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THE EVERYDAY AESTHETICS OF PUBLIC SPACE*

Abstract

The main claim of the article is that everyday aesthetics conceived as a philosophical analysis of everyday objects and situations offers a theoretical perspective that may be applied to the aesthetics of public space. Analysed in aesthetic terms, the public space may be thought to be a space that offers an aesthetic experience to the widest possible public. I contend that the aesthetic quality of public space should be a quality that favours positive experiences of the everyday, banal practices taking place in it. Accordingly, designing public space should consist in making it “everyday experience-friendly.” My argument will be illustrated by the example of a site-specific installation, the *Oxygenator*, created in Warsaw by Joanna Rajkowska, whose intention was to offer people an ordinary place where they could meet in a “healthy atmosphere.”

Keywords:

aesthetics, everyday aesthetics, public space, Joanna Rajkowska

1. A SOCIAL AESTHETICS

The concept of public space is used mainly by urban planners, architects, or landscape designers and is usually analysed in social or political terms; as such, it is often conceived of as a common good. It is thought to be a space that can favour or corrupt interpersonal relations, which is one of the reasons why it should be carefully designed and managed. Although its aesthetic aspects come to the foreground within professional discussion, quite often, debaters tend to understand aesthetics in a very general way – either as adding aesthetic qualities to public spaces and buildings or as creating public art. Given the political

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significance of public space, the above approach has recently been backed up by the idea of thinking of politics itself in aesthetic terms.¹

It seems however, that the above perspectives remain blind to an issue that is crucial when the aesthetic dimension of public space is to be taken into consideration, namely, the fact that a public space – understood in aesthetic terms – is a space that is public only in so far as its aesthetic qualities are public.² From this point of view, such urban phenomena that endanger public spaces, such as gentrification or privatization of space, are not only political but also aesthetic. One may even venture the claim that they are aesthetic above all, as they are sensed well before they are described in a discourse.

It is generally agreed that “convivial spaces”³ or “third places,” that is, “informal public gathering places”⁴ located in between “first places” (homes) and “second places” (offices), are indispensable elements of contemporary cities if they are supposed to be liveable environments for their dwellers, who need occasions and places where they can freely meet, exchange ideas, and solve daily problems. If such places are to exist – and where the proof of their existence is given by the numbers of people gathering in them – they have to be designed and managed in such a way as to be inviting and inclusive. Arnold Berleant postulates creation of social aesthetics that would be an “art of complex social and environmental organization,” claiming that it “may [...] *be* a kind of environmental aesthetics”⁵ able to create certain social situations. He describes the latter as follows:

A social situation, then, displays the characteristics of an aesthetic situation when its perceptual and other characteristic aesthetic features predominate: full acceptance of others, heightened perception, particularly of sensuous qualities, the freshness and excitement of discovery, recognition of the uniqueness of the person and the situation, mutual responsiveness, an occasion experienced as connected and integrated, the abandonment of separateness for full personal involvement, and a relinquishing of the restrictions and exclusivity that obstruct appreciation. A social aesthetic, then, is full integration, integration equally of the personal and the social, a goal as much social as it is aesthetic.⁶

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006); Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

² Cf. the volume *Esthétique et espace public* of the journal *Cosmopolitique* 15, 2007.

³ Henry Shaftoe, *Convivial Urban Spaces: Creating Effective Public Places* (London: Earthscan, 2008), 56–63.

⁴ Ray Oldenburg, “Our Vanishing «Third Places»,” *Planning Commissioners Journal* 25, (1996/1997): 6–10.

⁵ Arnold Berleant, “Ideas for a Social Aesthetics,” in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 30; original italics.

⁶ Berleant, “Ideas for a Social Aesthetics,” 31.

It is through the lenses of this theory that the issue of the aesthetics of public space should be discussed. Two questions are of primary importance for such a discussion: what does it mean for a public space to be aesthetic? What aesthetic values should a space have in order to be public?

In what follows, I shall try to offer a provisional answer to these questions by referring to the concept of everyday aesthetics and by illustrating my argument with an example of a “convivial place” created a decade ago in Warsaw.

2. PUBLIC SPACE AND EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

Public space may be understood in aesthetic terms as a space whose aesthetic values are or may be shared by people in the sense that they are publicly accessible or – in other words – as a space which is “an aesthetic common”⁷ offering an aesthetic experience to the wider public. Of course, an aesthetic experience does not necessarily have to be positive, but if a public space is to exist, that is, if it is to attract people, it should be a space that generates positive aesthetic experiences. It has to be a space that invites as many people as possible and thus is shared by them in the simplest sense of physical presence or engagement (etymologically speaking the adjective *convivial* comes from “living together”). Only in this way can a place really be a common place. In other words, a public space is truly public when it is lively, when it creates occasions for various people to meet, preventing them from privatizing a place that they might otherwise consider solely their own. As such, it should be as inclusive as possible or otherwise it follows the risk of being public only nominally.

Of course, such a cursory definition may sound utopian, it may even seem to be an expression of a totalitarian idea based on the assumption that what is needed is a space devoid of any sort of conflicts and hence on the idea that a public space is a space where people are perforce harmonized and unified. Yet, it does not have to be so; as I contend, it is possible to create an aesthetic public space that is heterogeneous in the sense that it is open to various, sometimes discordant, aesthetic experiences. Everyday aesthetics understood as a theoretical approach with practical ramifications seems to open up the possibility of achieving this goal – that is, it allows one to create a space welcoming different subjects without forcing them to be alike even though a sort of aesthetic consensus has to be achieved.⁸

⁷ Arnold Berleant, “The Aesthetic Politics of Environment,” in *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts. New and Recent Essays* (Farham: Ashgate, 2012), 181–193.

⁸ Cf. Johannes Müller-Salo, “Informed Aesthetic Consensus and the Creation of Urban Environments,” *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies* 2–3 (2018).

If we think of a public space in aesthetic terms, it is useful to replace the idea of public space with the idea of cityscape or – putting it more generally – landscape. A landscape is a phenomenon that is aesthetic *par excellence* and combines publicness and space.

On the one hand, the idea of landscape stems from the tradition of depicting picturesque views, places which public taste acknowledged as aesthetically appealing and hence worthy of an artistic record; on the other, it is rooted in administrative issues, since it used to be associated with a space understood in a political sense – that is, possessing publicly recognized borders and populated by a community.⁹ In other words, the landscape may be seen as “a travelling concept,”¹⁰ moving across different disciplines, some of which underline its aesthetic or intersubjective aspects whereas others focus on its objective dimension.

This duplicity is very well illustrated by a concise definition of the term *landscape* offered in 2000 by the European Landscape Convention (ELC) that states that a landscape is “an area, as perceived by people.”¹¹ It is enough to follow the etymology of the term *aesthetics* in order to handle the word *perception* used in the definition as a metonymy standing for aesthetic experience in general. As a result, a landscape turns out to be “an area (or public space) as aesthetically experienced by people.”

Even if it is a purely bureaucratic document, the ELC is conceptually important as it promotes a conspicuous theoretical shift. The landscape – as is explained in the preamble – is not conceived of as an aesthetically or otherwise spectacular place. A landscape – or cityscape as a sort of landscape – may be ordinary, dull, even degraded in every possible respect and nevertheless it is, as such, worthy of attention and proper management, including protection.

This break with the aesthetic tradition is based on yet another twist. Contrary to the approaches that treated landscapes as objective and hence possible to identify and define via an external observer – be it a lawgiver, geographer, or historian – the convention treats landscapes as spaces which exist in so far as they are lived by people who reside in them and who experience them one way or another. What is more, in many respects, such everyday landscapes are even more important than the spectacular ones, as they are the areas where people usually dwell and thus are associated with their identity.

⁹ See e.g. Kenneth R. Olwig, “Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, no. 4 (1996): 630–653.

¹⁰ Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002).

¹¹ “The European Landscape Convention,” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/landscape/about-the-convention>, accessed December 15, 2018.

Assuming this perspective, one should think of a cityscape mainly in emic terms, that is, think of it as a space which is experienced from within by people. What then makes a cityscape worthy of consideration is the fact that what counts more is how it is experienced by people and less what it is in itself, even if it may in fact have an “outstanding universal value”¹² measured by an objective criterion.

In other words, the ELC promotes the idea that landscapes exist inasmuch as they are given to people in their everyday aesthetic experiences. It may also be interpreted as the statement that it is precisely in light of such experiences that landscapes should be designed and managed.

Another important step in landscape theory was made in 2012 when UNESCO stated that landscapes create “harmonic life conditions and wealth” and affirmed, among other things, “the importance of safeguarding and improving landscapes for the quality of daily life,” and claimed that “considering that the landscape is a common good, the right to the landscape is a human necessity.”¹³

If the ideas behind the two conventions are combined, one may claim that people have the right to a space that they may experience aesthetically in a positive way. What is at stake here is not so much a spectacular landscape that offers an extraordinary aesthetic satisfaction, but an ordinary landscape – a space that is experienced positively by people every day.

This is how, I suggest, public space should be understood inasmuch as its aesthetic aspects are concerned. If we agree on the above definition of aesthetic public space, then we may claim that, consequently, creating a public space should amount to creating common, ordinary surroundings that may be experienced aesthetically in all their familiarity – that is, to creating places whose everyday character should be such as to offer aesthetic satisfaction to people gathering there.

It would not be a gross exaggeration to contend that, contrary to, for instance, Chinese or Japanese traditions, the everyday has been discovered by Western aesthetics rather recently.¹⁴ Everyday aesthetics may be defined as a subfield of philosophical aesthetics that has been continually developed over the past two decades and based on the assumption that the traditional aesthetics identified with the philosophy of art is too narrow as it does not cover the whole

¹² “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,” <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>, accessed December 15, 2018.

¹³ “The International Protection of Landscapes conference results in Declaration on Landscape,” posted September 21, 2012, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/943/>, accessed December 15, 2018.

¹⁴ Liu Yuedi and Curtis L. Carter, eds., *Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2014); Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

field of the aesthetic.¹⁵ From this perspective the Western traditional inclination to reduce aesthetic experience to the kind of experience one has in front of works of art as well as the consequent assumption that only works of art have aesthetic qualities seem unjustified. Everyday aesthetics is then a way to “re-think”¹⁶ aesthetics and go beyond its traditional boundaries by paying attention to objects, events, places, and activities that constitute people’s daily lives. Although everyday aesthetics may be said to be a separate field of inquiry, it partly coincides with environmental aesthetics, especially when the latter is concerned together with human environments.¹⁷

Traditionally, the everyday was believed to be devoid of aesthetic qualities, while everyday aesthetics – not denying that art does offer aesthetic experiences – claims that ordinary or commonplace things, activities, or places such as a *prima facie* dull street in one’s neighbourhood, chitchatting with a friend, or sipping one’s morning coffee on a square may offer aesthetic experiences that are similar or different from those offered by artworks. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present various stances on the issue of the nature of such everyday aesthetic experiences. Suffice it to say that one of the weightiest problems for aestheticians is the question of whether it is possible to aesthetically experience the everyday as everyday, that is as usual, familiar, or ordinary or whether the only way to do it is to experience the everyday as somehow unfamiliar and extraordinary.

According to Yuriko Saito, for example, “what is most important for the purpose of everyday aesthetics [is] the mode of experience based upon an attitude we take toward them [objects, places, situations].”¹⁸ She claims that we “tend to experience ‘everyday’ objects and activities, whatever they may be, mostly with pragmatic considerations,”¹⁹ which makes us insensitive to their aesthetic qualities, and hence we believe that they have nothing to offer but mundanity. She continues:

¹⁵ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012); Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith, eds., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

¹⁷ Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Everyday life is so familiar, so ordinary, and so routine-like that it forms a kind of background. In order for this aspect of our life to be foregrounded as the object of aesthetics, it has to be illuminated in some way to render it out-of-the-ordinary, unfamiliar, or strange: it needs to be defamiliarized.²⁰

Defamiliarization consists thus in disposing of one's habitual way of experiencing his or her everyday. For so, Saito points out:

Bringing background to the foreground through paying attention contrasts with conducting everyday life on autopilot, which puts the ingredients of everyday life beyond capture by our conscious radar. But putting something on our conscious radar and making something visible does not necessarily render our experience extraordinary. There are two sets of contrast we need to consider here. One set is being aware and attentive, contrasted with going through motions on autopilot, although it is not an unconscious state. The other contrast is between experiencing the familiar quality of the everyday and experiencing its defamiliarized strangeness. That is, I can attend to the appearance of the vegetables, their feel against my fingers and the knife, the kinetic sensation of using the knife and the staccato sound it makes, all of which are all-too-familiar, or I can experience all of these familiar things as if I am encountering them for the first time. Both of these experiences require awareness, attention, and mindfulness and contrast with chopping vegetables on autopilot. It seems to me that the contrast that is important here is not the first set between being aware and sleep-walking on autopilot, but rather the second set regarding the different characters of the experience we become aware of when we get roused out of sleep-walking on autopilot.²¹

While I am generally sympathetic with Saito's account of what it means to aesthetically experience one's everyday, I believe that it is possible to reconcile the awareness and attentiveness with which one may perform his or her quotidian activities with experiencing them as if for the first time and hence experiencing them in their "defamiliarized strangeness."

Ordinariness and extraordinariness meet whenever a daily routine is concerned: every single time we are sipping our morning coffee, we may experience this act as an ordinary one – we have done it so many times in our lives that we experience it as an act which is so repetitive that we barely notice it – and at the same time as something new, that is happening here and now only once in our lifetime. We thus have an aesthetic experience that follows the

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Ibid., 24.

dialectic of repetition and difference.²² Of course, more often than not, we just hastily drink our cup of coffee down in order to have our morning dose of caffeine, which has nothing or very little to do with an aesthetic experience. There are many factors that are responsible for whether a morning coffee is put on one's experiential "radar" and thus enjoyed aesthetically, starting from the quality of the drink or the cup itself and the drinker's mood and ending with the quality of the place. Not all of these factors may be controlled, but some can, including the situational and environmental context. As Saito and others rightly claim, artworks may be very useful in offering people opportunities to change their approach. Sometimes they even require such a shift from them. It would be wrong, however, to identify this aesthetic potential in art alone. I contend that designing aesthetic public spaces consists in making them places where the everyday may be not only successfully practiced by as many people as possible, but also aesthetically enjoyed. In other words, such spaces ought to be those where the right to landscape is offered to as many people as possible.

3. THE OXYGENATOR

In a city like Warsaw, the aesthetic dimension of public space is a crucial problem. Even though there are a several charming places in the city, it cannot be said to be beautiful, at least not in the long-established sense. Therefore, in order to identify its aesthetic qualities, one has to go beyond the boundaries of traditional aesthetics, and everyday aesthetics is the right direction.

The reason why Warsaw has its particular "look" or "feel" is the fact that it has never been, is not, and in all likelihood will never be, a consistent space, because it is too heterogeneous and, as a product of its recent turbulent history, it bears traces of fluctuating antagonism. They are defined by three basic dichotomies: past vs future, local vs national, private vs public. Not only do these tensions determine contemporary social, economic, and political issues, but they also have a decisive influence on the aesthetic experience one may or may not have in Warsaw. Consequently Warsaw cannot be called a landscape or cityscape if we understand these terms in a traditional aesthetic manner.

It is then understandable that there have been many different endeavours to make the city more aesthetically appealing. Apart from reconstructions of historic buildings, there have been numerous attempts at adding superficial beauty to areas or buildings which were otherwise considered devoid of any aesthetic values. The most eminent example of such practices is painting post-communist blocks of flats in pastel colours. Although it is easy to deride – this

²² Cf. Elisabetta di Stefano, *Che cos'è l'estetica quotidiana* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2017).

propensity has been nicknamed *pastelosis* – it is in fact an effort to make the ordinary extra-ordinary, an effort that may be interpreted as an expression of an approach that pretends that the everyday is not there any longer, replaced by its “extra” counterpart. Another example of a tendency that is analogous but at the same time opposite to the previous one in aesthetic as well as social terms is an inclination to replace public buildings or sites with new aesthetically enhanced versions. One of the most famous central market halls (Hala na Koszykach) was torn down and recreated partly in the same style and partly with old materials, and it still is a market hall. Yet it radically changed its character and turned into a fashionable “food hall” full of posh pubs, while the goods offered there are mainly luxuries. The same holds true for all the new skyscrapers and plazas that have replaced old ruined housing and post-industrial sites. Even if such solutions are probably more convincing in aesthetic terms than the “symptoms” of *pastelosis*, they are also more exclusive as they are aimed solely at the upper middle class and at how its members imagine their spectacular everyday.

The example I would like to discuss seemed to offer a public space in which all the aforementioned tensions were somehow present and acknowledged, and yet instead of transforming them into insurmountable antagonisms managed to reconcile them.

In 2007 a Polish artist, Joanna Rajkowska, created a small garden in one of the downtown squares.²³ The artwork had a major impact on later discussions of the aesthetic qualities of public spaces in Warsaw. It was also one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary public artworks created in Poland and was interpreted in numerous ways but has never been approached from the point of view of everyday aesthetics. As Kaja Pawełek, the curator of the project writes:

Plac Grzybowski is a place suspended between different temporal orders, architectural layers, social groups. There is a synagogue nearby and a church, corporate offices and small hardware stores. Approaching the square down Próźna street is like entering from another world, another time – as if the ghetto still existed. Around, thousands of people live in drab high-rise apartment blocks – once the symbol of modern, post-war Warsaw. Among them new, symbolic, architecture has been erected – the free-market capital city's office buildings and financial institutions; top-class residential condominiums are springing up nearby. All these layers meet physically in the same space, but they are unconnected. Their residents pass each other every day, but they do not

²³ See *Oxygenator. Grzybowski Square in Warsaw*, documentary film by Joanna Rajkowska, 18:05, 2007, Poland, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/rajkowska-joanna-dotleniacz-plac-grzybowski-w-warszawie>, accessed December 15, 2018; *Obieg* 1–2 (81–82), *Dotleniacz /Oxygenator*, 2010; Ewa Gorządek, *The Oxygenator – Joanna Rajkowska*, posted January 2015, <https://culture.pl/en/work/the-oxygenator-joanna-rajkowska>, accessed December 15, 2018.

communicate – their common space virtually does not exist. The place's identity is fragmented, no single narrative exists. The atomised present is based on those different, incompatible layers, it is fragile, there are gaps in it, places that need to be filled, in which there sometimes flashes some afterimage of the past. The past is a sensitive subject, usually perceived as history, a duty, a form of our thinking about the past.²⁴

Grzybowski square, where her *Oxygenator* was set up, is one of the historic squares located in the heart of the city. It was designed in the 19th century; during WWII it was a part of the ghetto and subsequently destroyed and then rebuilt. For many decades it was a dull place surrounded mainly by greyish modernist blocks of flats (never painted in pastel colours) and hosted, among other things, the Jewish Theatre. In recent years it has been surrounded by numerous glass-and-steel skyscrapers built for international companies or as luxury apartments. As a result, the square became a sort of “non-place” where hardly anyone wanted to spend time or identify with.



Fig. 1. Warsaw, Grzybowski Square in the late 19th century. Photo: Public Domain.

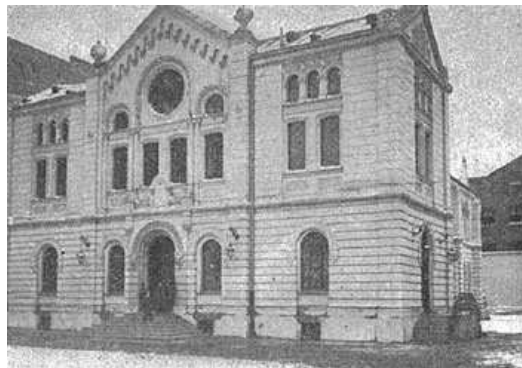


Fig. 2. Nożyk Synagogue, built in 1898–1902 next to Grzybowski Square. Today the only surviving prewar Jewish prayer house in Warsaw. Photo: Public Domain.

It is in this particular urban context that Rajkowska decided to install an artificial pond emitting oxygenated vapour and surrounded by a garden comprising rather ordinary plants. It was supposed to be a place inviting people to gather, spend some time in a friendly and healthy atmosphere, and enjoy the site. The work was intended to be open to everyone and in fact – despite inevitable criticisms on behalf of city authorities as well as certain city dwellers

²⁴ “Oxygenator 2007, Grzybowski Square, Warsaw; Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle,” <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/projektyp/63>, accessed December 15, 2018 [the archival Rajkowska’s website still available at <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/>]

– the idea did work: people, mainly the elderly, from the blocks of flats as well as employees from the skyscrapers would come and sit together in this temporary neighbourhood. Due to the fact that it was quite unusual and made by a renowned artist, the work also attracted visitors and tourists.

The success of Rajkowska's work stems from, among other things, the fact that she intentionally created circumstances for people to have an aesthetic experience that spanned from the most bodily reactions to the transient atmosphere of the place to more intellectual engagement in ruminations on the past as well as the future of the district. Her creation was ordinary in three at least respects: it was a variation on a public park – that is, it was a sort of green space typical of cities; she designed it in a rather non-spectacular manner – it was an artificial pond with water lilies and surrounded by shrubs that could make one think of a rather modest backyard; finally, she created a public space which appealed to everyone's everyday experience and managed to make it aesthetically enjoyable.



Fig. 3. Joanna Rajkowska, *Oxygenator*, Grzybowski Square, Warsaw, 2007. Photo by Adrian Grycuk, CC BY-SA 3.0.

It was related to people's everyday experience because it looked familiar and offered a place for simplicities such as sitting on a bench, breathing clean air, sunbathing, looking around, talking to someone sitting nearby, etc. In other words, not only did the artist appeal to a landscape accessible to (almost) everyone, but she also triggered an aesthetic experience available to everyone

with no exceptions. The *Oxygenator* attracted visitors by offering them an “aesthetics of place,” to use Arto Haapala’s term, that – as he contends – is an occasion to “sit down and set aside the needs and demands of the everyday, and enjoy the familiar scene” in which we take aesthetic pleasure because “we know [it] well and because we are deeply rooted into [it].”²⁵ The *Oxygenator* was a space that could “hide the extraordinary and disturbing” and hence “give [...] pleasure through a kind of comforting stability, through the feeling of being at home and taking pleasure in carrying out normal routines in a setting that is ‘safe’.”²⁶ It was a place where one could “become more aware of the pleasurable aspects of the everyday.” It should be added that it provided all its visitors with an aesthetic common in the form of clean air, a nice view, and tranquillity.

At the same time, by designing almost a rural setting in the heart of Warsaw, Rajkowska created an unusual space. It was deemed to be out-of-the ordinary by the city authorities, whose beliefs about how contemporary cities usually look stood in sharp contrast with what she invented. Her work could be extraordinary for another reason. Even if it did not offer spectacular or beautiful scenery, it modified or went beyond the hitherto ordinary or familiar “feeling” of Grzybowski square. Such was, after all, her intention. She managed to create “situational frames” thanks to which “a thoroughly normal everyday experience [...] appears in a new, exceptional light, in the light of aesthetic experience.”²⁷

Rajkowska’s work was intended not only to offer “an enclave of fresh air,” that is an enclave of aesthetic commons, but also social aesthetic, by setting up “a space open to interaction and communication” that did “not propose a single viewpoint instead, but rather suspend[ed] the everyday patterns, and creat[ed] a potential space besides – but, at the same time, [was] very much here and now.”²⁸ The visitors to the *Oxygenator* were then supposed to remain immersed in their everyday and at the same time to experience it as if from afar. Engagement and an experience from afar may seem *prima facie* irreconcilable. Yet, if we understand “afarness” not as leaving behind one’s everyday, but as a condition indispensable for putting it on his or her aesthetic “radar,” then the contradiction disappears. “Afarness” turns out to be a basis for an aesthetic experience of the everyday as everyday.

²⁵ Arto Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place,” in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 51.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Worlds: Reclaiming an Unredeemed Utopian Motif,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 2 (Spring, 2006): 302.

²⁸ <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/projektyp/63>, accessed December 15, 2018.

4. CONCLUSION

Rajkowska's *Oxygenator* was one of those works of art that allowed people to effectively change the way they experienced their surroundings together with their daily activities. This does not mean, however, that she incited them to experience their everyday as if it had been an artwork. She managed to create a space where they could gather and aesthetically appreciate their everyday as everyday despite all the socio-economic differences among them. *The Oxygenator's* conviviality was a part of the aesthetic experience it offered.

The work lasted not more than two months. After it had been dismantled, it was supposed to be re-installed as a part of the new arrangements of the square. This never happened. Nevertheless, after initial doubts the city authorities decided to follow the artist's idea and, while reconstructing the square, they opted for a project inspired by Rajkowska's idea.²⁹ The conceptual and stylistic differences between her project and the urban new setting are obvious.

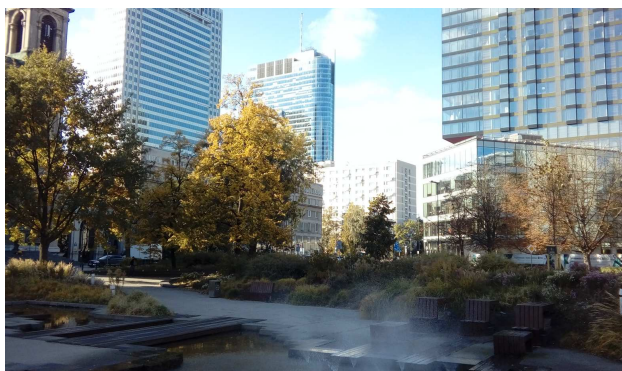


Fig. 4-5. Warsaw, Grzybowski Square. The place where Rajkowska's installation *Oxygenator* was located. The state after reconstruction of the square, 2018. Photos by Mateusz Salwa.

The latter is much less, so to speak, radical and thus much less like a third space. Although the new Grzybowski square has lost its participatory character inherent to the *Oxygenator*, and it allows for different activities (e.g., skating) on the condition that goes on obey the established rules, it does seem to do well as a place where people from the blocks of flats may encounter white collar workers from the skyscrapers. And it is still not extra-ordinary, since there is nothing really spectacular about it (especially when compared to the office

²⁹ Gabriela Świtek, *Gry z architekturą. Nowoczesne powinowactwa i współczesne integracje* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 2013), 351–353.

buildings next to it), quite the contrary – it has remained rather ordinary and everyday in character. Paradoxically, its current “polished” and “elegant” look, which the *Oxygenator* certainly and intentionally lacked, and which sparked criticisms on behalf of the admirers of the *Oxygenator*, seems to be much less out-of-the-ordinary than Rajkowska’s project, as it meets general expectations of what such squares in cities like Warsaw should be like. No matter how the new square is judged, one has to admit that it owes its present look and atmosphere to the artwork which was a successful attempt at solving a public space problem by engendering the kind of experience that everyday aesthetics is interested in and calls for.

In cities like Warsaw, whose character is heavily marked by economic, social, and cultural tensions and which causes people to dislike these urban environments, a way to make them change their mind is to arrange and manage public spaces in such a way as to make the dwellers’ daily lives aesthetically satisfactory in all their familiarity and ordinariness, individually and collectively. What joins people is, after all, their everyday existence in an urban setting, that is, a common place that does not have to be experienced as commonplace.

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