

# “AGONISTIC DESIGN MATTER”: FLOWERS, POTS AND WIRES

DESIGN AS A POLITICAL AGENT

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper provides an account on the big Polish cities that have recently undertaken major problems of so called revitalization.

According to New Urbanism ideas, these projects should involve participation of inhabitants and address needs of different actors which dwell in the cities. We introduce two cases of Warsaw and Poznań where the concept of participation becomes misunderstood and the cities' authorities' attitude towards urban green removes it – literally and metaphorically – from the soil and makes it a city property easy to move and remove. These cases show how the cities' policy towards urban greenery focuses different political tensions.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of “revitalization” of public spaces in Polish cities has evolved from being a marginal subject in urban policies to one that is gaining more and more widespread awareness among authorities and generating lively discussions. Due to the clash between visions of modernization between governmental institutions, city council boards, inhabitants, intellectual community, commercial sector, non-government organizations and urban activists the „revitalised” urban space perfectly reflects an urgent need for search of new models and solutions for urban renewal. In this exploratory paper we draw on two examples from Polish large cities where the problem of “revitalization” occurred; one devoted to the restoration of the street in Poznań and the other referring to Warsaw Uprising Square in the capital of Poland.

“Revitalization” literally means “bringing a life back” to an area which has become either neglected or not really appealing for the pedestrians and urban life in its mediterranean, relaxed version. In other words, “revitalization” usually means transforming a place into a friendly zone where people would walk around, relax and enjoy a coffee in a cafe terrace. In contemporary Polish cities the revitalization becomes a focal point, as it marks a shift between crude communist-era and transformation-era urbanism and a contemporary one which should take into consideration such actors as pedestrians, cyclists, animals, plants and so on. In reality, in its applied version, it marks a shift between former-era urbanism and urbanism of a “cappuccino city”, a good-looking at city prospects but exclusive version of the contemporary-era urbanism.

In these two cases the predominant role is played by non-human actors: plants and urban greenery. We address this subject matter for two main reasons. Firstly, in those two examples design has a political agency in the sense of the “vibrant matter” by Jane Bennett (Bennett 2010) and is taking on the role of a regenerator that performs in the agonistic spaces (Mouffe 2005) of urban policy making. Following the concept of “agonistic struggle” (Mouffe 2000) it is possible to bring out heterogenous vision and agree on polyphony of voices. Thus, the both cases, seen in those perspectives address the question of how analysis of “revitalization” events might change if we gave the force and voice to things? How, for example, would patterns of space consumption change, if we understood space not only instrumentally as a commodity, resource but more radically as an „actant”? The Bruno Latour's term, “actant” is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it makes a difference, alters the course of events, produces effects (Latour 2004). Things “vibrate” when perceived as dynamic not passive objects. Thus, the plants and urban greenery in presented cases not only reflect political issues but more predominantly shape its trajectories. By giving nature “vitality” it is possible to articulate discourses otherwise neglected.

Secondly, while the ideas associated with the New Urbanism as well as the Everyday Urbanism, the renaissance of urban renewal policies demand to plan and implement changes that meet social needs of inhabitants through enlightened design, urban policy-makers use the public engagement, contribution and participation cynically, in return offering the caricature of urban renewal. In both cases, the idea of „revitalization” of the city centre sustained by the policy-makers fails to respond to everyday practices and remains deaf to inhabitants desires, their daily routines and needs to engage with the urban greenery. This particular fondness for the quasi-cosmopolitan idea of order and aesthetics contradicts the way the city centre in both cases operates through the mutual interaction among human and nonhuman elements. The real urban re-design would need to follow more materiality-based actors in order to avoid reproducing the politics of urban planning according to modernist principles. As the cases show the new urban policies should be built not only on citizen involvement and participation, but take into consideration the complex relationships and networks of human and nonhuman actors.

#### SAINT MARTIN STREET IN POZNAŃ

Święty Marcin Street (Saint Martin Street) in Poznań have always reflected the historical, socio- cultural and economic transformations of the city; its beginnings, the Period of the Partitions, time during wars, period under the communist regime, and the political transformation into democratic, capitalist and cosmopolitan reality. Today the street gives the greatest evidence of the city’s urban policy and epitomizes its particular interests that often are to exclude inhabitants, and other actors from the process of making the city. This claim can be well illustrated by the outcome of a programme that was devoted to the urban restoration and renewal of the street. One of the institutional residents of the street CK Zamek (Zamek Centre Culture) was indicated by the municipal executive board of Poznań as the coordinator of the activities that would lead to desired changes.

Throughout the history, the CK Zamek took the responsibility of creating and implementing actions aimed towards the street revival (i.e. organising the Name Day of the Street, running debates referring both directly to the situation of the street and to a wider framework of the discussions about the city of Poznań). Thus CK Zamek also entered the „Integrated Programme of Restoration and Development of the city centre of Poznań for years 2014-2030” and became institutionally responsible for developing scientific proposals to be included in the programme. The document was supposed to come into existence in November 2014 and refer to the assumptions adopted by the city council in 2013 which were based on social consultations conducted by the sociologist from the Institute of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University as well as conclusions drawn from public debates on development and restoration of the city centre organized

together with local housing estates councils, non-government organizations and urban movements’ activists.

The basic objective of the planned programme was to bring long-lasting sustainable socio-cultural, spatial and economic development of the city centre of Poznań. The research programme was called Saint Martin Zone (Strefa Święty Marcin), consisted of the several debates (Debates Zone), cultural animation activities conducted on the Saint Martin Street, i.e. once a month the street would be partly closed for traffic (Sundays on Saint Martin Street) and qualitative research to identify and define local stakeholders located in the city centre. The research team (sociologists from the Institute of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University) also planned to carry out audio-visual walks with residents of Poznań aimed at gathering individual stories and memories associated with the street. The consecutive phases of the research project’s objective was to obtain both a thorough description of the street in terms of its social, cultural and economic features and audiovisual documentation.

Given that, the outcome of the research programme aimed at citizens’ participation in creating the proposal for the street renewal was totally misused by the city council board. The undertaken actions served only as an argument that city gave inhabitants an opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas for the street renewal. The idea to transform in the nearest future the Saint Martin Street into a zone free of traffic was rejected due to the lobby of automotive industry. The lively visions of playscapes of the street created by the children were seen as infantile, frivolous and therefore inadequate for a serious “revitalization” programme. Moreover, the inhabitants’ desire to have more greenery in the city centre became a caricature of itself because the city decided to plant flowers and formed them in strict rows as a good representation of the city authorities, having everything planned and under control. In the end, as it occurs, the „revitalization” excluded not only inhabitants who had wanted to engage in the urban renewal of the street, but also children, animals and a greenery which doesn’t necessarily take a form of evenly planted tulips, but is less controlled by city gardeners, thus more inclusive – both for animals and inhabitants and plant species themselves. The nature here becomes a metaphor for completely different modernization visions. One represented by the inhabitants, and the other employed and executed by the city council.

#### WARSAW UPRISING SQUARE IN WARSAW

Warsaw Uprising Square, formerly known as Napoleon Square is situated in the very centre of Warsaw. Before the Second World War it was a lively metropolitan area surrounded by 19th century eclectic buildings and the highest of Warsaw’s skyscrapers, Prudential Building. The centre of the square was devoted to the urban greenery: a lawn and some trees. During the Warsaw

Uprising the square was entirely destroyed. Rebuilt after the war, it lost its metropolitan character: eclectic housing was replaced by crude modernist buildings devoted to governmental institutions, such as the National Bank. The central area, formerly inhabited by trees and plants, was covered by concrete and transformed into a parking place.

Few years ago when a street adjacent to the square became a construction site for a second line of the subway system, the city authorities have planned a modernization of the area under a name of “revitalization”. The revitalization plan included liquidation of parking place, which, in turn, was to become a metropolitan square used by the pedestrians. But instead of bringing the lawn back, the concrete was replaced by a new one. The new plan didn’t include planting new trees – instead, it involved placing huge, over-scaled, colorful pots for small trees which have been distributed around the square. The square has not been the only place where potted plants have replaced plants growing in the soil. This solution has become more and more popular because it’s cheaper than planting new trees, effortless and – last but not least – it provides more parking places at the pavements.

The commentators from a local daily newspaper have interpreted the emergence of the potted plants as a cynical gesture of the city authorities known from their modernizing agenda which privileges the infrastructure for private cars above public transport and facilities for the pedestrians. The city hall – writes a journalist from “Gazeta Wyborcza”, a leading Polish daily newspaper – knows that every felling of trees receives an immediate response from the part of the public opinion, urban activists and local media. At the same time, it is aware that many inhabitants, that is voters, still commute by cars so they would appreciate as much parking space as possible. City authorities claim that the pots are temporary solution, as they plan to build an underground parking place below the square.

Nevertheless, the pots concept spread to the adjacent Świętokrzyska Street, opened after two years of the construction of the subway line. One of the most important streets in the very centre of Warsaw, formerly full of trees, has been devoid of the greenery and furnished with another set of potted plants. This time the official explanation mentions a conflict between trees’ roots and underground wires. This discourse resembles the old good division between nature and culture where, surprisingly, the nature becomes a threat to the culture which is being presented as fragile and vulnerable. As a result, it requires protection from the “unpredictable” nature. So the only solution is to tame and control the “nature” by putting it in the pots and transforming it into a commodity and an element of “culture”. Moreover, the greenery protection discourse of public opinion and local activists is being imperceptibly covered by the discourse of the nature vs. culture conflict where the one

which needs protection is not greenery but subway system wires.

## CONCLUSION

A possible way to approach the presented cases of conflicts organized around city planning demands, first of all, an identification of the protagonists of the conflicts. These are human, but also – especially in these cases – non-human actors (plants and objects, such as pots) whose agency can not be overemphasized. A comprehensive analysis of the conflict could be carried out, as we suggest, by an application of the “mapping controversies” methodology proposed by Albená Yaneva. It allows to capture complex interrelations between different actors within the agonistic space of a city and show different tensions which eventually lead to the conflicts. A closer look at both cases shows that the conflict lies at the intersection between a particular idea of modernization and the diffused interests of city activists, pedestrians and – last but not least – plants and animals. In Warsaw case, the city gains a new non-human actor – a pot, which plays a role of a trigger of a conflict between the advocates of the green city and the city hall. This version of modernization as it appears, is deeply rooted in the 20th century concept of a progress as a way of breaking away from nature towards technology. The nature, in this case, becomes a commodity, an object which can be designed, moved and removed. It has ceased to be literally connected with the soil – when put in pots and placed on the pavement, it loses its organicity. When the urban greenery is no longer assigned to a particular public space, it is not a common good anymore, it starts to be the city’s property, an element of an urban landscape which can be easily manipulated. This situation has also a legal implication – as an object owned by the city, a potted plant is not protected by the law of greenery protection. The same happens when it takes a form of a carefully designed flowerbed of tulips. Finally, potted plants and flowerbeds can hardly become any habitats for animals, such as birds, small mammals or even insects. In other words, given examples focus several conflicts: between pedestrians and car owners, between city authorities and advocates of the urban greenery (local media, activists, etc.), as well as between the nature and city politics.

The actor-network theory approach, as presented in the methodology of mapping controversies, reveals that the conflict lies not between the local authorities and inhabitants, as is usually presented. The careful look at both cases shows that the epicentres of conflicts are multiple and placed in different positions. If we take the agency of non-human actors (wires, pots, plants, etc.) into consideration, we see that the conflict may lie between wires and plants, between cars and trees, etc., not only between the city hall and pedestrians. As a result, any form of subversion, not to mention resistance, is difficult if not impossible. There are no clearly defined parts of the conflicts, as it were in the

antagonistic model of politics, so it's not clear who could be the subject of subversion and its object. Therefore any response from the part of citizens is unclear and undefined and is usually performed using irony. It's being exemplified by a cover photo at Facebook page of urban movement political group Miasto Jest Nasze [The City is Ours], which, by the way, has its own representation in the city hall. The photo depicts one of the pots at the Warsaw Uprising Square overturned, with the soil dropping out from the vessel. Used as the official visual representation of the urban movement at its web page, the fallen pot which looks pitiful and silly becomes an ironic commentary to the official city hall's policy. It's not an act of subversion, which could be too risky for the institution which is in the official structures of the city hall. So apparently the only way to comment on the potting fever is to document its failures.

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