Ústí nad Labem

Post-Industrial Diamond

The City at a Breaking Point
“I love Ústí. The more you walk, the more the city surprises you.”
“The great thing about solving a city’s problems is that you can learn from mistakes made elsewhere and choose the ways that worked.”
The City at a Breaking Point

Ústí nad Labem is a poetic, unusual, and controversial city, where beautiful nature of rivers and hills blends with brownfields and traffic corridors. The city has undergone fundamental changes, and it seems that it has reached a breaking point. Will frustration lead to newly minted motivation? Will there be enough will to set a better future for the city?

The Re-vize Ústí initiative (Re-vision of Ústí) is a joint effort of enthusiasts who have chosen not to remain indifferent to how the city of Ústí nad Labem functions and what its future will be. We are primarily urbanists and young people who have decided to help the future of their city by opening up important topics regarding the city and encouraging communication about them with both public and professionals. We feel that Ústí has so much potential that many people don't see. We are pushing for the creation of an official Office of Urban Development, which would be responsible for the vision, strategies, data, and conceptualizations of the city to ensure continuity of development and continuous communication with city stakeholders and its residents.

Ing. arch. Jitka Žambochová
Architect and urbanist, founder of the community education initiative Re-vize Ústí

doc. RNDr. Jaroslav Koutský, Ph.D.
Dean of the Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University (UJEP); regional geographer

Years ago, my colleagues and I wrote a book called “Ústí nad Labem – A City in the Fog”. The title emphasises the almost daily fog present in the city, but it also symbolically reflect the city's ambiguous and, in many ways, complicated current status. Although the morning fog disappears by noon, doubts and uncertainties concerning the city's destiny persist. As a geographer, I must point out that current problems are based on long-term issues, are structurally conditioned, and cannot be solved quickly. We cannot simply import solutions from other locations, regardless of how attractive they might seem. Thus I follow the activities of the “Re-vize” platform all the more. The young people behind the platform have the energy that they can give to the city, its destiny, and its future. This energy cannot be lost or wasted. I hope you enjoy this booklet, and if there is anything you can do for the city of Ústí nad Labem – DO IT!
Over the past century, Ústí nad Labem has experienced dramatic changes — the city built its identity and subsequently a large part of it was erased. What will be next?

Ústí nad Labem is a city that was established and grew after the introduction of the railway thanks to mining, chemical, and other industries. The town of two thousand inhabitants became an industrial superpower in just a few decades. Today, the one-sided economic background is dying out — chemical and other industrial companies are in crisis, endangering the city’s development, and often pose a security threat.

Both the city and the entire region suffer from problems typical of deindustrialization. However, industry is not the only identity that the city has been gradually losing. The city was partly destroyed by bombing during World War II, which wreaked havoc on its infrastructure. After the war, 75% of the population of Ústí nad Labem — the majority of its inhabitants — was lost when the German population was expelled. Subsequent settlement has rapidly changed the social structure of the city. During the era of socialism (1948–1989), a large part of the remaining city centre was demolished and replaced with socialist architecture.

Massive construction of prefabricated housing estates on adjacent hills began, which was not only a solution to the housing crisis but also a response to poor air conditions caused by the nearby opencast brown coal mining and frequent smog situations within the narrow valley.

The formerly prosperous and well-developed city is now in crisis. Traditional factories are closing, young people are moving away, and the city is struggling with socially-excluded localities and social apathy. The question today is: how will Ústí nad Labem cope with the situation and its negative reputation?

“How does Ústí nad Labem stand up to the competition of other cities today? Does the city have anything to offer? What is Ústí’s vision for its future?”

The city centre after bombing inWW2, 1945 (B. Pilař, B. Špinka, Xeroco)

Oil painting, Ferdinand Lepíř, 1857

Spolchemie complex (Association for Chemicals and Metallurgical Production), oil painting, 1904

The Interhotel Bohemia, 1960’s (B. Pilař, B. Špinka, Xeroco)
Highlights & hidden treasures

In addition to the official monuments and famous places in Ústí nad Labem, there is an incredible number of hidden treasures, fascinating views, and places which even some locals aren’t even aware of. Here are recommendations for things to see in Ústí.

1. View from the Marian Rock
   adventurous / view / 20 min walk up from the main square

   The Marian Rock is an important dominant of Ústí nad Labem. This phonolite massif rises on the left bank of the Elbe River to a height of 265 m above sea level. It is a piece of wild nature encroaching on the city centre. There are several natural scenic views.

2. Hraničář
   cultural and social place / café, art gallery, vibrant evening program

   The Hraničář public hall is an open platform which supports and connects contemporary art and culture with everyday life in a dynamically developing society. It’s one of the hotbeds of culture in Ústí.

3. Armaturka
   revived industrial building / interesting interior

   An industrial building called “Armaturka”, which is a part of a brownfield site consisting of industrial, mostly brick, buildings from the 19th century. The ribbed wooden ceiling (1919) was at the time – and still is – very progressive construction. It is one of the pilot brownfield reuse projects.

4. Socialist architecture in the centre
   interesting architecture / things to see

   The Ústí city centre was partly destroyed by bombing during WW2. During the socialist era, there was a plan to rebuild the whole city centre using principles of communist architecture. However, the plan was never completed. What we see here now is a mixture of old, socialist, and new architecture. The “Bath”, as locals call the building (1985), used to be a conference hall for the Communist party. Today it serves as a boardroom for the Regional Authority. The building is adjacent to Pivovarská Street, which is a favourite social place to meet.

5. The biggest mosaic in Europe
   interesting architecture / things to see

   Just next to the “Bath” building, you’ll find the biggest mosaic in Europe (450 m2, Miroslav Houa, 1985). It is somewhat hidden away in the building of Municipal Office. Originally it was intended to be the main dominant of the main square, but plans changed, and now the mosaic is hidden away from public view.
Elbe Riverbank, Střekov
The Střekov side of the Elbe riverbank is one of the city's key parks; an international cycling route runs through it.

Čínoherní Studio
Now a progressive theatre, it has been one of the most important small theatres in Czechoslovakia since the 1970s.

Klíše urban structure
A neighbourhood conceived initially as a garden city. It comprises mostly houses from the 1920s with very high architectural quality.

SETUZA silos
One of Ústí's industrial monuments.

Trmice
A bizarre urban combination of a chateau situated in a classic park with a highway above it and heating plant chimneys adjacent.

University Campus (UJEP)

Spolchemie Headquarters
At the time it was built (1930), this was the tallest building in Czechoslovakia.

The Labe Store
An example of very progressive architecture, built by R. Žertová in 1974.

The Bílina River
The Bílina River flows through the brown coal basin and thus has a very negative reputation. Although it one of Ústí’s high potential areas, it is currently nearly unreachable because of the unused railroad yards.

Views of the city:

Chateau Větruše
Střekov observation tower
Vysoký Ostrý Hill
Erbenova Observation Tower
Humbold’s view

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Střekov observation tower
Vysoký Ostrý Hill
Erbenova Observation Tower
Humbold’s view
Spolchemie company
planned HSR station
university campus
0.7 km
1.5 km
2 km
1.7 km
3 km
3.3 km
0,7 km
500 m
100 m
N
### Basic data

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Planned High-Speed Railway
What can it bring to the city?

How will the planned high-speed railway (HSR) influence Ústí? Can the city prepare for the opportunity to catalyse the development of the centre and brownfields?

In 15 years, thanks to high-speed trains, the Ústí – Prague and Ústí – Dresden train journeys will be shortened to half an hour, offering commuters more choices in where to work and study. Ústí nad Labem will then be able to compete with the outskirts of Prague.

It is a unique opportunity and a challenge for the cities that lie on the new rail line to take advantage of this opportunity for their development. High-speed rail stations can become a catalyst for the development of the surrounding neighbourhood and the entire city.

Planned route
Praha – Ústí nad Labem – Dresden

The proposed high-speed railway represents enormous development potential for Ústí nad Labem. Experience from other European cities shows that we can expect an impact similar to that experienced after the introduction of railways in the 19th century, when cities connected to the railways experienced a boom and shrank. High-speed interconnections through the Czech Republic are a priority for Europe – the country is currently a barrier for this type of transport, as German high-speed trains bypass it.

Location & potential of the train station

The station’s location is undeniably crucial for the city. Since the journey to Prague or Dresden will take only about half an hour, commuting times must to the station be short. It is, therefore, highly desirable that the train station occupies a highly strategic position within the city. Otherwise, the advantage of the high-speed line would be lost, and the investment and potential for the city depreciated.

The area in which the high-speed trains are expected to arrive is close to the city centre but is at present a problematic brownfield site. The future railway station is immediately adjacent to the Spolchemie chemical company complex but is convenient to the city centre and within walking distance of the university campus.

New high-speed railway station in place of Ústí nad Labem - West

This strategic location is exceptional – the new train station can help reunite the city centre and connect to the university campus. A brownfield belt that stretches across the lowlands west of the city centre may be gradually revitalized. After the introduction of the high-speed rail line, it will also be an opportunity to re-establish connections to the socially excluded locality of Předlice and create better access to the Bílina River, which is now severely cut off by the unused railway yard. The new railway station could thus provide access not only to the Bílina River but also to Milada Lake, which lies only 4 kilometres away from the station.

For the process to be successful, the adjacent municipalities need to communicate appropriately with all the stakeholders and accommodate their space-use plans in time.

Fifteen years to start construction on a project of this scale is a very short time.

The will of the city?

The new station will be situated in West Ústí, which lies close to the Spolchemie chemical company. Given the attractiveness of the area, with Prague and Dresden only half an hour away, it can be expected that interest in the area, as well as land prices, will increase rapidly.

The city must anticipate this and must be able to respond firmly and decisively to this situation and negotiate solutions that will be sustainable and advantageous for the city.

How will the new station handle the security risk of the Spolchemie chemical company? Is it even realistic to coexist in such proximity to a station of transnational importance?

A chance for Ústí

The potential of the new rail line can be enormous. The accessibility of Prague, Dresden and Berlin will be crucial for Ústí. At the same time, it is necessary to point out the risk of competition. If distances are shortened, then Ústí will have to shape itself with a strong vision and promote itself.
Brownfields
Does Ústí nad Labem’s future lie in brownfield areas?

Brownfields – mostly former factories, abandoned derelict sites and buildings. What makes them a threat to Ústí? What is their potential?

Brownfield sites in Ústí nad Labem make up a quarter of the built-up area of the city. Localities surrounding them often become socially excluded. Instead of figuring out how to reuse these derelict and problematic areas, the city has instead chosen to expand further into the countryside and permit building on greenfield sites beyond the city where all the infrastructure must be extended. This inefficient development deepens the city’s economic and land-use (un)sustainability issues. How has the problem of brownfields been solved successfully elsewhere? How can we reintegrate neglected and often contaminated brownfield areas? How can Ústí resolve this issue economically as it continues to shrink?

A threat and an opportunity
Brownfields devalue surrounding areas, impede the development of surrounding neighbourhoods, and often pose a security risk. In addition, these areas are often contaminated. Most of the Ústí brownfields are privately owned. Despite all these facts, all sides must work together to find a mutually satisfactory solution. The city should remain an initiator and coordinator of development, oversee land-use documentation, and search for proper tools.

Keys to successful brownfield revitalization

1/ The revitalization process is led by a city that can ensure continuity across electoral periods and economic cycles. The city can set up a specialized department – the Office of Urban Development – to oversee the process.
2/ Revitalization is part of the city’s overall vision, the city-wide development strategy, and is used to change the city’s image. The way in which neglected areas are used will change noticeably with the city’s overall position and image.
3/ The key actors of local economic and social life and all components of local government must be involved in the process of revitalization. This is the only way to bring the project to life.

Strategy

“Today, cities compete with each other. They compete for talent, investment, and visitors. The city must promote itself, invent strategies to succeed in the global competition.”

“Everything that is happening here in Ústí, all the closed factories, the crises, is typical of so many other European cities. Many of them are farther along than we are here, so we have a chance to see what works and what doesn’t.”

“All participants should try to understand the motivation of everyone else involved.”

“The first key step and a good signal for the city’s redevelopment is when the city establishes a ‘sounding board’. Think of it as a round table where the city’s political representation holds discussions with an active, engaged public. There must be mutual interest in finding acceptable solutions and starting conversations.”

Tomáš Ctibor
former developer, former head of the Prague Institute of Planning and Development (IPR)

Petr Návrat
economist and urban planner

Brownfields in Ústí; data source: GIS, MAGUL, 2016

Brownfields

- current
- newly identified
- expected
- excluded from the register
- temporary used
- in process of regeneration

Strategy
Severed roots
Ústí has had a turbulent past. After WW2, three-quarters of the city’s inhabitants were evicted during the expulsion of the Germans. New inhabitants came — whether by chance right after the war or in a controlled way later. For example, in the 1970s, Ústí had a contract with Michalovce in eastern Slovakia, whose aim was to dissolve Roma settlements in Slovakia and disperse them throughout the rest of the country. However, the system was not thought through properly, and the problems are still evident today. All these events have disrupted the long-term development of society.

Does the Sudetes still exist?
The expulsion of Germans after WW2 as well as the tremendous economic potential of the Sudeten area meant that the region was widely utilised for industrial purposes during the socialist era. The working class had a broad representation here. The borders of the former Sudetenland are still statistically apparent — high unemployment rates, low education levels, low participation in elections, the highest percentage of the population subject to property seizure to resolve debt, and more. These significant social problems must be addressed, both at the local and national levels.

Strategy

Prefabricated housing estates — what is next?
2/3 of Ústí’s population live in prefabricated housing estates. Locals often say that there is no place to meet and that the spaces between the buildings are not maintained. To make housing estates more economically and socially sustainable, sufficient civic amenities (shops, services, etc.), which are often missing, must be ensured and the overall quality of public space around the buildings must be maintained. Housing estates suffer from anonymity and uniformity, but also from the fact that there is a considerable amount of undefined public space — about 70% of the land on the estates is publicly owned, while only 30% is privately owned. In contrast, in the classical city block structure, the ratio is the opposite. The economic expenses to maintain such large public areas are enormous and thus, it is almost impossible to ensure sufficient maintenance of the space between the buildings. The solution may be a sensitive reorganization of space. For example, some public areas might become private front gardens, semi-public yards, etc.

Poverty, homelessness of families — how can it be solved?
Poverty and homelessness is a big issue in Ústí. Every fifth inhabitant of Ústí is in the process of seizure of property. There is a broad problem of socially excluded localities with all the negative social phenomena accompanying them (prostitution, drug dealing, moneylending, exorbitant rents in socially excluded areas). Thus, there is also a problem of homelessness of families. Homelessness includes all low-value forms of housing, including dormitories and shelters. Effective social service solutions must be explored. One of them might be the concept of “housing first”: socially disadvantaged families receive a city-owned apartment for one year with nearly no special conditions (they pay rent and must not disturb their neighbours). They receive the support of a social worker, who helps solve deeper problems (such as alcoholism, domestic violence, etc.). In Brno, this system has turned out to be very effective.

The situation is a result of the effects of the expulsion of Germans after WW2 and the tremendous economic potential of the Sudeten area, which was used during the socialist era due to resettlement, mining and other industries.

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Housing estates suffer from anonymity and uniformity, but also from the fact that there is a vast amount of undefined public space — about 70% of the area.

A community in the city?
There are many civic initiatives and associations in the city that try to engage people and organize events to revive their surroundings. Politicians have a unique opportunity to communicate actively with these groups and to make use of their local knowledge, ideas, enthusiasm, and energy. The associations can become essential links to the public when something needs to be discussed. Once the public space works well, it helps to create social contacts, resulting in a positive social impact on society in the city.

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Society
Will our children stay here?

Will we have to move? What does a neighbourhood mean today?
Young people keep moving elsewhere; the number of socially excluded sites is increasing. The prognoses are unrelenting. Everything is reversible, however, but it requires the will of citizens and politicians. How can we build a socially sustainable community? What can we do with prefabricated housing estates? How does the architecture and environment we live in affect life in the city?

Half of the class want to move away
When you ask high school students if they want to stay in Ústí, half of them will tell you that they want to move away. They don’t feel rooted here and think that the city has nothing to offer them.
**The City’s Image**

How can Ústí’s image be improved?

Is Ústí a place with no future? Why is anti-patriotism so popular here? How do locals perceive their city? How is it seen by people from outside?

The reputation of the city remains poor. Many young people want to leave as soon as they can. How does Ústí present itself externally? Is there a way to communicate effectively with its citizens? How can Ústí and the former coal-mining region around it improve its overall image?

**The city as a brand**

People move for the better. Many citizens, especially young people, move away or at least wish to move. Why? They say that Ústí has nothing to offer them. Often the main reason is that they feel ashamed of the image of their city.

Of course, the image of Ústí is not entirely wrong – the city does have many problems. But is it as desperate as it seems? After all, there are many things to be proud of and to build on – the beautiful landscape in which the city is situated, a university, excellent transport links, cheap rents, so many opportunities for potential investors.

Nowadays, cities compete for both citizens and investors. It is vital to offer them perspective, good conditions, and a vision for the future. This is also key to preventing the city from losing its young people. Therefore, every city should keenly care about their image and work hard to convince people that living here and investing here makes sense.

**Strategy**

Maintaining continuity of vision – strategic planning

What will the city become? Will Ústí be a city of new technologies and education? Or will the city promote culture and become a hotbed for creative industries? Creating visions and good conditions might be a magnet for people to come here to live.

A strategic plan is a document that states where the city is heading and what its vision is. Such a vision is not a fiction dreamed up by one person, but rather a thorough analysis-based agreement of all the stakeholders in the city – politicians, the university, significant investors, civic associations, NGOs, etc. The purpose of vision and strategic planning is to maintain continuity.

Participation – public involvement

Participation means that the public is involved along with the investor, politician, and municipal authority, although it is not required by law. Public participation is not a one-time event, but a complicated process that needs to be maintained professionally with facilitators. The key is to continuously build mutual trust.

Why is it useful to involve the public in the urban planning process?

- Take advantage of locals’, civic associations’, and NGOs’ knowledge of the place and issues.
- Quickly identify areas of mutual agreement.
- Early identification of potential conflicts.
- People cooperate rather than protest – everyone can be involved from the very start of the process.
- As a result, people have a better relationship with the project and the place in which they live and which affects them.
- Communication and coordination of politicians, citizens, experts and owners will be improved.

**Visual identity of the city**

In the era of social networking, internet, and media, the brand and its visual elements are essential marketing tools. The brand influences the perception of both citizens and visitors of the city. Every brand – and every city – needs to be visually recognisable. A city’s visual identity is more than just a logo – it’s a sophisticated visual language that can then also be adopted by other city institutions (municipal police, technical services, etc.)

What is the future of Ústí? Will it be a city of new technology and education? Or a city of sport and culture? Or...?

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I’m going to Ústí today.

You’re from Ústí?

Yes.

Oh my...

The worst place.

Have you ever been there?

No.
Landscape

Is the countryside surrounding the city its greatest treasure?

Do we use land sustainably? How can the city cope with floods? Will lakes replace coal?

Water and land are enormous potentials for Ústí, as is the dramatic and picturesque surrounding landscape. But how is the city connected with the surrounding area today? How can we work with rivers to benefit the city, not endanger it? How can water management be improved both in the city and in the surrounding areas? What will Czech forests look like in a few decades? What will the former coal mining landscape look like after revitalization?

A city among hills

Few cities can boast as diverse natural surroundings as Ústí nad Labem. Ústí nad Labem lies on the border of three important natural units. Nature rushes into the city. Do we use the proximity of the open natural landscape enough? Do we appreciate the open countryside that surrounds us, or do we exploit it with inappropriate land use?

Sustainable land use? – Why do we keep building on greenfields?

The city of Ústí continues to expand into the surrounding countryside. It devalues arable land by permitting the construction of industrial halls and family houses, while vast parts of the city, primarily brownfields, lie unused. Not only is this urban sprawl economically untenable for the city, what is perhaps even more fundamental is that one of the city’s most valuable assets – the beautiful landscape around us – is devalued and pushed farther away.

Revitalizing former mining coal mining areas

The ruined landscape of the brown coal basin in the foothills of the Ore Mountains can become a new lake landscape. The excavation lake Milada is a pilot project for the revitalization of the entire ruined landscape of the brown coal basin at the foot of the Ore Mountains. A regional landscape plan must be prepared and implemented that, over the long term, will lead to the transformation of North Bohemia’s shame into a beautiful piece of nature.

Water management

Water management is the key to a functioning ecosystem of not only forests and agricultural land, but also cities. It consists of small but conceptual tasks that will gradually be fulfilled. The aim is to restore a small water cycle, to achieve biodiversity both in forests and agricultural land. Rainwater management should be part of every public space revitalization project in the city.

Revitalization of brownfields

Neglected areas within the city are an ideal opportunity not only for new development, but also for transformation into parks.

Strategy

Revitalization of rivers

The connection of the centre of Ústí nad Labem to the Elbe River is considered impossible due to the railway barrier and flood control measures. But is that really the case? Today’s central station will become a local stop after the construction of the high-speed rail line, which will fundamentally change the situation. However, the concept of the riverbank must be consistent and based on a traffic analysis followed by an urban-transport solution. The Bílina River is a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered. It can become an important recreational connection between the city centre and Milada Lake.

Landscape permeability

Since the city of Ústí is situated in a hilly area, traffic corridors often create barriers. It is necessary to restore lost connections between city districts, between the city and the rivers, and between the city and the surrounding countryside.

A good concept and maintenance of parks

People always complain about the lack of greenery. However, the real problem is not the lack of it, but the quality of green space. Parks and all other public areas need a thoughtful concept as well as proper and continuous maintenance.
“There are a lot of things to build on. Let us focus on them.”
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