



**POLITICS AND THE  
ENVIRONMENT IN  
EASTERN EUROPE**

**EDITED BY ESZTER KRASZNAI KOVACS**



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Cover image: 'People before coal' action (Warsaw, 18 November 2013). People from around the world gathered in front of Poland's Ministry of Economy in protest of the World Coal Association's International Coal and Climate Summit organised on the sidelines of the 19th UN climate change conference. Flickr, <https://bit.ly/3wumj1P>

Cover design by Anna Gatti

# 4. Gaps of Warsaw

## Urban Environmentalism through Green Interstices

*Jana Hrcckova*

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When Warsovians are asked to reflect on their city, they eventually steer the conversation towards the phenomenon that I call urban gaps. As Joanna Kusiak contends within the opening pages of *Chasing Warsaw* (Kusiak, 2005), the city is marked by many small and large open spaces with an interstitial character that are seemingly ‘left-over’ and derelict. This is a result of a combination of the planned and the unplanned, as Warsaw has a scattered structure of buildings stemming from modernist planning and the after-effects of the destruction wrought by WWII, as well as more contemporary development. As an illustration, the reader can imagine terrains that span from halted construction lots and squares turned into improvised parking lots, through to meadows and poorly kept lawns by the roadside, to dilapidated socialist sport complexes. As many of these hard-to-define areas bustle with vagabond greenery and can still be found in the very centre of the city, both the municipal government and developers often have their eyes on them as sites of lucrative future urban development.

Looking at these green spaces through an ethnographic lens, this chapter analyses shifts in urban policies that have led from formal stakeholders trying to undermine the social life in such areas, towards considering the ways in which these areas are today providing openings for a re-evaluation of the city and their role within it through environmental considerations. The chapter begins with an exploration of city hall policies as well as the prevalent imaginaries of neoliberal



Fig. 1. Empty area in Mokotow district in the vicinity of a housing estate about to be developed. Photograph by the author (2017).

spatial order and urban life, which have paradoxically often led to both the production and disappearance of the gaps, as well as to their dormant character. The analysis links such processes with norms associated with the fetishisation of private property in post-socialist countries (Hann, 2005). Sonia Hirt (2012) once called this phenomenon a condition of privatism, signalled by a disintegration of public spaces and a belief that the private realm ensures a thriving society. Besides the centrality of private property, the chapter focuses on both physical and metaphorical 'clean ups' within urban space that have been facilitated by the city hall, which have made the existence of these 'unruly' green gaps in the city undesirable.

On the other hand, zooming in on a contrarian approach to these gaps, the text also highlights the often unforeseen social value held by the urban interstices in Warsaw and their unique liminal condition in urban space (Berger, 2006: 31). Using an example of the Jazdow initiative as one such rebellious 'gap' in the city's very centre, the chapter examines the dynamic changes of the discourses of the municipal

government in post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) Warsaw and explores how the shifting official imaginaries as they relate to environmentalism and value have been used to 'save' some of these spaces. Seizing the re-opened possibilities of city hall policy through the creative city paradigm, the activists at Jazdow subversively employed the official language of participation and public space 'activation' to keep the area open for alternative social experimentation.

Here, I use the term 'activation' as an emic term that urban activists in Poland have used, denoting an opening up of spaces for public use so that they can be filled with all sorts of social life. Urban activation thus perfectly fits with newly embraced 'creative city' approaches, influenced by the now infamous works of urban consultants Richard Florida (2005) and Charles Landry (2000). Creative city development preaches that cultural resources and the symbolic content of urban economies ought to be harnessed, and "local peculiarities" for economic development appropriated (Novy and Colomb, 2013: 1821). The recent emergence of environmental concerns has also been used as a way to articulate urban struggles, to link up localised issues with national and global ones. While urban agendas are often perceived as confined to a specific place, embedding the conflict within transnational environmental activism has provided a boost in legitimacy as well as equipping activists with new tools in their work.<sup>1</sup> For example, the air pollution crisis that has resonated amongst the local population in Warsaw has allowed for a re-evaluation of what urban 'gaps' represent and could be as an inherent part of the urban realm, possibly putting an end to authorities and developers seeing them as black holes in the city.

A leftist, Warsaw-based publisher that I talked to about what I perceived as a lack of social life in the urban interstices of Warsaw exclaimed that "Warsaw is no Barcelona!" Visibly surprised by my problematising and questioning the processes that might be behind a 'no Barcelona' vibe, she continued: "People in Warsaw always make their own rules. When the need arises, they will figure something out." I therefore hope that the chapter will reveal that 'figuring something out'

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1 See for example Timothy Choy's (2011) discussion on the centrality of striking the right balance between local and international expertise in environmental struggles in Hong Kong.

in relation to the green interstices and formulating possible alternatives for their future has already begun.

This chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork that took place between 2015 and 2018. I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders ranging from activists at Jazdow to members of other urban movements, officials and academics. Further data was acquired from participant observation at Jazdow and in various other gaps as well as a qualitative analysis of policy and media outputs. During my fieldwork, I was an active member of a community gardening group at Jazdow.



Fig. 2. Jazdow community garden. Photograph by the author (2018).

## The Social Life of ‘Gaps’

I have derived the ‘gaps’ concept from the emic way in which Warsaw urban interstices are discussed amongst people: these places are often referred to as empty or desolate. In this chapter, such gaps will be used as an umbrella term for the informal, interstitial spaces that often remain from wartime destruction or poor planning, spaces that either lie derelict or are not used for the purposes for which they were designed.

In eastern Europe (EE), and in Warsaw in particular, the urban interstices have a special significance due to particular histories of destruction and consequent waves of (sometimes unfinished) re-builds and constructions that have contributed towards the spatial organisation of the city. If these gaps appear at all in the literature, they are identified as being the result of post-industrial economies giving rise to abandoned factories in the inner cities (Edensor, 2005) or of urban sprawl (Sievert's *Zwischenstadt* concept, 2001). In Warsaw such spaces have been present since the destruction of WWII (when approximately 84% of the city was destroyed) and perpetuated by the numerous, often unfinished construction projects that took place on the outskirts. Zydek (2014: 76) points out that "Warsaw's emptiness has often had a planned character," as the city outline included monumental open spaces that have been hard to maintain, and often originally served predominantly ideological goals, such as the huge Defilad Square in the city centre that hosted regular parades. The urban development of the city was fully controlled by planners, as in 1945, 93% of land in the capital was nationalised by the so-called Beirut Decree (Kusiak, 2012: 303). The move provided the communist party with a free hand in deciding spatial development, stripping the land of its commercial value and opening possibilities for an airy, modernist development that extended beyond the city centre.

The disintegration of the socialist regimes ushered in further 'gaps' that appeared during the 1990s together with the destruction of public facilities and infrastructure, and sprawling suburbanisation. Urban interstices must be placed in the context of the post-socialist reality and "actually existing neoliberalism" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) that swept through the whole EE region from the 1990s. The processes that neoliberal governance unleashed led to an interesting paradox. While the urban interstices started disappearing quickly during the late 2000s, as they filled up with new constructions, others paradoxically sprang up in spaces where busy urban life used to take place. These new spaces arose due to failing public infrastructure and ownership irregularities. The fuzziness of actual ownership and the messy land restitution process contributed to the production of these new gaps. As Murawski (2018: 28) shows, fuzzy property issues in

Warsaw have been severely detrimental for ordinary inhabitants,<sup>2</sup> as they have led to the further exploitation of the already dispossessed while the wealthy and corrupt have benefited from this fuzziness by being able to manipulate ownership restitution titles and processes in their favour.

Scholars of political ecology have demonstrated the stark economic and developmental unevenness that can be found in urban landscapes (Heynen, 2014); in Warsaw such unevenness can be traced in the natural and social lives of gaps as well as in the gaps that no longer exist. Interstitial spaces are thus today infused with meaning stemming from such histories, serving as some of the most important sources of contemporary traces of the pre-war, socialist, but also recent capitalist past, through which unique ecologies are produced. Despite often being framed in moral dimensions of waste and decay, remaining urban gaps have been perceived to stand out by authorities and developers from value-producing structures of the city (De-Sola Morales, 1995: 120). They can be researched as a mitigating border zone, presenting limits to the omnipresent commodification of space, as well as acting as a last refuge and potential for alternative uses. They can be seen as places that are not “stage-managed for tourism or consumption” (Gandy, 2009: 152), or as places with ruderal ecologies where unexpected human and non-human neighbours can come together.

Upon entering my field, and influenced by the existing literature on gaps, vague and left-over spaces, I assumed that I was to find such spaces filled with all sorts of social life that had been squeezed out of the mainstream and increasingly uneven Warsaw (Berger, 2006: 31; Saksouk-Sasso, 2013; Anderson, 2015; Tonnelat, 2008). I expected to find tiny markets there; I expected to find people, who used these spaces as restrooms, meeting places, spots to take their dog out or sell crack, as sleepover areas, sites for game scenarios for kids or hipster hangouts, the world of the subaltern and the world that exists beyond the rules of the profit-oriented capitalist city. To my great surprise, however, I found that not much was happening in these so-called ‘gaps’, in a social sense. In general, informants agreed with this observation, but the range of

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2 As opposed to Verdery’s description of fuzzy property in Romania (1998: 179), which sometimes allowed people to manipulate and navigate new sets of rules and relations to their favour.

their interpretations has been a challenge to process. Some attributed the lack of social action to cold weather during the first months of my research in late autumn 2016. One man I talked to even suggested that the oft-unemployed working class whom he met while hanging out in such spaces simply “moved to England” after accession to the EU.

I believe that underlying causes of such dormancy could be clearly identified in the largely unchallenged mode of neoliberal governance that has functioned in the city for almost two decades. After the shock therapy reforms in the early 1990s and a subsequent economic slump that aided the creation of many of the gaps in the city, it was the 2000s that brought in a new wave of financialised corporate capital. Poblocki suggests that this was the time when earlier Polish “car boot sale” capitalism swiftly changed, accompanied by a construction boom (Poblocki, 2012: 272). The scale of development led to more stringent execution of property rights, making it more difficult to appropriate spaces with known owners. It is also vital to understand the inherent desire of the municipality and some of the inhabitants at this time to show that Poland was a ‘normal’<sup>3</sup> country, and to mimic the perceived ways of being Western and modern.

‘Hoping for normal’ in this sense can be linked to the ideology of post-socialist transition that understands the changes in the 1990s as a trajectory of catching up, moving back (or forward) towards democracy, capitalism and civilisation (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008: 321). Unsurprisingly, the prevalent imaginary of the desired spirit of Warsaw<sup>4</sup> mirrored the capitalist ideals of the late 2000s and 2010s, attempting to model the city as a sterile safe haven for capital as well as for the upper classes. In the case of the gaps, the ‘normal’ stands for a well-landscaped and maintained city, where the shabbiness of both the urban space and its inhabitants would be relegated to the socialist past, to showcase the ‘winners’ in the new economy.

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3 The term often used among my informants when describing their desires and ideas about the future or notions of a ‘good life’. Similar use of the term ‘normal’ in post-socialist urban space has been recorded by Fehervary (2002), who wrote about how conspicuous consumption in the households in Dunaujvaros would be interpreted as returning to the wished-for normal; or Jansen (2015), who described the yearning of the Sarajevans for a working and predictable state.

4 A nod to Bell and Shalit’s *Spirit of Cities* (2014).

In the late 2000s, the city hall unleashed a process of what could be called a 'beautification' of Warsaw. This meant not only making the city cleaner of trash and 'unkept' greenery, but also cleaning its public spaces of unwanted individuals. The ban on public drinking that has been in place since the 1980s curfew became more strictly policed. Similarly, small illegal market stalls were targeted and many legal ones had their permits removed. A friend made a comment that Warsaw from this time had the 'clean' aura that cities have under authoritarian rule—a cleanliness that is heavily enforced. The inspiration for such measures could be traced to Rudi Giuliani's infamous clean-up of the streets of New York and his introduction of 'broken window theory', which eventually became a playbook for mayors around the world wishing to market their "world class cities" (Schindler, 2014). An urban renaissance desired by some resulted in the displacement and harassment of others, and Warsaw was no different.

The often-dormant character of the gaps can also be attributed to a widespread post-socialist emphasis on the centrality of private property in everyday life and as an integral part of society (Hann, 2005: 550). Linking to the aforementioned fuzzy property issues in Warsaw, it is important to understand the double-edged consequences of the fetishisation of private property—on the one hand, it led to the emergence of gaps, as the rights and titles to lots in the city were often unclear, such that formal development was kept at bay, while at the same time, such uncertainty prevented social life within them, as such areas became fervently policed and thus untouchable by anyone save the (often unknown) owners.

The resulting relative abandonment of the gaps gave rise to a very convenient situation for real estate developers, aided by the city hall, who depicted many of the gaps as useless, dangerous and ugly, as areas with shrubbery standing in the way of the much desired 'densification' and a more compact city.<sup>5</sup> Warsaw has an unusually diffuse built structure, causing problems with the provision of public facilities and public transport and effectively enhancing car usage amongst some inhabitants. However, the quest for urban density has been used to justify

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5 There have been numerous events (e.g. the Dense City conference held in January 2017 and the Dense City Workshop in February and March 2017) hosted by the city hall to discuss the options for further construction on unused urban terrain.

all kinds of projects, often destroying green spaces without responding to the above-mentioned challenges.<sup>6</sup> The approach has led to decades of “wild development,” as inhabitants derogatively describe it, enabled by a virtual lack of binding planning processes in Warsaw, which has turned the city into a developers’ playground. As an illustration, the number of new developments in 2008 was equal to all new constructions in London in the same year, a city four times the size of Warsaw (Kusiak, 2012: 302). While such a scenario was to be expected on privately-owned lots, the construction and privatisation fever has also frequently affected publicly-owned land. In the following sections, I will explore a strategy of resistance employed by the urban activists devoted to preserving one such publicly-owned space.

### Gap Struggles

Here, I zoom in on Jazdow as one of the few cases where urban gaps have been preserved from real-estate development (at least for the moment) through the concerted action of local activists and inhabitants. I use this case to explore how urban imaginaries of city hall authorities were ‘opened up’ and redefined, where desired forms of urbanity could become a manoeuvring space for the advocates of the preservation of Jazdow.

The Jazdow settlement has an intriguing history: it arose in the very centre of the city as almost one hundred small wooden houses that were sent to Poland by the Finnish government as part of WWII reparations. The area is today approximately 5 hectares and full of lush greenery. The houses are municipally owned and were conceived as a temporary solution amidst the post-war housing shortage. Out of the original ninety houses, about twenty-six still stood during my research in 2017. Some of them were empty, some hosted the remaining twenty-five permanent inhabitants (as the city stopped allotting the houses and the former inhabitants left or died) and some were occupied by various NGOs and

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6 There are numerous examples of questionable development: for example an (ongoing) attempt to start construction in the middle of the Bemowo Forest at a lot between two conservation areas. Similarly, an environmentally diverse area popular among Warsawians around Czerniakowski Lake has been picked for future development.

activists. The settlement has undergone a slow dismantling ever since the 1970s, however it took until around 2010 for the district authorities to proceed towards a complete clearing out of the area. The district mayor (representing the centre-liberal party that, in 2020, still governs city hall) argued that having a 'village' in the city centre is a shame, as the area was way too valuable to host overgrown shrubbery and a few shabby houses. The area truly lies within the most exclusive zones in the city, both in terms of prestige and land prices. The Polish Parliament is on the opposite side of the road from the settlement. The unique position of the settlement is regularly highlighted during bigger protests, as the police often use the streets around Jazdow to park their radio cars.

As state power and money coalesce here, it was not surprising that the mayor's vision of 'acceptable' functions claimed to be 'more adequate' for the area included a new Japanese embassy and a shopping mall. This process interestingly coalesces with other well-described gentrification-like cases in the EE region through 'urban renewal' and 'urban revitalisation' practices, with strong state or municipal presence acting as a catalyst for the changes (Drozda, 2017; Jelinek, 2020; Pastak and Kahrik, 2016). Another peculiarity of Warsaw and many other cities in the region is that 'gentrification' processes occur in sync with shifts in property regimes, either on formerly public land or due to ownership changes and restitutions (often filled with irregularities).

Around this time, a group of citizens and Jazdow inhabitants started to organise to defend the area from development, forming an 'Open Jazdow' initiative. The goal of the activists was to preserve the living space for the few remaining inhabitants and to keep the area open for everyone, together with its wild character, without overt landscaping or hierarchical organisation, much in line with the Lefebvrian 'right to the city'. In this manner, the area would continue to serve as a counterpoint to the nearby baroque park with sterile and meticulous up-keep and set visiting hours.

What played into the activists' hands was the silent change that took place at the city hall. The liberal administration that had been in power for twenty years with only a minor break saw its approval rate plummet, especially after a far-reaching scandal connected to the restitution of public spaces and housing in the city. Additionally, within Poland, Warsaw city hall was one of the last strongholds of the once powerful liberal party that had enjoyed only very limited power on a national

level, as national politics were dominated by the social-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) Party.

The shaky position that the administration found itself in was echoed in their inclination towards experimentation with policy. As Brenner and Theodore (2002: 28) remind us, cities have become absolutely central for policy experiments and new politico-ideological projects designed to deliver changes that in reality allow 'business as usual' to continue. While the earlier rule of the liberal party could be described as full-throttle neoliberalism, it soon became obvious that the revanchist approach (Smith, 1996) of aggressively uneven and exclusionary urban governing had met its limits. In addition, the GFC<sup>7</sup> slowed down the influx of investment, forcing the city hall to limit its spending. The city hall found the solution to this conundrum in the creative city paradigm, which the city hall hesitantly adopted (see Florida, 2005). As several researchers have shown, after the recession, the desire for relatively cheap 'quick fixes' across cities increased, leading to a boom in officially-sanctioned, so-called tactical urbanism (Mould, 2014) and 'creative' approaches (Pratt and Hutton, 2013).



Fig. 3. The green space of Jazdów. Photograph by the author (2018).

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7 Poland weathered the financial crisis rather well, but it could nevertheless be felt due to slowed-down investment.

Based on the communications and the new projects of the city hall, as well as their hiring choices, it became clear that the city realised that to perpetuate the image of Warsaw as a cool and modern global city, they would need a few 'alternative'-looking areas, with people riding bicycles and at least a simulacrum of 'authentic' urban experiences;<sup>8</sup> delivering the urban lifestyles to attract the middle- and upper-class inhabitants following developments in other global cities. For example, Colomb (2012) has analysed policy shifts in urban governance in Berlin, a city that acts as one of the main sources of inspiration in Poland due to perceived geographical and cultural similarities, and even includes a discussion on the city's use of the urban 'voids' in urban development and marketing of space. Similar tendencies of rebalancing neoliberal development have been described in other cities around the world, e.g. in an article on urban development in Moscow by Zupan and Budenbender (2019) as "hipster Stalinism", a way of rejuvenating and greening space physically, without any attempt to address deeper undemocratic rules or strategies inherent to the processes of urban development politics and planning.

To keep up with the "global economy of appearances" (Tsing, 2000), several well-known urban experts and activists were hired by the Warsaw city hall. The newly hired consultants perpetuated the creative language following western European urbanist tendencies (and the new head architect gave a Powerpoint presentation called '*Copenhagenize Warsaw*'), although it is questionable whether they enjoyed any reasonable influence to push through their more radical propositions. Generally, the whole story echoed a familiar scenario of the counter-culture representatives in the urban realm being coopted by capital-backed political representation and thus effectively silenced (Frank, 1997). At the same time, however, it was undeniable that the desired mode of urbanity shifted and provided a degree of fluidity that led to the Jazdow initiative's success.

Tapping into the tendencies in the city council, the protest against demolishing Jazdow immediately took the form of 'community activation'. Besides the more conventional forms of struggle, the activists organised concerts, picnics, workshops, and started a community

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8 As suggested by one of my informants, a young female architect.

garden in order to present the space as a valuable gathering spot for the community. At the same time, they employed the language that echoed the ‘creative city paradigm’ and suggested that Jazdow could be an urban laboratory of a kind. Some of the otherwise rather radical positions remained strategically under-communicated<sup>9</sup> while the activities that fitted well with the city hall agenda were highlighted. The Open Jazdow group also made sure that they had a professional and very neat-looking visual representation of their plans and attempted to include ‘respectable’ organisations and experts<sup>10</sup> in their propositions.

There is a significant corpus of academic literature that shows how the creative city discourse often serves as a way to introduce and justify gentrification in impoverished areas (McLean, 2017: 41–42; Pratt, 2009; Zukin, 1995). According to this line of reasoning, public activation, artistic interventions or community gardening herald the upcoming ‘clean-up’ of neighbourhoods that turns them into a desirable destination for capital. The irony in the case of Jazdow is that these dynamics have curiously worked the other way around—as a safeguard against being pulled into a pre-existing government-business district with its sterile, elitist space. The discourse that the activists more or less willingly coopted thus acted as a functioning buffer that succeeded in persuading the city *against* development. It also ensured that the area could be kept messy and open, and created space for more radical experiments that would otherwise never take place.

### Warsaw: The Green Capital?

Besides the space activation and creative city discourse, ‘gap activism’ has acquired a new tool, as Warsaw has seen a sudden and somewhat surprising turn towards environmental issues. The spike was signified by an air pollution crisis that has been alarming for decades, but for various reasons only truly became a household concern during the

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9 An example of this was the pilot micro-housing initiative for the homeless or some of the commoning experiments.

10 For example, at the moment some of the houses are occupied by well-established NGOs. One provides support for migrants, another works in education, and there is a group of young architects. At the same time people who presented themselves as experts on urban topics, urban ecology and more have been involved in order to gain a respectable and favourable negotiating ground.

winter of 2016–2017. One environmental activist described his feelings about the sudden buzz around his work by likening his organisation to a rock band that had been confined to their garage for years before getting ‘discovered’. Throughout the winters, EU norms on air pollution were exceeded almost every day. In January 2017, for one day, Warsaw even topped the global air pollution statistics. Linking this to the aforementioned attempts to mimic the West, it could be argued that the January smog was a breaking point. Newspapers printed titles suggesting that Warsaw was worse than Beijing, to emphasise a cultural horror about being so far from desired western standards and core.

Amidst barely existent industrial pollution in the capital region, the culprits were found to emanate from two of Poland’s greatest loves: cars and coal. Leading up to this period, between 2009 and 2014, approximately 147,000 trees were cut from within Warsaw, often with justification and reference to the ‘modernisation’ of public space in Warsaw (‘Urban heat island’ report, 2014). However, with the upheaval over pollution, environmental concerns entered the agenda of both inhabitants and municipal governments. In its attempts to search for new branding ideas, the city hall even entered a competition ‘Warsaw—the green capital of Europe’ with reference to the large numbers of parks and “lush green space” in the city (Jakubowski, 2015). Even though the green capital slogan was laughed off by many as a poor attempt at greenwashing, it nevertheless remained in the official municipal communications, with the promotional video being played on public transport and regular announcements by the administration about Warsaw as the “green capital in-the-making” (most recently in a tweet by Mayor Trzaskowski in May 2018). Similar to other cases described by the literature (Rademacher, 2008; Szili and Rofe, 2007), environmental issues made a grand entrance in Warsaw and became focal points for manifesting rifts in state policy-making.

Amid the upheaval that the city simply could not ignore, the Jazdow area as well as other gaps in the city started gaining new salience as spaces of urban reproduction, as the sensibilities of the media as well as inhabitants became more attuned to environmental issues and greenery in various shapes and forms. The arguments at hand for a long time amongst activists suddenly gained power and coverage. The activists were now able to discuss how the vacant lots could vitally contribute

towards urban living as well as providing a refuge for vagabond species of plants and animals (Harrison and Davies, 2012; Clement, 2011). They discussed how Jazdow and similar areas mitigated urban heat island issues, and even tapped into urban ecology theorisations and presented these as options to be included in the official city policies, e.g. in the ongoing 'Adapcity' project acting as an umbrella institution for research on resilience and climate change in Warsaw. Ironically, the above-mentioned policies that had kept the gaps devoid of social action and allowed for the overgrown greenery to develop contributed to making such spaces even more valuable once urban space was reframed. The pollution crisis revealed the ruderal ecologies of the gaps as vital urban spaces, finally transgressing the dated nature-urbanity duality.

Moreover, the area of Jazdow, as well as many other gaps, underwent a certain metamorphosis of scale. Earlier, Jazdow had been perceived as an isolated issue—today it is viewed as part of a system of Warsawian green corridors. Almost forgotten in the 1990s, Warsaw boasts a system of 'air wedges' filled with unkempt greenery, parks, cemeteries or airports, which have been in place since the war—and which are the reason behind many of the gaps in the city's fabric. As nowadays the corridors are often built over, the topic of their usefulness for air ventilation rose to prominence in relation to the air-pollution crisis. Within a surprisingly short time span, the loss of green wedges was singled out as a symbol of wild capitalism, which should be prevented.<sup>11</sup> Jazdow is located at the tip of one of the corridors, linked to the system of public parks that penetrates the city centre.<sup>12</sup> Due to this positioning, Jazdow gained an unequivocal boost in the way the legitimacy of its existence was perceived by the Warsawians. As earlier rights-to-the-city approaches became intertwined with pressing environmental

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11 The existence of the corridors has always been included in urban plans, however these were not binding and officials rarely respected them in their building permit decisions.

12 While the effect of trees and greenery on the urban environment can be scientifically demonstrated, at the time of research nobody in Warsaw seemed able to conclusively comment on whether the green corridors actually work in their main task of circulating fresh air within the city. As one researcher dealing with air pollution told me, the corridors in Warsaw are simply a matter of tradition and "people sort of believe in them." Nevertheless, even without clear evidence, they have become a buzzword, a sort of long-lost panacea to smog invoked by environmentalists and the leftist opposition alike.

grievances, it became difficult to imagine that the city hall would move towards developing the area. Urban greenery in the gaps and elsewhere gained a new political and practical salience that could not be ignored.

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The literature posits depoliticisation or even a post-political agenda of green urban projects (Swyngedouw, 2018). However, at the time of the Jazdow case, the city of Warsaw was still reluctant to embrace the green sustainability paradigm, and environmental struggles had a unique aura of veiled politics, hiding deeply political agendas behind seemingly apolitical issues. By using gaps as a means in urban struggles, an intriguing circle in Polish activism has been drawn: the current situation echoes the activist scene of the 1980s around the EE region. As the 1980s movements realised, environmental activism is a topic through which it continues to be possible to launch systemic critiques of government and policies, by raising seemingly 'apolitical' grievances. In a deeply divided Polish society, the Jazdow initiative has thus attained a unique position from which it has become possible to critique and highlight other far-reaching topics such as the Polish coal industry, automobile fetishism or climate change, and link them to uneven development in the city and beyond.

## Conclusion

Through gaps and the interstitial areas in the city, I have explored how policy decisions in post-socialist and post-crisis Warsaw have yielded contradictory results. At different points, the imaginary of a global city in the neoliberal era and unique property relations have combined with a modernist urban outline that has ironically led to both the appearance and disappearance of urban gaps. While they have caused a large degree of dormancy within such spaces, they have also provided an opening for city residents to 'reclaim' them.

The Jazdow initiative exemplifies one case study of such struggles towards the preservation and rearticulation of urban gaps in Warsaw. By proposing an alternative approach to gaps, opening them up and highlighting the value of urban greenery, the Jazdow community showed that an eventual reconciliation with the goals of municipal

policy-makers was possible. Jazdow achieved this by taking advantage of a policy shift at the city hall that embraced a paradigm of creative city and public 'activation'. By making use of the new approach to urbanism, Jazdow activists essentially found a tool that enabled the preservation of accessible and non-commodified areas within the heart of one of the most exclusionary and securitised neighbourhoods. The recent rise of the environmental agenda has further supported the efforts of the initiative and provided the community with a chance to link their struggle to more systemic issues reaching far beyond Warsaw.

It must be noted that until now, Jazdow activists have been rather shy to use the full potential ushered in by the environmental crisis and to truly jump scales in their work. In *Cognitive Cartography in a European Wasteland*, Gille (2000) described the competing forms of invocations of the desired 'Westernness' in a struggle over a trash processor. In my case, the competing imaginaries of urbanity are only implicit, as one side tactically waits and uses the cracks in the other's discourse. It would be easy to criticise the approach for a lack of radicalism—after all, in order to maximise capital extraction in urban areas, 'weird' and alternative spaces in the city are currently highly sought after by policy-makers. However, after decades of tough policing as well as harmful and unfavourable city hall policies, the strategy could also be described as mimicking the power imbalance between the two sides of the struggle. The activists were manoeuvred into carefully testing their field of possibilities before unleashing action and thus far, this strategy has been rather successful. At the same time, in the near future it will be immensely important to develop the range and scale of topics that the initiative touches on, to continue with a simple territorial expansion to other similar areas in the city and the country—before they disappear, as so many already have before them.

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