



ECOLOGICAL APPLICATION OF CULTURAL VALUES

**Placemaking for Sustainable Living: Nature, Community, Art**

**International conference (on-line), 6 March 2025**

**Summary**

The conference was organized by Prof. Katarzyna Kosmala and Roman Sebastyanski from the University of the West of Scotland, in cooperation with Prof. Maria Mendel and Dr Klaudia Nowicka from the University of Gdansk. Its main goal was to disseminate awareness which harmoniously includes into every community also non-human beings – various species of flora and fauna and the potential roles engaged artists in creating such communities.

In the first presentation, entitled *Holistic approaches to placemaking in urban contexts and the role of art*, Prof. Katarzyna Kosmala, from the University of the West of Scotland, drew attention to the conceptual ambiguity and complexity of the processes of creating friendly places for sustainable living, emphasizing the importance of reconnecting social life with the natural environment. Art and artists may play a key role in these processes, including human emotions and integrating environmental, social and economic conditions with architectural practices. The main value in these activities is therefore the pursuit of full inclusion of the most important elements of reality, by searching for their mutual relations and creating connections between them.

In the second presentation, entitled *On tenderness in the Anthropocene*, Prof. Maria Mendel, from the Institute of Pedagogy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gdansk, presented *tenderness* as a necessary condition for shaping a symbiotic community. We coexist in relationships and related interdependencies and *tenderness*, as a category understood spatially and affectively, opens the perspective of co-life, the fragility of which is an asset in the perspective of sustainable existence and development. The postulate of a *tender* state of coexistence – taken from Olga Tokarczuk (Polish writer and Nobel Prize laureate) – at the theoretical level breaks down anthropocentrism, going beyond humanism towards a multi-species, symbiotic community of the future, achieving political benefit from the intertwining of experiences known as different forms of experiencing the Anthropocene. In a situation of progressive poly-crisis, the postulate of *tenderness* expresses the ethical imperative to take action aimed at transforming human relationship with the natural environment and the way of inhabiting the planet.

In the next presentation entitled *Community placemaking – one step further. What if..?* Dr. Klaudia Nowicka from the Institute of Socio-Economic Geography and Spatial Management of the University of Gdansk drew attention to the need for a paradigmatic change in culture, as well as in the design and planning of cities, in order to ensure the integration of all living beings that share urban areas with us. She proposed a modification of the basic principles of effective placemaking, established by the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), in a way that is consistent with the concept of a community that includes not only humans, but all living beings. The processes of collectively imagining and innovating public places as the heart of such a community would require cooperation with various entities acting as advocates for non-human beings, and the main value of such effective cooperation would be dialogue.

The theoretical part of the conference was closed by Roman Sebastyanski from the University of the West of Scotland. His presentation entitled *Art as a place-making-community process*, intertwined the culture of social life (in the built environment) with the nature of ecological life, assuming mutual connections and equality/balance of these two domains. Art engaged in place-making processes connects and integrates with the everyday life of a given community and its political vision as well as priorities of action. Artists use appropriate symbols and metaphors, which effectively complement different languages of social communication. In order to discover the potential for transformation of the diagnosed reality, artists create participatory processes of imagining a commonly desired future. Through the relational dynamics of dialogical

participation, such a creative process becomes itself an artwork, in which each participant becomes an artist (and therefore a co-author of the results of the entire process). It is a continuous experiment, requiring participants to listen carefully, sensitively (tenderly) to each other and to respond ethically, taking into account the wellness of the entire community.

The practical and discursive part of the conference, *Artists' approaches and practices*, was led by Roman Sebstyanski. It consisted of five presentations as examples of specific artistic practices that support the creation of communities in specific places.

It was started by Pernille Stentoft from Aarhus, who describes herself as a wanderer. In her presentation *Thoughts about a psychogeographical walk through Sydhavnen, Aarhus – places, senses, notes, map*, she presented a psychogeographical walk through a construction site in the historic port area of Aarhus as an opportunity to discover this post-industrial space and the relationship of the participants to this place. The aim of this project was to build close, sensory (not rational) relationships with the surrounding space, which can create an emotional awareness connected to a specific place and its history. Such an emotional awareness requires openness to soft (tender) connections.

Another project from Aarhus was *In front of the shadows* by local visual artists Kim Grønberg and Klaus Marthinus. Its aim was to illuminate through art the neglected aspects of the democratic process of urban development. The role of the aesthetic artistic action was to make visible the historical features of the development area of the former harbour in Sydhavnen, in order to activate conversations about the city, intertwining the past and the future. In this way, art enables active citizenship, thus extending the democratic co-creation of the city, whose past connects with the future in the present.

The presentation of the project by the visual artist and educator from Gdansk, Iwona Zajac, entitled *Anchors*, also concerned the Sydhavnen area in Aarhus. The artist created two anchors from rubble, stones, broken plates and metal debris, with which she attached one historical building to the ground. They embedded it in a safe space and protected it from being pulled down. In this way, she expressed a kind of resistance to the dangerous changes taking place. She attempted to search for solutions that, by preserving traces of memory, would allow us to symbolically remain in emotionally significant places, ensuring the durability and continuity of relationships. Art helps to talk about shared feelings in a universal language when standard appeals for help cease to work.

In her presentation entitled *Actions for biodiversity*, Kamila Chomicz, a biologist, photographer and activist from Gdansk, presented a platform for cooperation between scientists, activists and residents as a form of building bridges between reliable knowledge and everyday social engagement. Such a platform for observation, exchange of experiences and support for cooperation between different social groups enables learning and development of community-based monitoring of nature, and thanks to them, collection of scientific data supporting nature conservation. Among the values and emotions supporting such actions are care and responsibility for the environment, the desire to find effective solutions to existing problems and the pursuit of agency in the area of actions for the protection of biodiversity of urban communities and ecosystems.

Blanka Byrwa, an architect, design curator and bio-materiality researcher from Gdansk, presented her project *Algae Community*, which combines art, material design, ecology and local community engagement. It focuses on restoring the habitats of algae communities, emphasizing their potential role in actively shaping a more sustainable future for the Baltic ecosystem, contributing to the well-being and future of the sea. In this process, storytelling becomes a key tool in explaining complex ecological issues, making them more accessible and credible. An important value implemented in the practice of this project is building relationships – between people and the sea, between art and science, between tradition and innovation. Through the personification of a selected species of algae, the project promotes emotional engagement and empathy towards the marine environment. Thanks to this narrative, the Baltic Sea is no longer just an abstract concept, but a living being with its own history. This approach strengthens the sense of responsibility and care, encouraging individuals to take action for the benefit of marine ecosystems.

The specific theoretical model and examples of practical activities presented during this conference will be used in dialogic workshops (*charrette*) organized on April 26, 2025 by Roman Sebstyanski. This meeting will concern the principles and forms of transforming the former Gdansk Shipyard into a new, waterfront district.