

**W**rocław, one of the main urban centres in Poland, is a cradle of creative initiatives for people experiencing homelessness. The writers of this article present two unique projects in detail: MiserArt, which offers homeless people the opportunity to grow as artists as well as business people, and Cinema Albert Productions, an independent low-budget documentary and feature film company created by homeless people.

# WROCLAW: A CRADLE OF INITIATIVES FOR INTERVENTION AND INTEGRATION

By **Małgorzata Sieńczyk, Aneta Szarfenberg, Dariusz Dobrowolski, Maciej Gudra, Andrzej Ptak**

Wrocław is one of the main urban centres in Poland, where the modern dimension of social policy and solving the problem of homelessness is shaped. Apart from Warsaw and Gdańsk, Wrocław is a leader in testing and implementing social innovations. Thanks to the support of the city authorities and the activity of non-governmental organizations, the scale and dimension of social exclusion is decreasing, and people at risk of marginalization find support, person-centred treatment and a chance of social reintegration.

The range of Wrocław's social services for people experiencing homelessness includes both intervention and integration services. Innovations such as the "A Streetcar Named Heating", in which, in the wintertime, people living on the streets can get warm, drink tea, eat warm soup and receive help from a streetworker, have been successfully introduced and are now popular in other cities in Poland.

Wrocław is also the cradle of initiatives which, although successfully implemented in Europe and the world, have few followers in Poland. An example here is Wrocław CUP - International Street Football Championships for the Homeless, which is played in about 60 countries, and of which tournaments have been taking place from 2009 in Wrocław. The main idea of the project is to undermine the negative stereotypes held about the homeless community. First and foremost, these are individuals with ambitions, goals, and a genuine desire for a better future. The Wrocław Cup is a great opportunity for the homeless community to integrate socially, to achieve goals, to learn how to compete, maintain healthy habits, and to live a fulfilling life.

Wrocław also developed special initiatives, unique not only in Poland but also in the world. Undoubtedly one of them is MiserArt - a cultural zone in the maze of exclusion - Wrocław's cultural space, where the borderline worlds of art and homelessness merge.



Wrocław CUP – photograph by Małgorzata Sieńczyk



MiserArt, a creative zone in the maze of exclusion, has existed in Wrocław's Nadodrze district since September 2014 as part of the activities of the Homo Sacer Foundation and the Wrocław branch of the Saint Brother Albert's Aid Society. It is a meeting place and a common workplace for homeless people, streetworkers, artists and craftsmen. It is a studio, an art gallery, a workshop of crafts and upcycling, and a café. In MiserArt various relations and often extreme experiences intermingle, enriching each other. Here homeless people are involved in the creative process on an equal level with the partners involved. MiserArt combines various activities - from a recycling carpentry workshop, a bread baking workshop,

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upcycling, screen printing, to a theatre, concert and exhibition hall, and a streetworking workshop with a street outpatient clinic.

The MiserArt community is made up of people with experience of homelessness and streetworkers; some are artists, others are friends engaged in the surrounding world. Through their actions they try to awake in people who are homeless and in themselves an aesthetic awareness mature enough that they can become artists. They write about themselves: “We want to adjust the aesthetical everyday life, provoking the imagination to creative development. We do not change the other person, but their environment. Through encounters and daily attentive relationships we help to free people with the experience of homelessness from labels that exclude them.”

MiserArt is also an experiment powered by the principles of the social economy where homeless people learn not only how to grow as artists, but also how to run a successful business. They deepen the sense of aesthetics and try to transfer their extremely difficult life experiences into a process of art creation. That is why each of the artistically crafted tables, created here with a true passion, has




MiserArt team and the craft-table, source: <https://www.facebook.com/MiserArt>

its own inspiring human story behind. MiserArt's newest venture is to launch a school with an upcycling design studio that will allow for the development of design, technology of producing applied art in cooperation with people with experience of homelessness, and practical implementation of projects in the workshops of an open EcoBauhaus factory. An important area of the school will be ecology, in particular designing green space using waste materials.

The year "in the time of pandemic" was totally and globally different for everyone. There were many new challenges and only a handful of MiserArt staff. The activity required close relations, but this closeness and these relationships were forced to hide behind masks and be conducted across distances, it was difficult to "be" engaged as before, fully, with those affected by homelessness, as well as with each other. "Art for Miser", an attempt to invite people into the artistic space, was also not easy as the focus on the street was considered a priority in this strange time. The daily work was accompanied by a struggle with the lack of closeness, of face-to-face meetings, as well as the need for multidimensionality that art brings. Everyone is waiting for normality, which will allow us to meet just like that, over a cup of tea. You can find MiserArt on [Facebook](#) or [check the website](#).

The second unique project is Cinema Albert Productions. It is an independent low-budget documentary and feature film company created by homeless people.

In December 2005, an informal film group acting for the benefit of the Wrocław Branch of St. Brother Albert's Aid Society (TPBA) was established and named Cinema Albert Production. In 2006, two films "Sie masz Wiktor [Howdy Victor]" and "Pielgrzym [Pilgrim]" were



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produced. In 2007 "Sie masz Wiktor" qualified for the Polish Film Festival in Gdynia in the independent cinema category. In 2008 the film "Skopani [Kicked out]" - based on facts - was made and thanks to all these productions a more real image of the people who experience homelessness is slowly getting through to a wider audience.

Film therapy is as old as film itself. It softens mores, elevates the mood, makes people feel more sophisticated. People who are surrounded by beauty are less inclined to use violence, force or destructive behaviour, they become more inventive and creative. Access to a good film, music or the beauty of nature makes a person better. An illusion seen in a movie becomes the beginning of a path on which people begin to take responsibility for their actions and their life. The film set becomes a place for improving one's relationship with the environment or developing contact with others. People can learn how to have a positive attitude towards themselves, try acquiring skills

necessary for a sober life, and put their emotional life in order. They learn to understand themselves by impersonating various characters or by replicating their previous behaviour, in order to analyse it and to draw satisfactory conclusions.

The use of a hypothetical scenario in a film to facilitate the understanding of certain behaviours, phenomena, situations, serves one's development and sense of security. By creating such films, one can talk about dreams, anger, disappointments, show oneself, face one's own weaknesses, be soothed by a film, understand one's own complexes and negative emotions. Watching such films becomes a discovery of the map of one's soul.

Since 2006, 15 films have been recorded, and another is in development. You can find the film studio on [Facebook](#) and [Brother Alberts Aid Society's website](#).

Exiting homelessness is a long process demanding a huge effort from a person in a homelessness crisis. This process will not always end with the kind of success which is understood as an independent life in one's own apartment. This does not mean, however, that people in situations of homelessness are doomed only to struggle to change their life and to live in a support centre for life. It is possible to become active and develop as a person, an artist, a person involved in social and cultural life. Indeed, homeless people can create something valuable for the local community. And the described projects show exactly this – the human dimension of the homeless life.



By Dariusz Dobrowolski