
A Place for Meetings, Leisure, and Activity: The Multifunctionality of the Eastern Boulevard in Szczecin

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Abstract:

Purpose: The analysis of the functionality of the Eastern Boulevard in Szczecin as a public space serving recreation, social integration, and place identity building. The focus was on identifying the recreational behaviors of the boulevard's users and assessing the extent to which it meets the needs of residents and tourists.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study employed covert and participant observation methods, conducted systematically over a ten-month period. The primary objective was to determine the motivations driving individuals to engage in recreational activities along the Eastern Boulevard, along with an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses through a SWOT-TOWS framework.

Findings: The Eastern Boulevard serves as a multifunctional meeting and recreation space, exhibiting strong seasonal variations in activity and a diversity of leisure-time uses. While it holds significant recreational potential, measures are needed to mitigate the seasonality of space utilization.

Practical Implications: The study findings indicate the need for further adaptation of the boulevard's space to evolving user needs, including the expansion of gastronomic offerings, cultural events, and recreational infrastructure. The importance of maintaining a balance between recreational functions, social interactions, and the preservation of cultural heritage was emphasized.

Originality/Value: The study provides a new perspective through long-term observation hidden in natural conditions, enabling the capture of authentic behavior of users of urban space. It also contributes to the development of research on the contemporary use of waterfront spaces in medium-sized European cities.

Keywords: Multifunctionality of the place, waterfront space, leisure, Szczecin.

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1. Introduction

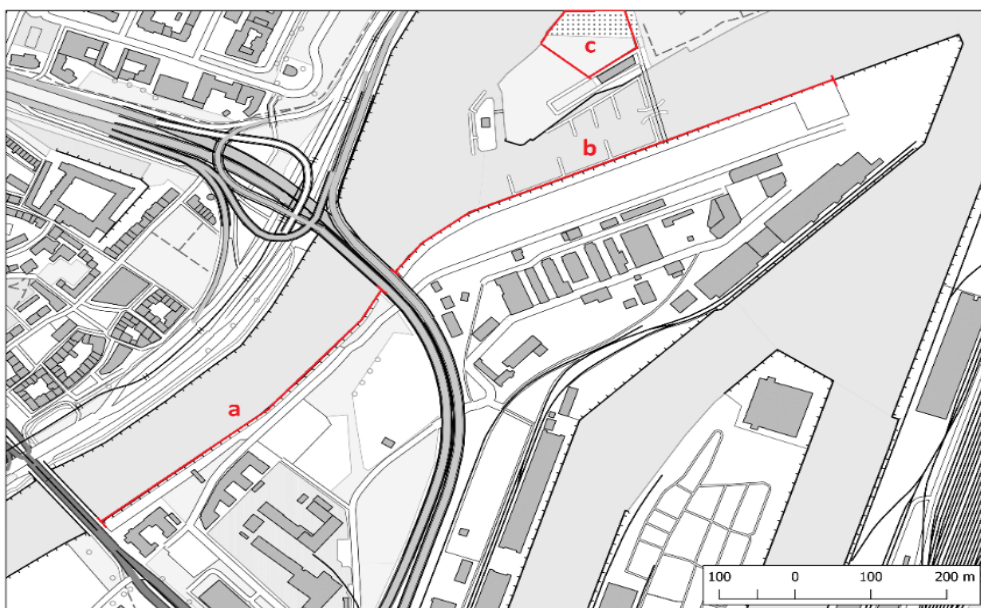
Selected public spaces distinguished by their strategic location and distinctive landscape features are today gaining substantial significance, not only contributing to the identity formation of cities and other human settlements but also playing a critical role in expanding recreational areas (Jaszek, 2022).

Waterfront zones characterized by a high landscape contrast index, typically rated favorably by visitors (Duda-Gromada, 2018; Kistowski, 1997), are particularly representative of this trend. In Szczecin, riverside areas are emerging as an important response to the increasing demand for spaces dedicated to leisure and physical regeneration.

Among these, the Eastern Boulevard, a relatively recently revitalized and continually modernized area located in the very heart of the city and comprising several distinct sectors (Figure 1), assumes a special role. According to municipal authorities, the boulevard, due to its prominent location, serves as one of the city's flagship public spaces, aimed at both residents and visitors, including tourists.

Nevertheless, it is pertinent to ask whether the boulevard effectively fulfills its intended recreational function. What patterns of recreational behavior can be identified within this space?

Figure 1. Eastern Boulevard in Szczecin divided into existing sectors



Note: Explanation: a - Gdynia Boulevard, b - Old Town Quay, with green belt Łasztownia, c - Marina North East including Grodzka Island.

Source: Own elaboration.

While a broader discussion on the differences between recreational behaviors and leisure-time activities is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that these behaviors are not synonymous (Table 1). Nevertheless, due to the objectives of the study and the specific nature of the research procedure, both forms of spatial behavior observed within the study area have been included in the analysis.

Table 1. Differences occurring between leisure time and recreation

Leisure time	Recreation
Separation of time	Focusing on a specific activity
Physical passive leisure	Physical active leisure
Spending time not in line with the law 'illegal leisure'	Behaviour in line with norms
Unconscious daily activity	Planned and conscious activity

Source: Own elaboration based on the work (Winiarski 2011).

2. The Eastern Boulevard as a Component of the Contemporary Szczecin Waterfront

Since the early 1990s, awareness has grown that Szczecin, like other riverside cities, should be oriented towards the river (Gzell, 2015). However, it was not until 2010 that a breakthrough occurred in the development of the Eastern Boulevard. The first stage of the waterfront revitalization was the section known as the Gdynia Boulevard.

According to the investment project data, work began in February 2011 and was completed in July 2013. Three years later, it was decided to extend the Gdynia Boulevard by restoring the "Nabrże Starówka" (Old Town Wharf). This renovation took approximately one year. In addition to creating conditions suitable for walking and sports activities, significant historical objects were restored—most notably, the illuminated and secured port cranes, which have become an attraction of the waterfront.

Adjacent to the water surface is the North East Marina. Access to it, apart from the waterway, is possible between the end of the Nabrże Starówka and the beginning of Łasztownia Island. Construction of this section was completed in 2015.

The spatial layout of all Szczecin boulevards, including the Eastern Boulevard, is coastal in character, meaning it reflects the natural shoreline of the Oder River, forming a characteristic waterfront development (Lorens, 2013). Such areas foster development in commercial, service, residential, and recreational sectors.

The Eastern Boulevard continues to undergo transformation, adapting to new spatial conditions and contemporary lifestyles. Along Szczecin's waterfront, often referred to as the "heart of the city," several important aspects can be distinguished:

- **Economic Dimension** — Historically industrial areas are now extending beyond traditional functions such as processing or production, embracing new purposes while preserving the historical spatial layout. A notable example along the Eastern Boulevard is the "Old Slaughterhouse" building. Formerly a meat processing facility, it now houses a bookstore, a restaurant, exhibition halls, and office spaces. Although the original appearance has been retained, it has been simplified, free of unnecessary structures.
- **Social Dimension** — This dimension reflects increased tourism interest, particularly cultural tourism. Sites with historical significance evoke curiosity and a desire to explore historic waterfront and port-related areas. For example, near the descent from the Long Bridge (Most Długi), the preserved Customs Office building, one of the few surviving structures from World War II, can be observed.
- **Environmental Dimension** — This aspect emphasizes the symbiosis between waterfront areas and nature. As part of the "Green Lungs of Szczecin" initiative, the city, alongside the Eastern Boulevard, is implementing environmentally friendly technological solutions, particularly focused on expanding green spaces along the river.
- **Cultural Dimension** — This dimension involves the protection of cultural heritage within the Eastern Boulevard area, safeguarding elements that constitute the city's identity. It serves both the public sector and local residents, who increasingly value and preserve historically significant features. An example includes the port cranes from 1929, which remain iconic symbols of Szczecin.

The Eastern Boulevard aligns with a commercially oriented project model related to downtown functions and service spaces. It fully meets the criteria of the so-called Festival Marketplace (FMP) model. FMPs are designed for a broad public audience, integrating spaces conducive to artistic performances, offering views of the water, and providing facilities for commerce, services, gastronomy, and recreation, thus creating opportunities for social interaction and leisure (Lorens, 2013).

3. The Eastern Boulevard as a Recreational Space

3.1 Methodological Framework

The primary research method employed to study recreational activities on the Eastern Boulevard was observation—one of the oldest research methods. In theoretical terms, observation is understood as the purposeful, planned, and objective perception of a selected segment of reality (Skarbek, 2013).

It is interpreted as a research activity aimed at gathering necessary data through the researcher's direct perceptions. Another definitional approach views observation as a personal and individual collection of in-depth information, captured in a realistic and immediate manner using the senses, particularly sight and hearing.

Observation encompasses three key stages, perception, data collection, and interpretation. Its classification is crucial, allowing for the identification of the researcher's position and role in the study area. Observation can be categorized as: covert observation – participants are unaware they are being observed; overt observation – participants are informed about the observation, although this may lead to unnatural behaviors; shadowing – a specific form of observation involving the tracking of a selected individual to reveal phenomena of which the researcher might otherwise be unaware (Cybulska, 2013).

In this study, participant observation was also utilized, meaning the researcher integrated into the community, experiencing the setting as a regular participant without influencing the natural flow of activities. The observation had a systematic character and was conducted with the direct presence of the researcher at the site.

Observations were recorded manually in notebooks and supplemented with occasional photographic documentation. Given the presence of people in the study area, covert observation was used to ensure natural behaviors and prevent research bias (Pilch and Bauman, 2001).

The research was carried out over a period of 10 months, from August 2023 to early June 2024. The plan involved visiting the Eastern Boulevard at least twice a week during two time slots: around 3:00 PM and around 8:00 PM. One observation per week was conducted on weekdays and one during weekends. Various observational forms were applied, including walking, passive sitting, and social participation.

In total, 62 observation sessions were conducted. Afternoon versus evening observations were distributed in a 39:23 ratio. Each entry included: observation number, date, time, and detailed descriptions of perceptions and surroundings.

Focus areas included forms of recreation, number of visitors, ways of spending leisure time, general mood, group sizes, and the influence of weather on social activity. In the final stage, particular attention was given to understanding the motivations behind the choice of the Eastern Boulevard for recreational purposes and analyzing its strengths and weaknesses.

3.2 Research Findings

The Eastern Boulevard, extending approximately 1.2 kilometers along the Oder River, was divided into sectors for observational purposes (see Figure 1). Each sector was analyzed individually.

Sector A has the greatest spatial accessibility, which is associated with the least level of discretion and anonymity. It is the most visited area, regardless of the season. There were days when the traffic volume was so high that it was difficult to find a seat, and just moving through the central part of the boulevard was difficult.

The highest activity was recorded in the spring and summer, especially in the evenings. The dominant group was 16-25 year olds, mainly teenagers and students. This sector, identified with the Gdynia Boulevard, provided a space for social integration. People were rarely observed hanging out alone - usually people appeared in groups of 2 to a dozen people.

As the weather warmed up, an intensification of social life was observed. Cordial forms of greetings were common - from a simple 'hello' to handshakes and kisses. It was difficult to determine gender predominance, while a sense of freedom, security and enjoyment of the moment was noticeable. Attendees often consumed alcoholic beverages, sang, danced and shared music, which reinforced the sense of community.

Sector A was also the starting point for many walks. Weekdays were dominated by groups of two people - usually a woman with a woman or a mixed couple. In autumn and winter, walks took place at a slow pace, often with a hot drink in hand, accompanied by conversation and smiles. Couples - mostly people aged 20-25 - often stopped to admire the view across Szczecin. At weekends, especially on Sundays, families, usually 2+2, dominate.

During the colder seasons, the sector attracted anglers - during 13 of the 62 days of observation, their presence was noted, mainly on rainy days. They were males aged 40-60, usually silent, keeping their distance. Small eating establishments were in operation until November, with the greatest interest in October and in spring from mid-May - at which time they were particularly popular with families with children. Dishes and desserts dedicated to the little ones were most frequently ordered.

Recreation was accompanied by photographic documentation. Photographs were taken both during walks and during social gatherings. The vast majority of photographers were men, most often taking a "selfie" with the city skyline in the background. Families documented their stay mainly in the premises, while advanced photographers took pictures of birds, details of the skyline or anglers. In autumn and winter, people with professional equipment were more often observed.

The section by the Customs Office was the most densely populated section of the boulevard during the entire ten-month observation period (except in winter). This sector fulfilled the functions of meeting, integration and regeneration.

Sector B, covering a section of the "Old Quay" of about 500 metres and the Lasztownia area, includes, among other things, the area of the car park at the walking promenade and the Marine Science Centre. There are 26 free-standing benches here.

A special place is the section under the Castle Route bridge - although seemingly unattractive, it has become an arena for street concerts in the spring and summer

season. There have been situations where random passers-by have stopped, listened, recorded videos and taken photos. One person even set up their own chair. The general mood of the observers was positive, with people swaying to the beat of the music and singing under their breath.

The Marine Science Centre was controversial - its shape and colour scheme elicited negative comments, mainly from younger passers-by. During the winter observation, the presence of families with children was noted - parents showed their children the changes in the surroundings and talked about the history of the site.

The symbol of sector B are the loading cranes, the so-called "Cranes" - a visual attraction and symbol of the city. Photo shoots often took place against their backdrop - men usually acted as photographers, women as models. The cranes are illuminated, allowing for night sessions.

An organised night run involving two groups - athletes and costumed runners - was one of the most spectacular activities. There were also runners, cyclists and Nordic walkers along the boulevard. The car park parallel to the boulevard was the starting point for walks. In autumn and winter, it was often empty, serving as a place for young men to perform car 'drifts'. In summer, it served as a meeting place and stopping point.

A food truck zone and a funfair were summer attractions - the area was teeming with life. At its end is the installation 'Szczecin' - used mainly as a backdrop for family photos and individual sessions. Nearby, a water equipment rental shop was in operation since May. Sector B has entertainment, social, educational and recreational functions.

Sector C includes the marina, green areas and the city beach - functioning mainly in the spring and summer season. Despite the potential, increased interest was recorded on only 7 of the 62 observation days - mainly due to weather conditions. Sundays were days for organising children's animation. The evenings were dominated by high school students, university students and people aged 30-50. They often stopped at the entrance to assess the situation and then decided to stay.

Groups gathered around tables, eager to use the bar - the predominant gender in the queue was male. Physical activities were popular, volleyball, football, ringo. The facility was decorated with a green plant wall, particularly popular with women for selfie photos. In the evenings, the beach was transformed into a party zone - hen parties were held and DJs played dance music.

There was a noticeable change in the image of the participants - the women were more stylised. Although the infrastructure was not yet fully prepared for all-night parties, the venue was the centre of summer integration and relaxation.

Attendance on Eastern Boulevard was influenced by both the time of year and the weather conditions. The higher the temperature and less precipitation, the greater the traffic on the quay. From an observer's point of view, it is significant that it was the weekends - especially during the summer - that provided the impetus to increase the presence of people in each sector of the boulevard.

Also common to all parts of it was a marked intensification of traffic in the evening hours, typical of the summer season. It is difficult to clearly determine the predominance of any one gender among visitors, but there was a clear dominance of young people - high school and university age - actively using the boulevard space.

Those interested in photography were mostly men, while the "selfie" mode was more popular among women. Sports were mainly played by men. Due to the nature of spending time outdoors, phone use was kept to a minimum - usually to play music, take photos, share them with friends or make calls. Only lone walkers with headphones in their ears showed increased activity in phone use. Being outdoors definitely had a positive impact on the mood and well-being of the participants.

4. Discussion

Surveys confirm that Eastern Boulevard effectively performs the recreational functions assigned to it. The main activities observed in the area are fishing, photography, simple physical activities and - above all - social and integration meetings. The 1.2 km stretch of waterfront provides users with a wide range of leisure activities, with the intensity of use of the space showing clear seasonality.

The dominant form of activity (1st in the hierarchy) turned out to be social gatherings, fulfilling the function of mental regeneration and social integration. Observation of all sectors of the boulevard showed their high attendance, indicating a strong need to participate in the social life of the city. It is worth noting that the space is also conducive to romantic encounters, both during the day and in the evening. Physical activities came in second place.

Among these, the most frequently observed were: walking along the waterfront, jogging and cycling (mainly at times with less traffic), beach sports on Grodzka Island. The above sporting activities - result from fashion and the need for active recreation, access to fresh air and appropriately designed infrastructure. Fishing (the Bulwar Gdynski area) and its popularity is due to the favourable fishing conditions (currents of the Oder River) and landscape values. Finally, photography is favoured by the fact that the boulevard is an attractive place in terms of its visual aspect, offering numerous objects of photographic value

Following the concept of Mantey (2019), the Eastern Boulevard fulfils all the key requirements for urban space in terms of: morphological (variety of places and forms

of development), social (creation of social ties and integration) and functional (organisation of various events and activities).

According to Szafranek (2014), the riverside location of the boulevard determines its four basic functions: social - integration of the local community with the river, recreational and leisure - through appropriate infrastructure, cultural and integrative - cultivation of history and natural values, representative - exposure of the river landscape of Szczecin.

The SWOT-TOWS analysis (Ingaldi, 2017) revealed the following shortcomings: lack of canopies - limitation of use in adverse weather conditions, seasonality of operation of catering infrastructure, inadequate provision of recreational equipment (e.g. lack of an “indoor gym”).

The adopted MAXI-MAXI strategy indicates the need to develop year-round infrastructure, increase the amount of green areas, improve accessibility for the disabled, diversify the recreational offer. The Eastern Boulevard, despite some limitations, is an important recreational space in Szczecin. Its further development should focus on minimising the effects of seasonality, extending the year-round offer, improving the standard of infrastructure, preserving the unique riverside character. Thanks to these activities the boulevard may become a real showpiece of the city, performing both recreational and integrative functions.

The analyses carried out indicate that the Eastern Boulevard is a space intensively used for various activities. The area has considerable spatial potential for further development and improvement for recreational functions.

Importantly, despite seasonal restrictions on access to the infrastructure, users spontaneously adapt the boulevard space to their needs, seeing it as a place for both leisure and personal development. The proximity of the Oder River and the accessibility of the walking boulevard are conducive to satisfying basic social needs, especially the need for belonging. The space allows for social integration, meetings, conversations and various forms of recreation - both active and passive.

Research has shown that the boulevard concept is particularly relevant to the 18-26 age group. It is these people who make the most use of the recreational qualities of the Eastern Boulevard. Although observations indicate that students are the most active user group, this does not exclude the participation of other age groups.

5. Concluding Remarks

Recreation has accompanied mankind for centuries. The need to spend leisure time outside of work has stimulated the development of various forms of activity, with those carried out outdoors in suitably adapted spaces being of particular value.

Table 2. SWOT_TOWS analysis of the East Boulevard recreational area in Szczecin

STRENGTHS	R	I	FE	WEAKNESSES	R	I	FE
Access to the River Oder - the entire waterfront boulevard runs through it	0,15	9	1,35	Few catering facilities	0,2	8	1,6
A long, well-maintained walking trail with adequate infrastructure allows for a wide range of sports	0,2	10	2	Poor landscaping	0,17	10	1,7
A place with history, appropriate use of historic buildings included in the boulevard	0,035	8	0,28	A small range of equipment for recreation	0,25	10	2,5
Municipal beach - Grodzka Island - urban attraction and entertainment facility	0,15	10	1,5	Low interest in the facility during the autumn/winter period	0,2	10	2
Scenic qualities - the Eastern Boulevard is a place where you can admire the other bank of the Oder, and with it the historic architecture that is the city's iconic landmark, as well as the view of the sunset against the city's backdrop	0,04	9	0,36	Not suitable for disabled people in wheelchairs - no ramps at main entrances	0,1	8	0,8
Installation of a funfair	0,075	10	0,75	Lack of cycle paths	0,08	7	0,56
Meeting place	0,1	10	1				
Organisation of events	0,06	8	0,48	.			
Proximity to the city centre	0,1	10	1				
Marina	0,015	6	0,09				
Water equipment hire	0,05	7	0,35				
A place to develop hobbies	0,025	9	0,22				
	Total :		9,38		Total:		9,16
OPPORTUNITIES	R	I	FE	THREATS	R	I	FE

Tendency to expand the recreational zone in the city (urban trend)	0,3	10	3	Seasonality - a well-developed area should function all year round, in this case the area only has leisure and recreational facilities from spring to summer	0,65	10	6,5
Growing popularity of water-based leisure (outdoor trend)	0,2	8	1,6	Dependent on weather conditions	0,15	10	1,5
Active leisure trend (health trend)	0,4	10	4	Competitiveness of other places	0,2	7	1,4
Seeking new venues for cultural events	0,1	8	0,8				
	Total:		9,8		Total:		9,4

Explanation: R-Rank, I- Importance, FE- Final Evaluation.

Source: Own elaboration.

The main focus of the study was to determine the recreational functions of Bulwar Wschodni in Szczecin. An additional aim was to analyse the motivation of people choosing this place for activity and to identify recreational behaviour. Nine months of participatory observation made it possible to collect data on leisure activities, users' preferences and reasons for visiting the boulevard.

The collected results made it possible to verify the research problem posed, which was the identification of forms of recreation in the study area. This confirmed that the choice of the waterfront space of the boulevard was not a random one, but resulted from its key values.

The Eastern Boulevard was thoughtfully designed in reference to Szczecin's historic function as a port and trading city. Its revitalisation highlighted the old character of the waterfront, while modernising the space along the Oder with respect for cultural heritage. Today, the boulevard, with its extensive promenade and green belts, is a visual highlight of the city and increasingly competes with the neighbouring Piast Boulevard.

The identification of forms of recreation on the Eastern Boulevard was made possible by using the participatory observation method. The research made it possible to answer the question of what activities dominate in this space and to identify the motivations of its users.

Direct involvement in the life of the boulevard revealed that it serves both sports people and those looking for a place to meet, relax or develop passions such as photography or fishing.

An assessment of the land use was carried out using a SWOT_TOWS analysis, which considered strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The results

indicated a preponderance of strengths and development opportunities, which fits with the MAXI-MAXI strategy.

This confirmed that the boulevard has a high recreational potential, although it requires measures to reduce the seasonality of the use of the space. It is worth emphasising that the development of recreational areas is crucial for the city. Continuing to revitalise and improve the boulevard strengthens the image of Szczecin, making it an increasingly recognisable landmark and an attractive space for residents.

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