

Post-Pandemic cities #13.

Habitat Warsaw, an investigation towards multispecies urbanism

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GK: Centrala. Architects from Warsaw.

SI: Hello. Today, we would like to talk about our endeavour that is now lasting for almost two years around the subject of multi-species urbanism. And for us, the interest in this field of research began around a place, which is the the Warsaw Zoo.

GK: We went there for the first time since decades ago in the spring of 2019. And we understood it as an asset that, of course, is now a relic of another era when humans perceived nature as something external to them. We believe that the format of the zoo, this concept of combining conservation programs and entertainment is over. We can re-conceptualize this terrain. We asked ourselves how this land can be dedicated to Warsaw's animals as a hub, as a biological center, as something that is serving wildlife.

SI: When we started to think what we could do with an area that's so big, such as the Warsaw Zoo –which we have to recall, is a vast as Warsaw's old town and new town together–, we first began investigating its own history, being one of urban layout or one of its architectural gems, which are mostly concrete, modernistic, abstract forms derived directly from the Hagenbeck concept of creating a sort of scenographic set, for the display of animals. And also besides its physicality. We went on to investigate the genesis of the zoo from the perspective of the human / animal relationship we had in the city of Warsaw. So we understood that before the zoo, we used to to have what we call pre-modern intimacy when animals were part of urban life, back then used for transportation or food; butchery was happening in every neighborhood. Modernity instead brought the concept of sanitation, and with it, animals started to be concentrated in specific areas of the city. So butchery was moved. All the

butcheries were moved to the right bank of the river in the so-called Port Praski. And the animals accessible to the vast majority of the population were mostly for entertainment, such as the horse race track or the zoo. After that, we encountered what we call post-modern justification. And this is what Małgorzata was referring to earlier meaning the fact that the species conservation program has always been like the advocacy and the element that justifies the existence of the zoo besides the entertainment factor.

GK: Yes. And now we can see the zoo as an exhibition of animals and architecture, which is a constructed backdrop for artificial relationships. So we believe in the conservatory programs, but maybe they don't need it to be conducted in the middle of the Metropolis. We know that in the world there are about 850 metropolitan zoos. It's a huge number and when we will conceptualize them anew, we will, for example, think that the concept of a conservation program can be conducted somewhere outside of the city center. And so then we will have animal districts, places in cities that can be dedicated to them, to our neighbors.

SI: We believe that the district can serve many purposes, which would be pro animals and not pro people like the one supporting ecosystems and logics of animal care, fostering the city's circular economy, being a hub dedicated to preventing loss of biodiversity, and hosting nurseries. A place allowing a non-human urbanite to thrive. We postulate that the Warsaw zoo is perfect for this purpose, especially its physical location. It's in fact located alongside the Vistula river, which is the only recognized ecological corridor crossing urbanized Warsaw, therefore, it could be a sort of pocket, let's say, of the system in which animals migrate in and out the anthropocentric morphology of Warsaw.

GK: While visiting the zoo we understood how caged animals are important for the metabolism of the city. Even today, some sheeps are often invited to graze on Warsaw's meadows as mowers. Every autumn kids collect corns and nuts for the animals in the zoo. Every Christmas tree after the holiday season ends up as a toy for animals there. So one of the concept that we would like to analyze is how the animal district and its urban wildlife could be recognized as a partner in this transformative process of the urban matter.

SI: One way in which we're trying to approach it, from a designers' perspective, is to understand this quality of in-betweenness, a space between two ecosystems, which are the river's natural ecosystem and the humanly built ecosystem: an ecotone. We've been trying to understand how the existing structures could co-exist with the the river fluctuating between floods and droughts. Contextually the nearby settlements, such as Praga two in Warsaw, should adapt itself to host animal life. We'd like to break down the logic of a city subdivided in clusters and introduce one of organic transitions from one area to the other.

GK: The issue of what to do with the zoo, how we can transform it into the future fauna district, raises up questions such as: how would multispecies architecture look like? Together with landscape architect Natalia Budnik we tried to propose, for example, solutions based on landforms which are consistent with the way animals move through space. They are not dependent on horizontal surfaces like humans, they climb as well. Some of them fly and they are living according to a completely different circadian rhythm. Many species are nocturnal, or crepuscular, that means we can share the same spaces in the different times of the day. The question here is how we can think about the future architecture, bearing in mind that its inhabitants are not only humans.

SI: During the last year, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we brought this project to the attention of the Contemporary Art Museum and *Habitat Warsaw* was born. Thanks to the curator Anna Czaban, we began a cycle of interviews with experts in animal life. We are architects, and in order to design for animals we would have to talk with biologists, with ornithologists, with evolutionary biologists and eventually get to know more about our “clients”. So we conducted three interviews. One was with Andrzej Kruszewicz the Warsaw Zoo’s director, another one was with Emilia Skłucka, an architect, who is consultant for creating wildlife crossings alongside linear infrastructure, such as railways and highways. The third person was a Marta Szulkin an evolutionary biologist of the University of Warsaw.

GK: There are so many different languages that we can use to talk about animals in the city. So that was really striking that every conversation was conducted with a different vocabulary, in fact. And we think that the key to create a multi-species cities is to establish dialogues.

SI: I think that maybe one aspect besides the one Małgorzata mentioned with the understanding of animals’ circadian rhythm was for us to get to know their need for access. Different animals move in different ranges in the city, for instance, a hedgehog would move at night for about a kilometre. So we shouldn't think of animal transfer through the entire city cause sometimes the span of their movement is just very limited. The city is a very diverse environment for animals’ adaptation and we do not have to think of connecting everything with everything. In fact, each animal has its own needs and sometimes these are very little needs.

GK: Yes, a trap in the way of thinking about animals in the city is the polarization of humans versus animals. In fact, humans are one of five thousand species in this city. Therefore we are supposed to understand this proportions of needs. Another inspiring information that we received while talking with biologists is connected to the consequences of sanitation, because of it, we don't have biological processes which look “bad”, I mean the dirty aspect of it, places where nature can close life cycles by rotting away.

SI: Well, this means that if a tree falls in a city, it's immediately considered a danger. And instead, a fallen tree is actually a very natural life cycle process and should be allowed because of its capacity of fostering new life. Introducing a rotting infrastructure in cities can be a way of helping, especially insects, in thriving in an urban setting.

GK: So, what we understood as architects is that we have to forget about the beauty in future cities. I mean, we have to be open to some degree of discomfort, we have to bring back darkness for the nocturnal animals and be open to the rotting aspect of biological matter. And it's OK. I mean, we can definitely move our boundaries of comfort.

SI: Yes, in a sense, from a strictly architectural point of view, it's very common to include plants in elevations, but it's not as common to think of elevations of our buildings where we can actually host the hideouts for insects, bats, mice or any other species that needs hosting. Animals often need only a place to hide, a place to sleep. In fact even some very small yet systemic intervention can transform our cities into a truly multi species organism.

GK: Thank you.

SI: Thank you.