

Building a Community on Pride

Overcoming the realities of short term politics and economics

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1. Good Intentions

Miasteczko Wilanów (MW) is the ongoing construction of a coherent neighborhood on 169 hectares within the boundaries of Warsaw, Poland. Warsaw was shattered during the 20th century by two wars and swiftly rebuilt in the 1950's. However, during the last 20 years it has experienced rapid growth of a different kind: opportunistic, short term and largely unplanned. From the outset Miasteczko Wilanow was intended to be a physical expression of the renewed democracy in Poland. However, as the project began development in 2000, it was not the government, but the market, that was creating gated and single use enclaves throughout Warsaw. The narrow objectives of Soviet era planning were being replaced by the narrow objectives of a new capitalistic era of development. MW, though a private sector venture still attempted to re-establish sustainable planning and development practices in Poland in the context of one of Europe's most rapidly growing cities. In 2008 MW received the ISOCARP award for excellence regarding the theme: "Growth without Sprawl".



Figure 1: ISOCARP Award For Excellence 2008 for Miasteczko Wilanów



Figure 2: Growth of Miasteczko Wilanów (Google Earth)

During the beginning of the 21st century, Miasteczko Wilanów was the largest built development project in central Europe. It's growth continues unabated today.

It was quite a challenge designing an inclusive and integrated environment for modern investors who were already in 2000 accustomed to current standard market practices of creating: single use districts, gated residential enclaves, interior shopping malls, and parking instead of parks. In spite of this MW had several long-term principles which guided the master-plan and development of the new district and managed to convince over a dozen international leading developers to join:

1. Respect of, and integration with, the surrounding context
2. High density mid-rise human scale architecture
3. Multiple architects engaged in building designs
4. Orientation towards public transit and pedestrian scale
5. Building for future generations not only for short term economics
6. Incorporation of meaningful institutions (schools, places of worship, hospitals)
7. Security not through gates, but making the public realm everyone's concern by design

By 2008, Miasteczko Wilanow was no simple dormitory community for 20,000 residents, it was a complex mosaic which connected history and the future. In addition to the nearby Wilanow Palace, the community integrated the largest church built in Europe during the last 200 years. It is the location of the John Paul II museum and will be the place of burial for Poland's presidents of the 3rd republic. The community also contains one of Poland's most advanced hospitals, a private facility which is open to the public for the use of operating facilities and analytical equipment. Dozens of small schools were in operation and the Willy Brandt German school will begin construction in 2012. The Wilanow business park is in it's 4th phase of development including the headquarters of Central Europe's largest software producer. Over one hundred convenience shops and services of all kind are already spread throughout the site, even before the completion of the main retail center.

2. The Reality of Short Term Economics and Politics

Between 2007 and 2010 the necessity of short-term returns on investment and the politics of large scale real-estate development began to impact the project in a direct way. During that time the original land owning company, Prokom Investments, was absorbed into one of Poland's largest development companies, Polnord. The reasons were both political and economic.

The President of Prokom Investments was at odds with the presidential leadership in Poland at that time to the point that he would have been arrested where he to return to Poland during those years. In addition, he was intent on cashing out of his Wilanów real estate venture in order to invest in oil exploration and production in Kazakhstan. Polnord's shares jumped after the acquisition of Prokom Investments, whose main asset was the remaining lands in MW. For the former owner of the Wilanow fields, Real estate was a short-term window of opportunity that he capitalized upon, then sought the more lucrative pastures of serving China's energy needs.

Concurrently, the remaining land and the infrastructure of MW fell into the hands on an old school real-estate development company. One of their first decrees was: "there is no Miasteczko Wilanow, it is simply a series of independent development parcels to be built for maximum profit". No schedule was determined for the completion of roads, schools, landscaping or public areas. Public spaces were used to park construction equipment, including abandoned construction sheds, even buses, and to store unused construction materials and other refuse from the development process. While these things were often sitting behind temporary construction site walls they were in full view from the completed buildings that overlooked them. A chief engineer of Polnord said in early 2010: the public

spaces within the site would be finished at the very end when all buildings will have been constructed. To them it also had the advantage of postponing their investment for a decade.

Given that the first residents moved in in 2003 and the project would not be “built out” until at least 2016, that meant residents were to live with a battlefield like public realm while a whole generation of children would grow to high school age. About 15% of the promised roads were completed, the rest were simply makeshift concrete slabs traditionally used for military purposes or simply right of ways left to become weed fields. Some canals were constructed to specifications, others not – so they would only partially hold water. All canals and parks lining them were treated as road right of ways without maintenance. Planted landscaping was simply left to battle with weeds as the city and developers would not undertake maintenance. After all it was kind of a perpetual construction site that neither the city nor the developers thought would finish anytime soon. Developers seemed ok with the un-kept public space and did not push the city to make maintenance. No-one was interested in taking responsibility.

In 2000, at the outset of the project development, a parcel was carved out near the Wilanow Palace, and provided to the city for the creation of a new Town Hall for the newly planned district. The Town hall, appropriately, was to have a symbolic location on the Royal Axis and also mark the main entry to the first phases of the new community. Construction started in 2001 the town hall, an office building, and a residential development. A joint venture was established between a Turkish development company and the Wilanow district government, whereby the developer would build the new town hall in exchange for the land and development rights for several hundred housing units adjacent to the future town hall and entry. As the concrete frame for most of the buildings were topping out, the Mayor of the district was arrested for receiving inappropriate payments from the partner developer .

The construction stopped in 2002 on that structure and is finally to perhaps resume in 2013. But for 11 years the abandoned carcass of a town hall haulted by corruption stood as the main symbol of the nascent community. Areas around the Townhall to this day are hazardous weed covered tracts with derelict construction materials. The below grade parking of the apartment buildings developed their own ecosystem and where cynically compared by residents and in the press to the lakes of the Mazurian region. The city could not even agree on wrapping the structure, so instead it was graffiti covered almost immediately after construction was halted by the scandal.

Real estate values fell throughout Poland during the crisis years of 2008 – 2010. The prices of MW, which had one of the steepest run - ups in Central Europe until 2007, dropped precipitously during this period. Developers were still selling, but with deep discounts. Because of tightening on residential lending, developers sought to reduce the size of the units for sale as well by 25% and tried without success to circumvent the requirement for a range of unit sizes inherent in the Masterplan. Instead of the value of the community increasing as it took shape, the perception was that of a failed project. Certainly walking down the street with missing sidewalks and meter high weeds one could not help but think neither the developers, nor the city cared about the residents. For sale signs littered the facades.



Figure 3: Town Hall 2010



Figure 4: Typical sidewalk 2010



Figure 5: Royal Axis 2010

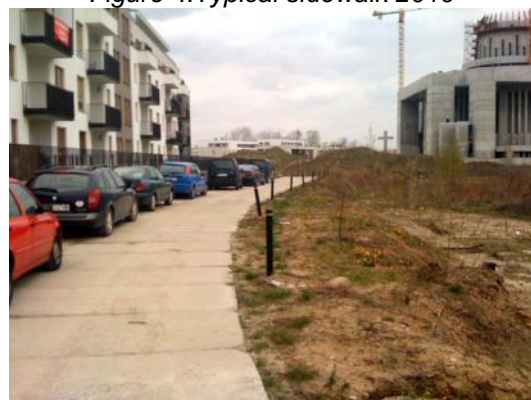


Figure 6: Temple of Providence 2010



Figure 7: Luxury apartments 2010



Figure 8: Primary intersection 2010



Figure 9: Spontaneous advertisement 2010



Figure 10: Cycling path 2010



Figure 11: Town Square 2010



Figure 12: Boulevard 2010

2.1 Glimpses of hope

In contrast to the chaos of the public realm were the beautiful buildings and their courtyards. Although this was typical throughout Warsaw, these buildings are not distanced from the road or hidden behind gates. They are part of a neighborhood and shape the streets and parks. If one peered into any courtyard of the handsome variety of buildings there were perfectly maintained landscapes and playgrounds. Unlike the rest of Warsaw there was no graffiti on the building walls. The most advanced hospital in Poland opened within the project. The largest religious structure built in Europe during the last 200 years was rising in the heart of the community. Though under construction it was preparing for the beatification of a Polish priest killed fighting communism during Soviet rule. Whole families would stroll proudly down the fragments of street and sidewalk that were completed as designed. A Who's Who of Poland had bought into the promise of this community, bought into the dream of a coherent community built from scratch and without gates: former presidents, representatives of European Parliament, senior corporate executives, well known actors, embassies and many young people with a great education and a loan. By 2011, the leading Polish Magazine, *Polityca*, simply stated: "MW has the best educated, wealthiest and youngest demographic in Poland. It is the future of this country".



Figure 13: Burial of Polish President in exile, 2010

3. A Community takes control of Itself

In 2010, IN-VI decide to take steps to try make MW achieve it's potential as a great neighborhood to live work and celebrate. It was no longer under contract by the main original landowner, nor any of the individual developers. IN-VI did believe, though, that it still had a moral contract to the 20,000 residents who had moved into the district. For most of those residents, their investment in a property in MW, was an investment of a lifetime. Many residents had little savings, so they took long-term loans to buy a piece of the new community. Seeing it not completed as planned and ill maintained amounted to a betrayal for these hopeful citizens.

IN-VI would address three entities to bring about a positive realization of the original plans of the community: the district government of Wilanow, the developers who had built and were building the community and the residents, who were growing in number everyday.

3.1 Developers – helping the bottom – line.

In 2008 many of the developers were very proud of being part of an award winning planned community. They hung their ISOCARP award in their main conference rooms or in the office of their president. Poland had rarely been recognized in recent years for planning or design on the international stage. In an increasingly competitive real-estate market being part of an acclaimed project had added value.

In the spring of 2010 IN-VI gathered all of the developers of the original site and some of its neighbors in the offices of the main conference room of the original landholder, Polnord. On the wall was the ISOCARP award of excellence. It was the first time that the majority of the developers were together since the ceremony in Sitges in 2008. They were brought together this time under the pretext that they would enter another competition, the ULI Awards for Excellence.

IN-VI had made an audit of the existing conditions around the site, focusing on the public places, many of which were still the responsibility of the developers prior to being handed over to the city. No developer was spared as images from through the district hi-lighted the neglect of areas that often stood in front of their own sales pavilions. IN-VI referred to the neighborhood Internet forum (e-wilanow.pl) which largely focused on the disappointment and frustration of residents of the district. Developers also were shown the bad press that the project had received in the years after having received the ISOCARP award. The project had gone from being a symbol of the new Poland with rapidly rising property value and profits for it's developers, to a project which contained largely unsatisfied residents and precipitously falling sales prices. The neglect of common space was having a direct impact on the salability of the project and the bottom line of each developer. For sale signs dotted the facades of beautiful buildings at an alarming density. The presentation was met with silence, perhaps embarrassment, but it began a whole process of common sense that changed the attitude from, only paying attention to my own development, to: we are all in this together.

Using aerial and ground level photographs IN-VI highlighted strategic locations throughout the community for improvement and established the route through which a potential jury would visit – by design, it touched every developers parcel. Developers were reminded that their past and future buyers were taking these routes every day, and that, in it's actual state it would be an embarrassment for each of us if the jury was to visit. IN-VI presented a budget for the basic improvements, but basically said that developers should clean up their ongoing construction sites and to begin to treat the common spaces as finished places for the thousands of residents and not just a place for construction equipment and parking for construction workers.

3.2 Public sector shake up

In 2010, the district government turned out to be the least interested in doing anything to enhance the public space of the community. Even though part of the infrastructure and public spaces had been formally handed over to the public domain by developers, the local government continued to claim that it was the role of developers to maintain and enhance these places. Government officials also saw the public spaces as simply part of a road network that might require occasional cutting of weeds and grass, but no more. Meetings were held to remind elected officials that with small investments in maintenance and roads. Thousands could benefit; unlike the sprawl developments in other surrounding districts like Marki and Piaseczno. Where each investment could serve only a few people.



Figure 14: Marki vs Miasteczko Wilanów – urban edge conditions.

In early 2010 not one bench or garbage can had been provided by the municipality for this new community of 20,000 residents. If sidewalks and streetlamps and landscaping of the public domain was not made by the developers, the city had no budget to implement the existing plans. Officials also inferred that since many of the residents were new to the district, having moved their domicile only recently to Wilanow, they were not yet eligible local voters and not yet paying taxes locally, so there was no budget for the community. It should be noted, that prior to the construction of MW, the entire Wilanow district had less than 13,000 residents, so now whether voters or not, the majority of the district residents were now living in the new community. Not only did the government have no money or resources to complete or maintain the public spaces that were already built, it would create hurdles to initiatives to enhance the district. That stance would cost it dearly during the next elections.



Figure 15: TV confrontation government vs. residents

3.3 Residents take action

Beginning in the spring of 2010 IN-VI began organizing a series of community actions to improve the public spaces of the community. The idea was that if the government saw it as a non-issue and developers still had a problem with investing outside the boundaries of their own site, it was up to the citizens to take steps to improve their own community. It had to be done in a way that was interesting, directed and safe.

The first of nine so far was called: "Move and Plant". It referred to the removal of hundreds of illegal billboards, signs and posters that littered the public spaces of the community and the planting of 500 hundred bushes along one of the linear parks that led to the Palace on Wilanow. The city was for-warned about the action and remained silent. For example their attitude about the signs: "it is illegal to remove someone else's property, however since they are illegal it is as if they do not exist in the first place". The city of Warsaw generally has a "laissez faire" attitude about illegal signs, though some administrators at the city level, not district, encouraged us off record.

An announcement of the action appeared on e-Wilanow forum and flyers were posted in every stairwell of every building. Well over 100 residents of all ages turned up to help out on a gray cool day. The removal of hundreds of signs took only about 30 minutes. The residents were so energetic that they managed to remove signs that had been set into the ground with concrete. Residents brought ladders to remove signs that were high up on light posts. Whether a construction company, developer, opportunistic service providers, private schools, fitness clubs, no advertiser was spared. I should be noted that no developer or construction company would let the residents use containers to dispose of the signs. Only a building manager was willing to help the residents in that respect. People wanted clean and billboard free parks and streets, unlike the rest of Warsaw.

The residents then went on to plant 500 shrubs to form a hedge along a park in order to reclaim it from illegally parked cars and construction equipment. That lasted another 45 minutes. Professional gardeners made demonstrations on how to properly plant, oversaw the planting, then watered and maintained the new 350 meter long hedge. After sitting on the sidelines for 10 years, in 1 hour and 15 minutes, the community belonged to the residents.

Based on the success of the first action, IN-VI launched a second action, this time entitled "Weed and Cut". With spring came grass and weeds, which in years passed had simply been left to grow with no maintenance whatsoever. The canals which marked the approaches to the Royal palace were either choked with weeds or filled with stagnant water and scattered floating garbage. The idea was simple, weed the parks, cut the grass and clean the canals. This time, not only did the residents turn up, so did the press and two television stations. The city was again kept posted of the event, but this time the Wilanow district dispatched a spokesperson who announced to the press that the action was technically illegal, since it was public land. However, they stopped short of police intervention. The event ran on several news programs and was covered by all major newspapers and local press. The district government was in disbelief and disarray. They called a meeting with IN-VI and the head of the resident association who had begun to support the actions. They simply said that the actions had to stop on legal grounds. IN-VI suggested that the discussion needed to occur at the city level regarding the respect of the original master-plan and basic services like park maintenance.

A meeting was held in the Warsaw president's office which was a confrontation between the district government and the IN-VI led residents. The local government had specifically signaled out the hedge of the first action as an illegal element placed in the landscape without authorization. The chief planner of Warsaw, reviewed the master plan in the presence of all participants and concluded that not only was the hedge legal where it was planted, but that it was an obligation that the city plant it. IN-VI new this all along, having designed the public spaces of the community, but had to hope that the plans had meaning in an ever changing political context.

Actions continued on a monthly basis throughout the summer, to the frustration of the local government. Residents and finally developers began to donate benches for public spaces,

again deemed “illegal” by the administration. IN-VI placed them carefully and requested confirmation for each bench from the Warsaw Conservator out of respect for the nearby palace. The benches were so popular that there were waiting lists for donors.



Figure 16: Miasteczko Wilanów, Move and Plant Actions

By the end of the year, there was tangible progress, the public space was passable rather than a disgrace and it had been done on shoestring budgets. IN-VI donated three full time employees sometimes more to ensure the proper organization of the actions. Individuals would donate benches, developers would chip in a few hundred Euros each per action, building managers would sponsor areas near the properties they managed. Gardening companies provided rock bottom prices. IN-VI prepared press releases being sure that credit was given where credit was due. Developers had to participate from fear of being left out of positive publicity from the third action onward, almost all developers supported the actions.

At the end of 2010, IN-VI and the residents of Warsaw were nominated for one of Poland's top citizen award, the Stołek (the chair) given to citizens that undertake exceptional actions to benefit society, and presented by the influential Gazeta Wyborcza. Simultaneously it was discovered that the wife of the vice mayor of the district, in charge of infrastructure and public spaces, had been hired by Polnord as president of one of their affiliate companies in Lublin. While this was not strictly illegal, it was illegal to not make it known since it represented an obvious conflict of interest for the vice-Mayor in office. The cozy relationship that allowed both the city and the main developer of MW to not fulfill their obligations within the new community had been exposed. Also in 2010, the precinct of MW established an absolute record for voter turnout in Poland of over 80% of all eligible voters.

In 2011, the local government was completely over-hauled by the same ruling party. The chief operating officer of IN-VI was asked by that same ruling party to run for a board of alderman position for the city of Warsaw on their ticket (declined because the president of the Senate made it clear she would have to vote along party lines), and the new mayor was out planting trees with the residents in the spring of 2011.

By 2012 a procedure was put in place whereby IN-VI would make proposals to implement neighborhood enhancements. A case study is the enhancement of Sarmacka Street, one of the communities largely completed streets. Over 1 km long, it is home to over 5,000 residents represented by 12 building associations. The city had provided no landscaping to the street and developers would do pretty much whatever they wished – sometimes nothing. IN-VI worked with each building manager to create an over-all strategy to enhance the street. It was drawn and submitted to the city and to the conservator responsible for the area around Wilanow Palace. The new “legal” procedure took over 2 months to implement, rather than the 1-2 weeks of the original, more spontaneous actions. However, more funds could be raised and a mutual sense of respect was able to be created between Government, developers and residents. With the success of the Sarmacka street harmonization and beautification came request from all parts of the MW community to organize the same for them.



Existing march 2012



Published image march 2012



Plan



Plan



May 2012



May 2012

Figure 17: Miasteczko Wilanów, Move and Plant 8 – “Elegant Sarmacka Street”, 20% of the action.

4. Conclusions

Miasteczko Wilanów is a project with a strong concept, design and a valid way to handle very rapid urban growth. Unfortunately it was briefly side tracked and compromised by short-term economic and political objectives. It took initiative to mobilize a public that bought into the original concept and focus their energies, not on criticism, which even in democracies falls too often on deaf ears, but to act and implement a better environment. It required a focused approach based on the knowledge of what was already planned and treading a fine line between the legal rights of residents and what can be built on the public domain.

For IN-VI this process has been a double edged sword: IN-VI garners the appreciation of the residents and every resident association and building manager calls on IN-VI to assist them in enhancing their part of the community in a coherent way. Developers are happy for the increasing real-estate values in the area and record sales pace of the last 18 months, but since IN-VI did not mince words to get things done and indicate responsibilities for both good and bad, those developers are simply afraid to hire IN-VI for any future work. IN-VI has earned the respect of the government and is beginning to implement the better public space standards and maintenance with much less prodding than before. Not yet fully to the residents standards, but there is a pride in the community today, that had been lost 3 years before.

In 2010, Miasteczko Wilanów received the ULI Global Award of Excellence, the only project from Europe, the Middle East and Africa to receive that honor that year. It was the residents who earned it.





Figure 18: Miasteczko Wilanów, Move and Plant Actions