

A former Polish mining town reinvents itself

An old mining town in southern Poland is gradually becoming a symbol of the sustainable energy movement for the country, boasting a new office complex that could soon be rated the greenest in continental Europe.

Katowice looks very much like a city in transition. On the one hand, soot-covered buildings showing its days as a mining town abound. On the other, new construction sites can be seen on nearly every corner. Its rapid transformation is obvious. For Gregory Grabiak - who partially grew up here before emigrating to the United States with his family - Katowice is almost unrecognizable these days. „What I remember as a child was that the air was hard to breathe,” Grabiak, who now lives in Katowice, recalled. „Now, you can see that Katowice has changed dramatically. You can look at all the green spaces that have blossomed and flourished here. These days, the largest municipal park in all

of Poland is located right in the middle of the city of Katowice. Looking back Between 1945 and 1989 Katowice was a major mining hub for communist Poland. The environment suffered serious ecological damage, like a loss of water sources, top soil and vital nutrients in the ground due to the mining activity. Many of the region's green areas were stripped for industrial use. Now, 30 years later, Grabiak has returned with his family to live in the city and says he enjoys a lifestyle there he never could have imagined. With more than forty percent of the city transformed into either parks or woods, and with newly installed bike paths and nearby lakes to visit, Katowice's post-industrial makeover has set an example for the rest of Poland. You have a country that has people who want to focus on the environment, and especially Katowice, which was really devastated as an industrial monolith,” Grabiak said. „Now, people are emerging from that haze and there's situation in which things are going right.” Looking forward. Outside the center of the city, near a highway, is one of Katowice's new sources of pride. The GPP Business Park may not seem like a must-see attraction, but it could soon be labeled as ‚Outstanding’ by Europe's sustainable building certification system BREEAM. Should it receive the distinction, it will be the only building on continental Europe to claim that title. What makes it even more impressive is that it was built on 15 hectares of land considered untouchable by many companies. Land developers steered clear of the area for decades because they were concerned about land contamination left over from the mining days, so almost all of the cleaning of the land in Katowice was paid for by the government. It's a costly endeavor that includes reclamation, a process which reshapes the land, restores lost water sources, tests for contamination and re-vegetates the area. But GPP also decided to tap into European Union funds set aside for regional development. The money the company received covered almost half the cost of the 9.5 million-euro

(\$12.3 million) project. Currently, only the first office block has been completed. The development will ultimately include four sustainable office buildings, a large green space, a hotel and apartments.

New building technologies

The first building, named Goeppert-Mayer after the Katowice Nobel laureate, Maria Goeppert-Mayer, is the first building in Poland that operates using a trigeneration system. The trigenerational energy system that powers the electricity, heat and cooling in the building. The technology simultaneously produces its own electric, heating, and cooling energy, using natural gas as a fuel. The building also has a programmable building management system, which includes a weather station, a window blind and light system that detects when a person is entering a room as well as numerous other features. GPP CEO Miroslaw Czarnik believes it's a collection of the best sustainable technology out there. „We brought together professors, architects, engineers and builders and went together to Germany, Sweden and Switzerland and checked the technologies in the buildings there and brought them back to Poland, and improved on them,” Czarnik said. During Katowice's clean transformation, however, it doesn't want to erase its „dirtier” past completely. While the old smokestacks no longer function, they are kept standing as relics. Old mining shafts have even been integrated into its new state-of-the-art shopping mall. In the face of rapid change and development, they stand as reminders of how far the city has come. ■

