

**THE GLOBAL DIMENSION OF ALTERNATIVE URBAN AESTHETICS.
ON THE PALMS AND TOADSTOOLS IN BACKYARD GARDENS**

*Residents create a city
through everyday activities,
they transform them through
thousands of microactivities
intertwined with their everyday life*
(Drozdowski et al., 2012, 12)

The aesthetic dimension of the space of modern cities depends on the vision and decision of many agents/actors — representatives of municipalities, developers, investors, architects, urban planners, monument conservators, advertisers, and finally also residents. Importantly, of greatest interest and concern are those fragments of cities which fulfil representative functions, building “official” and “valid” images intended for dissemination. These images are then used in the processes of shaping images of the metropolis. They are concentrated on areas which are “centrally located, with structures, buildings, elements of small architecture and monuments exposed in various ways, important due to their historical value, aesthetic and artistic values, meaning for the identity of the place, etc. They are presented as the most characteristic, focusing the life of the city, determining its rhythm and pulse. They are designed to be shown, constituting the main attractions that fuel the development of the tourism industry.” (Fereński, 2016, 71). Such spaces are characterized by a kind of smoothing. They are legally protected, as in cultural parks, so that only a limited number of actors would affect their appearance and shape. Thus, they are subject to continuous supervision and official inspection.

In recent years, however, we can observe a number of phenomena that can be associated with the desire of residents to exercise an influence over shaping the urban space –

including its aesthetics. Tools such as the civic budget are becoming increasingly popular¹. Various NGOs operate actively and the so-called urban movements are growing. Bottom-up initiatives aiming to improve living conditions in the city are being launched, and the authorities are forced to conduct public consultations regarding proposed changes

¹ Or “participatory budgeting”, the global career of which started in South-Brasilian Porto Alegre in 1989.

I would like to devote these considerations to areas which, although in contrast to the representative spaces (e.g. SagradaFamilia, Torre Agbar and ParqueGuell in Barcelona, Stefansdom, Hofburg gardens and Prater/Riesenrad in Vienna or КраснаяПлощадь in Moscow) are still less frequently studied as urban space, have nevertheless already attracted a few thorough studies, especially in Polish academic literature. It concerns specific type of grassroots initiatives, undertaken by urban residents in order to beautify their immediate environment. These are usually individual acts characterized by spontaneity, consisting in interference in the nearest space. Such realizations can be found, among other places, on the balconies, in the courtyards, and in backyard gardens, that is in unexposed places not included within the “official” images of the city. The causal agent of their emergence is the will of space users, not the visions of the local magistrates (which does not mean that they are not intercepted by the authorities and/or animated by official competitions). This sphere of so-called “urban aesthetics”, after MarekKrajewski, can be called “invisible” (Krajewski, 2012, 9). The term was coined as a part of the “InvisibleCity” project, directed by MarekKrajewski from the University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznan. The origins of this project date back to 2007, when a group of employees, PhD students and students of the UAM Institute of Sociology began the process of collecting photographic documentation of the “Poznań invisible city”. Later they were joined by more than three hundred people from all over Poland, and thanks to their joint efforts a database of photographs was created, comprising almost seven thousand pictures². Local groups were active in cities like Toruń, Warsaw, Łódź, Wrocław, Kraków, Kielce, Tarnów and Bydgoszcz, regularly supplementing the “InvisibleCity” database. Pictures on the website, in a spontaneous and rather disorganized manner, have also been posted by private individuals. The project was presented to a wider audience for the first time in 2008 as a photography exhibition at the Arsenal City Gallery. Other ways of publicizing the results of exploration have also been utilized, i.e. multimedia presentations, paperback publications and internet galleries, with the purpose of demonstrating places well-known from everyday experience in a non-standard, unofficial form, revealing on this occasion the city’s way of functioning, the dynamics of its changes and the needs of its inhabitants. As the photo database grew, people involved in the project decided to learn more about the objects being documented, so they enquired about the motives behind the actions of the inhabitants. Why do they intervene in the space and transform it? Are their actions modelled after something or someone? What is the attitude of the creators of the “invisible city” towards other actors operating within urban space? These and other issues became a contribution to the inauguration in 2008 of the already mentioned “InvisibleCity” Project (Drozdowski, Frąckowiak, Krajewski, Rogows-

² The picture database was published as www.niewidzialnemiasto.pl (access of 21.03.2018).

ki, 2012, 12-14). The title “invisibility” results from the fact that research carried out as part of the whole project “concerned elements of a socially/culturally produced urban reality, which, although visible in their *physical dimension*, go unnoticed by residents/users of communication routes and objects in their everyday routines... It’s a world next to us, but a world thoroughly *overlooked*” (Fereński, 2016, 73). The “invisible” activities of the inhabitants are spontaneous forms of creative activity. These are traces of being and inhabitation left by the very people who create urban space. “Demonstrating various aesthetics and imaginations about the modern city, manifestations of life and alternative actions against the urban standards and global aesthetics dominating in metropolises, has become one of the basic goals of the project discussed here.” (ibidem). The idea of this research stemmed from the statement that it is — often overlooked in the local authorities’ visions — the residents who are the active actors, not only modifying but also creating the surrounding space. Importantly, the practices analysed have material implications, thus affecting the appearance, organization and dominant aesthetics of cities. In this way, the researchers paid attention to what is generally considered to be irrelevant and trivial, thus completely overlooked hence “invisible” (Krajewski, 2012, 9-11). “The project was therefore looking for the unnoticeable world next to us, for the elements of social life or cultural phenomena, for the types of activity/agency that have remained on the margins of the research so far” (Fereński, 2016, 74).

In 2015-2016 I participated in a research project called “Visual organizations of urban space: behaviours, interpretations, historical and cultural perspectives. Comparative analysis of the iconosphere and its relations to the ways of life of Russian Tomsk and Polish Wrocław inhabitants”³, managed by one of the members of the “Invisible City” team, Piotr J. Fereński. The first stage of the research (September 2015) included preliminary exploration of the areas of interest. At that time it was possible to identify the most important elements conditioning both the former and current processes associated with the creation and transformation of not only the visual sphere of the city but also the styles of life of its inhabitants. We were interested in the appearance and character of city arteries, squares, promenades, parks, monuments or pedestals, cemeteries, commercial and service facilities. We asked about the views, ideas and expectations of residents regarding urban space and the changes taking place within it. We have considered the globality and locality of the city, both in the context of the identity of the places and observed differences between Siberian Tomsk and Lower Silesian Wrocław. In the second stage of the project (May-June 2016), we looked more closely at the historical and cultural background of the Tomsk iconosphere, focusing on selected parts of the city. We compared its space with the spaces

³ The next stage of research in Siberian Tomsk is planned for the period 21st of May — 8th June 2018.

of Irkutsk and Novosibirsk. We asked about the determinants of the place's identity and about the character of the architectural and urban space, with the elements of visual communication present in it. On the same level as activities within memorial sites or in the areas of cultural creation, of equal importance for us were the practices/strategies for the development of common, semi-private and private spaces that are manifestations of grassroots initiatives by residents. We interpreted such aesthetic, functional or symbolic interventions, leading to relatively permanent changes in the immediate environment, as creative acts. We were not interested in their evaluation in terms of form, i.e. quality of execution. Important were the reasons for the creation of objects, as well as methods used to create them. It was in this sphere of research that we were inspired by the "Invisible City" Project, referred to above.

Tomsk turned out to be extremely abundant in "invisibility". In almost every courtyard, whether adjacent to modernist blocks of the Soviet period (the so-called big slab, that is large panel system-building), or to unique, wooden single- and multi-family houses, we have found examples of spontaneous creative activity by residents. A characteristic feature of this Siberian city is its façade⁴ and a very strong division into representative spaces and those whose image should be less seen. The former are distinguished by the attention to the aesthetics of buildings, imposed from above (especially those located in the central part of the city, which reflect the sphere of power, the might of the country, etc.), squares, streets or recreational spaces. We won't find much "invisibility" there (with the exception of graffiti). The latter, in turn, are everyday spaces, where the economic and social problems of the inhabitants can be seen. Only selected examples of wooden architecture have undergone renovation, often associated with the activities of institutions or private companies located there. The rest, abounding in unusually beautiful ornamentation, are left alone. Their inhabitants do not have the financial resources that would allow for thorough, thoughtful renovation, which is why most of the wooden houses are in poor technical condition. People living there try to adapt the buildings and their immediate surroundings to their own needs using their own resources. This results in various transformations, significantly modifying recurrent appearance of the buildings. A similar situation takes place in the case of panel system-built blocks of flats, whose original form has significantly degraded over several decades. As I mentioned above, the "invisibility" present in the backyard areas was an interesting issue for us. In the Tomsk home gardens "there are giraffes hiding" (photo 1), as well as zebras (photo 2), exotic palms (photo 3), small pigs (photo 4), black and white swans (photo 5&6), ladybirds (photo 7), small chickens (photo 8), tulips (photo 9), Spanish bluebells (photo 10), toads-

⁴ I am referring to the fact that city administration cares only about the façades of buildings located on the most important communication routes, which represent prestigious spaces and thus are the most "visible".

tools (photo 11), and suns (photo 12). Of course, we are talking about representations here — all of them are made of the materials close to hand: old tyres, plastic bottles, used shoes, unused pots, bowls, containers, protective helmets, variously painted stones, wooden sticks and branches. It's a textbook case of upcycling. Residents transform unnecessary objects or materials into installations whose primary function is to “tame” and “embellish” the nearest — often dehumanized — space, as well as work to solve everyday problems and shortages. Bricoleur-like minds and hands are then transforming rubbish and fragmented objects into emancipating entities. Areas forgotten by the city administration are grey, neglected and unpleasant. Invisible objects introduce familiarity to them and mark the presence of the creators/residents who, by adopting an active attitude, thus decide about the image of those city fragments. These creative acts “give” their power back to them and the objects produced in this way are characterized by a very special position in the entire universe of objects. “They belong to a fairly spacious area of the borderland, drifting between the worlds of things. This state makes it much more reasonable to talk about the aesthetics of an *invisible city* — firstly, from the point of view of its creators and the process of creation. Secondly, not in the context of *appearance*, but in terms of function and meaning, and finally thirdly — in relation to the generally accepted social order” (Kiedlińska, 2012, 147-148). At first sight, these palm trees and toadstools send us back to pure kitsch. Through their fairy-tale, naive forms, pastel colours or general motley appearance, they are there to embellish and decorate the space. This, however, is only the first, very superficial layer, because in fact they hide many more levels — of symbols, values, etc. In addition, there is a distinct emancipatory potential there. That is to say, they are obviously related to class within society. In the suburbs of Tomsk, currently including areas where the dachas with small crops of vegetables and fruits were formerly located (today few of those remain), the magnificent villas of the wealthiest Tomsk citizens have sprung up. The arrangement of their lawns and backyards is totally different. The role of the decoration is fulfilled by ready-made items, purchased in garden stores, and the activity of the owners is limited to the selection of products, purchasing and placing them in a private space. The latter is protected against glances from the outside by high fences decorated with animal motifs (having a symbolic character) and dense shrubbery. It is completely different in the case of less prosperous settlements located in the more compact housing areas — within the city itself. The materials, from which their inhabitants create “invisible” objects clearly indicate economic shortages. People must put in a lot more imagination and effort to arrange their backyards.

Interestingly, the Tomsk local authorities noticed this unusual activity of the citizens and made some kind of a capture. For almost a decade, a competition for the most beautiful cour-

tyard has been organized on a yearly basis. Special catalogues presenting realizations are published, and for the best creators there are cash prizes. During the documentation of one of the greenhouses, we had the opportunity to talk to the author of the courtyard arrangement awarded by the jury. She proudly presented diplomas and newspaper clippings describing her work. Residents are adamant that although the competition is a nice initiative of the municipality, the financial incentives offered within it are not the reason for their commitment.

„Invisible objects do not fit in uniform, globalized aesthetics. They constitute a breach in it, a smaller or larger crack” says Kietlińska (2012, 150) yet at the same time, their authors create a specific aesthetic framework. In many Tomsk yards, you can see similar installations, not only because of the materials used but also due to the shapes and colours. They reflect not only ideas on the world of beauty but also trends within it.

The analogies mentioned are not visible just in a single city space — be it Tomsk, Poznań or Wrocław. My great-grandmother Henryka in her Wolin⁵ backyard as well as in the surroundings of her son’s property, including a shop, a laundry, and the wedding house, had been placing and still places “invisible” objects. Most often they are shaped like toadstools or boletuses. They are made of a wooden stump and an inverted metal bowl, painted in appropriate colours. Of course, these forms are not as sophisticated and extensive as the Tomsk ones, but the tendency is very similar and is not limited to Wolin. The photographs collected by people involved in the “Invisible City” project clearly indicate that the phenomenon described is very popular in the largest Polish agglomerations. The case from Wolin illustrates that it also remains strongly present in small urban centres. However, given the examples from Siberia, can it be said to have a global character? (I leave open the issue of whether it is about globality understood as the diffusion of certain phenomena, ideas, practices and objects, or rather as the universality of the need for “beauty” or, for example, to control your own space).

A certain type of “invisibility” (in this case, within the space of Polish towns and villages) was also researched by the authors of the *Hawaikum* project, Agata Pankiewicz and Marcin Przybylko. A few years ago, they attempted to document various aesthetic interventions in both private (primarily in the backyards and direct surroundings) and public space. In this way, they became the owners of a photo library with an abundance of pictures presenting plastic palms, dinosaurs, elephants, sophisticated flower beds, pastel paintings, stuffed animals, Greek plaster columns and spatial forms made of used tyres. Before *Hawaikum*, Pankiewicz and Przybylko had been involved in the “underconstructed.pl” project, dealing with unfinished houses in southeastern Poland. They photographed the “skeletons of dreams” of Poles, in the foothill

⁵ Wolin is a city of ca. five thousand inhabitants in NW Poland.

landscape manifesting themselves in the form of unpainted blocks of bricks or breeze blocks (often arranged in bizarre shapes). Their owners never inhabited them or occupied only one story of the entire structure. Perhaps they dreamed of a multi-generational idyll or comfortable, large rooms, but the socio-economic realities and individual fates have altered their plans. The desire to portray these objects was associated with a kind of protest, with disagreement and anger at disorder, aesthetic chaos prevailing in the Polish public and semi-public space. They asked themselves the question: “Why is it so terrible here?” (Pankiewicz, 2015). *Hawaikum* was to be an attempt to find the reasons for this state of affairs and assistance in accomplishing this task was to be provided by: Dariusz Czaja, Hubert Francuz, Monika Kozień, Marta Miskowiec, Marcin Smerda, Jan Sowa, Filip Springer, Ziemowit Szczerek and Marta Urbańska. Pankiewicz and Przybyłko created a photographic essay consisting of a selection of photographs documenting the “invisibility” they encountered, and the abovementioned cultural anthropologists, architects, art historians, cultural experts, writers and journalists were asked for commentaries in the form of articles. The word “hawaikum” itself was created for the needs of the project⁶. It was to be a key concept that captures all kinds of spatial forms presented in the book — “describing what is unspeakable” (Springer, 2015, 9). The originators of the publication have repeatedly stressed that the whole undertaking was not aimed at criticizing and mocking this domestic “hawainess”: however, in interviews or during authors’ readings, aversion and scorn show through in their statements, e.g. “it is not as provisional as in America, but it may be only for the worse — in America the wind will eventually blow such eyesores away. With us, they are anchored in concrete and will stay for a long time” (Pankiewicz, 2015). They also closely link the “hawaikum” with Polishness — “the West relies on reason and we don’t do it much. Well, we didn’t pass through certain stages of civilization development — either someone imposed something on us or we tried to imitate something — and we cannot make up for it anymore. We are unable to see things in context” (ibidem). Taste, in their opinion, is a thing conditioned by ethnic or national origin. Therefore, they emphasize that just over the German border space looks completely different, and above all it is characterized by a high degree of orderliness and smoothness. They confront the “hawainess”, “invisibility” with the dominant aesthetics, and that is why the above-mentioned emancipatory potential of these objects, and above all the empowerment of the residents while making itself present in the objects discussed here, remains imperceptible to them. The photographers look for the reasons behind this exceptional Polish worship of “hawaikum” in their Slavic herit-

⁶ Although the authors of the title took their inspiration in the exoticism of plastic palms in the native landscape, in Polish culture it may evoke associations with the well-known cabaret song of Wojciech Młynarski too, whose first verse is: “There, among the mountains of Hawaj/It’s a beautiful country with a Hawaj in it”

age. During the author's meeting, held as a part of the "CulturaLectionis" cycle at the FOTO-GEN gallery in Wrocław⁷, Pankiewicz and Przybylko claimed that the "hawaikum", love for cheapness and kitsch, is an innate feature of Slavic souls. The Slavs already in the 6th or 7th century apparently showed disrespect for materiality. They did not produce objects that were distinguished by special aesthetic values, the effects of which are allegedly still evident in the form of everything encompassed by the concept of "hawaikum". Therefore, the farther away from the areas with a population of Slavic origin, the less "hawainess". However, are "invisibility" or "hawainess" real phenomena characteristic only for Poles or the more broadly understood Slavs? These extremely interesting strategies of fabricating space are rather commonly found around the world, in varying intensity though, .

While Tomsk can be regarded as a city historically (through the activities of the Russians) associated with Slavdom which is not so obvious already in the case of equally Siberian Irkutsk (despite the dignified, impressive sacral architecture), the Australian cities certainly cannot be described as Slavic. "Tyre-Swan-O-Rama" is a blog that was created as an expression of a fascination with used tyres turning into white or black swans. You can find there not only the documentation of these objects in various colour options, but also the exact instructions for constructing your own swan. The author of the blog centrally placed the following sentence: "Documenting the tyre swans of Australia and the world" (Cathy Parry, 2006), clearly indicating that such objects are not specific to Australian continent only, but are a global phenomenon. A quick analysis of the Pinterest website seems to confirm this statement. This database of visual materials sent by users abounds in representations not only of upcycled rubber swans, but also the birds of paradise, crabs, butterflies, cockerels, various fish, and even characters from one of the most popular movies of recent years — the Minions from "Despicable Me". Entries are made by individuals using languages such as English, Spanish, Russian or Chinese. Importantly, in the platform's collection, we can also find images mirroring those seen in the backyards of Tomsk. Obviously, the idea of forming a tyre and a stump into the imaginary shape of a zebra or a giraffe precedes "Pinterest" and all other social media portals (which does not mean that they will not significantly contribute to the popularization of the phenomenon). We should probably ask how is it possible that people all over the world saw a swan or a palm in the tyre? For example, on the tropical Panama Bocas del Toro archipelago one can find tyres functioning as the flower pots, whose colour schemes resemble ladybirds (photo 13). The thing is, this beetle normally does not occur in Central America, so it is not about reproducing a form known to the artist from his closest surroundings — just as in the case of palms or exotic animals in Tomsk. It would be ex-

⁷ 14th March 2018.

tremely interesting to try to trace possible ways and paths of inspiration flow, resulting in recycled “invisible” objects. Perhaps it would even be useful to turn back to some of the ideas born within the diffusionist framework?

The objects described in this article seem to represent certain aesthetics of the space of cities and towns which is an alternative to the leading patterns. The “invisibles” are often assigned to the spheres of kitsch and bad taste because they quite strongly break the established and valid canons. However, paradoxically, alternative aesthetics have their own internal canon, too. As its basic principles, we can identify re/upcycling, independent construction of objects, avoiding abstractness, and referring to animal and plant shapes not necessarily known from the surroundings, as well as an unusual community of forms that cannot be denied in its global character.

The key variable determining the practices described here appears to be the rather modest wealth of the societies in which they manifest themselves. A “culture of poverty” would then be sentencing its representatives to solve their shortages on their own. In such conditions, satisfying needs (of various orders) would consist in the wholly creative processing/transforming of anything that can still be processed. The main source of these forms would be then an alliance of the economy and imagination. In that case, it wouldn't be about kitsch, but about designing cultural frames of reality, about giving meaning to the surrounding world and transforming it into a familiar, friendly living space according to the desires and capabilities of its inhabitants.

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PICTURES



Picture 1, photo by AgnieszkaSmutek



Picture 2, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 3, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 4, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 5, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 6, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 7, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 8, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 9, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 10, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 11, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 12, photo by Agnieszka Smutek



Picture 13, photo by Agnieszka Smutek