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The role of green urban wastelands in 3rd place creation. Challenge for urban policy in Poland

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Introduction

An Urban area is a complex system that constantly changes, forms dynamically and functions independently. Despite of huge development pressure coming from the fast urban growth there are still many neglected areas or so-called urban wastelands. These zones seem to be commonly considered (also by local governments and city planners) as worthless and unproductive critical spaces that need to be invested in and returned to the city. On the other hand, we should point out a growing conviction among scientists about the importance of wastelands in context of their strong impact on the urban ecosystem and some social aspects of urban life as well. (Gandy, 2013; Wysocki, Sikorski 2009).

The urban wasteland is nowadays one of extremely few forms of informal green spaces that people can freely use according to their needs and ideas. These places don't have any defined forms or functions, so they leave a space for their user's creativity. Supposedly, they may take different forms from making grass roots to much more complex bottom up initiatives.

Background/Literature Review

There are relatively few definitions of what exactly urban wasteland is, and its role in cities. One of the platforms interesting for the focus researchers and practitioners interested is Wasteland Twinning Network. They specificate this kind of space as overgrown areas with spontaneous vegetation, usually neglected and abandoned (according to Oxford Dictionary). Polish National Urban Policy approved by Polish government on October 2015 (Polish Ministry of Infrastructure and Development 2015) defines wastelands as open areas, temporarily undeveloped, which have lost their function. What makes vacant spaces wasteland? Are overgrown with old trees and rich, natural vegetation areas still wastelands? Is there any necessity or possibility to introduce them into cities policies?

Legal aspects and urban wastelands:

Nowadays some elements of the creative city theory (Landry 1995, Florida 2012, Klasik 2012) came to many European and national policies affecting urban and regional development. The most recent example is Polish National Urban Policy. According to the main idea of that document, the development of urban areas should be based on a smart and livable city concept, and also include some innovative and creative context. According to strategic goal n.4 “High quality of life inside urban areas” the policy underlines the importance of third places for creation of social ties, integrated society but also for catalyzing the creative and innovative potential of the city. According to Ray Oldenburg definition the 3rd place (Oldenburg, 1995) is a place where people come to relax, meet friends, renew mentally and feel like home apart from their real home or workplace. Although the set of kinds and forms of 3rd places is considerably wide and does not have exact limits, the Polish National Urban Policy concentrates on typical public spaces and places set in the centre of the main urban core, or local cores.

Additionally, as already mentioned, this document touches upon the aspect of urban wasteland but doesn't associate it with third places, which seems to be significant for the whole document.

Environmental and social aspects of urban wastelands are the following:

Nowadays we can observe an increasing interest in vacant places. The importance of urban wasteland is emphasized both by researchers (Sukkop 2002, Janecki 1983, Wysocki, Sikorski 2009) and designers (Clemont, 1991). This movement is connected mainly with a growing awareness of ecological values as well as the depleted resource of free and undeveloped space in the city. Obviously, that is intentional preservation of spontaneous vegetation to a greater or lesser extent.

One of the common solutions to keep natural values is to transform wastelands into parks (eg. Irchelpark in Zurich, Switzerland, ASP Atelier Stern und Partner and Eduard Neuenschwander, 1986) in the spirit of sustainable development. Another one is a kind of popular keeping the industrial atmosphere (Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, Latz + Partner 1991).

A lot of landscape architects emphasize the value of natural succession in their design philosophy. One of the main example is Gilles Clemont and his manifesto Gardens in Motion (Clemont, 1991) where he has underlined the role of waste lands as a reservoir of city biodiversity. In this time of eco-

trends, and fear about climate change it is considered to be even some kind of an architectural movement. It could be said that an icon example of XXI century landscape is High Line Park in New York, which has been shaped to look like a wasteland (Gandy, 2013). We can say that in this way the aesthetics of wasteland has become a positive symbol of the modern city landscape, a symbol of a successful transition, the final victory of a creative city over an industrial one.

Moreover, it's evident that wastelands seem to compensate insufficient number of open recreational areas in the cities. Some architects indicate that residents use wastelands for "spontaneous leisure" (Trzaskowska, 2008) by grassroots initiatives. It may be a result of some inadequate design of urban spaces, which doesn't meet all age groups needs. For example, approximately 80% of the recent investments in Poland in recreational areas are playgrounds (Trzaskowska, 2008).

These grassroots and bottom-up practices create a phenomenon defined as "an invisible city" in the Polish literature (Krajewski, 2012). In the outstanding research-project with the same title, sociologists from the University of Poznan (UAM) investigate thousands of places and objects created by locals. As the authors point it out, an important result of their work is the recognition of these practices as extremely valuable for cohesion of local communities and socializing the city. This is also connected with a so called inhabitation process (Gawryszewska, 2013) when a man starts to create deep relation with the landscape through designing his or her surrounding as he considers it as his "home" place.

A unique feature of wasteland that makes it being considered as a separate category of space in social and urban context is their informal nature and the lack of regulations. Inspired by the existing need of freedom, authors of the article *Wild Nature Park. Wild Nature Park as an alternative for Culture and Recreation Park* (Kosiacka, et al., 2005) developed the concept of Freedom Park located at periodically flooded banks of the Vistula River in Warsaw. Relying on the concepts of John Appleton (1975) and evolutionary psychology they argue that people have a need to return to the primary nature and to interact with it freely and actively through such activities as tracking, hunting, fishing, gathering, constructing shelters, cooking on charcoal, etc. This idea creates a significant realm of freedom and opens possibilities of a personalized usage of wastelands.

Despite of all these elaborations the social aspects of urban wastelands are still underestimated in design practice, public debate and decision making processes.

Goals and objectives

Author's main objective is to examine the existence of close interrelations between inhabitants, urban wastelands and the theory of 3rd places. We want to investigate reasons for people's choice to spend a part of their free time on urban wastelands and the main motives of doing it, as well as the reasons for choosing some particular wasteland instead of another one, and the preferred forms of resting there. The Presented research is a pilot research for a large-scale project of urban wasteland investigation in context of being an important part of social urban life and thereby should be taken into account in National Urban Policies.

Materials and methods

Authors analyzed different forms and locations of urban wastelands in Warsaw according to the criteria:

1. open, accessible area presence of ruderal vegetation forms
2. different stage of inhabitation (existence of territorial marks)
3. different function in city master plan (to become a classical park, to be built up, to be left as a wasteland, to be transformed in bottom-up initiatives)

According to the criteria these case studies have been chosen:

Kazurka hill is a field in front of the entrance to the Kabacki forest in the south of Warsaw. It was created in the 70's from dirt taken away from the construction of the multifamily housing area - Ursynów. Now it is used in large variety of activities. A Part of land around Kazurka is maintained by the city (occasionally mowed) and another part is completely overgrown with trees and high meadow. According to city municipality plans it is going to become a public, traditional park.

Bema strong hold with ruins of an ancient, fortification of the XIX century is grown over by ruderal trees. It is occasionally mowed in some parts and equipped with garbage and lightning. City municipality plans to design it in a traditional park and multifamily settlement.

Zoliborz old railway siding is an overgrown, green corridor area, left behind a brand new, dense built-up block housing settlement, located on the former industrial site. There is a bottom-up initiative to create here a linear park, a part being constructed this year.

Area of small family houses near old Służew strong hold is a place where people have created commonly their own semi-private park, as another stage of the inhabitation process, just after private front and back yards respecting the existing wild vegetation. It is constructed with handmade benches and tables and more garden type plants, but the rest is left to grow spontaneously. Ruins of strong hold are inaccessible. The Whole terrain is prepared for development in unclear future according to wider unknown plans.

The basic implemented method was case study and its comparison. To study different cases authors used non participant observation method, photographs and inventory which helped to gather information about the structure, users and their activities as well as the form of vegetation (in the context of management).

The Public data review was used to collect the information about the areas designation according to master plans of Warsaw.

Informal interviews have been conducted in the form of spontaneous conversations to gain the data about the users' attitude.

The survey based on SBE method consists of two parts. The First part defined the profile of a potential user by a particular set of questions. The Second part was based on 21 pictures presenting the urban green landscapes from totally neglected up to French parks.

The final method was a comparison of results with National Urban Policy used to check how urban wastelands fit in its outlines.

Results

According to the non participant observation that was made, most of urban wastelands areas are used by dog owners. These places give them opportunities to drain dog leash and let them running out. The Second significant group is youth who use these areas for barbecuing, making bonfires, or simple walking and enjoying the landscape. An important group that is less presented in wastelands, however plays a significant role, is local activists. In these group we can find the youngsters making bike or ski jumps, as well as those who make bottom up designed bonfire places, but also groups of local inhabitants undertaking larger scale projects such as creating social gardens, or bottom-up designed mini parks. The Last group of wasteland users is presented by homeless people who treat these places as a good shelter especially in summertime.

The Informal interviews show that the wasteland users find many advantages of these places. A Great number of them noticed that wastelands are the only places in the city where they can let their dogs running out. There were also some respondents who pointed out such activities like drinking alcohol (which is forbidden in public spaces in Poland), sunbathing, burning private documents and paragliding. Some people noticed that nowadays urban wastelands bring them a substitute for wild landscapes, where they can commune with nature.

Asked about possible changes, people usually suggested simple treatments of green areas such as mowing the lawn or cleaning. The Respondents also suggested creating dirt paths, however most of them are worried of any drastic, top-down changes.

The surveys based on SBE method were used to evaluate different types of urban wasteland according to scenic beauty preferences. The majority of 343 respondents were 15-35 years old (together 86,3%) while only 1,5% of them were over 65 years old, 10,6 % of the respondents raise a child up to 10 years old and 37% own a dog. As for the place of their origin, 28.4% pointed out the countryside, 26.7% metropolitan cities (over 500 000 inhabitants), 24.9% regional and sub-regional cities (40 000 - 500 000 inhabitants) 10.3% local towns (less than 20 000 inhabitants) and 9,7% supra-local towns (20 000 - 39 000 inhabitants). Most of the respondents were women (65,4 %)

The scenes preferred by the respondents mostly presented semi-designed areas where some basic infrastructure elements such as dustbins or dirt paths are gently introduced into wasteland environment.

Discussion

After Comparing the results of the research with the provisions of Polish National Urban Policy it seems that the role of urban wastelands is underestimated. Although, the policy points out the importance of green, open areas including wastelands in creating local ecosystem and water economy. It is suggested to transform the high ecological significance areas into designed parks which are usually not connected with preserving already existing vegetation in practice. This approach seems to be opposite to already described new landscape designing movements as well as preserving landscape identity which can lead to non-places creation (Augé, 2010).

In addition, Polish National Urban Policy do not take under consideration social aspects of urban wasteland in context of freedom of use and grass roots design.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is almost no open space in the cityscape which is completely deprived of function and users. According to the gathered information, it could be assumed that urban wastelands may function as so called *third places*. These places constitute vernacular space for everyday meeting. Their informal character is one of the strongest creativity factors for inhabitants and thus they should be introduced into National Urban Policies.

Because of variety of different grass root and bottom up initiatives urban wastelands are a perfect environment for an architect to observe real needs of city inhabitants. According to SBE and interviews people prefer semi developed areas with elements as paths, dustbins or street lights, where the unlimited nature of wastelands is kept. These places give users a sense of freedom, a kind of privacy as well as a feeling of safety.

Służew strong hold could be treated as a model of developing this kind of areas due to the fact that it was made completely by residents but based on the existing frames. These conditions allowed to create a park as a common good (Harvey, 2012) full of local identity functioning as a perfect third place.

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