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## URBAN WATERFRONTS' WILDERNESS AS A SPACE OF ENGAGEMENT

### DZIKIE MIEJSKIE OBSZARY NAD WODĄ JAKO PRZESTRZEŃ ZAANGAŻOWANIA

#### Abstract

The article presents theoretical considerations on the philosophy of designing and protecting wild urban waterfront spaces. Its goal is to examine the sense of these places in terms of their significance for urban and ecological structures, city social life, as well as for individual human beings. The analysis presented here based on the theory of architecture, environmental psychology and aesthetics, leads to two conclusions. First of all, such spaces are important places for city residents to engage in behaviorally and emotionally. Secondly, when it comes to managing wild water areas in cities, it seems to be more important to create places than to implement a specific project. What seems to matter most in creating such places is an emphasis on their familiarity, openness, effective simplicity and harmony in balancing the requirements of water nature and social life.

**Keywords:** urban wilderness, waterfront, architecture, placemaking, ecology, environmental justice

#### Streszczenie

W artykule zaprezentowano teoretyczne rozważania na temat filozofii projektowania i ochrony dzikich miejskich terenów nad wodą. Celem niniejszej pracy jest analiza znaczenia takich miejsc pod kątem roli, jaką odgrywają one w strukturach urbanistycznych i ekologicznych, w życiu miasta, a także w życiu poszczególnych ludzi. Zaprezentowana analiza, oparta na teorii architektury, psychologii i estetyki środowiskowej, prowadzi do dwojakich wniosków. Po pierwsze – dzikie miejskie obszary położone nad wodą są dla mieszkańców miasta ważnymi miejscami, w które angażują się behawioralnie i emocjonalnie. Po drugie – jeśli chodzi o gospodarowanie takimi przestrzeniami, ważniejsze od wdrażania określonego projektu, wydaje się być tworzenie miejsc. Najważniejszą zaś rzeczą w tworzeniu takich miejsc jest nacisk na ich swojskość i otwartość aranżacji, efektywną prostotę i harmonię w równoważeniu potrzeb wodnej przyrody i związanego z nim życia społecznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** miejska dzika przestrzeń, nabrzeże wodne, architektura, tworzenie miejsca, ekologia, środowiskowa sprawiedliwość

## 1. Introduction

The city as a result of human activity has become an outpost of civilization and culture, and to some extent this has happened against the logic of nature, which tends towards entropy. Historical urban civilization has long been defined by city walls that separate city life from the savagery of the outside world. However, real, vibrant cities rarely remain the perfect man-made urban structures that we might imagine. The reason for this might be inner forces that inspire uncontrolled growth, with no need for geometry (especially typical of organic medieval structures) to reveal natural human ‘disorder’<sup>1</sup>. Almost every historic city used to have wild enclaves which were beyond the strategies of the city plan or, on the contrary, the plan was based on their very existence. This, for example, was the case of ancient Greek cities, which – besides buildings – also contained open spaces that were used for participatory sporting activities or passive spectator enjoyment; this was not true of their predecessors (Egypt, Mesopotamia) or many successors. The ancient Greek model of life was characterized by “availability of <spare time>” and an atmosphere that encouraged public gatherings [16, p. 18]. And thus Athens’ plan, which oscillated around the space of Panathenaic Way (*dromos*) and Agora, also cultivated and protected important open spaces of other types that were closely related to nature, such as the mystic wild places on the hills of Pnyx that were dedicated to specific urban rituals<sup>2</sup>. In mediaeval England, in city centers which evolved out of rural settlements, there was usually a large open green area that initially served as common ground (pasture for grazing animals), but which was gradually reshaped for urban purposes. Echoes of this traditional landscape can be found in green open spaces in the center of some much more recent Anglo-Saxon<sup>3</sup> towns and housing estates.

The gradual disappearance of wild places in cities started in recent centuries. The reasons for this might be twofold: Firstly, the idea of fencing properties initially arose as a result of progress in agriculture around the eighteenth century [20]. Secondly, functional zoning began in the early twentieth century as the first step of the urban planning movement in towns. Roughly from the middle of the twentieth century, urban modernization clearly accelerated and indeed changed the image and the meaning of the traditional city due to the dynamic development of automobile communication and co-related urban sprawl. Entire expanses of green areas disappeared under overpasses, viaducts and local roads. Today, wild places within urban structures are usually waterfronts, industrial wasteland, vast transportation areas (sometimes taken over by nature), and very rarely post-agricultural areas. Truly wild, pristine natural areas in cities – with the exception of sites protected by law (such as nature

<sup>1</sup> I use this word following Sennet’s understanding of this term (Sennet, R., *Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*, 1996, also: Sennet, R., *The Craftsman*, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> An example of this may be a place reserved for feminine rituals (*tesmoforie*) related with soil, fertility and women’s solidarity. This place was filled with temporary huts and dug-outs dedicated to these rituals only and located very near to the ‘official’, male-only part of Pnyx, which generally was a meeting place of Athen’s citizens (*ecclesia*) [21].

<sup>3</sup> This profound idea is visualized and evoked by urban structures of the Royal Crescent in Bath (arch. John Woods, 1767–81), the National Mall in Washington D.C. (urban plan by Pierre L’Enfant i Benjamin Banneker, 1791) or the garden-city principles Welwyn (urban plan by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, 1919).



reserves) – are virtually unheard of. Facing ongoing changes in the urban landscape as well as radical changes in the way of life of its inhabitants (a mass exodus from the countryside to the city and then from the city center to the periphery), modern cities are experiencing a crisis of identity and of place attachment [6]. Landscape without signs of the past nor the expression of nature further exacerbate the situation. Contemporary research – particularly in the field of environmental studies (psychology, philosophy) – proves that in our environments we do not need simply an address and a house, but also places which are available for spur-of-the-moment events and meetings. We need a space that offers something more than just a choice of predefined options of behavior (housing, work, recreation) – a space which is not strictly regulated by the oppressive principles of zoning. Paradoxically, we need a space that is not a product of ourselves and of our anthropocentric thinking – a space in which we can feel like “partners of the world or of nature in a larger than usual sense” [25, p. 181] and “feel enlivened to the wide range of our being, one full of surprise, uncertainty and irritation” [25, p. 184]. The need for such places seems to arise directly from human nature; we want not only security and belonging, but also self-realization, knowledge and creation. This can also be interpreted as a cultural retreat from the dominant position of functionalism based on the notion of economic efficiency. Instead, the return of older ideas such as the “good life” originally described by Jane Jacobs (1961) or the coordinated concept of “happiness” (as described recently by Charles Montgomery, 2013) may be observed. These ideas co-create the structure of multidimensional people’s needs even though they are frequently difficult to label, see or be drawn in a project. They go far beyond the technical, functional and artistic criteria of a good modern urban project, but they are crucial for the quality of life in cities. Rather than being seen, the qualities of a city which are particularly important for residents might be felt and known, like a sense of community with other residents or with natural elements that are also framed by the city. The presence of wild urban spaces such as waterfronts may satisfy some of these needs.

## 2. Urban wilderness – mapping the sense of place

Wild natural places play an important role in the urban environment. As spaces for human beings, they are important not only because of what we see (visual aspects) or what we use (functional aspects). Their significance relies on the fact that they provide an evolutionary perspective and an opportunity for more trans-human and ecological being – reminding us of the importance of our symbiotic relation with nature in general, and with other humans and different biological species. Urban wilderness can be read on many levels: as a natural habitat that is important for eco-biological reasons, as a place for people to visit and spend time in, as a cultural space of historical, ideological, social and aesthetic value, and finally as a space of material value which has liberating potential, “where nothing exists and everything is possible”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Koolhaas, *The Berlin Wall as Architecture* [18, p. 108].

## 2.1. Eco-biological importance

Biodiversity, whose size and importance for the world we have just discovered, is increasingly threatened by the activities of human beings<sup>5</sup>. The processes of urbanization also contribute to turning more and more natural spaces into biologically 'dead' areas, not only because of disappearing wild enclaves, which are the natural substrate (*deep beds*) for native species, but also because existing habitats lose their natural connections. Contemporary urban planning and environmental protection strategies require rethinking; protected areas must be reconnected with each other and the overall ecosystem. Since the late 1970s, a new branch of research called *urban ecology* has been developed. Research in this field relates to environmental interactions in cities. A city is understood here as a special kind of ecosystem in which significant roles are played by people and the built environment. A city differs from other more natural environments, mainly because of the intensity of human impact. People are the main actors and builders responsible for the creation of specific human-made structures, but they are also the most important elements of the natural environment in the city [15]. Until recently we have lived with a sense that the formation and existence of cities is only a human matter. The complex issue of biodiversity should make us realize that the urban environment definitely has more players – other species of animals and plants. (Fig. 1, 2).

Nowadays, changes in approaches towards nature are the result of increasing understanding of ecological processes. Unlike in the past, when green city areas served practical needs or were designed to make a city beautiful, nowadays it is more common that natural areas are appreciated just for what they are. Ecology has gained priority over aesthetic values. We understand much better now that the landscape evolves from and is dependent on natural resources: "it is these interconnected systems of land, air and water, vegetation and wildlife which have dynamic qualities that differentiate cultural landscapes from other cultural resources such as historic structures" [5, p. 2]. An example of a place-based urban ecological analysis was given by researchers from the University of Washington; their study of park development in Seattle over the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a practical insight into changing environmental and cultural priorities. While studying the implementation of John C. Olmsted's long-term plan from 1903 over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dooling, Simon and Yocom (2006) observed and described the processes of change. They focused on the relationship between patterns of park development and shifting political, economic and cultural conditions and so highlighted four different periods of park planning in Seattle [12]. Starting from the first period (up to 1915), which was characterized by a romantic concept of nature as civilizing, humanizing and healing the city with its scenic beauty, there then came a period of urban challenges (up to the late 1960s), and later a period of progressive participatory planning, (up to the mid-1980s), ending with a period called "pocket park in a global city". The last period in Seattle's history of parks was when the

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<sup>5</sup> Because of the current very high level of extinctions (approximately one per million existing species each year), scientists say "we have now entered <<the sixth great extinction event>> the fifth having occurred sixty-five million years ago, when dinosaurs and many other organisms went extinct. That event resulted from natural causes, perhaps including a giant asteroid striking the Earth; this one we are causing" [7].

Wildlife Habitat Management Plan was established to protect critical areas against development and treat “wildlife as an integral part of the city” [8]. New parks and green areas have recently been developed (such as the Olympic Sculpture Park<sup>6</sup>), thus creatively producing a symbiosis between human culture and domestic nature (Fig. 3, 4).



Fig. 1, 2. Complex issue of biodiversity as perceived in urban wilderness  
Waterfront of Lake Drwęckie in Ostróda (Northern Poland), 2016 (1); community art in Oakland  
(California, USA), 2014 (2) (photos by author)



Fig. 3, 4. Symbiosis between human culture and domestic nature: Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle  
(WA, USA), 2014 (photos by author)

## 2.2. Social and cultural significance of urban wilderness

Urban wilderness, especially water wilderness, is essential for us. Not only does it create patches of sustainable, biodiverse landscapes that provide a healthy environment for various species including people, but it is also a necessary landscape for testing and developing our sociobiological habits. Like any other animals, people perceive their environment to look

<sup>6</sup> Olympic Sculpture Park was designed by Weiss/Manfredi/ Architecture/Landscape/Urbanism (international competition – 2001) in cooperation with Seattle Art Museum; it is a rehabilitation of a post-industrial area dedicated to staging the history of the site’s redevelopments and prospects, exhibiting art in an open outdoor gallery, and promoting the wildlife and domestic species in the city center.

for opportunities and to avoid danger. Our landscape preferences are derived from survival behavior, which is a product of evolution. A natural landscape which offers a multitude of individual qualities is a good “participatory landscape” that encourages quite a different mode of experience. Such a landscape “develops a spatial continuity with a person” in which one is no longer “a disinterested spectator” and the appeal of the landscape is “not exclusively visual” [4, p. 88]. It offers a greater opportunity for participation and enjoyment; in “a no man’s land, children and adults may leave their marks without guilt, nature will erase them” [17, p. 83]. It is also a place for experimenting and discovering the limits of safety. To explain this phenomenon, some authors use ‘prospect-refuge’ theory, which links certain types of landscapes with the attribution of symbolic values such as ‘prospect’, ‘refuge’ and ‘hazard’. People climb trees, hike and walk on the edge of waterfront – by doing so they practice an adaptive behavior that “leads to fascination with hazard symbols” [2, p. 32]. The prospect-refuge theory may be understood on multiple levels of cultural reading. It obviously, in a sense, explains human behavior, but it also explains the human aesthetic response to the landscape.

Landscape preference studies by environmental psychologists (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1981) state that the most preferred landscapes are those with elements of ‘mystery’ and ‘involvement’. Involvement refers to the desire “to figure out, to learn, to be stimulated” [11, p. 47], while mystery refers to “surprise or novelty” – it embodies “the temptation to follow the path <just a little farther>” [11, p. 50]. In landscapes that stress ‘prospect’ rather than ‘refuge’, “more information is promised than is actually revealed” [8, p. 66]; they evoke people’s fascination with the idea of nature as wilderness, which goes back to Rousseau’s symbolic concept of ‘wildness’. In the past, this idea was a driver of the romantic movement versus the instruments of civilization<sup>7</sup>. For many people, the city has become a wrong place to be, not a habitat, but rather a waiting-room where one expects to leave “for the land where [...] human beings truly belong” [14, p. 201]. Unlike architectural space, natural space is spacious and “horizontal” and is consonant with our body time – “a rhythm akin to the natural processes of the physiology of the human organism” [14, p. 202].

Natural wilderness is also praised for its political and social neutrality; it does not serve any commercial purposes. Hence, it becomes an important tool in competing for space and resources. Introducing nature to the city or preserving it is a democratic move – it not only improves living conditions in a densely populated modern city, but also becomes a statement of political and economic freedom. Some authors associate nature with the feminist symbolism of ‘mother earth’ or ‘motherland’, as opposed to the structured, architectural ‘fatherland’. From this point of view, the natural environment is symbolically associated with nurturance and tranquility, whereas built environments are associated with the social dominance structure of a nation [9]. Nature is also seen as a space of individual recovery and protection against dominative aggression and control. It offers generously what is limited in urban space: a sense of freedom and an opportunity to react to urban stress. What is really important and has to be emphasized here is that everyone needs direct contact with nature and that “people’s reaction

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<sup>7</sup> In American culture the idea of “wilderness” is usually closely related to the idea of Zion in Wilderness, which can be traced back to the times of the early American Puritans (from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century); for them, going West meant simply leaving the cities, which were the embodiment of “vulgar necessities and as interruptions in the natural flow of persons in nature” [14].

to nature is an example of non-economic need” [11, p. 54]. People even value “common instances of nature” and their uniqueness, and at the same time they sometimes do not at all value “non-natural elements” in a landscape [11].

### 2.3. The architectural dimension of wild space within the city

We need to reintroduce natural elements into our built environment, but we need to do it in a contemporary way. This requires refreshing our approach to urban and architectural design mostly in terms of control, visual dominance and the anthropic principle of modernity. We understand now that a landscape is “a <lifeworld> rather than a scene to view or a projection of cultural meaning” [19, p. 4]. It cannot be civilized in a battle against nature; neither it can be kept unmodified by humans, because we live in it. There is no way now to go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century utopian and pastoral visions that forced people to live in a ‘natural’ costume, whereas the landscape itself was highly controlled for the pleasure of a very few to admire the scenic view.

Some help in grasping the problem comes from the theory of architecture and art. In his theoretical study of architectural form, Żórawski (1962) analyzed the perceptive conflict in man-made forms shaped according to human aesthetic preferences and built in natural landscapes. As Żórawski wrote, “landscape touched by the human hand loses its original character”; it happens because we tend from free forms (*formy swobodne*) towards cohesive ones (*formy spoiste*). Paradoxically, as he observed, “we are attracted by natural forms which do not bear any marks of human activity” [27, p. 153]. This contradiction is accented by many other authors. Alexander (1977) developed this problem in *A Pattern Language*. He noticed that for people who lack “a total view of the ecology of the land” it is most natural to build “in the best possible place”, which is the place where the landscape, greenery and the view is the most beautiful [1, p. 509]. But this is in striking contrast to what we want to achieve, because in doing so we destroy the existing beauty of the place. Another issue theorized by Alexander is ‘lifeworld’. Talking about landscaping, he assumes that gardens which are “formal and artificial<sup>8</sup> (...) have none of the quality which brings a garden to life – the quality of wilderness” [1, p. 802]; “a garden growing wild is healthier, more capable of stable growth (...), can be left alone (...) and for people too, a garden growing wild creates a more profound experience (...) the gardener is in the position of a good doctor, watching nature take its course, occasionally taking action...” [1, p. 803]. Taking these into consideration, the architect should also work like a doctor, treating “the site and its building as a single living ecosystem” and leaving areas “that are most precious, beautiful, comfortable and healthy as they are” [1, p. 511].

Enjoying the beauty and ecology of nature requires “an incomplete landscape – that is an open space that has not been designed in every detail and that is not perfectly maintained” [17, p. 82]. Such a landscape of unstructured aesthetics allows and encourages people’s activity and involvement. It enables a multiplication of ways of using the existing – natural or man-made – space. The resulting place is a stage of a triangulation process and improvisational practices

<sup>8</sup> The opening passage of the chapter is: “Many gardens are formal and artificial. The flower beds are trimmed like table cloths or painted designs. The lawns are clipped like perfect plastic fur. The paths are clean, like new polished asphalt. The furniture is new and clean, fresh from a department store” [1, p. 802].

of users who might be not only human beings but also other species living in an urban ecosystem (Fig. 5, 6). A landscape has to be vast and open enough so as not to suffocate these activities. In this sense, as stated by Welsch, “the old maxim of <less is more> could still have a point” [25, p. 188].



Fig. 5. Willamette River waterfront in downtown Portland as inhabited by wild geese (Oregon, USA), 2014 (photo by author)

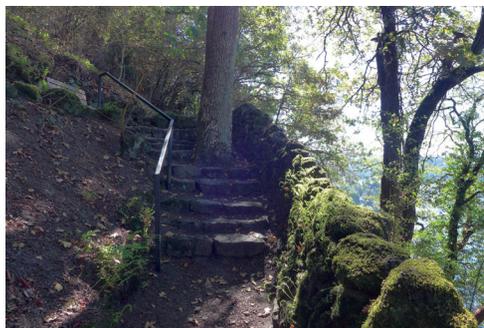


Fig. 6. The Point at Elk Rock Garden above Willamette River's bank in Portland (Oregon, USA), 2014 (photo by author)

### 3. The *riverlution*<sup>9</sup> idea

#### 3.1. “Everywhere in the world the best place to live is by the river”<sup>10</sup>

Urban wilderness as pristine natural environment frequently exists amidst urban structures as water and waterfront areas. Certainly, there are places and towns that are more blessed by nature with beautiful rivers and varied waterfronts or are built as a semi-natural island like Venice. Being in Venice, it is easy to understand that what attracts people to the place now is the unique relation between urban aspiration and the totality of the water nature that overwhelms the city. However, these breathtaking landscape conditions are both an environmental challenge to assume and the result of very sensitive and patient human activity over the centuries to balance the benefits of the place with its sustainability. During the last two centuries of urban modernization, rapid and senseless development in many places has irreversibly destroyed natural relations between towns and their water resources. River networks, which were once crucial for industry as well as for inhabitants, were frequently the starting point for many towns. It was so, for example, in the urban history of Łódź – the biggest new 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial city and the heart of the Polish textile industry. When the city was founded in 1820, the authorities took into consideration what Stanisław Staszic<sup>11</sup> had written about the site, that it was a place “with innumerable springs” [32]. However, when the town began to develop, the natural water resources began to shrink because of increasing

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘riverlution’ is borrowed from the manifesto of the Human Access Project [28].

<sup>10</sup> Translation of the title of an interview with a developer of *River Angel* housing in Wrocław [34].

<sup>11</sup> Stanisław Staszic (1755-1826) – a leading figure in the Polish Enlightenment and pioneer of Polish geology.

water consumption and the reduction of forest areas and biologically active areas generally. Łódka, the biggest river in Łódź, was the initial axis of urban development but had almost disappeared from the city at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a narrow concrete storm-water drain. Similarly, other rivers have disappeared from the landscape of many other towns<sup>12</sup> as a result of unreasonable planning decisions or insensitive competition for space.

Sometimes, instead, the attraction of a waterfront becomes oppressive for nature. This might result in expanding building areas over waterfronts and rearranging them to simply make economic use of them. Today, thanks to technical progress it is possible to build almost anything we want and wherever we want – it is only a question of cost. Waterfronts seem to be hugely popular locations<sup>13</sup> for development, no matter whether they are natural or artificially created<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, in some cities there are attempts to uncover rivers and their waterfronts and to do so even at the price of removing the existing overbuilt structures. This happened in Seoul, where the project of uncovering the river Cheonggyecheon – once buried to support a new elevated highway – was executed in 2005: the former transportation space was turned into open linear park space on both sides of the uncovered stream (project by SeoAhn Total Landscape) [31]. This famous and successful project has inspired many others all around the world.

People are increasingly interested in the waterfront areas in cities. It has become obvious to almost everyone that these areas should be protected as open green areas and that they may constitute the main attraction and pride of the city. Moreover, the main value of these areas is based on their ecological importance as green corridors, connecting wildlife habitats amidst the urban structure and improving environmental conditions within the city. Even the unimpressive (in terms of physical size) uncovered Łódka river valley in Łódź – sometimes hardly visible in the urban structure – now forms the axis of a “local ecosystem” [23, p. 50]. It includes not only parks and rearranged green patches, but also wild or even derelict natural elements that are useless as spatial structures but are of great potential for developing the local wildlife ecosystem.

### 3.2. Socio-cultural cultivation of urban wilderness

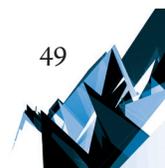
Place attachment<sup>15</sup> is strongly linked – positively or negatively – with pro-environmental behavior. Positive affective bonds with one’s place should be associated with activities to protect that place. For some people this might also mean “putting the interest of the place

<sup>12</sup> In Cracow, one of the rivers that has disappeared in a tunnel is Młynówka Królewska, once an important river for the local water-mill industry outside the city and the axis of development of neighboring villages. Nowadays it can only be traced in the urban structure of the city as an open-to-the-public strip of greenery, a linear park called – the same as the hidden river – *Młynówka Królewska*.

<sup>13</sup> “The housing condominium is situated [according to the design] right at the waterfront and thus apartments will have splendid views and an environment enabling relaxation. This will improve the quality of life of the inhabitants. [*River Angels*] is one of the best locations in town with massive potential for the future” (extract from an interview with Ron Ben Shahar from Angel Poland Group (developer)) / “Na całym świecie najlepiej mieszka się nad rzeką” [34].

<sup>14</sup> An example of new massive development situated around the waterfront of an artificial lake (in a post-military and post-industrial area of the former airport) is Aspern Smart City in Vienna, currently under construction.

<sup>15</sup> *Place attachment* is a psychological term signifying the set of positive affective bonds or associations between individuals, groups, communities, and their daily life settings [6].



before their self-interest” [6, p. 156]. Many studies have shown that people are more open to pro-environmental behavior in the context of protected natural areas and recreational settings. Natural, fresh and clean surroundings might be a “prompt” [26] to pay more attention to the problem of the environment. It is also important that natural, open spaces close to water are frequently the most valued places that are often remembered in detail as people’s *personscapes*. These “personally sacred places” have predictable origins – “most are from childhood; most are outdoors in nature”. They express “our growth and identity” [10, p. 194]. One of the studies undertaken by Hester in Manteo (North Carolina, 1985) was to identify the “essence” and “sacred structure” of a place. The places most valued by inhabitants of Manteo were – not surprisingly – the places and areas encircling the local bay. For most communities, a “sacred structure” signifies a center of community life that is frequently associated with a sequence of ritual behaviors that celebrate place attachment. A “sacred structure” should primarily inform about what to protect and what not to do rather than impose dominant formalist trends and their architecture over existing structures. Sometimes to make a place it is enough to show interest and promote activities and public engagement with the place. Performative pro-community and pro-ecological events such as Water Critical Mass (*Wodna Masa Krytyczna*) on the Vistula River in Cracow or the Big Float on the Willamette River in Portland (Oregon) are examples of this. These actions are intended to inspire an attitude change and public interest in rivers to improve the water quality and the environment quality in general. According to its organizers, the Big Float project “serves the dual purpose of fundraising and giving Portlanders a fun day on the river”<sup>16</sup>. Its mission is to change the way the city “interacts with the river that runs through it” and to “envision a day when Portlanders can interact with a clean, swimmer-friendly version of the Willamette [...] to heal the link between people and waterway” [28].

### 3.3. Wild vs ordered

Nature can be allowed to assert itself or it can be tightly controlled. In the urban environment, nature is unavoidably superimposed by some cultural meaning, no matter whether it is left uncultivated or is the object of economic consumption and architectural rearrangement. The water environment in a city is an illustrative example of a “new cultural landscape” which is not “new from scratch” but which demonstrates how change “adds new layers to an already layered composition” [19, p. 2]. The decision to redesign the natural landscape in a city entails responsibility mainly for the decision makers. The choice between leaving an area uncultivated and taking it into tightly controlled possession and rearranging it as a housing, commercial or recreation area is not the only choice. There is always a range of possibilities of what can be done with a wild urban waterfront. To name just a few, instead of taking the space under control, it may be more reasonable to take it under protection and cultivation. Similarly, instead of the immediate profits of extensive functional use of the area,

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<sup>16</sup> Human Access Project (HAP) is an organization responsible for Big Float and other actions promoting the Willamette River in Portland [28].

it may be more profitable to preserve this enclave as a natural reserve of the city and a space of relief (a “free space amidst the hyper design of the rest” [25, p. 187]) that will increase the value of surrounding buildings and developments.

To answer the question, “wild versus ordered?”, it is necessary to listen to the place itself to gain knowledge *of* the place rather than *about* the place. It requires time and mindfulness to understand its daily life patterns and to determine its real needs, issues and problems. As studying places indicates, the lack of a functional label does not necessarily mean the lack of use; less design may sometimes encourage more satisfying activities. This is very clear when analyzing the city life on both sides of the Vistula River in Warsaw. The right bank of the Vistula – in places almost wild, with spacious sandy beaches – is full of people on warm summer days. It has become an increasingly popular place to be – it is amenable for users and encourages various types of spontaneous activities. The left bank, freshly rearranged (arch. RS Architektura Krajobrazu, 2015) as new concrete embankment with a type of stand-like stairs to observe the water and the other side of the city, serves different needs and co-creates Warsaw’s more metropolitan side. Both sides are practically complementary and seem to be in dialogue with each other. In contrast to the more open, unstructured space on the right side that encourages more unpredictable behavior, the activities on the left bank seem easier to anticipate. Warsaw’s residents accepted the first stage of changes on the left bank “with reserve”; as an architectural journalist commented, “the built section of wharf is designed more for urban aesthetes majestically parading along the promenade than for amateurs of informal riverside recreation”<sup>17</sup>.

## 4. Creating a place not a design

### 4.1. Key traits for protecting and sharing

Waterfronts, especially urban waterfronts where the land meets the ocean, lake or river, are unique and definite resources that are based on the individual relationship between the urban structure and water. In 1981, The Waterfront Center, a non-profit educational organization, was formed to help in defining urban waterfronts as dynamic *places* to create the best opportunity for community enhancement and enrichment. As this organization claims, its main goal is to assist communities and professions in “making the wisest and best long-term uses of waterfront resources for maximum public benefit” [30]. It also manages the international awards program “Excellence on the Waterfront” (since 1987), which recognizes the best projects and visionary plans. For this they created a set of judging criteria to assess the quality of architectural projects (1. sensitivity of the design to the water; 2. quality and harmony of the design), community (3. civic contribution) and environmental care (4. environmental values), as well as cultural enrichment (5.) and technical problems (6. degree of difficulty). The criteria given by TWC, in a sense, respond to the problem of protecting and sharing

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<sup>17</sup> Commentary to the design by Grzegorz Stiasny [24].

these places. Considering the value of the project, it is clear that what matters most is not a specific form but its correspondence with a particular site, its nature and people's behavioral patterns. The important value of a design is to make public use of water resources, to provide physical, not only visual, access to and along the waterfront – to let people enjoy the water environment. A project should fit into the surroundings – be they natural or man-made – and should grasp the problem of human scale. Considering its social background, a good project should help its community's economy and boost civic pride. It should be a sustainable project in the sense that it is economically viable over the long run and cares about environmental values. A good project should contribute to the local culture and enrich the place. And, finally, its value may also be measured by the difficulties it has to overcome, be they natural, political or economic.

Bearing in mind the human dimensions of architecture and planning, in particular planning so-called public common spaces, one should not forget about environmental justice<sup>18</sup> – a key concept for sharing limited goods. Justice as understood here involves: 1. spatial distribution (of attractions and environmental risks); 2. legislative procedures; and 3. the decision-making process (via participation) and democratic, open access to information. The environmental justice movement (not only in U.S.) has forced an attitude change to public spaces and their functions [13] – it really does influence projects with the idea of public accessibility all over the world. Let us take the example of the Human Access Project – a public initiative in Portland. It organizes not only Big Float but also some micro-projects to inspire local engagement with waterfront places and the creation of various “pocket beaches” in the city center to let people freely access the river. One of the pocket beaches realized by HAP is called “Poetry at the Beach.” It is a really tiny place located underneath a bridge with a patch of sandy beach. The most important part of it seems to be a pathway leading from the main waterfront boardwalk straight to the river. The sides of this pathway are made up of big stones on which one might sit to rest and observe the river or just stop and *read* them as the stones are covered with short poems written by children from the local elementary school. All the poems written here are inspired by the river and nature and they grasp a specific moment in space and time. Like the one written by Makenzie (8<sup>th</sup> Grade): “Walk down the pathway/Towards the center of all life /Rushing body of magic/Forever flowing to the sea” (Fig. 7–8).

## 4.2. Conclusions

Wild or ordered urban waterfronts are important elements of cities' new cultural landscapes. As such they constitute “an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere”, “a key element of individual and social well-being” and – as is stated in the European Landscape Convention – this is why “their protection, management and planning entail rights and responsibilities for everyone”<sup>19</sup>. Because they are made of nature, architecture and city life, taking care of such places is a complex, multidimensional

<sup>18</sup> Environmental justice (esp. in U.S.) is the term referring to equal treatment of people of different races, nationalities and income in terms on environmental decision making [28].

<sup>19</sup> *European Landscape Convention. Preamble.*

responsibility that has to be shared between many people and professions. This is especially true when we assume that we want to take care of the place instead of taking control. A waterfront environment requires nature protection (land and water) because it is a landscape evolved from and dependent on natural resources and is a wildlife habitat. As a man-made architectural structure, it requires technical maintenance and management as well as strategies for the future. As a place for people, it requires understanding of what it means to people. To do so – to truly understand the place – one has to avoid exclusive assumptions and “to learn from poverty”, from people that “rely on the informal economy” and who are “intimately tied to the place without choice” [10, p. 200]. For the designer it means the necessity of combining science and experience: his or her own experience with the place as well as the experience and knowledge of local experts. “Learning from poverty” is also a way to achieve more ecological and locally intelligent solutions.

Redesigning existing natural patches of waterfront land is a risky job that almost always involves conflicts that are usually caused by unbalanced distribution of resources and power between global players and local actors, but they are also about the aim of waterfront redesigning: is it to produce a space of production, consumption or a lived space? The existing oppositions are also solid evidence that the places in question are of special importance to people, and thus dealing with these places requires accommodation of conflicts as well as cooperation. The attitude which is expected here involves an open mind and time to work out and adopt more organic, *slow* and community-based design methods. Using such methods should prevent designers from aiming at formal design that contradicts not only the nature of the site but also the human content of architecture. What seems to be the most important lesson here it is to focus on creating a place not a design. The conclusions of this lesson might be revolutionary for the philosophy of design; it is about not only inviting the public to engage in the design process via participatory projects and for designers to be involved with the complexity of the place, but it is about the idea that sometimes it is simply better to leave things as they are than to implement projects. To put it more accurately, in the case of such projects the emphasis on culture and architecture should not destroy the nature of the place and forget about the true nature of humans.



Fig. 7–8. *Poetry at The Beach* – a micro-project realized by HAP in Portland, 2014 (photo by author): one of the stones with a short poem (7) and the wild pocket beach at the end of the path (8)

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