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1. SUMMARY

The City Architect’s office of Warsaw, Poland has been employing a combination of soft tools to address the urgent needs of a city under development pressure, and to lay the foundation for the creation of a wider design culture on urban issues. This paper outlines the efforts of the Department for Architecture and Spatial Planning (under the City Architect’s direction) to be proactive and increase citizen engagement with the development of the city, in a context where not just the city itself but also the formal planning tools – laws etc. – are in a transitional phase. This paper looks at the combination of different initiatives in a ‘landscape’ of informal governance tools for urban design, with a particular emphasis on the ‘Warsaw Neighbourhoods’ series of workshops. Early insights and recommendations based on these ongoing processes are presented as tips for the employment of soft tools in challenging contexts.

2. CONTEXT: WARSAW IN TRANSITION

Warsaw has always been and remains, the epicentre of the most important changes in Poland—the transformation of the political system in 1989 also brought about a rapid transformation for Warsaw, from provincial town of the Soviet bloc to a thriving European capital, with 2004, the year of Poland’s accession to the EU, being the next important checkpoint. As such, change in Poland tends to radiate outwards from Warsaw to the rest of the country, and the same is true for spatial planning and design, alongside the development of urban space in general.
Contemporary Warsaw is a dynamic city that is still experiencing rapid development: in 2019 alone, the city gained 21,599 new apartment buildings and 175,000 sq. m. of new office space. Year to year, the skyline grows higher and higher with new skyscrapers, while, on the ground, public spaces are being modernised to become more and more attractive to people while new infrastructure, such as cycling networks, is created.

Polish spatial law, however, has not been able to keep up with the rapid pace change has taken in the city in recent years. For example, the last substantial change was in 2003, when, due to the need to align with European standards, a new Spatial Planning and Development Act was voted into law by the Parliament. The key element of the 2003 Act was the provision of two avenues towards building permits; depending on whether the site in question was part of an existing Local Development Plan or not. The goal was to encourage the formation of Local Plans and coordinated development; however, in practice it proved to be an enabler for just the opposite. As currently only about 40% of Warsaw is covered by valid Local Development Plans, and for the rest the dual avenues towards permits have led to a series of issues.

On the surface, obtaining permission to build on a site without a local plan seems more complex, given that the developer would have to specify design elements such as building height and indexes concerning living spaces, green spaces and so on, in addition to having to negotiate all of those. If a Local Plan is already in place, then only the building permit needs to be obtained—a complex procedure in itself, although based on established rules and criteria.

In reality, however, what was meant to be the exception actually became the rule. Negotiating specific conditions for developments outside local plans turned out to be, from the point of view of developers, easier than complying with existing local plans; therefore, much of the new development was occurring outside the areas already covered by plans. In a sense, it was (and still is) a race between planners trying to draft local plans for more areas and developers trying to build before plans are established.

In 2006, Warsaw established a General Spatial Plan (called the Study for Conditions and Directions of Urban Development) which became the overall framework for the future planning of the city. This plan specified the minimum requirements that must be met in order to obtain permits for areas lying outside local plans (e.g. forbidding building on designated forest areas) and also designated areas where new housing developments could be built. Still, in 2020 the document remained outdated and in need of revision, and while the process to produce a new formal plan is still underway, the old versions remain in place however, thus hindering efforts towards a sustainable mode of design and planning of the city.
3. INTRODUCING A LANDSCAPE OF (INFORMAL) TOOLS

Today, the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of the City of Warsaw, led by the City Architect, is coordinating the spatial planning of the entire city. Public participation and transparency in all the actions the City takes with regards to spatial planning were brought to the forefront with the current City Architect’s appointment in 2016, although efforts had already been in place previously so as to sow the seeds of a wider ‘design culture’.

As such, increasing public engagement within the process of developing the new planning law was one of the priorities. As this is, however, an extremely length process and one that is often not capable of conditioning high-quality architectural solutions by itself, other soft tools have focused on other fronts, mostly on creating space for and initiating discussions on the city and on design quality. Besides that, a series of workshops was launched that have tried to bridge the gap between formal legislation (or the absence thereof) and a more general debate that does not have site-specific goals.

Below is a brief account of the main tools employed by the City of Warsaw today, with a particular emphasis on the ‘Warsaw Neighbourhoods’ workshops.

3.1. Participation in the development of formal planning legislation

Under current Polish law, there is no legal requirement for substantial consultative processes for any spatial / urban development plans, much less for development occurring outside of plans. As a result, often the citizens’ relationship to local development plans is restricted to late-stage objections when it first becomes known that something controversial is happening in their neighbourhood.

Since 2014, however, the City Architect’s office has made significant efforts to involve citizens in the planning process and utilize their local knowledge to the benefit of new plans. Crucially, these efforts are directed not only to increasing participation in general but to transforming the way that citizens engage with the planning process – an innovative experiment for the Polish context. As such, we have strived to shift the bulk of participation efforts earlier in the process, rather than at the final stage, and to cultivate a continuous engagement. We have therefore introduced a three-stage structure, the first of which begins at the initial phases of
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the plan and focuses on knowledge – both in the sense of gathering insights from the public (via workshops and surveys, asking to identify valuable elements, problems, opportunities for change, etc.), and in the sense of creating a common base of understanding for what a development plan is and is not, and what it can and cannot do.

A second stage then follows when different conceptual versions of the plan are ready for public consultation and a third wherein the final design outlines are presented, both in physical and online forms, with the emphasis being on translating technical and legal elements into an easily understandable language. This creates a chain of involvement and a better understanding of the process, building trust between the City and its citizens and helping to reduce conflicts over the design in the final stage.

3.2. Mayor’s Architectural Awards & the ZODIAK centre

Established in 2015, the Architectural Awards of the Mayor of Warsaw annually awards designers and investors for the best completed work in various categories. Citizens have the opportunity to put nominations forward and vote for the residents’ award, whereas the City sets the tone by defining the categories. Last year, for instance, two new ones were included to highlight environmental impact (best eco-solutions) and inclusivity (best accessible building).

In Warsaw, as in many other places, it is typically the negative examples of architecture and urban design that dominate the public debate—where ever that exists in the first place. By identifying and promoting high-quality works, the Awards play an educational role in helping to shift that balance towards good examples. As well, although it is still rather a niche subject and, as such, presents some issues; wider dissemination is always a tricky thing while, for example, it is easy to treat the Awards solely as a promotional tool for the city administration. Still, the Awards create a much-needed space for constructive discussions on architectural quality that are more easily separated from current political disputes.

Along similar lines, a collaboration between the City and the Warsaw Branch of the Association of Polish Architects led to the creation of ZODIAK in 2018. ZODIAK is Warsaw’s Pavilion of Architecture, a place dedicated to architecture, urban planning, economic development and other aspects of the city’s built environment. The pavilion hosts exhibitions and a variety of events, from lectures and workshops to movie screenings in addition to, in more official capacities, meetings with the Mayor and press briefings. It also functions as a meeting point for city officials, planners, architects and citizens.
ZODIAK was financed by the City of Warsaw and is operated jointly with the Branch of Architects in its status as an NGO. This poses certain, primarily administrative, challenges, in addition to those regarding the identity of the pavilion itself. Given that is owned and managed by the City, the pavilion is meant to be a space as open as possible, not just to the NGO that initiated the idea but to as many associations and citizen groups as possible. After two years operating in that mode, one of the directions we are discussing for its future is actually trying to have the City be a little more present, and to use the space to open up dialogues about public policy, especially spatial policy, alongside all other debates and events.

![Figure 2: the ZODIAK](image)

3.3. Working in the gap: “Warsaw Neighbourhoods” workshops

‘Warsaw Neighbourhoods’ is an ongoing series of workshops that began in 2018, with the aim of addressing the particular problems that have arisen from the transitional state of the formal, legal planning documents, as explained above under ‘context’, and more specifically for those areas wherein the conflict between current and emerging spatial plans primarily concerns the designated land use. 14 such locations were originally mapped, the majority of which are brownfields and are mostly privately owned.
The specific issue is this: for the majority of these sites, the 2006 General Plan specifies that they should be preserved as industrial land. The reality of the city has already proven this to be outdated, and new uses are certain to be introduced one way or another. However, until the new strategic spatial plan is implemented, no local development plan can be created for such areas that would assign a change in use, therefore there is no ‘formal’ path for the local authority to influence any proposals. What can occur, as explained previously, is that developers can ask for an individual building permit, which does not have to take into account the previously assigned use. Again there is little room for the City to control or guide the development of such areas, yet, at the same time and as is often the case, these brownfields are now of increasingly high value as land for development, and as such neither the developers nor the City want to wait for the lengthy processes of first general, then local development plans to be completed before moving forward. On the City’s part, this is because realistically it will lead to uncoordinated and uncontrolled development.

Based on these conditions, the idea behind the workshops was to try and bring all three of the main stakeholders involved in such development plans to the table: the private landowners, city officials and inhabitants / citizens. Given this, transparency has been a key principle from the beginning regarding both the process and the City’s intentions. The main goal was to use these workshops to try and create a common vision for each of the areas examined, so in turn case-by-case and uncoordinated permits to different investors could be avoided. Results would then feed into the local development plans, when eventually these are put together - but the workshops themselves aimed more at creating a masterplan for each area.
A participatory workshop method (based on the charrette workshop method) was selected for the process and the decision was made to have the workshops be organized and run by an independent facilitator rather than city officials themselves. As well, three of the fourteen areas have already been worked on, with each workshop running for an average of three days.

The first workshop concerned an area that is partially (by about 1/3) owned by the City and is currently empty. Nevertheless, it still was essential to the City Architect that citizen groups were part of the discussion. Bringing the ‘neighbours’ to the table, however, proved to be hugely challenging due to the way the surrounding areas had been developed, meaning the residents there were reluctant to see any investment into an empty area while public urban/social infrastructure was still lacking in the areas where they lived. Public perception played a huge role and numerous misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the City’s intentions provided further obstacles. Turning to local academic experts in social sciences, we were advised to investigate the social demographics of the people living in the wider area and to identify who the new place might be attractive to; then we would invite a statistically suitable sample with similar backgrounds to participate, although this still proved highly difficult, with engagement in the actual workshops ultimately being limited and rather superficial.

In the end, this first workshop concluded in four potential scenarios for development which the City Architect’s office then began to look more closely into from a financial point of view. This process then led to another conflict, this time on the side of the investors who had expected the workshops to lead to almost immediate permits for new development. Eventually, a mix of scenarios was used to come to a ‘final’ result, but this was where the process stopped in anticipation of the new strategic document.

Reflecting back on this initial effort, on the one hand, it was crucially important to have a concrete result from this process; this is something that has been communicated to the team developing the new plan and which has been taken into account in the drafting of the new formal documents. On the other hand, from the point of view of both the inhabitants and the investors, there is as of yet no concrete result, as in, a development underway, which is something that can be frustrating. Yet, for us it is still extremely valuable, not least because the new General Plan and subsequent steps (the local development plan, the individual permits, etc.) can now be developed on the basis of this consensus rather than an isolated designer’s vision.
Building on the lessons from the first workshop, we organised the second one on the site of a former car factory, an easier case as there was almost no public land and nearly all of the land was under the ownership of the car factory (with just few other lots privately owned). Moreover, the fringes of the site were already inhabited, so there were actual residents to talk to, while an artistic foundation had already been active in one of the old industrial buildings for some time and which had been trying to engage with the community. In a challenge particular to this site, a citizens’ group called ‘The City Is Ours’ (already active for many years as a ‘watchdog’ for both public authorities and private investors) had been advocating for the site to become a kind of Exposition area—however we found that public opinion in general was against the idea, and eventually the group stopped participating in the process. Yet for us, this demonstrated the value of having different stakeholders at the same table and bringing the conflicts to focus.

The structure of the workshops was also adjusted so that the first stage involved city officials and investors only, who compared and contrasted expectations and needs on both sides. Spatial concepts were developed based on this dialogue and taken to inhabitants for further debate. Dialogue over maps and models proved effective as it allowed for an immediate testing of ideas. In the end, the second try at the process was much easier for all involved, however, the practical result is still the same—
investors and land owners came to the process expecting a quick route to building, which was neither the intention of the City nor the path we would have liked to take, especially without proper time allowed for economic discussions.

It is perhaps not uncommon in the European context to plan and organise such collaborative processes, yet one key difference is that they are typically employed in places and contexts where formal frameworks (laws, spatial strategies and visions, etc.) are already in place. In Warsaw, we initiated this process in an effort to be proactive about the city's future while the formal framework is still under development, rather than wait for it to be finalised. On one hand, it could prove to be a disadvantage to not have an established legal framework in place when discussing a site in the workshops. On the other hand, it opens up new possibilities to discuss the future of the space. Once the document is in place, it would be difficult to have these kinds of discussions—in the Polish context, it takes a minimum of three years to create these documents and nearly as long to alter them if needed. Therefore, having discussions based on altering an existing local plan is not actually the most efficient or productive method, not just practically but also because it gives people the sense they have to fight against something. By contrast, the 'Warsaw Neighbourhoods' workshops enjoy the freedom to explore open potentials.
4. KEY LESSONS & TRANSFERABILITY

Through the combined effect of all the aforementioned tools, in recent years one clear achievement for the City Architect's team has been introducing more dialogue and transparency into the planning and development process. As such, citizen participation has become a key issue in spatial planning at all scales, from small neighbourhoods to new visions for large districts and the city as a whole.

As Warsaw is rapidly evolving, so are the tools and initiatives the Department employs. This is an emerging work-in-progress, yet experiences from the last few years have already provided us with insights on how we can optimise the function of each method, what is necessary for each tool to work well, and where potential pitfalls might lie.

Firstly, we have learned that innovation is context-dependent; an architectural pavilion, for instance, is not innovative in itself, unless such a space is completely missing from an urban context that is facing investment pressures or other significant transitions. Particularly in contexts where such elements are lacking, as was the case in Warsaw, simple tools like creating a space to gather or a well-considered annual award can be highly influential.

When it comes to public-facing initiatives such as awards and architectural centres, dissemination is the key challenge, like reaching as broad an audience as possible, and making the discussion relevant to different groups of people beyond the involved professionals. In the case of pavilions and similar spaces, the key to success is how these are animated by a variety of actors and in different ways.

When working in a workshop format, we found the biggest challenge to be having to explain to each group of stakeholders their role in the process, the opportunities, but also the limitations they have. Without such boundaries, there would be no constructive gathering of information and comments. On the bright side however, this is also the most valuable aspect of such formats: gathering information from different actors in one place, so that every party can see the others' needs and be confronted with differing points of view. We identified a similar insight from the consultative processes on the development of new spatial plans; the biggest innovation is creating a better understanding of the process itself, for all those involved.

We found the methodology of a charrette workshop, already tried and tested in numerous other countries and cities, to be highly recommendable as a means of finding solutions to complex spatial problems. At the same time, workshops need to be fit for purpose if they are to be successful; patterns of land ownership, resident/neighbouring citizen demographics and other social aspects need to be
considered before planning the process, and the specific steps of the charrette method adjusted accordingly.

The ‘Warsaw Neighbourhoods’ workshops are only just the beginning; beyond the first four, ten more are planned for areas that have already been mapped. They are an ongoing experiment and each edition provides lessons for the next; overall, however, early results are encouraging for the role of such tools in complex, transitionary planning contexts—in other words, wherever the legislation is under development itself and there is a higher degree of uncertainty. It is a peculiar experience to try and develop a constellation of informal tools at the same time as the formal ones are being re-defined, yet what we are seeing is that such initiatives are highly valuable even under these conditions, and there is no reason why they cannot be employed before planning law and formal procedures have been established. Despite the obstacles that will and have arisen, mostly in terms of the speed of implementation of results, engaging citizens and bringing stakeholders together in dialogue remains crucial.

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought even more challenges to cities all over the world and as well as challenge how we conceive of their development. At the same time, Warsaw, like many other places, is facing a future that is very hard to predict and anticipate, particularly with climate change already demonstrating its effects. In contrast to previous visions for Warsaw that focused on explosive development in housing and other sectors, we now need to think in much more modest manner spatially, and focus on everyday living conditions and sustainable solutions. A reconsideration of traditional planning tools is essential to addressing the urgent changes already underway, and it seems that following the principles of transparency and engagement is the way to go.
URBAN MAESTRO

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