



# HOPE AND DREAM

**Robert Baj, president of the management board of CBR Events that operates Warsaw's Hala Gwardii, shares his thoughts on the hall.**

BY MORTEN LINDHOLM

**WBJ: How did you (CBR Events) get the idea for Hala Gwardii?**

**Robert Baj:** The owners of CBR Events share a passion for food and travel. In many countries where we have lived and visited, we have been to wonderful markets where you can shop, eat, meet, talk and play with children and grandmother under one roof. A place that you do not have to book a table, where you wear a white shirt and come as you are. You will find something nice for yourself at every moment. We wanted to create the same for ourselves in the city where we live: a place where we can work pleasantly but also a place where we can go like an ordinary client and that can make Warsaw unique and recognized for it. It is not only mixing restaurants with a food and vegetable market, it is a meeting place, a place for socializing. You do not need a smartphone to enter — here is space and options for everyone.

**HG is a public-private partnership (PPP) — how has that worked and what are your expectations for the future?**

The City of Warsaw is the owner of Hala Gwardii and it is their decision to operate the hall as a PPP. For the five years that we have been working together, it has been working well, both parties have gained from each other and learned from each other. We believe that also in the future the city will consult and rely on the extensive experience and knowledge CBR Events has gained from work with clients, tenants and partnerships for very unique events

and actions arranged in Hala Gwardii over the years. For us, it is important to have a transparent partnership where it is clear for both parties what is expected, what additional development may be taken, making sure that city inhabitants' needs are considered and that not only finance and development will be driving the decisions on keeping this historic and special Warsaw heritage authentic.

**The Hala Gwardii is a "kamienica". How has it been over the years to**



**OUR DREAM IS THAT HALA GWARDII REMAINS AS IT IS AT THE MOMENT**

**provide business and comfort for tenants and consumers in the "old" building?**

It is correct. Hala Gwardii is a tenement house standing here for over 100 years. Can you imagine how many different things and activities have happened here that give the hall a soul? You feel it as soon as you enter the hall. You can't really decide what it is. It is just a feeling of authenticity. We have tried to keep it that way, avoiding too much interference in the original setup. Despite the opportunity, we did not build an additional floor that would destroy the entire volume and spirit of this place. We kept investments in the things that were required by the PPOŻ (fire safety) and by the tenants, like electricity and sanitary issues for our guests (toilets, etc.). We also took a strategic decision to keep the project local and original.

So, we did not invite network brands as they would not fit the place.

**You have done a lot of non-standard events and exhibitions in the Hala — where do you get the ideas and partners from?**

Our initiatives come from within us, from our tenants and partners. But the overall strategy for the implementation has always been an idea that must be interesting for everyone and for free. We make the hall available for free. So, even young talented musicians, unknown artists or other supporting organizations have the possibility to be seen and heard and bring out their message to the people. We support idea takers and the finances should not be an issue as long as the idea and realization are reasonable.

**Do you (CBR Events) have plans for further development or adding to the existing setup?**

For CBR events, plans for the future are connected with the City's final decisions about the place. Should the city expect to extend the space or the hall — using extra floor or underground, widening the useable areas outside today's spaces — we will find out when we know the tender results. For us, however, the whole building is intended to serve one purpose — "a meeting place for everyone, with food, culture and fun, while remembering the history of the hall." In our opinion, for this purpose, the hall doesn't need additional space — neither the extra floor nor the orangery (greenhouses). However, outside gardens would be very useful and great for both tenants and visitors.

**What has been the biggest surprise in the period you have managed the project?**

I must say that our biggest "surprise" was probably that we from the opening weekend became a "lightning success." We were not really 100%

*A renovated indoor market hall in Warsaw's CBD, Hala Gwardii, is operated by CBR Events. Robert Baj is the head of the operator's management board.*

prepared at the beginning. Remember, that we opened the hall four months after signing the contract with the city. The local newspapers even compared Hala Gwardii with Hala Koszyki, which was for me a great shock, taking into consideration the investments in both projects. We had a lot of guests in Hala Gwardii from the beginning and we have been able to keep the interest, renew ourselves and constantly develop the mix of food, experiences and socializing. So, we are a celebrated and important meeting spot for Varsovians.

**What are the latest trends you observe in terms of audience visits and consumption behaviors?**

During the last year of operation in the new reality of Covid-19, we have noticed a change in customer behavior. First, before Covid, on Fridays, we had a lot of clients from office buildings who used to come to the hall for lunch and then started working from home. So, our Friday lunch hours are different now. Secondly, before Covid, we also had a lot of clients from the senior group who used the food court, and during the pandemic, they could use only the market. However, we noticed that younger customers during this period came to the hall, even though



it was not possible to eat on the spot because the whole gastronomy was only take away.

**What are your (CBR Events) dreams about the project for the future?**

Our dream is that Hala Gwardii remains as it is at the moment. Obviously, the







building needs renovation. But we hope that the city will stay clear of financial and other development goals in this project and keep the originality and leave Warsaw as a space for everyone, like famous southern European cities have, where fresh local food is brought in from the countryside, where local passionate food lovers can find gastronomy made with love and where visitors — old, young, local and foreign — can meet and socialize in a relaxed and lovely atmosphere. We also hope the city in its PPP choice has been convinced during our five successful years of cooperation, that the most important thing for Warsaw residents is the choice of a partner who will take care of the hall for another 15 or 20 years, as an operator, not a partner who will renovate it and treat it as a developer for selling it for a profit. For us at CBR Events, we hope and dream that the city will appreciate Hala Gwardii's amazing guests, our passionate work, the satisfied local surroundings and will continue to choose us as a trusted partner for this project.



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