

The Future of World Heritage Cities: Heritage Governance and New Urban Commons

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Abstract

In cities with World Heritage status, considerable attention is devoted to officially designated heritage properties and their immediate surroundings. As a result, other heritage sites, particularly those located outside the protected zone, may be perceived as less significant and become vulnerable to underfunding, weak legal protection, or lack of expert evaluation. This article examines how residents shape urban futures through the creation of new urban commons outside officially protected World Heritage zones. Using the case of Medieval Town of Toruń, Poland, a World Heritage city since 1997, this article investigates how urban futures are shaped through grassroots heritage activism. The article analyzes two situations in which citizens challenged the boundaries of institutional heritage frameworks and asserted their right to shape the city’s cultural landscape and future. Empirically, the study is based on a combination of semi-structured expert interviews and a contextual analysis of local and regional media publications, official statements, and planning documents related to the contested heritage sites. The study shows that despite constraints related to the Covid-19 pandemic, Toruń residents succeeded in making their expertise count, either by joining decision-making bodies or by involving experts whose authority was recognized by institutions. This allowed for the creation of new urban commons and led to the partial preservation and official recognition of contested heritage sites.

Keywords

commons; public good; UNESCO; urban future; urban governance; World Heritage Sites

1. Introduction

The future of cities is neither linear nor singular; its multiple trajectories are produced in different presents and rooted in different pasts (Adam & Groves, 2007; Datta, 2019). Future-making, from this perspective, is a collective process of imagining and bringing about desirable futures, understood as “collective, value-based judgments of what the future might and should be” (Comi et al., 2025, p. 2468). In urban contexts, these judgments are actively negotiated among residents, experts, institutions, and community groups, each bringing unique perspectives and priorities (Davies & Burgess, 2004; Zhelnina, 2022). The governance of these urban futures involves a broad range of city-makers: “policy-makers and developers who build, promote, and design urban spaces, as well as ordinary citizens whose daily actions and interactions both influence and are affected by urban change” (Molho et al., 2025, p. 6). The influence of this range of actors on different future trajectories highlights that urban change is not only a technical process based on planning, but also a social and cultural negotiation over values and visions of what a city might become.

In this context, World Heritage Cities represent complex urban systems in which the tension between preservation and development shapes the direction of change. The status of World Heritage, initially established to guide cities toward a “bright future” (Assmann, 2018), has become a framework for negotiating what heritage means today and who has the right to define it. These cities, while often perceived as guardians of the past, face the challenge of making choices with limited resources and under conditions of urban crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Each decision reflects how they define what is important for their urban futures.

This article examines how residents participate in shaping the urban future through the creation of new urban commons, understood as shared spaces of value and meaning that emerge beyond official heritage protection boundaries. It explores how everyday practices and local initiatives redefine what is considered heritage, and how these bottom-up processes respond to and counter the disruptive effects of crisis, contributing to more inclusive and participatory models of urban governance. The following sections focus on two such cases to illustrate how these negotiations unfold in practice.

The study builds on the concept of urban commons, a term that has been used in various ways and can refer to “economic goods, property rights, or social dilemmas” (Hess, 2008, p. 21). At the same time, similar to other forms of collective engagement for the public good, commoning can be understood as a form of civic participation (Lohmann, 2016). However, unlike other forms of collective engagement for the public good, urban commons rely on solidarity and cooperation, which generate added value for the community (Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2025). This perspective reflects our understanding of the commons as “a social regime for managing shared resources and forging a community of shared values and purpose” (Clippinger & Bollier, 2005, p. 263). In conceptualizing urban spaces and assets as urban commons, most scholars refer to “urban green commons” such as lakes, parks, and gardens (Colding et al., 2013; Feinberg et al., 2021). Ostrom (1990), a number of scholars (Carlone et al., 2022; Makashini et al., 2023) argue that analyses should extend beyond “urban green commons” to include urban commons more broadly. Building on the argument of Pablo Alonso González, this study moves beyond a focus solely on “urban green commons” and instead examines heritage as a commons (Alonso González, 2014). In this sense, urban heritage can be seen as a form of residents’ commons, created and expressed through social processes that produce and represent a meaningful and collectively shared past within the present (Cermeño & Mielke, 2023). New heritage

practices are continuously generated through evolving heritage formations that emerge from shifting material conditions and changing temporal and meaning orders (Harrison, 2015). From the perspective of the commons, shared heritage constitutes an urban resource that enables local communities and their networks, including civil society initiatives, to participate in processes of future-making.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a case study approach focusing on the Polish city of Toruń, whose historic center was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997 under the name “Medieval Town of Toruń” (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 1997). The heritage zone covers 48 hectares and is surrounded by a 300-hectare buffer zone. Founded by the Teutonic Order in the mid-13th century, Toruń developed as a major Hanseatic trade center, preserving an exceptionally well-integrated medieval urban layout that remains visible in its contemporary cityscape (ICOMOS, 1997).

Within this broader historical and institutional context, the study focuses on two cases that illustrate how heritage values are discussed and negotiated at the local level. The first case, the urban development of Philadelphia Boulevard (Bulwar Filadelfijski), concerns a large urban project located within the World Heritage zone, where tensions arose between modern architectural designs and the preservation of the medieval cityscape. The second case, Helena Grossówna House (Dom Heleny Grossówny), addresses the relocation and reconstruction of a late 19th-century residential building outside the heritage zone and highlights how civic activism and local engagement can influence decisions to protect more recent layers of urban heritage.

Although the two cases differ in historical period and location, their networks of actors are similar, particularly among representatives of the city administration, local communities, the City and Voivodeship Monument Conservators, and members of heritage organizations such as the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, Toruń Branch (Towarzystwo Opieki nad Zabytkami, oddział w Toruniu; hereafter Society for the Preservation of Monuments). The first case concerns a site directly connected to the 14th–15th centuries, the same period represented by the World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń.” It is located within the buffer zone and historically integrated into the city’s medieval structure and identity. The second case, by contrast, originally lay outside the buffer zone and belongs to the 19th–20th centuries, a period not directly related to the historical and architectural context of the World Heritage property. Its protection, therefore, required a different kind of justification, rooted in civic activism and the recognition of more recent layers of urban history rather than the city’s medieval landscape.

Both cases were selected for comparative analysis because they share a similar temporal framework and reflect broader shifts in urban heritage governance. While the initial planning and conceptual work for both projects began in the 2010s, the effects of the transfer of areas of responsibility between the City and the Voivodeship Monument Conservators became most evident after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was the period when, on the one hand, restrictions were introduced, and, on the other, substantial funds were allocated after the end of the restrictions to mitigate the pandemic’s consequences. As a result, the implementation of the projects and the most intensive public engagement took place between 2021 and 2024. In both instances, the pandemic served as a turning point, reshaping funding priorities, public participation practices, and institutional decision-making.

The study is based on a combination of semi-structured expert interviews and document analysis. Between 2023 and 2024, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts representing a wide range of institutional and professional backgrounds. Snowball sampling was used to reach further informants within the same professional and civic networks. Interviews were conducted in person. The interviewees can be grouped into several main categories according to their professional affiliation and field of expertise. The first group included representatives of local and regional administration, such as members of the City Administration, the Office of the City Centre, and the Urban Planning Office. The second group consisted of heritage and conservation professionals, including members of the Voivodeship Heritage Office, the National Heritage Institute, and monument conservators. The third group represented the academic and research community, primarily scholars from Nicolaus Copernicus University. The fourth group comprised civil society representatives and cultural experts, including members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, local NGOs, journalists, and independent specialists who took part in expert assessments and public consultations related to urban and heritage projects. The final group included representatives of public institutions and project partners, including the Public Transportation Company and the State Archive. Additionally, a contextual analysis was applied to local and regional media materials and institutional reports to identify key practices through which residents contribute to shaping urban futures and establishing new urban commons beyond officially protected heritage boundaries.

3. Heritage Management in Toruń

In the Republic of Poland, monument protection is implemented through a multi-actor system comprising state authorities, local governments, property owners, users, investors, and, in a broader sense, all institutions and individuals (Government of Poland, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2003). The Polish heritage management system is characterized by a hierarchical structure of authority that extends from the national, through the regional, to the municipal level. At the top of this structure stands the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which defines national policy and overall strategic priorities for heritage protection. Policy implementation is entrusted to the *voivode* (governor), who acts as the central government's regional representative and oversees the execution of national directives within the voivodeship.

All four Polish cities that are home to World Heritage cultural properties—Kraków, Toruń, Warsaw, and Zamość—possess county (*powiat*) status and are administered by a mayor (*prezydent miasta*). Within this administrative arrangement, the Voivodeship Monument Conservator serves as the principal regional authority, tasked with supervising heritage conservation and ensuring adherence to national legislation. At the municipal level, the City Monument Conservator operates within the local government structure and remains subordinate to the city's executive leadership. As a result, heritage-related decisions are integrated into municipal governance and day-to-day administrative processes. Furthermore, in accordance with the Act of 8 March 1990 on municipal self-government, the responsibilities of municipal authorities encompass, among other aspects, the promotion of culture, protection and maintenance of monuments, spatial planning, real estate management, public education, sport and recreation, and tourism. This hierarchical arrangement generates a multi-layered governance structure, in which responsibilities are distributed across various administrative levels. The degree of influence and autonomy, however, is contingent on the specific nature and scale of heritage interventions.

In Toruń, unlike the other three cities, more significant powers were transferred from the voivodeship to the municipal authorities after 2004. This shift resulted in a new arrangement wherein the mayor gained direct influence over heritage decisions, including funding and priorities. The reform of heritage management in Toruń is best understood as a redistribution of practical responsibilities between the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator. While these categories are not formally defined by law, documentary analysis and expert interviews for this study make it possible to distinguish two main spheres of competence.

The first sphere, which we can refer to as the city-level sphere of authority, includes everyday operational responsibilities for heritage care: ensuring proper maintenance of monuments, issuing expert opinions and approvals for renovation or modification projects, monitoring the condition of heritage sites, halting works that endanger monuments, and ordering corrective or preventive measures. The second sphere, which remains at the voivodeship level, covers functions that require specialized expertise or have broader spatial and legal implications. These include archaeological and excavation works, management of historically designed greenery areas, monument export, and monument-related spatial planning and real estate transactions.

In this sense, the Toruń case illustrates how decentralization in heritage governance does not merely transfer formal authority from one institution to another but rather redistributes practical power between the regional and city levels, reshaping how decisions about heritage are made in practice. This reconfiguration has also created a system in which residents, through various institutions and participatory mechanisms, act as mediators between the Voivodeship and City Monument Conservators, influencing both the interpretation of heritage values and the everyday management of the city's cultural assets. In a context wherein responsibilities for heritage management have been redistributed between regional and city levels, this research shows that residents shape urban futures through participation in various forms of institutional organization.

The first key actor is the Society for the Preservation of Monuments. Established in Toruń in 2015 as part of the National Heritage Protection Association, the Society continues the tradition of collaboration between civic activists and heritage professionals engaged in the protection of cultural heritage (Society for the Preservation of Monuments – Toruń Branch, 2018). It operates as a non-governmental, non-profit organization open to civic initiatives and public participation in heritage protection. Members of the society must pass an exam administered by the City Monument Conservator, after which they are granted the right to visit monument sites and to issue warnings to individuals who violate legal regulations concerning the protection and care of monuments. They hold their status indefinitely and can only be dismissed following a petition from the Voivodeship Monument Conservator.

The second key actor is the initiative We Have an Impact on Toruń (*Wpływamy na Toruń*), a coalition of organizations run by the NGO Fundacja Stabilo. The main aim of the project is “to strengthen civil society in the City of Toruń” and “increase the influence of residents on local laws concerning environmental protection and support for endangered social groups” (Active Citizens Regional Fund, 2023). While the initiative initially focused on areas located outside the historic city center, it gradually expanded its activities to engage with heritage-related issues within the World Heritage zone.

4. Urban Development of Philadelphia Boulevard: Expanding the Boundaries of World Heritage

The first case examines the urban development of Philadelphia Boulevard, a riverside area and popular recreational space included in the buffer zone of the World Heritage site situated between the medieval city walls of Toruń, which define the boundary of the World Heritage site, and the Vistula River. The idea for redeveloping Philadelphia Boulevard first emerged in 2011, when the city administration organized initial public consultations on the future of the riverfront area. After several years of debate, in 2014 an architectural competition was officially announced, aiming to transform the boulevard into a modern public space that would reconnect the Old Town with the river. In 2016, the competition results were announced, and a design contract was signed with the winning team.

Construction was originally planned to begin in 2017, but was postponed due to financial difficulties and the reallocation of municipal funds to the renovation of the city bridge. The situation was further complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The project remained suspended for several years and was revived only after financing was secured in late 2021–early 2022. Additional funding became available through the Polish Governance Fund's Strategic Investment Program (Program Inwestycji Strategicznych Polski Ład), a national program that was politically framed as a response to the crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Construction of the pavilions began in close proximity to the historic city walls and gate, which form part of the Old Town complex (Figure 1). This was poorly received by the residents and sparked public protests, as the big size of the pavilions blocked the view of the World Heritage site. City activists wrote official letters, including



Figure 1. Philadelphia Boulevard pavilions. Photograph by the author (2023).

to the mayor of Toruń and the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Local experts also argued that the newly constructed but not yet opened low-rise, glass-fronted pavilions positioned on the embankment immediately below the historic brick wall and in immediate proximity to the historic city walls obstructed the view of the World Heritage site from the opposite side of the river and, due to their glass surfaces, strongly reflected sunlight.

In the summer of 2022, the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, represented by the General Conservator of Monuments and the Deputy Minister, sent an official letter to the mayor of Toruń. The Ministry expressed concern over the potential risk of the Old Town of Toruń being removed from the World Heritage List. Excerpts from this letter were published in several Polish media outlets at both the local and national level. In the letter, the General Conservator of Monuments stated the following:

The proposed building's mass and height, in my opinion, constitute a serious interference with the panorama of the Old Town of Toruń—a unique landscape recognized by the international community as having exceptional and universal value on a global scale. Moreover, the structures are located within the buffer zone established to protect the heritage values of the World Heritage site, as observed from the perspective of Philadelphia Boulevard. ("Sellin: Toruń może zostać usunięty," 2022)

In August 2022, an open letter from the academic and cultural community of Toruń was published, protesting against the planned construction on the Philadelphia Boulevard in Toruń. It was signed by 74 people, 32 of whom are professors at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. In this letter, the signatories stated that the city authorities were acting against the spirit and values of the city:

The unrestrained and arbitrary intervention of the mayor, Michał Zaleski, in the material fabric of the boulevards is, consequently, also a brutal intrusion into Toruń's symbolic space. The overwhelming concrete pavilions—which could stand anywhere in the world, from Cape Town to Saigon—destroy the unique *genius loci* of this place and profane a space that is important to all residents of Toruń. The commercial function of these invasive structures reveals that the primary goal of the investment is to turn common heritage into a commodity. This provokes our firm opposition. A city should be perceived above all as a place for people, not as an economic resource serving merely as a tool for generating profit. (Sygnatariusze listu, 2022)

Under public pressure, the city administration commissioned an expert assessment and an investment feasibility study from an independent specialist. The resulting report recommended replacing the wooden cladding and dismantling the balustrades on the roofs of the pavilions. These recommendations were consistent with the position of the National Heritage Protection Institute.

At the beginning of 2023, the design was revised to incorporate local expertise and partial citizen participation, and the city introduced limited design changes prepared by another architectural office. As revealed by the expert interviews, the community feedback and expert consultations influenced the adjustments to the materials, layout, and visual integration of the new structures with the historic landscape.

When work began on laying the new pavement, workers soon discovered human bones, which led to a temporary suspension of the project. Later, an entire group of burials was uncovered. Fragments of

structures were also discovered, which were initially identified as storage facilities used for trade. The discovery of the burials, along with the continuation of construction work, deeply concerned residents after a series of publications in local newspapers. The issue gained media attention not only at the local level but also nationwide (for example, “Archeolodzy przejmą Bulwar Filadelfijski,” 2023; Więclawski, 2023).

During subsequent archaeological investigations, archaeologists discovered the remains of a medieval Gothic monastery complex (the Church of the Holy Spirit and Benedictine Monastery, which was in use from approximately 1242 to 1656) near the Monastery Gate. The site included foundations, wooden panels with preserved ornamentation, and parts of storage buildings. The existence and approximate location of this structure had previously been attested on the historical map of Toruń dating to 1641, as well as on several other early maps of the city, all of which accurately depict its urban city structure (Figure 2).

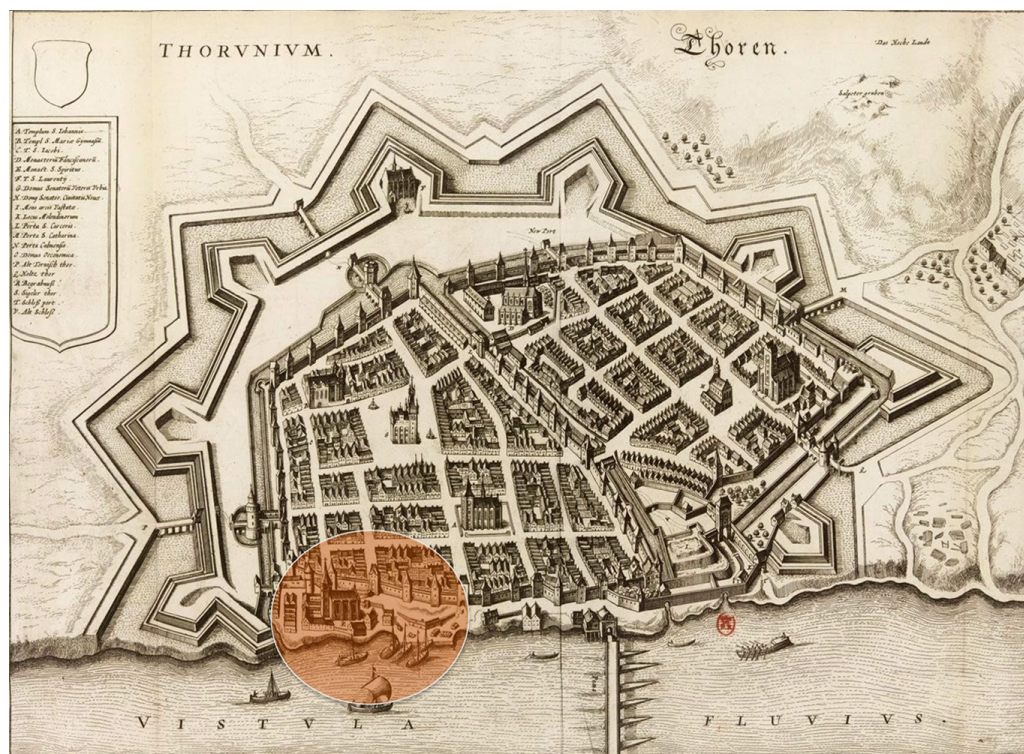


Figure 2. Map of Toruń, with the highlighted area indicating the location of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Benedictine Monastery. Source: Adapted from Zeiller (1652, pp. 470–471).

The archaeological work also exposed tensions between heritage protection requirements and the city’s interest in completing the redevelopment on schedule. Because the interests of the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator differed, the residents of the city played a crucial role through their participation in two organizations: the Society for the Preservation of Monuments and the We Have an Impact on Toruń coalition, as well as through the involvement of other local activists. In their petition, local activists emphasized that the boulevard redevelopment plan allowed for modifications under “extraordinary circumstances,” which the archaeological discoveries clearly represented. They proposed rerouting the road slightly to preserve the ruins in situ and to present them as a visible element of Toruń’s historical landscape, reinforcing the city’s identity as both a living and layered heritage site.

To preserve the discoveries, residents of Toruń proposed creating the Archaeological Museum of the History of the Vistula River. The concept included an underground exhibition space on Philadelphia Boulevard. The idea was supported by members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, who shared the vision of creating a new public space.

The first important protest concerning the Church of the Holy Spirit and Benedictine Monastery took place on September 29, followed by another on October 10, 2023. The We Have an Impact on Toruń coalition rallied under slogans such as “Don’t bury Toruń’s heritage!” and “Let’s save our Pompeii.” Later, on October 23, 2023, the Society for the Preservation of Monuments played an active role in organizing a meeting with city officials and stakeholders. They created a platform for dialogue between the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator. Experts from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the City Museum were invited to discuss the most appropriate strategy for proceeding with the project.

An important outcome of this meeting was the decision for experts from the City Museum, later joined by specialists from the university, to carry out archaeological work within a defined timeframe. As shown in Figure 3, the archaeological excavation is located in an open and highly visible urban setting, which contributed to public awareness of the discoveries. The proposal received support from an expert at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, who warned that covering the findings would result in a major loss for the city. Scholars from Nicolaus Copernicus University also endorsed the initiative and strongly opposed the burial of the archaeological remains. Several professors publicly advocated for comprehensive research and the postponement of the roadworks, arguing that establishing the Archaeological Museum of the History of the Vistula River could ensure the long-term preservation of these unique heritage assets.



Figure 3. Archaeological excavations and the discovery of historical building structures. Photograph by the author (2023).

The city authorities prioritized improving the boulevard's infrastructure, focusing on modernizing the transport system and restoring vehicle access along the riverfront. The construction works also blocked transportation routes for cars and public transport, which had previously run along the city's historic walls. Another argument against the museum proposal was the insufficient municipal budget and the reallocation of funds to other infrastructure projects. As a result, the authorities decided not to implement the concept, and an administrative decision was made to cover the archaeological site rather than preserving it in situ, which, in turn, intensified public criticism. Ultimately, only a temporary exhibition of movable artifacts was organized at the regional museum, leaving the broader vision of an archaeological museum unrealized.

The flooding of the archaeological remains in November 2023 revealed not only the fragility of the uncovered material but also the limitations of the existing governance structure. Despite the urgency of the situation, no collective decision was made to establish the museum. In this sense, the post-Covid recovery framework that had enabled the redevelopment also narrowed the room for alternative civic proposals once the investment was already underway. This demonstrates how competing institutional interests (especially in contexts where city and regional authorities have constrained capacities, diffused responsibility, and fragmented authority) can impede the development of shared public goods. As a result, the potential to transform the archaeological site into a new urban common was lost, showing how governance complexity can prevent local initiatives from becoming part of the city's officially recognized cultural landscape.

5. Helena Grossówna House: World Heritage as a Tool for Protecting New Urban Commons

Helena Grossówna (1904–1994) was a Polish actress and dancer born in Toruń, best known for her roles in silent films during the interwar period. The house in Toruń where she lived has been preserved and dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is part of a complex of similar residential buildings, some of which have been demolished and replaced by new developments.

In 2020, a decision was made to demolish the Helena Grossówna House, situated outside the designated World Heritage zone. This decision met with strong opposition from local communities, who recognized the building's architectural and historical significance. The case highlights the emergence of new urban commons, that is, shared spaces of value and meaning that develop beyond the boundaries of official heritage protection. Members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments prepared a comprehensive expert report that elucidated the building's integral role in the historical development of the cityscape and highlighted the broader significance of 19th- and 20th-century architecture in shaping Toruń's urban identity. On March 14, 2021, these findings were presented to the public during a civic event, "Citizens Say Goodbye to the Building." The presentation took place outdoors in front of the house, as Covid-19 restrictions precluded gatherings in enclosed spaces. Figure 4 illustrates the Helena Grossówna House after posters had been installed on its facade as part of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments' efforts to draw the attention of local residents.

During the event, portraits of Helena Grossówna were prominently displayed on the building's facade, transforming the site into a locus of shared remembrance. Subsequently, members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments delivered a presentation from across the street, maintaining a safe distance from the audience in compliance with pandemic-related restrictions. The members wore protective face



Figure 4. Helena Grossówna House. Photograph by Szymon Spandowski (March 14, 2021).

masks and used printed materials, including maps, which served as key visual aids in contextualizing the building within the broader urban landscape. In their remarks, the speakers articulated the significance of the building's historical connections to Toruń and its architectural heritage.

The Society had prior experience in advocating for the recognition and protection of 19th- and 20th-century architecture in the city, emphasizing its historical and cultural value for the urban environment. They argued that such buildings, while not formally protected under heritage legislation, constitute an integral part of Toruń's historical landscape and often suffer from insufficient funding for restoration and maintenance. Members of the Society already had experience in counteracting unauthorized alterations to historic buildings and used their membership in the organization to gain the right to access private property, which often proved more effective than relying on the official procedures of the City Monument Conservator and the Voivodeship Monument Conservator:

In a situation where someone is working on scaffolding and it is clear that they are adding some decorations or making changes without permission, and the conservator knows about it, they still have to sit down at the desk and write a letter. They have no right to warn the person verbally. But we, as social guardians of monuments, have the right to approach the person, show our ID, and say, "Stop, you're breaking heritage laws, and you could get a fine from PLN 5,000 to half a million." And it works. (Member of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments, interview, 2023)

In the case of the Helena Grossówna House, the City Monument Conservator and the Voivodeship Monument Conservator took opposing positions. The former supported demolishing the building and implementing the developer's project, arguing that the property lacked historical value. In contrast, the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Centre for Heritage (Kujawsko-Pomorskie Centrum Dziedzictwa), following the active involvement of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments and their expert analysis

demonstrating the building's historical significance and its connection to the city's development, adopted the opposite view.

When members of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments learned that the demolition of the building had been scheduled, they immediately initiated the procedure for entering the house into the register of monuments on behalf of their organization:

On Saturday we decided that we would submit an application to add the building to the register of monuments as the Society for the Preservation of Monuments. We have such a right. We had already studied the history of this house earlier, so all the documents were ready. We wrote the application on Saturday and I sent it to the Voivodeship Monument Conservator, because it is the Voivodeship Conservator who is responsible for such entries. (Member of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments 2, interview, 2023)

According to the Law on the Protection of Monuments, launching this procedure automatically suspended construction or demolition work for 30 days, giving time for further action and negotiations. However, since the procedure was initiated only two days before the planned demolition, it was unclear whether the official documents would be signed in time:

I went there [to the Helena Grossówna House] and waited for them [the City Monument Conservator and the Voivodeship Monument Conservator] to arrive; I was on the phone the whole time, talking and asking them to issue the paper as quickly as possible. I went to the guy and told him that he couldn't demolish the house because the registration procedure had started and so on. Of course, he laughed at me, I don't think he had any idea what that meant—the procedure for entering a building into the register of monuments. It was very tense. The Voivodeship Conservator arrived, and we called the police twice. (Member of the Society for the Preservation of Monuments 2, interview, 2023)

As a result of sustained civic pressure and institutional collaboration, without which the Voivodeship Monument Conservator would likely not have been able to complete all the necessary procedures in time, a decision was made to relocate and reconstruct the building within the World Heritage buffer zone, on Wola Zamkowa Street.

Deconstruction was completed in 2022, and reconstruction was finished in April 2024 (Figure 5). The building is now used as a local history museum and is dedicated to Helena Grossówna (officially named "Dom Heleny Grossówny w Toruniu"), operating as a branch of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Heritage Centre. Although questions remain about material authenticity, this project preserved the building and transformed it into a new cultural site. The museum project was debated among residents due to discrepancies in the structure's color. However, the historical plans used and the materials presented in the museum substantiated its connection to the original building. The original plot has been converted into a parking area (Figure 6).

This case highlights the emergence of new urban commons—shared spaces of value and meaning that develop beyond the boundaries of official heritage protection. Such commons are forged through everyday practices and grassroots initiatives, which challenge and expand conventional understandings of heritage.



Figure 5. Reconstructed Helena Grossówna House at its new location. Photograph by Zuzanna Lewandowska, Kujawsko-Pomorskie Centrum Dziedzictwa w Toruniu (2024).

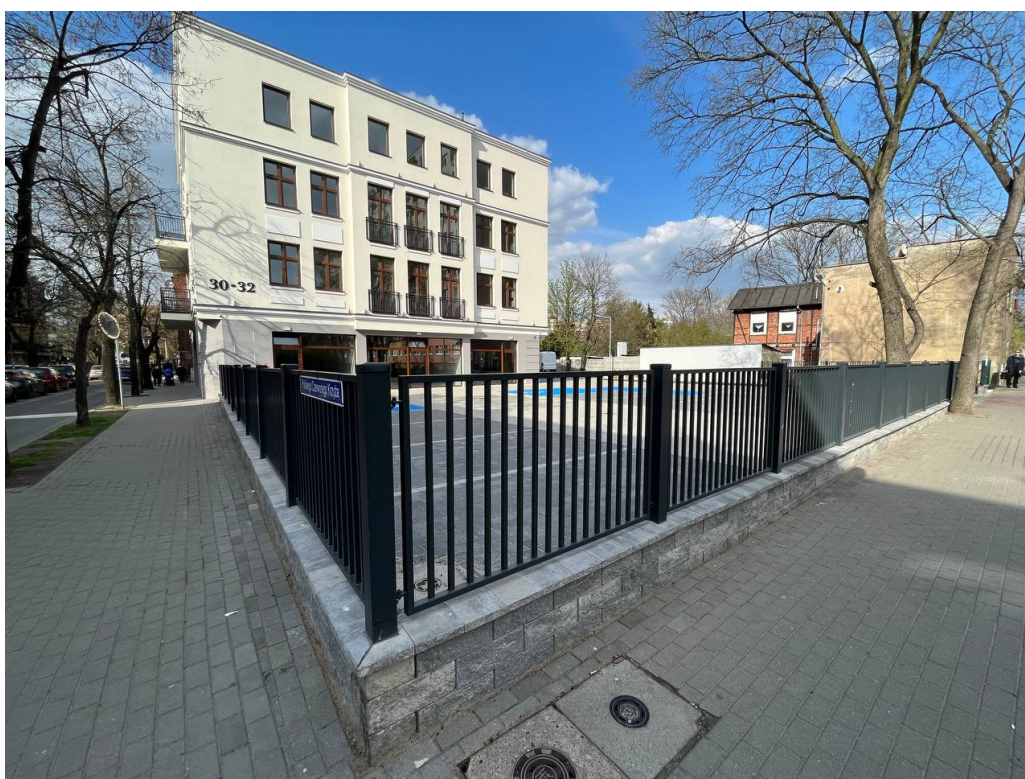


Figure 6. Former site of the Helena Grossówna House (now a parking area). Photograph by the author (2024).

These bottom-up processes foster more inclusive and participatory approaches to urban governance by enabling local actors to redefine what is regarded as culturally significant.

As illustrated in Figure 7, both heritage sites discussed in this study are situated within the buffer zone of the World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń.” In the case of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Benedictine Monastery, the precise location of the ruins was unknown at the time of the World Heritage nomination, resulting in their exclusion from the 1997 inscription, despite their demonstrable relationship to the broader historic complex inscribed as World Heritage. In contrast, the Helena Grossówna House, while not historically connected to the medieval heritage, was nonetheless physically incorporated within the buffer zone boundaries. This inclusion could be understood as a mechanism for safeguarding a site that local residents conceptualized as a new urban common, a shared space imbued with collective value and meaning, emergent from grassroots initiatives and everyday practices rather than official heritage frameworks. The constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, encompassing both public health mandates such as mask wearing and physical distancing and the prohibition of traditional indoor gatherings, did not, however, diminish residents’ engagement and further underscored the importance of this new urban common to them.



Figure 7. Map of the World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń” and its buffer zone (scale 1:33,500). Beige area: World Heritage property “Medieval Town of Toruń.” Purple shaded area: buffer zone of the World Heritage property. Purple circle (top): original location of Helena Grossówna House. Red circle: new location of Helena Grossówna House. Green area: Philadelphia Boulevard, where archaeological remains of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Benedictine Monastery were found. Source: Created by the author based on OpenStreetMap data.

6. Discussion: Reimagining Heritage Through New Urban Commons

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was an important factor in both cases, as it significantly restricted traditional forms of civil mobilization due to social distancing, isolation, and lockdowns, thereby limiting opportunities for public protests against the implemented projects. Under these circumstances, the traditional means of collective action such as gathering in the streets to protest or meeting with others to discuss strategies became practically impossible (Coen et al., 2022).

For example, public gatherings, in-person collection of signatures for public petitions, and face-to-face meetings to discuss collective action became virtually impossible in Toruń, as in many other cities (Lorch & Sombatpoonsiri, 2023). As a result, new forms of community-based urban mobilization emerged, centred on community members producing and circulating knowledge among other actors. This included archival research, photo analysis, and the presentation of collected materials.

This form of mobilization enabled the community, under very limited time constraints, to successfully submit an application for obtaining heritage status for the Helena Grossówna House. It also allowed community members to act as recognized experts during the organization of a meeting between the Voivodeship Monument Conservator and the City Monument Conservator. In a situation where responsibilities for heritage protection had been redistributed between municipal and regional institutions, the local community effectively assumed the role of mediator between them. Such a level of civic involvement had no precedent in the city's recent history. For instance, in the 1970s, when an important decision was made to preserve historical heritage by creating an arch through one of the buildings in the historic center to extend the tramlines, local residents were not engaged in the process (Eremenko & Kraski, 2024).

The comparison of the two cases shows that the scale of public and institutional attention does not necessarily determine the outcome of heritage interventions. For Philadelphia Boulevard, plans were made to extend the World Heritage boundaries to include the site. The project received considerable media coverage and drew the attention of national authorities. The discovery of significant archaeological remains also involved the local university, whose specialists in restoration and conservation contributed to the site assessment. Despite this high level of institutional and expert involvement, the citizens' initiative to create an underground museum and culture park as a new urban common was not realized.

At the same time, the case of the Helena Grossówna House received far less national attention. The local university was not directly involved, the site was located outside the World Heritage buffer zone, and the subject of concern was a building from the late 19th to early 20th century that was not originally considered historically significant. Nevertheless, this project proved more successful in generating a new urban common. Through the persistence of local activists and residents, the building was relocated, reconstructed within the World Heritage site buffer zone, and reopened as a museum that now serves as a shared cultural space for the community.

This contrast demonstrates that the visibility and historical significance of a site do not necessarily correlate with the success of community-based heritage initiatives, particularly in contexts of disruption wherein local capacities for action become crucial. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that a high level of public participation faces various barriers and consequences depending on the contextual and political conditions of a project, and therefore does not always lead to success (Foroughi et al., 2023).

Researchers argue that, in Poland, protection and care provided by local self-government may prove more effective than that of the central government. They justify this by arguing:

It is precisely the features and patterns of distinctiveness embodied in monuments that constitute values around which local communities may integrate. It is this category of monuments that should be afforded particular care by local self-government authorities and supported through municipal budgets. Such care is especially necessary, since these are often monuments that are not of the highest value on a national scale. In the queue for funding from the state budget, they usually occupy the last places. (Pawłowska & Swaryczewska, 2002, p. 135, translation by the author)

World Heritage sites represent a unique category in that they are recognized not solely at the national level but also possess international acknowledgment. Nevertheless, they remain within the purview of local self-government, similar to other heritage monuments. This dual recognition frequently results in municipal attention and resources being directed toward World Heritage sites, potentially to the detriment of other heritage assets. Therefore, local communities are often the most interested and engaged group regarding other monuments. Being closest to the object of protection, they are best able to recognize its needs and the specific conditions that influence its preservation. In this context, local communities can be conceptualized as co-stewards of heritage, mobilizing collectively around it as a form of new urban commons, treating heritage and associated public spaces as collectively managed resources necessitating shared responsibility and collective action.

Urban heritage commons can be understood as locally recognized heritage resources whose value and care are collectively negotiated and enacted by communities beyond formal protection regimes. They may draw the attention of municipal authorities to other heritage assets by linking them to the World Heritage property and its buffer zone, thereby increasing their perceived significance and strengthening the case for municipal support and resource allocation for their preservation. This willingness to invest effort and resources may stem from emotional attachment to locally situated monuments, which can increase readiness to bear the personal and financial costs of their maintenance and care (Rouba, 2013). In this context, residents may pursue “linking” practices that can be interpreted as a “commons-making” strategy: By framing non-designated sites as part of the shared value system associated with World Heritage, residents attempt to expand the locally recognized commons beyond the formally protected World Heritage zone.

The physical or symbolic linkage of new urban commons to the World Heritage property is shaped by their relationship to established heritage frameworks as well as by the period in which they emerge. Regardless of whether they correspond to the same historical period or reflect different layers of urban development, such sites are frequently exposed to competing interests and often lack consistent protection. In this context of vulnerability, and particularly in situations of crisis and disruption, the role of local actors becomes especially critical. Local actors shape urban futures through the creation and defense of new urban commons as forms of collective response to these conditions, mobilizing heritage institutions, legal frameworks, and coalitions to support their initiatives, though not always successfully.

7. Conclusion

World Heritage status introduces nuanced challenges for the development of new urban commons, whether these sites are historically associated with World Heritage sites or originate from other periods. Instead of ensuring broader protection, the designation often directs municipal attention and resources toward internationally recognized landmarks, possibly sidelining other significant heritage sites. This dynamic amplifies the importance of locally rooted initiatives for monuments deemed “non-priority.” The examined cases indicate that the formation of new urban commons depends less on the formal designation or the scale of institutional engagement, and more on the ways residents and local actors deliberate and co-create shared spaces of meaning under evolving governance structures. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that heightened public visibility, expert involvement, and media or national attention do not guarantee effective community-led outcomes, as local political and contextual factors can hinder progress even amid robust participation.

In both cases in Toruń, residents proposed the establishment of museums as a means to safeguard and institutionalize emergent urban commons. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly constrained traditional forms of collective action such as street demonstrations, face-to-face assemblies, and signature drives, prompting a shift toward practices rooted in community expertise as a response to the crisis. The Toruń case illustrates that the reallocation of authority between regional and municipal levels has fostered new avenues for civic engagement, particularly through mediation. Within this framework, residents assumed novel roles as co-stewards and intermediaries, bridging municipal and regional heritage agencies and thereby contributing to the evolution of urban heritage governance.

The Covid-19 pandemic generated a complex and ambivalent opportunity structure. Although public health restrictions diminished the possibility of public assembly and facilitated the progress of construction projects with reduced direct opposition, they did not eliminate resistance. Even amid stringent limitations, local residents did not cease to act as future-makers: They demonstrated a sustained commitment to defending their vision for the city’s future, employing a variety of strategies to achieve their goals.

Through the institutionalization of their own roles as active participants in heritage-related initiatives and decision-making processes, residents may seek to formalize the forms of heritage they perceive as new urban commons. They recognize that inclusion within the World Heritage buffer zone does not guarantee preservation, and therefore attempt to protect such places by institutionalizing them through the creation of museums. At the same time, communities may pursue “linking” practices, symbolically or physically associating less-recognized sites with World Heritage status and its buffer zone, as a commons-making strategy aimed at increasing administrative recognition and strengthening the case for municipal support. Taken together, the cases described in this article suggest that urban heritage commons are best understood as locally recognized heritage resources whose value and care are collectively negotiated and enacted beyond formal protection regimes, with outcomes shaped less by status than by residents’ capacity to mobilize institutions, legal frameworks, and coalitions in contested and vulnerable urban contexts. In this sense, commons-based practices demonstrate how collective forms of urban future-making remain possible in times of disruption, highlighting the agency of local actors in shaping more plural urban futures.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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