

Dagmara Staniszevska

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
Łódź University
Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning
Łódź University of Technology

Andrzej Olejniczak

Institute of Philosophy
Łódź University
Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning
Łódź University of Technology



Where does Łódź leak?¹

Abstract

The text concerns the potential area of cooperation between anthropologists, architects and local community, who lives in space that is to be projected. The city of Łódź faces several urban, economic and political obstacles and problems. The article presents the project, the aim of which was to show that the architecture as a discipline should care about the users of space and ask them about their needs and make them the members of a revitalization project. Therefore, cultural anthropology with its fieldwork methodology is a chance to hear what the people say about the place where they live or would like to live. The authors plan to conduct action research among the inhabitants of Łódź's backyards and to create a participatory design, which is also aiming at improving civil attitudes.

Keywords: participatory design, action research, etic interpretation, emic interpretation, *praxis*, interdisciplinarity.

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A short trip to the downtown of Łódź – once a lively centre of Polish textile industry – shows the city in a state of decay. Despite the dense nineteenth-century urban tissue which seems to be everything, what is necessary for the city to be teeming with life, attracting tourists and new inhabitants, poverty and apathy

¹ This expression is a quibble which bases on the fact that in Polish “łódź” means “boat”.

reign here. The downtown of Łódź is the only depopulating centre among other Polish metropolitan centres.

It is no wonder that during the 2011/2012 summer semester students of architecture from Technical University in Łódź were looking for the answer for the question: where does Łódź leak? We organized a series of meetings with experts at different fields, who were trying to answer this awkward question. As early as in the phase of preparation of the meetings with the representatives of the branches which deal with the urban space, we realized that the problem is multidimensional and needs interdisciplinary approach. We were aware that talks with the experts on urban planning are not enough, so an urban anthropologist, an economist, an activist related to widely understood social participation and an artist creating urban tissue also participated in the talks.

Our first guest Artur Zaguła (an art historian who is mainly interested in architecture) compared Łódź with the French city of Lille and discussed what profits Lille gained due to the establishment of business and commerce centre “Euralille”, which is connected to the TGV. “Euralille”, built according to the urban plan by Rem Koolhaas, is an example of an enormous investment based on public and private partnership which contributed to revitalization of the city destroyed by the crisis of the seventies and eighties. It is worth adding that the city also experienced troubles caused by the destruction of textile industry which makes it the French kinsman of Łódź. Zaguła tried to prove that well-judged spacial and economic policy powered by the funds from various sources could act as the catalyst for positive changes. While Poland is still beneficent of EU structural funds, this situation is with no doubt practicable.

Aleksandra Krupa-Ławrynowicz (the urban anthropologist) talked about “the wounded identity of Łódź”. Łódź which used to be considered the “city of four cultures” (the expression denotes Polish, Jewish, German and Russian cultures) after the Second World War became the city without the past, as the military storm “swept off” most of the pre-war inhabitants. The postwar population was created mainly by the immigrants from the small localities of Łódź region and contemporary political situation (communist regime) prevented the creation of the real community of inhabitants.

The economist Mariusz Sokołowicz (who at the time combined academic activity at the University of Łódź with work at municipality) indicated that according to the “genesis” of the city and the economic conditions that had been existing before the period of its dynamic growth, Łódź is an “artificial” city. On initiative of the contemporary government of the Kingdom of Poland (then being a part of the Russian Imperium) Łódź was founded as a settlement for the textile industry. The location of Łódź was set not only on the basis of economic or geographic reasons but also on political ones. Contrary to what Russian administration was predicting due to the rapid growth of the global economy during the first industrial revolution, Łódź sprawled to the size which could not be found in economic models. As a consequence it is located too closely to the capital of Poland – Warsaw. Sokołowicz indicated that the negative impact of

the economic conditions is strengthened by the lack of appropriate policy of the city government.

Mirosław Wiśniewski (an active architect, town planner and educator) accentuated mistakes in the current Study of Conditions and Directions of Spatial Development² of the city. He pointed out the ignorance of the municipality and town council in the conduct of spatial policy. Similar theses were advanced by other architects and town planners: professor Marek Janiak (the contemporary Municipal Architect) strongly criticized destructive action of town hall and unclear decision-making process in this institution which hinders – or sometimes prevents – issuing successful spatial policy; Michał Domińczak (previous Heritage Conservator) pointed out indolence of present political powers and specific inertia in which (in condition of pressing necessity) not an active policy but rather “strategy” of reaction and summary actions are being run.

The conclusion of lectures and discussions that followed them seemed clear for us: “Łódź leaks at the municipality”. Still, it is hard to blame incompetence or indolence of administrative officers only. In democracy the voter is the first responsible person for the municipalities doings and in immaturity of the citizens grown up in the socialist reality we should look for the source of the problem. All paths seemed to lead to the recently popular keyword – participation, meaning the instrument for civil involvement encouragement.

So we turned to several persons who seemed to have the remedy for this state of affairs. Professor Wiesław Karolak from the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź and Wojciech Kłosowski from Warsaw University presented us with their experiences related to acting on the edge of art and social activity.

These two meetings made us, as well as other students of the architecture faculty, realize that cooperation with anthropologists, planned in advance, is essential for our action of making people involved in creating the place they live in. Wojciech Kłosowski showed us that the requirement for the cooperation with members of dysfunctional spheres is a good area of recognition and getting reliance of the local community. The tools of data processing prepared by anthropologists have seemed to create for “reading” the complicated situation of the Łódź city centre inhabitants.

II

Not only is the essence of the matter restricted to the case of handy tools serving the implementation of some aims, but also has some broader implications. At some point we exchanged our professional experiences with the students of Ethnology Student Research Group from Łódź University. Comparing activities typical for architects and anthropologists, led us to the conclusion that architecture students lack some crucial ability. That ability is carrying a conversation, not only

² A document defining official spatial politics.

with a client, but also a user or, as Hannah Arendt posits, with an actor of city space (Arendt 1958). The last definition of a citizen is mentioned and treasured by Wojciech Kłosowski:

Culture – that eternal fuel which sustains the community – is losing its community dimension or, at least, our participation in it is becoming the matter of domestic activity. Are we still actors of public space or just users? Within public space *acting* [stressed by W.K.] is always an input into public discourse and *behaving* is just expressing your own privacy and passive bumping against other privacies (Kłosowski 2011: 70).³

As Paweł Jaworski fairly remarks: “Vitruvian definitions of theory of architectural composition and his concept of designing process are becoming (...) insufficient, as we try to describe asymmetrical, non-hierarchical appeal of democratic space” (Jaworski 2012: 19). Hence we conclude that traditional classification regarding only an architect and investor (client), cultivated also in the modern age, is no longer congruent. It is especially incoherent when we are to encourage the emerging of social capital and civil attitudes.

The discipline of architecture is expected to be interdisciplinary in nature. It is bound to invoke multiple discourses: those of social sciences, humanities and other, often surprising, branches of knowledge. Such a context is establishing a situation in which we face a shortage rather than overflow of competence and knowledge. This limitation is especially noticeable on the interpersonal field of architectural practice and may be the one of major reasons why architects constrict themselves to their relation with a client and treat instrumentally other actors of building process. One may claim that architects are unable to speak with the people involved and, what is worse, they design for their own pleasure. On the urban field their aim is usually to fulfil civil servants’ desires and they eagerly skip problematic and complex phase of public consultations. They just do not want to see citizens as actors of public space.

Consequently, methods of teaching ethnological research to architecture students seem to be vital. It is especially desirable when we want to achieve a mode of participatory design that is based on Markus Miessen’s “cross-bench practitioner.”⁴ For Miessen, the mentioned model should be a solution for a certain problem. This problem is caused by automatic incorporation of design participants into superimposed decision-making structures:

(...) an alternative rendering of participation and the relational should be delineated, one that moves from a performer to a pro-active enabler, beyond the event-driven realities of a certain artistic production around social situations, toward a direct and personal engagement and stimulation of specific future realities. This can only be achieved by avoiding a trap of getting stuck in one milieu, such as the art world, or a singular political project; humans have feet in

³ All quotations from Polish sources were translated into English by Dagmara Staniszewska and Andrzej Olejniczak.

⁴ Miessen combines “cross-bench politician” with “independent practitioner”. According to Miessen, a cross-bench politician is “an independent practitioner who neither belongs to a specific party nor regularly fosters alliances with the same political camps” (2010: 243).

order to move and not get stuck. Otherwise, we would be trees. It needs to result in a content and agenda-driven nomadic practice fuelled by critical inquiries, an extra-discursive position in which one exits a milieu in order to be able to re-enter it differently. It should allow for an ambiguity that assumes responsibility while moving from pedigree to bastard. This practitioner will be a co-author rather than a participant – as participants are usually confronted with superimposed structures. Although the “free radical” does not exist and nothing is clean – rather, everything is ambivalent – such a practice needs to work toward an ambition that is immune to complicity. Such complicity can be overcome by assuming three positions with which modes of proactive participation can become meaningful: attitude, relevance, and responsibility (Miessen 2010: 251).

Among three “positions” mentioned above, each one is to provide such kind of participation that will solve a problem and will not mire in superficial discourse framed by the rules of political correctness. Hence they seem to cry for at least a minimum of anthropological approach, which will allow cutting through the data about facts to the knowledge about future “co-authors” of participatory design.

Shortly speaking, this ambitious project, which is meant to engender the feeling of citizenship, should be preceded by anthropological research. Such research should (1) reckon with cultural and social factors and expose them to actors of the undertaking, (2) create intimate relations among participants, that would break through the situation in which roles are strict and predetermined, (3) result in a collectively created work of art instead of guidelines to be taken into account by one author.

Our assumption about the role of anthropology students in the process seems to be confirmed by David Wang’s concept. Wang places the thick description method (one of the main tools for anthropologists and important mode of qualitative research) in crucial point among other means used in the theory of architecture. According to Wang, the theory of participatory design is placed on the line drawn between empirically accessible and inaccessible theoretical objects, for example in the situation in which perceptibly built environment meets a concrete social fabric (Wang 2006: 262–273). It should be stressed that the author situates the work of ethnologist nearly at the same point where the line mentioned before is drawn.

III

The area of “Where does Łódź leak?” action is in the very point where physical space meets social space: yard⁵ of urban houses. The yard that for the inhabitants is not only a space but a place in the city. The place that is acquainted and cultivated in their own way, the place that is adapted by daily routine. Residents jointly manage such space and thus become a community.

⁵ As you will see below “yard” in this text means a special enclosed space characteristic for tenement/town houses.

It tries to explain that mentioned and educed during the interviews aspect called community concerns relations between individuals or groups to a small extent, and do not base on entrenched patterns of interaction. (...) Sentiments, conscience of jointly experienced emotions are a foundation for emerging of this way understood community (Karpińska 2000: 131).

Importantly, it is not an incidental space but strongly defined one. According to Łódź citizens, a yard is not only a space framed by four walls of their home (it regards especially to tenement houses):

In Łódź, a “yard” means completely enclosed space with the floor (as architects put it) made of soil, asphalt or stones and refers mainly to tenement houses. Our interlocutors emphasised that “First of all, yards are connected to houses. In particular with well⁶ houses. (...) Because for example by the block of flats that thing is not a yard at all. Those are, don’t know how to put it, squares? Yards should be an enclosed space, they have to be separated because if they are not it is not clear if it is still our yard or the other block’s yard” (Karpińska 2000: 128).

The quote above shows how much residents are attached to the archetype of a yard. It also indicates how the archetype itself is related to the sort of space we are describing: what is “enclosed” is also safe, it is our own, it is our yard and it constitutes a place. On the other hand, open spaces, such as the kind we can come across around big resident blocks, constitutes an unnamed realm. It belongs to no one therefore citizens of Łódź would never call it a yard.

Yards, being not exactly a well-defined place, are also one of the most interesting parts of the city. It is a private space, delimited and handled by the residents. However, that privacy, being shared by residents, is in some way peculiar. Moreover, usually opened gates make a yard a welcoming in some terms public, space. Additionally, the yard varies in terms of values assigned to it and:

(...) has an adaptable structure. This structure is each time demarcated by the people representing different cultural groups like: children, pigeon raisers, old ladies. They establish their own centres, borders and rules. Let’s pay attention to the fact that a “benchmark” yard imposes the category “our own” on each resident. However, a yard used by members of different cultures restricts the archetype and extends the category “outsider”. In such situations it can possibly include residents if only they occupy some other territory (meaning: other cultural zone in the same architectural structure of the yard) (Karpińska 2000: 150).

Yards in Łódź are also a medium on which the industrial heritage of the city is inscribed. It is a testimony to lost grandness. Formerly, neat places misgive, disgust and thus embed the negative stereotype about “grey and sad Łódź”. In the present situation it seems that without social revitalization programs based on grassroot initiatives, the change is improbable. Hence, our action will consist in: (1) entering a community of a selected house, (2) an attempt to define and understand the way they perceive their space, neighbourhood relations and history using the method of ethnological interview, (3) creating a participatory design of their yard and (4) a realization of the design. The two last stages will be an

⁶ “Well” is a Polish expression which indicates a tight and high space of tenement house yard.

occasion to use action research method(s), which seems to be conceived for our action. Wilfred Carr offers the following way of understanding action research:

(...) it would be regarded as nothing more than a post-modern manifestation of the pre-modern Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy. As such, it would be a mode of inquiry whose chief task was to reclaim the sphere of *praxis* from its modern assimilation to the sphere of *techne* by fostering the kind of dialogical communities in which open conversation can be protected from the domination of a research methodology. This is not an easy task to achieve (2006: 433–434).

Carr's concept corresponds with Hannah Arendt's theory described in *The Human Condition* as well as with our notion of participatory design. Also, benefits drawn from the collaboration with ethnologists seem to have a lot to do with careful consideration and thus *praxis*.

As we are writing this article, we are at the stage of selecting a yard which will be the object of our action. By "we", we mean cultural anthropology and architecture students from Łódź University and Łódź Technical University.

IV

We are still not sure what the collaboration during anthropological interviews phase and design phase will bring. However, we can predict some obstacles typical for the centre of Łódź. (1) A complicated proprietary situation is often source of clashes among residents. In such a case, after finishing interviews, we will try to mediate a settlement. (2) We may encounter some hostile and pathological behaviour and, being young and inexperienced, we might not be able to react in a proper way. (3) Individuals hell-bent on ruining our efforts (whether because of their maliciousness or some particular business).

We are also aware of the fact that, apart from external factors, some problems may also arise due to some other circumstances. (1) Timespan of our undertaking may result in an outflow of the group members. Such a determinant is typical for social revitalization projects, for they require time and patience. (2) Lack of financial resources that would be given us free so that we have a basic freedom of action. Unfortunately each and every sponsor sees his charity work as a kind of investment in the image. Advertising always lowers our credibility and questions sincerity of our deeds. (3) Furthermore, we have already noticed some negative attitude which students of architecture show to the idea of participatory design. What you can see straight away is that, even at the beginning of their career, architecture students are encouraged to design in isolation from the social context. They learn a technocratic and antidemocratic attitude. Interestingly, at the beginning of its development, anthropology was similar in its approach to the social field and had to be brought "off the verandah". While in anthropology a turning point occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, architecture is still waiting for someone like Bronisław Malinowski.

V

In view of the forgoing and because of the lack of experience, we treat our schedule as a draft. Furthermore, we are convinced that it should be flexible and adjustable for the situation may rapidly change. It should also reflect an open-mindedness of actors of the event.

After choosing a yard collectively, we will begin with informing the residents about our intentions. Then, teams comprised of an architect and an anthropologist will carry out interviews and write reports. The presence of architects during the interviews is one of the key aspects of the whole project. Direct contact with a real and not importantly ordering person seems to be vital. The lesson of generic attitude may be the most important in the whole project. Sensitizing the architects to different perspectives and ways of perceiving the space will help them create better architecture. Architecture that would be adjusted to the needs of users in a better way. An architect has to abandon a mode of *etic* interpretation in which they are just an observer, dispatched from their clients reality. They should inherit an attitude typical of ethos represented by ethnologist (*emic*). Leaving the spot of outside observer and moving towards the position of inner interpreter will make dialogue possible.

Showing to young architects how ways of perceiving the same place may vary will bring them to a conclusion that a talent and technical skills are sufficient only in socially "sterile" tutor-student situation. Conditions of architectural practice have a highly social character. It is so not only because of fundamental relations between a client and architect, but also due to complex character of the building process. Reaching to the other person is a condition *sine qua non* of seeing things from their point of view. In such a situation, attentiveness and scrutiny of an ethnologist are indispensable.

Next, we will work out conclusions from the interviews and define problems standing in the way of establishing a communication platform among actors of the event. Then we can begin the essential phase of our actions: participatory design workshop. In this stage ethnologists will have an occasion to acknowledge the diverse practical application of their method. They will also see that their knowledge and skill may be useful not only for academic speculation. They will realize that ethnologist part in market-based architectural practice may be crucial as a cure for deceitful both architect's and investor's actions. Finally, they will apprehend that humanities may avail.

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(Institute of Americas and Europe, American Studies Center, Warsaw University)

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