). The need to simulate the process of Czerwińsk joining the Cittaslow network may also stem from the fact that, so far, only one town in the Mazowieckie Voivodship – Sierpc (since 31 July 2023) – has obtained certification, in contrast to the concentration of Cittaslow towns in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship.

The socio-cultural context has a strong influence on the urban form of cities developed in accordance with the Cittaslow concept. Small towns are natural candidates for this approach, as they meet its basic criteria. Smaller urban centers can offer a peaceful living environment, emphasizing local identity and close social and economic ties. Polish examples of small towns supporting the Cittaslow idea seem to confirm this thesis, as evidenced by the growing interest of tourists and the active involvement of residents and local authorities.

#### Characteristics of the Cittaslow idea – research indicators

Due to the multidimensional potential of Czerwińsk, the most optimal concept to pursue is Cittaslow. Aspiring to join the organisation is preceded by participation in workshops preparing for the certification process. Both the certification and the re-certification conducted five years after joining the movement are seen as diagnostic tools for the city, recognising its material and social endogenous potential (Presenza, Abbate and Perano, 2015; Zawadzka, 2017). The principles of Cittaslow are outlined in the Cittaslow Charter, signed in 1999 by the mayors of four Italian cities: Orvieto, Bra, Greve in Chianti, and Positano. Cittaslow International continues to gather more member municipalities each year, and the number of supporters of the slow philosophy keeps growing (Radstorm, 2011; Botta, 2016; Zawadzka, 2017), spreading beyond Europe to countries with diverse cultures, such as the United States, South Korea, South Africa, Australia, and Turkey (Mallet, 2018).

The Cittaslow movement emerged as a response to the trend in which the global economy surpasses local economies (Grzelak-Kostulska, Hołowiecka and Kwiatkowski, 2011). In 1999, Cittaslow was established as a network of municipalities focused on improving quality of life through an alternative approach to development. Originally an Italian concept, it has evolved into an international network of small and medium-sized municipalities worldwide, spanning 33 countries and 287 cities, according to the updated list from June 2022 (Cittaslow, 2022).

Each country is free to shape its own Cittaslow policy, adapting the criteria to local conditions so that these activities can positively stimulate the development of the city (Blazy, 2016; Gruszecka-Tieśluk, 2013). In order for a city to become a full

member of the association, it must meet at least 50% of all criteria. According to the 2017 statute, there are seven groups of criteria, covering a total of 72 requirements. Each of the seven areas is dedicated to different aspects of activities; several dozen criteria can be distinguished within them (Cittaslow Polska, 2001). The criteria are mainly qualitative in nature. Out of the 72 requirements, 31 are mandatory (in 5 policy areas) and 5 are prospective in nature. The division of criteria by areas is as in **Tab. S2**.

- I. Energy policy with 12 indicators, including five mandatory.
- II. Infrastructure policy with nine indicators, including 5 mandatory.
- III. Urban quality policy with 17 indicators, including 9 mandatory.
- IV. Agricultural, tourism and crafts policy with 10 indicators, including 7 mandatory.
- V. Hospitality, awareness and education with 10 indicators, including 5 mandatory.
- VI. Social integration policy with 11 indicators.
- VII. Partnership policy with 3 indicators.

Therefore, the research method is based on five groups of policies, verifying the current quality and level of development of these groups in Czerwińsk. When assessing the possibility of implementing Cittaslow in Czerwińsk, 30 out of 72 requirements were selected for testing – those identified as mandatory in the Cittaslow statute. Accordingly, the following criteria were taken into account: energy policy (5 indicators), infrastructure policy (5 indicators), urban quality policy (9 indicators), agricultural, tourist and crafts policy (6 indicators), hotel, awareness and education policy (5 indicators).

## RESULTS

### CITTASLOW CRITERIA IN CZERWIŃSK

Czerwińsk meets 17 out of 30 mandatory requirements, does not meet 11, and data is missing for 2. Energy and environmental policy (positively meets 10/13, no data for 3 criteria), infrastructure policy (positively meets 3/9, 4 requirements not met, 2 no data), urban quality policy (meets 6/17, does not meet 7, and 4 no data), agricultural, tourism and crafts policy (meets 8/10, 1 not met, 1 no data), hotel, information and education policy (meets 2/10, does not meet 6, and 2 no data), social integration (meets 10/11, does not meet 1 – young people leave for work), partnership policy (meets 1/3, and 2 remain to be met) (**Tab. S2**). Tradition, cultural and landscape values make this urban and natural complex a “small homeland”, a spiritual capital. The preserved historical architecture on the escarpment creates a characteristic *genius loci*. The city has a human scale in the perception of a walker, and the well-being of its inhabitants is dependent on local initiatives.

### STRENGTHENING THE CITY'S POTENTIAL IN LIGHT OF THE FIVE MANDATORY POLICIES CONSIDERED WHEN JOINING THE CITTASLOW NETWORK

In Czerwińsk, it is essential to enhance the identified potential – symbolic, spatial, cultural, natural, ecological, and human – through improvements in the following areas:

## I. Energy policy

- implementing Czerwińsk's development strategy in the spirit of the Slow movement would allow local authorities to focus on improving city accessibility, eliminating architectural barriers, and promoting solutions related to energy management and ecological awareness.

## II. Infrastructure policy

- improving the city's infrastructure, including the road and bicycle network;
- the municipality should seek financing and support from external sources, leveraging its well-functioning agricultural base, potentially expanding into food processing.

## III. Urban quality policy

- small-scale trade and processing as a basis for social activation; this would combat unemployment, social demoralisation and emigration for work;
- growth in tourism would drive investment in the hotel and catering industry, creating jobs and solving the problem of young people leaving the city or migrating for work.

## IV. Agricultural, tourism, and craft policy

- expanding workshop offerings that promote local traditions;
- strengthening connections to the European network of pilgrimage routes along the Way of St. James, with the monastery hill serving as a focal point for cultural and spiritual tourism;
- educational, landscape and historical paths, visual identification, multimedia attractions; establishing a Vistula cycling trail linking towns along the Warsaw–Płock route;
- integration of Czerwińsk boulevards with the Vistula tourist network, strengthening the cultural and economic value of the river in local initiatives; renewal of river travel from Warsaw through Młociny, Jabłonna, Modlin, Zakroczymski, Czerwińsk, Kępa Polska, Wyszogród, Płock and Gdańsk.

## V. Hospitality, awareness, and education policy

- promotion of Czerwińsk as the spiritual capital of Mazovia, emphasising the continuity of sacral tradition since the 12th century, which strengthens the symbolic and cultural significance of the city; highlighting the city's multicultural heritage – regional museum;
- reconstruction of wooden architecture from the 19th century, creation of accommodation facilities, recreational and educational spaces and promoting local products;
- modernisation of riverside buildings while maintaining authenticity – urban renewal;
- establishing art galleries showcasing various artistic fields (drawing, painting, graphic arts, ceramics, photography, etc.) and painting workshops to promote the picturesque Vistula landscape of Czerwińsk among contemporary artists. It is also important to give some recommendations to policy areas connected to social integration (VI) and partnerships (VII);
- financial support for local initiatives that revive traditional crafts and professions; including King Jagiełło's crossing of the Vistula before the Battle of Grunwald; Construction of Kościuszko Mound by Father Gruberski, Legacy of Bishop A. Hłond, Honouring of the Halama Boat; the greatest assets of Czerwińsk are efficient local government administration, dynamically engaged community – local activity groups; the greatest value is its location on the Vistula River and historical and cultural heritage.

## DISCUSSION

Czerwińsk does not function fully in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, it remains in a state of stagnation due to unresolved ownership issues and an insufficient city budget. Like many small towns, it struggles with maintenance problems, which hinders its development. Long-term survival requires planned and integrated actions, undertaken jointly by property owners and local authorities.

The first step should involve informational and promotional initiatives to raise awareness of Cittaslow principles among residents and local entrepreneurs (indicators 28, 29, *Tab. S3*). Establishing a local producers' market for agricultural goods (indicators 23, 24, *Tab. S3*), creating a central urban space at Batory Square, and regulating vehicular traffic according to Cittaslow (indicators 8, 11, *Tab. S3*). Encouraging local producers and reviving traditional crafts (indicators 18–22, *Tab. S3*) will support economic activation (Branduini and Carnelli, 2021). Building a bicycle path network (indicators 6, 7, *Tab. S3*) is another crucial step. Strengthening spatial and landscape values – which are the foundation of the town's appeal but remain underutilised – should be prioritised. Many historic buildings have been transformed into hotels or cafés (indicator 2, *Tab. S3*), demonstrating the potential for adaptive reuse.

Actions need to be taken at multiple levels, as defined by Cittaslow, particularly socio-economic development (Senetra and Szarek-Iwaniak, 2020), sustainable local development (Brodziński and Kurowska, 2021), spatial planning (Zagroba, Pawlewicz and Senetra, 2021), social resilience (Gunduz, Oner and Knox, 2016) and social innovation in slow cities. The connection between Cittaslow principles and sustainable development should be further explored, emphasising the role of the river and the monastery complex as key elements of tourism that can be a driving force for the development of the city.

The role of the river in stimulating city development and strengthening the implementation of Cittaslow principles should be closely linked. The success of similar cities within the Cittaslow network is a valuable point of reference (*Tab. S4*). For example, in Lidzbark, participation in the network enabled funds to be obtained for the revitalisation of the Łyna River boulevards, which significantly increased the attractiveness of the city. A similar transformation could take place in Czerwińsk, where the revitalisation of the Vistula boulevards would stimulate river tourism and contribute to the economic and cultural development of the city. Another example that could be an inspiration for the local authorities of Czerwińsk is Morąg in the Warmian-Masurian region. Despite a very limited budget, the determination of local officials to secure the necessary funds to join the network paid off. Since joining Cittaslow, both the city and its community have consciously developed in accordance with the principles of the idea. According to respondents, membership in Cittaslow has a positive impact on the functionality of the city and serves as a development stimulus and a negotiation tool when applying for EU funding for projects. These investments not only attract tourists, but also promote local culture (Szczepańska and Pietrzyk, 2018).

### • Czerwińsk branding and identity

One of the key arguments is the coherence of the Cittaslow strategy in shaping the city's image (city branding), the aim of which is to stimulate the economy and activate residents. The

chosen direction of implementing this strategy can serve as a starting point for small cities to gain visibility, increase attractiveness, improve competitiveness and economic situation (Grzelak-Kostulska and Hołowiecka, 2011). Currently, Cittaslow is a strong, positively associated brand, used both as a trademark of the Cittaslow Association and as a distinguishing feature of network cities. This branding strategy consolidates the reputation and image of Cittaslow across all its associated products.

The Cittaslow brand is a guarantee of quality in various aspects of life, promoting innovation, environmental sustainability and a lifestyle consistent with the “slow life” philosophy. The target audience is current and potential residents of the city, domestic and foreign investors, entrepreneurs and tourists (Zadęcka, 2017). Obtaining the Cittaslow certificate is a long process based on strong principles rooted in sustainable development. Given that Czerwińsk has always been an important and recognisable place, although currently dormant, its inclusion in the Cittaslow network is an opportunity to restore its status as the Spiritual Capital of Mazovia, situated on the Vistula River – the Queen of Polish rivers.

#### • Recommendations for small towns with historic townscapes

The following recommendations aim to support the sustainable development of small towns with valuable historic townscapes, ensuring that growth respects local heritage, identity, and landscape qualities.

1. Urban development strategies based on Cittaslow principles – 7 policies – 7 areas, taking into account the specificity of cities and their individual needs.
2. Activities related to the care of the historic fabric, history, local heroes and products.
3. Defining centropic places, socio-spatial values, and stimulating their development.
4. Exposing natural and cultural identity carriers.
5. Protection of the open landscape, exposure of the city silhouette.
6. Preservation of corridors and viewpoints.
7. Creation of high-quality, safe public space.

It is worth encouraging representatives of city authorities, small towns with a historical heritage, to join Cittaslow, expanding the Polish network, which has been operating since 2015. The attractiveness of these cities can be increased through numerous revitalisation projects in public spaces, as exemplified by Reszel, Lidzbark Warmiński and Biskupiec. Hospitality is promoted as the greatest value, as evidenced by the modernised railway station in Działdowo, renovated public spaces in Dobre Miasto and bicycle infrastructure in Lubawa and Niedzica. The effect of belonging to the Cittaslow network is the creation of a social activity center in the Castle in Lubawa and the actively engaged residents of Murowana Goślina, who contribute to its development. Głubczyce prides itself on a regional product – rapeseed oil – and Olsztyń is famous for its blueberry buns. Cities such as Olecko, Pasym and Morąg, along with 38 other member cities, their history and values.

Observing the functioning of network cities reveals challenges such as misunderstanding the concept of slow living, low community involvement, lack of information flow and top-down initiatives that standardise projects instead of adapting them to local needs. These problems often do not improve the daily lives of residents (Gazińska, Czyńska and Rubinowicz, 2023).

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of Czerwińsk in the spirit of Cittaslow is an optimal solution for a city with a unique historical heritage, natural conditions, original spatial composition, strong local identity and social ties. Preserving traditions related to the proximity of the river and religious heritage – by strengthening initiatives promoting knowledge about the historical complex of the city – can strengthen local traditions and historical awareness among residents.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material to this article can be found online at: [https://www.jwld.pl/files/Supplementary\\_material\\_67\\_Kosiacka.pdf](https://www.jwld.pl/files/Supplementary_material_67_Kosiacka.pdf).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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