

An architect's vision of how city centres should look

# Time to mix it up



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**HOW CAN THE PLANNING MISTAKES OF THE PAST BE PUT RIGHT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN CITIES SUCH AS WARSAW OR BUCHAREST? 'EUROBUILD CEE' TALKED TO GUY PERRY – ARCHITECT AND URBAN PLANNER, AS WELL AS THE FOUNDER OF INVI**

**EWA ANDRZEJEWSKA, 'Eurobuild CEE':** Do you like the way Warsaw looks? And do you enjoy working and living here?

**GUY PERRY, architect and urban planner, founder of INVI:** For me Warsaw is one of the most exciting and interesting places to work. Because much of its physical history was erased, it provides more opportunity for exploration and flexibility in architecture than other European cities. Of course, I still love the traditional cities like Paris and Barcelona in which I have lived, but Warsaw is a more interesting place to work on the future.

**EA:** In Central Europe there are lots of other cities which could also provide great opportunities for architects.

**GP:** Budapest is a fascinating city, wonderful in the way that it engages with the Danube, in that it has one of the most impressive river fronts in the world. In this respect it's very different from Warsaw, which seems to distance itself from the Vistula. Yet in Warsaw you have one of the few wild rivers running through a major city, and I think that too is a remarkable asset. However, for me the most spectacular urban river in Europe is the Dniepr running through Kiev: majestic in scale and with real beaches within walking distance of Krshatic. In contrast, without a significant river, Bucharest also has very beautiful parts, especially

**PICTURE:** Guy Perry, founder of Investment Environments

those developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In those parts of Bucharest you have urban spaces on a par with cities like Paris and Lyon, and architectural detail of the highest quality. I have difficulty appreciating districts built more recently last century, because this is a kind of architecture representing a political will, whose big ideas were better than the reality. From a distance it looks like a monumental traditional European city, like parts of Madrid, but close up it's quite brutal, with a real lack of imagination. I prefer the honest difference between the past and the present in Warsaw, even if it hasn't yielded the most beautiful capital yet.

**EA: All Central European cities have almost the same history, having been devastated by wars and having existed through totalitarian systems. Are these ci-**

**ties similar in their design and urban planning?**

**GP:** There are some similarities between European cities, but of those which were destroyed to different degrees during the war; Warsaw was arguably the most devastated, with the exception of Minsk. Minsk was then re-built in a Stalinist sty-

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***“It’s a crime to develop a project these days that isn’t mixed-use and gives people the opportunity to walk”***

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le, which you can see to some extent here in Warsaw, but I would say there was a difference in interpretation, with Warsaw having more faith in modernity. In Bucharest the post-war

architecture is the most heavy handed, with an outright totalitarian feel. Warsaw on the other hand has some very nice areas developed just before and just after the war, that still have this good sense of scale. The real urban problems came in the 1960-70s – and this was the case throughout the world, demonstrating that this wasn't just the product of a political system, but it had more to do with ideas in city planning and zoning and trends in the name of urban planning and reform. In America, many central cities were abandoned, and atomized through many kilometres of zoning, thus isolating different segments of society. In France, single class dormitory communities were built outside major cities that now have an increasingly violent character. In contrast, Warsaw retained a good density and urban mix when compared to US cities of similar size

***“Architecture is about doing the right thing in the right place. We don’t design in a single style, the city or place informs us about what should be built”***

and it avoided the class ghettos of the French cities. Warsaw also avoided the vast faceless districts that sprang up on Kiev’s left bank.

**EA: What is the most important trend in urbanism today?**

**GP:** It would have to be that we have come back to creating mixed use environments that correspond to a human scale, in addition to the necessities of institutional scale investment and material progress. If we don’t create environments that are mixed-use, then the only way to connect separate places is through transportation, and even the best transportation cannot connect cities that are all made up of single-use districts. So you have to give people the option of doing 70 pct of what they have to do during the day on foot.

**EA: So, to describe the trend you need only two words - sustainable development?**

**GP:** Yes, I think this is a key of the feature. There is no point in creating a green suburban development if everyone has to drive 20km or more a day to exist, which is exactly what has happened in the US over the last half a century. The Atlanta metropolitan area is now over 200 km across. We have created environments which appear to be ecologically friendly, but actually weren’t – and now we’re paying for it through climate change and the degradation of people’s health.

**EA: Developing city architecture according to sustainable development roles also depends on city councils.**

**GP:** I think the mayors of most European cities are increasingly aware of the relative efficien-

cy of their cities, and their human dimension. In Paris and Vienna you have fewer and fewer cars within the city limits, and they haven’t achieved this by implemen-

ting tolls like in London, but by making the roads smaller and smaller and by limiting the availability of parking. Public bicycle systems in both cities have also helped the residents get out of their cars. In Warsaw I would argue there is still a 20th century automobile-oriented organization of traffic, which makes the city less liveable and pleasant for visitors, yet it is still congested and prone to accidents. Despite all the efforts in Warsaw to systematize the roads, you still have one of the highest accident rates in Europe. A balance between the automobile, the cyclist and the pedestrian must be found by city builders. Streets are multi-use environments that can’t be over-engineered, just as cities should not be over-designed to separate all the users. When they are, you not only make cities and roads less attractive, but also less efficient.

**EA: Western European cities tend not grow upwards, but architects and developers in Warsaw, Kiev, etc. are competing to build the highest tower. Why do you think this is?**

### **A SHORT HISTORY OF...**

Investment Environments. INVI is a design and development services company established in 2000, providing design solutions and development strategies, as well as analysis and marketing, for large scale sustainable environments. Guy Perry is a French American architect, urban planner and the founder of INVI. Among these were the development strategy and award winning master plan for the Wilanów district of Warsaw, and two winning entries for the competition to redevelop the port of Palma de Mallorca.

**GP:** The main reason for skyscrapers is to maximize the value of a site while creating an icon on the skyline that is universally recognized. Despite being a personal fan of tall buildings, I have to say if you look back in history the tallest bu-

ildings tend to have been built at the end of an economic cycle. For example, the Empire State and Chrysler buildings were being built as the US entered the great depression. In Kuala Lumpur, the Petronas Towers were built when the market collapsed in Malaysia. Even the World Trade Centre was built at a time when New York couldn’t even pay its debts; it was basically a bankrupt city. So there is a very interesting association of high rise towers with market cycles. I believe it has to do with a euphoric – or desperate – optimism that is too often unsustainable. Time will tell what will happen in Dubai, where the world’s tallest structure is now under construction.

**EA: Warsaw council has been trying to redesign the centre of Warsaw since the early 90s. Recently, the idea of skyscrapers has come back into vogue. Would you prefer to see lower buildings in the centre?**

**GP:** In Warsaw I think there should be certain districts where high-rise buildings are to be encouraged, for example around the Palace of Science and Culture, where the public infrastructure can support it; but elsewhere, this it is not appropriate, such as in the vicinity of pl. Trzech Krzyży. It’s critical that we avoid the American system of combining high rises with suburban sprawl, where everyone gets around with a car – it just doesn’t work. This is partly to do with the planning, partly to do with people’s habits now becoming overly automobile-oriented, and may increasingly have to do with a real estate development pattern that is not mixed-use enough and doesn’t allow people to work or shop closer to home. The concentration of shopping in malls also creates far more traffic than is necessary. A high rise building in the centre of Warsaw is part of a larger urban picture, but by and large the centre is the best place to do it because you have the convergence of the necessary infrastructure and a healthy mix of activities and amenities within a short walk. ■