

WHAT A WASTE? REFLEXION ON SOCIAL USE OF WASTELANDS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of the paper is to reflect on the role of urban wastelands in the context of legal and social construction of urban public spaces. This reflexion is based on analysis of what ecological values are connected with urban wastelands and how those values are manifested during a pandemic.

Methods. The paper is based on observatory research put in the context of theoretical reflection on urban research, especially applying to ecology and urban management.

Results. Spontaneous social animation of urban wastelands related to restrictions placed upon using green areas by the Polish government in order to stop the spread of COVID-19 in April 2020 revealed potential of such places to trace regulations introduced in public spaces resulting in transfer of some social practices to less ordered and supervised areas.

Cognitive value. Nowadays urban wastelands have gained appreciation as areas of specific high biodiversity and ecological value. However they can also be useful as a measure of social practices excluded from planned and highly organised urban places. They can be used to trace them and rethink legal and social circumstances that led to that exclusion.

Key words: urban wastelands, social exclusion, marginalisation, ecology, third landscape

INTRODUCTION: WASTELANDS AS BLINDSPOTS

It happens very often that areas qualified as urban wastelands remain unnoticed in everyday practices of city inhabitants. In many cases, those post-industrial sites are surrounded by high fences and separated from other parts of the city. Even if they are practically accessible it happens very often that people avoid them because they do not find any purpose for using them – those areas lost their prime function and until now they have not been given a new purpose. Because of that for many they remain useless and as such invisible (Gańko, 2019). For that reason they function as urban blind spots (Kossak, Schneider, & Walker 2014).





Deserted rail tracks in the centre of Warsaw, may 2020.

Source: own research

Infrastructure connecting those areas with other parts of the city does not lead anywhere anymore: the city has gained new connections: paths, pavements, streets that go around those areas. Because of that, many such areas are densely overgrown transforming themselves into reservoirs of specific urban nature.

During the pandemic in 2020, such places re-appeared in the field of interests of Polish city dwellers in a new way – no longer according to their former functions but in relation to their green ‘affordances,’ to use the term coined by James Gibson (1979). It was a response to restrictions placed upon using green areas as parks, forests or boulevards by Polish government in April 2020 in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. This situation brings opportunity to give a glimpse of public spaces functioning not only during pandemic but, what is more important, also in ordinary times.

Following article is based on observations and short field interviews made due to the long-term project connected with urban wastelands and their social functioning¹. Research was placed in chosen spots in Warsaw and Wrocław. Situation caused by pandemic brought opportunity to observe functioning of those places in new context and according to changing circumstances and as such revealed new features of these areas.

¹ The project is led due to ZIP (The University’s Integrated Development Programme).

WASTELANDS AND USELANDS

Urban wastelands in many cases consist of post-industrial sites, areas formerly used for railway infrastructure or abandoned tenement houses. They have lost their prime function and no new one was officially assigned to them. They are perceived as non-functional, which is the reason why they usually appear in the context of revitalisation or any other future use. Actual use consists mainly of unofficial, bottom-up, sometimes illegal practices like, for example, homeless people's dwellings, scrap collecting, urban exploration or occasionally recreation.

Because of limited presence of people it means that these places are overgrown, in many cases with tall trees covering view of adjacent buildings. Even though it is not rare for such places to be in the middle of the city, because of their natural character they create some kind of inner periphery: a comparatively wide area of wild greenery neighbouring with densely built up urban space. One person met there described this area as "another world – you're in the city centre but it feels as if you were somewhere far away".

In traditional approach, such areas are not perceived as valuable in any ecological way. Composed by invasive species treated as a threat for others, traditionally they have not been placed under protection in any way. Wasteland areas develop ecosystems that consist of ruderal plant species characteristic for degraded soils, impoverished by previous usage. Among them are commonly recognisable birches and poplars, as well as many types of flowers usually identified as weeds, for example goldenrod. These kinds of ecosystems appear on lands intensively used and transformed by people and abandoned afterwards. Because of degraded environment only species with low needs - called invasive – could inhabit. It gives specific mixture of species that cannot be met anywhere else. Therefore such places are gaining interest of ecologists because of the biodiversity specific for areas that run wild – that "came back to nature."

This comparatively new approach is represented by Ingo Kowarik – a German ecologist, who researched those 'novel ecosystems.' He distinguishes four types of ecosystems (Kowarik, 2011). First called 'first nature' is unspoiled environment, untouched by human activities -that is the one traditionally preserved in reserves. 'Second nature' is related to agriculture and forest management. 'Third nature' consists of parks, gardens, managed urban greenery. 'Fourth nature' applies to areas in the field of interest of this paper: abandoned places previously connected with agriculture, industries and urbanisation.

Gilles Clement (2016) in his manifest calls such areas a 'third landscape.' He explains: "The term Third Landscape does not allude to the Third World, but to the Third Estate. It refers to a space that does not express power or submission to authority" (p. 3). He presents it as a reservoir of natural freedom – undesigned and uncontrolled biodiversity that cannot be found in any other areas. He writes that there's no similarity among fragments of landscape of

that kind. They have only one common element: each of them creates territory that is refuge for diversity displaced from every other place: "Third landscape is a place for living of many species that do not find the place anywhere else" (p. 4).

Furthermore, actually the growing interests of urban wastelands can be observed. They contain much higher biodiversity than ordered, 'sterile' gardens, parks or other urban green areas. Because their main characteristic is their wilderness their much easier maintenance – there are practically no funds needed. What is more more they are more and more appreciated as urban green areas that plays an important role in city management in the face of climate change.

Dominika Dymek, when she writes about allotments (2019), indicates: "Nature does not recognise the void and wastelands, so undeveloped, post-industrial and not-mapped parts of the city (...) in reality are not useless or empty, even though they undoubtedly infringe generally accepted standards of spatial order" (p. 37). She postulates that such areas should be concerned as counterbalance for ordered places.

What is more, this recognition – wastelands as having actual potential instead of awaiting to being re-used in the future – leads to wider reflexion on coexistence of people and nature but also, what is more important according to the purpose of this text, it provokes to rethink categories of what is useful and what is waste, what should be protected and what to get rid of.

In 2019, Biennale Warsaw created an exhibition called "FLORAPHILIA. Revolution of Plants." During that event artists were undertaking topics connected with nature in political and social contexts. For example Dagna Jakubowska in her work "Weeds" which is a part of "Edible Map of Migration" series used abandoned peripheral spaces to find underestimated plant species. She raises the issues of belonging and migration, familiarity and alienation. "The forgotten and thus rarely used urban food resources include both native species and those regarded as alien. The artist is particularly fascinated with the latter: contrary to humans, wild plants recognise no borders" (Rostkowska, 2019, p. 6). In that way weeds are no longer useless but are presented as something needed. What is more by comparing them to people D. Jakubowska encourages visitors to treat them as a source of strength.

When Beata J. Gawryszewska and Michał Łepkowski (2016) analyse aesthetics of wastelands they distinguish three basic characteristics applicable to them. First is resilience – flexibility and readiness to develop new forms and relations. Second: coexistence – emphasis on spontaneous processes: natural as well as social. A crucial aspect of that are actions going on beyond planning and beyond control. Third: emergence – creation of place of a kind that could not be achieved by following traditional design principles.). As they say: "Wasteland presented that way becomes very useful in the city, it becomes useland" (p. 26-27).

PANDEMIC: RECONFIGURATION

During the pandemic 2020 such areas – urban wastelands – were re-discovered and appreciated on a practical level by city residents. According to restrictions imposed by Polish government in April 2020, access to urban green areas was highly limited. Recreational use of parks, forests and boulevards was prohibited under penalty of law. According to that urban wastelands become a great alternative for those who needed to stay in the city. They were not mentioned in the regulations and, what might be even more important, they also were of no interest to police or city guards to any extent as it was in case of other public spaces. Because they made a great hiding place they were safer in that context.

People from neighbourhood recognised green potential of those areas and used them more often than prior to the pandemic. Some of them directly admitted that they had never been there before or never went there very often, but the situation created by the pandemic led them to give to those places some attention. In this way the scope of activities taking place there expanded significantly. There were people having walks, there were some informal group meetings including alcohol (which was breaking the law in two ways: because of drinking alcohol in public space, which is generally not allowed in Poland, and because of not keeping social distance). Some even organised campfires.

Let us reconstruct this simple observation on a more general level. When legally and practically (by fines) people were deprived of the possibility of using urban green areas their activities were moved into places that were officially not used, which made them less supervised. The activities that were needed but impossible to realise in public spaces did not disappear but just moved somewhere else.

And this is a point that I would like to reflect on how this kind of mechanism works beyond the pandemic state of emergency: what activities move to such places (publicly available, but less accessible than others and as such less monitored) in so called normal time. What kind of needs cannot be met because of construction – legal, social or material – of public space? What are everyday restrictions in public spaces? Or maybe not what are they, but against whom? In other words: on a daily basis, who is so unwelcome in public spaces that they would have to move to urban wastelands?

Now it is time to go back to description of wastelands given at the beginning. Even though they are usually described and perceived as empty in terms of being used by people, it is not true that they are totally abandoned. There are unofficially used by those who – in some way – cannot fit their activities into supervised urban spaces; many times on the verge of legality. Here the second characteristic of wasteland indicated by Gawryszewska and Łepkowski (2016) is revealed: coexistence of different species (in context of nature) and users (in social contexts) possible only because the place is developing beyond plan and beyond control.

The easiest, commonly recognisable example of such activities is drinking alcohol. Empty bottles are a permanent element of this kind of urban environment. The reason is obvious – it cannot be done anywhere else outdoors in the city but it is still a solid part of social practice. But there are other, equally obvious, but much more important examples. Such places are known as informal refuges for people in homelessness crisis and are regularly visited by social workers. For some reason it is more comfortable – or safe – for them to use those places. Urban wastelands are also used by trash collectors to collect and sort the garbage. They are used by junk collectors to find cables to sell for scrap. For some reasons such – unsupervised – areas, not ordered and managed public spaces, give them possibilities to make a living.

In traditional urban planning discourse wastelands are called such because presently they do not fulfil any particular function. In this context they are a waste because they seem to be useless for city inhabitants. This traditional simplifying of divisions perversely plays a role also in ordered public spaces: some people and practices are unwelcome there, hence the need to move somewhere else – to the wastelands.

WHAT IS THE WASTE?

Karolina Grzywnowicz is an artist who created an installation named “Weeds.” In her project she presented part of the land taken from a small village in the Polish mountains, in the periphery of the country. During the second world war inhabitants of the village experienced violent, forced resettlements. Their homes were destroyed and in many cases burnt down. One of few signs of their former presence there are flowers and trees characteristic for places inhabited by people still growing there – after more than 60 years. Grzywnowicz cut out part of that land, brought it to an art gallery in Warsaw as a visible sign of memory about those people. A crucial point of her project was a statement about pulling people – like weeds – out of their land (Sulej, 2015).

The metaphor shows injustice of treating people as unneeded, as a useless kind of plant. In this projects weeds stand for something regarded as waste to get rid of. As Jakubowska clearly showed in her project, such categorisation according to plants is arbitral and unnecessary. Weeds or any other plants characteristic for wastelands do not have to necessarily be something unwelcome in urban environments. Wasteland nature becomes appreciated as an important part of the urban ecosystem. It has been created by circumstances – they adapted to given conditions and were the only ones to survive. The question is, what kind of conditions were created in other – widely available, supervised, ordered public spaces – that made some practices or people unwelcome and forced them hide in the wastelands – to be treated just like weeds.

This comparison brings a simple conclusion: categorisation applied to both plants and people. Dividing what is welcome and what is not is arbitrary.

However it seems that this arbitrariness is much easier to overcome when it comes to appreciation of nature than when it comes to social aspects. We started by appreciating diversity in terms of nature, but it is still hard to embrace diversity in the social context. It is easier to appreciate the nature and to redefine terms of aesthetics or usefulness than to avoid social distinctions and exclusion. It's easier to appreciate flowers than to notice people.

A clear example of that approach is a situation that I could observe during academic discussion among sociologists and urban researchers according to wastelands. One of debaters stated: "urban wastelands might be arranged according to natural habitats – they are relicts of nature in cities and specific ecosystems. Domination of hobos in these areas devastates it in some way."

Aneta Rostkowska (2019), curator of the "Floraphilia..." exhibition writes:

Plants are community beings by nature – not individuals forming clear boundaries from one another. Their identity is deeply pluralistic: from roots that are a source of decentralised intelligence to dependency relationships that tie them to other organisms. Does it not seem like a panacea to contemporary individualism?

However it does not lead to reflexion on social division based on simple value judgements. It obviously shows how easy it is to get used to simple distinction: who has right to appear in public space, who has a place there and who is unwanted – what can be done openly in public spaces and what should remain hidden. During the pandemic this simple habitually recognized pattern was out of balance. Suddenly we all, as city dwellers, found ourselves on the wrong side of the track.

Taking the closer look at wastelands, not only in terms of ecological approach but especially according to social practices, can be an opportunity to trace regulations or informal rules existing in other publicly available urban spaces – during pandemics as well as in any other time. Because what can or cannot be done in public space is not obvious and, as the pandemic has clearly shown, is not permanent: it changes based on the changing circumstances. It is probable that small changes in regulations can reconfigure the whole system and, what is important, leaves some people and their practices beyond it – and forces them to remain hidden. Wastelands make a good hiding place and as such they manifest what cannot fit elsewhere.

Clement (2016) writes that "taming living-space of third landscape can be compared to mind lacking subconsciousness. This idealised demon-free perspective has never been observed in any known cultures" (p. 16). I believe that what Clement writes is true especially in the social context – many practices present on wastelands are a manifestation of this part of social life that is being successively displaced from public spaces. The time to face those demons will certainly come.

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