

## Social initiatives as a means of participation in the transformation of city space

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**Abstract:** *Social initiatives as a means of participation in the transformation of city space.* A review is made of selected social interventions having the goal of improving the quality of the landscape in Warsaw. The chosen case studies also illustrate a typology of social activities carried out to improve city public spaces and greenery. The initiatives have taken place during the past several years, starting from 2007 (the year of the first known social action to improve the landscape: “Dotleniacz/Oxygenator”, created by Joanna Rajkowska). Since that time there has been a noticeable increase in social expectations in many areas of life, including the creation of public city space. From the second half of the first decade of the 21st century we can observe more and more social initiatives which may be considered a reaction to the low quality of Polish city space. The presented examples illustrate a trend for the transformation of city space by means of actions organized by nongovernmental organizations and non-associated activists.

*Key words:* city landscape, social activities in the public space, social activities for landscaping, social participation, urban gardening

### INTRODUCTION

Nongovernmental organizations and foundations, which are the main organizers of various social activities in cities, show through their actions the most

current social needs in recreating city space. We may regard these initiatives as something of a “first-aid kit” for urban problems – in many cases social initiatives are the first step towards transforming city spaces in need of modernization. We can see that organized initiatives take place mainly in two kinds of city spaces: firstly in the most degraded city areas, including residential neighbourhoods, and secondly in the most representative city public spaces. This gives an indication of what is important to citizens: firstly a pleasant place to live, followed by space to spend time outside the home. It can also be clearly observed that many of these actions include the modernization of existing green areas and planting of new greenery<sup>1</sup>. These small-scale in-

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<sup>1</sup> These need basic knowledge about ecosystem services and green infrastructure theory – the two most contemporary theories on how greenery (and ecosystems on a larger scale) are perceived in human life. *Ecosystem services are the benefits provided by ecosystems that contribute to making human life both possible and worth living.* According to the European Commission’s definition of green infrastructure, greenery in the city is also a tool to increase the quality of life. Social benefits of green infrastructure include, for example: *better health and human well-being, more attractive, greener cities, higher property values and local*

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terventions, of which the main idea is to recreate city space with greenery, shows how important for residents (on the basic level of needs) is contact with nature<sup>2</sup>. Observation of spontaneous actions in the city space can provide an excellent opportunity to obtain knowledge on how to create smarter and more pleasant cities. According to the New Charter of Athens 2003 we can distinguish four main trends in changes in the city: social and political changes, economic and technological changes, environmental changes, and urban changes. Under each of these categories, the expected influence on cities is considered – both for citizens and planners. These trends are also seen in social city interventions.

We consider here selected social interventions carried out since 2004 of which the goal was to improve the landscape of Warsaw. The presented examples of social initiatives show how great is the impact of small-scale interventions on the quality of living in the city. Nongovernmental organizations, through their actions, highlight the most pressing issues for urban residents. It has been observed that one of the causes of social activation of the city's residents is a reaction to the gradual degradation of Warsaw's urban spaces in four areas: physical, social, aesthetic and natural [Domanowska

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*distinctiveness, enhanced tourism and recreation opportunities* (from the European Commission brochure "Building a Green Infrastructure for Europe", European Union, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For basic information about the psychological impact of greenery on city residents, see A. Baum, P. Bell, T. Greene, 2004, "Environmental Psychology", Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk.

2014]. The selected examples indicate the needs and expectations of citizens concerning the modernization of degraded areas. They also show that increasing the amount and quality of greenery in the city is seen as one of the best tools to improve the city space.

The political backdrop to the problem is that since the first decade of the 21st century there has been a rapid increase in the interest of city inhabitants in transforming and improving their own place of living. There are several reasons why local activism has begun to gain popularity in Polish cities. First, Polish accession to the European Union has opened a new period of social participation. The new political situation and opening of borders gave Poles a sense of equal opportunity with the countries of Western Europe, and the end of the period of Poland's association with the countries of Eastern Europe. Another reason is the increase in knowledge about the Polish spatial planning system, partly because of educational social initiatives. The next step to increasing opportunities for public participation in shaping the landscape of the city was the creation in 2009 of a Commission for Social Dialogue at various offices of the City of Warsaw (as well as in other Polish cities, for example Kraków and Łódź). This is an advisory body for the city authorities, and may include individual residents and representatives of nongovernmental organizations and foundations (during meetings, a given range of current issues relating to the commission's area of interest are discussed). The Commission for Social Dialogue is one of the first steps in

the creation of a civic society. Public participation in the urban planning decision-making process, respected by the authorities, forms part of the broader concept of democracy [Siemiński 2007].

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials which were used to prepare a review of social activities having an impact on city landscape quality were collected by the author through her work for nongovernmental organizations in 2007–2013. The starting point of the period of study is defined by the first known social action to improve the landscape: “Dotleniacz/Oxygenator”, created by Joanna Rajkowska.

Basic materials for the article were gathered by the author by mapping and describing (based on the same questionnaire) more than one hundred social interventions on the Map of Social Interventions<sup>3</sup>. The mapped interventions were required to fulfill several conditions (Appendix):

- they took place in Polish city public space or in city parks or squares (so-called activities for landscaping);
- they were a social response to city space degradation (activities such as city space modernization, creation of new public green areas, increasing of the amount of greenery in the city);
- they took place after 2004;
- they involved the participation of local inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup> The map was prepared by Monika Domanowska for the Sendzimir Foundation and is published on the Foundation’s webpage: <http://www.uslugie-kosystemow.pl/?q=mapa>.

Only a few of the mapped interventions were selected for inclusion in this article. All of them took place in Warsaw over the past eight years. The interventions described here were chosen because of their diversity, the goal being to illustrate the full range of participatory activities for landscaping. The material analyzed consisted of inventoried social initiatives which took place in:

- city parks – 23 social initiatives;
- green private gardens and terraces – 32 social initiatives;
- green streets and city squares – 45 social initiatives.

The cities with most inventoried initiatives were Warsaw (33 initiatives), Kraków (9 initiatives), Gdańsk (8 initiatives), Łódź (13 initiatives), Poznań (12 initiatives), and Zielona Góra, Wrocław, Olsztyn, Opole, Lublin and Białystok (a total of 27 initiatives).

## RESULTS – A TYPOLOGY OF PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITIES FOR LANDSCAPING

On the basis of the Map of Social Interventions described in the previous section, it was possible to construct a typology of participatory activities for landscaping. Types of participatory activities for landscaping were also identified on the basis of the most popular theory in social participation: the ladder of social participation [Arnstein 1969]<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> In the typology, social participation is divided into 8 levels, in three groups. The levels are arranged from the lowest social participation up to the 8 level, called citizens’ control. Every level shows how great an impact citizens can have in

Landscaping activities carried out by nongovernmental organizations are of two main types: those with short-term impact and those with long-term impact for local citizens. We can also distinguish actions which relate to a specific location in city space from those that do not, as in the case of many educational activities. The first type of activities includes short-term projects of various kinds carried out in a specific area of the city, such as:

- artistic activities, art in public spaces, installations, exhibitions (in parks and green spaces) – these actions may have an educational impact on city inhabitants;
- temporary land development, for example playgrounds which can be used only in summer time – this kind of activity may have a diverse impact on citizens, depending of the type of land use.

Participatory activities for landscaping with a long-term impact on the city space include:

- I. Point actions (actions related to a specific location):
  - design solutions and design consultations – initiatives to present new ideas for the functioning and design of existing space – such actions have both an informative

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creating their own way of living in the community. Every step of the ladder also reflects different stages in the creation of a civic society. Even if issues of public participation in transforming the landscape in Poland are not new, it is still considered to be at an early stage [Pawłowska and Staniewska 2012].

and an educational impact (impact on the creation of a civic society);

- modernization of public spaces such as green spaces, housing estates, residential courtyards, parks, green spaces and cemeteries – such actions can influence the aesthetics and the quality of city space;
  - urban gardening (including parks and green spaces, boulevards, and housing estates) – such actions can influence the aesthetic, social and ecological aspects of living in the city;
  - action against destruction of green areas – these initiatives are mainly organized by local inhabitants who use the green areas in question.
- II. Educational activities: lectures, picnics, workshops, training courses – many of these initiatives are organized to educate people about ecological ways of living, sustainable development or the creation of a civic society.

Educational activities not related to a specific location in the city space may have the aim of teaching about the landscape and promoting good practice in the development of spaces, in the form of workshops and lectures with the general theme of understanding the shaping of spaces. The goal of these initiatives is to increase knowledge and contribute to creating a civic society.

The activities listed above have different durations and may have short- or

long-term effects. Short-term effects are associated with actions implemented in a particular area for a specified time. Long-term effects are prolonged indefinitely. A classification of types of action into short-term and long-term is shown in Figure.

veloped and under-utilized small squares close to Warsaw city center. The installation in the square consisted of a pond with aeration apparatus that created bubbles on the surface of the water and mist rising over the pond. This installation gained recognition both among peo-

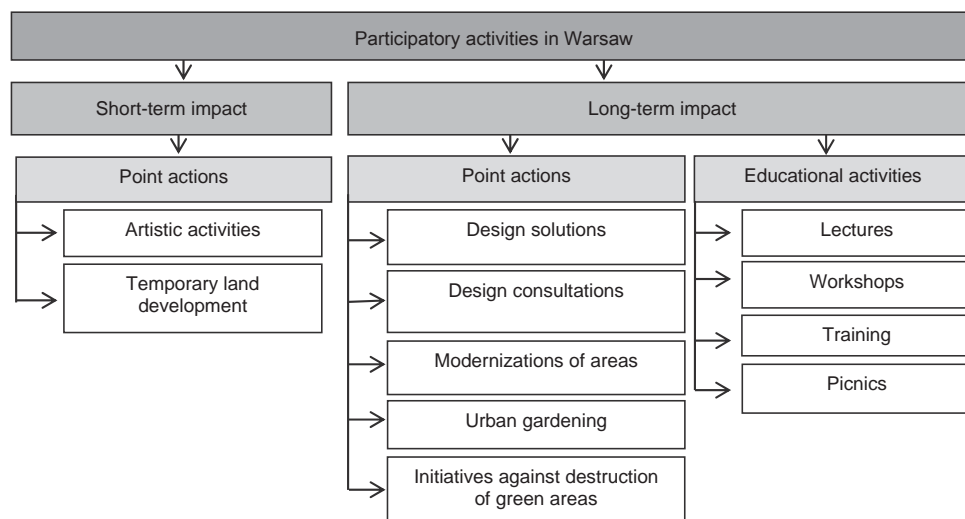


FIGURE. Types of participatory activities for landscaping

RESULTS – EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITIES FOR LANDSCAPING IN WARSAW

**Point actions – artistic activities**

The best-known social action (and one of the most important and noteworthy) in the Warsaw city landscape was also one of the first, created by the Warsaw artist Joanna Rajkowska. The “Oxygenator”<sup>5</sup> was built on one of the poorly de-

veloped and under-utilized small squares close to Warsaw city center. The installation in the square consisted of a pond with aeration apparatus that created bubbles on the surface of the water and mist rising over the pond. This installation gained recognition both among peo-

<sup>5</sup> “Dotleniacz/Oxygenator” was created in collaboration with artists from the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

test for the modernization of the square, which was won by a design in a modern style, although this did not provide for the continued presence of “Oxygenator”. The modernization was carried out between 2009 and 2011; however, the removal of “Oxygenator” led to a drop in the popularity of the square. Ultimately, the square has become a symbol of the “death” of public space and of lack of agreement between residents and officials.

#### **Activities in the field of education with the temporary use of land**

The selected examples are two projects prepared by the “Unlock” Association for the Improvement of the Residential Environment, implemented between 2011 and 2012: “M3” and “M4”. The aim of these projects was to enable housing estate residents to attend meetings where actions were carried out, and to encourage them to identify issues affecting the development of the residential space and identify possible solutions. Efforts were made to provoke local communities to engage in dialogue and cooperation to improve the quality of life. Additionally, a series of workshops and lectures attempted to indicate possibilities for residents of the housing estates to use parkland for active recreation. Based on the whole of the projects’ action plans in both cases, temporary exhibition halls were built in parks close to the residential areas. These were designed in the form of housing typical for the residential development adjacent to the parks. Both projects thematically re-

ferred to the architecture and the present way of functioning of those residential areas. The names “M3” and “M4” refer to codes formerly used in standards for housing construction<sup>6</sup>.

#### **Point actions – design solutions**

The “Seven Year Stadium” Urban Sports Square is a project which represents activities carried out by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It is an initiative of social architects and representatives of Warsaw NGOs (including ordinary citizens). The square was designed to offer a number of proposals for active recreation. There was space for various kinds of sports such as skating, biking, yoga and basketball, and also a place for spending time more quietly, sitting and relaxing while viewing others engaged in sporting activities. The project led directly to the establishment of cooperation with the District Office of Bemowo, which worked with the project team to design the Bemowo Urban Sports Square, opened in July 2014.

#### **Point actions – urban gardening**

Urban gardening is one of the most popular types of city actions among individual citizens, and also among NGOs. Gardening initiatives include both grassroots actions such as “guerrilla gardening” (which consists of planting in public spaces without obtaining a permit to

<sup>6</sup> “M3” is the symbol for a two-bedroom apartment with kitchen, and “M4” for a three-bedroom apartment with kitchen.



do so) as well as a large group of educational initiatives to promote the planting of crops. The promotion of urban gardening in Warsaw is currently supported by cultural institutions such as the Copernicus Science Center and the Ujazdowski Castle Museum of Modern Art. The photos show one such initiative, involving the creation of a communal vegetable garden. This was carried out by individual urban gardeners in the area of the Finnish Cottages estate.

#### **Point actions – modernization of city areas**

The purpose of these actions in the context of Warsaw is the beautification of degraded common areas (mainly courtyards of old houses) in the more neglected and less subsidized districts. An example of a project aimed at this kind of renewal is a project of the “Unlock” Association with the slogan “Blocks, courtyards, townhouses revive neighborhoods”. It consisted of the transformation of selected courtyards in several districts of Warsaw. Activities within the scope of the project included partial modernization, retrofitting areas with recreational infrastructure<sup>7</sup>, and vegetable plantings in selected areas of the housing estates. During the implementation of the project public consultations were carried out to determine the main needs of residents around the courtyards, integrate the residents, increase their identification with

<sup>7</sup> This was mainly equipment typical of children’s playgrounds, such as swings in courtyards (<http://www.odblokuj.org/?cat=3>, data dostepu 20.04.2012).

the environment, and gain their support for the changes. The result in each case was a mobilization of residents to work together physically to improve the quality of the space “belonging” to them all.

#### **Point actions – initiatives against the destruction of green areas**

Currently in Warsaw, some properties expropriated after the Second World War are being returned to their prior owners. This situation creates social conflicts. One of these conflicts concerned the green space on Szara Street in the center of Warsaw. This green space lies within an area which was returned to its pre-war owner, who wished to change the zoning of the land from green space to housing and services. This plan led to objections from local residents. By law, the owner was entitled to build on the site (as a result of, inter alia, the absence of an enforceable zoning plan, and the issuance of a construction permit). Following the intervention of citizens opposed to building on the green space (the culmination of the intervention coming in 2010) the site today remains undeveloped and functions as a green space. The determination of Warsaw residents in the fight against building on a small green area has had a real effect.

Another area of greenery for which people in Warsaw are fighting is a small park in Szmulowizna, which, in accordance with the findings of a study, is to be transformed into an area used for transport purposes. Thanks to the intervention of residents and nongovernmental organizations, Warsaw’s authorities

have begun work on the demarcation of a new route for the road. In the literature we can find a new term for this kind of situation: “public argument”, as opposed to public debate [Pawłowska 2009].

#### DISCUSSION – SOCIAL ACTIVISM AS A TREND

In comparison with other cities, Warsaw appears to produce a relatively large number of social activities related to the landscape. According to the Map of Social Interventions prepared by the Sendzimir Foundation, Warsaw heads the list of active cities. This may result both from the city’s large population and residents’ higher level of knowledge about social participation. In 2014 the City of Warsaw offered an opportunity for citizens to take part in reshaping the city. The municipality allocated a special budget (“participation budget”) for social initiatives proposed by citizens. We can also observe that there is currently a trend towards social participation and city debates. The most common topics of debates include the aesthetics of the city space, greenery in the city or lack thereof, community gardens, local spatial plans and public transport in the city. This trend can certainly be expected to have a positive impact on the sense of social participation.

In the period since 2013 we can observe three very strong trends in social initiatives for green areas:

- urban gardening (here we should mention the Jazdów Housing Estate and its vegetable gardens);
- actions to draw attention to the number of trees felled every year in

Warsaw (for example, a campaign which was organized to compel the City of Warsaw to publish official statistics on how many trees were felled and where);

- actions to draw attention to the extent of the problem of air pollution and to campaign for new regulations to protect Polish cities from pollution. A good example of this can be seen in Kraków, where because of a campaign by activists and the very poor condition of the city’s air, a new by-law was enacted. Within a few years it will be illegal in Kraków to use products (for example coal) which increase dust emissions.

We can also observe that some social activists who formerly played a leading role in the actions of NGOs have attempted to form political groups such as *Miasto Jest Nasze* (“The City is Ours”). Also, a few activists from NGOs are active in left-leaning political parties such as *Zieloni* (“Greens”) and *Razem* (“Together”).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The actions described in this article illustrate how social activists try to deal with a wide range of city problems, including air pollution, lack of greenery, the condition of housing estates, and so on. These problems are mainly connected with city space degradation or with the lack of high-quality city public space which would offer diverse possibilities of recreation. The beginning of the trend for transformation of city space by non-



-governmental organizations and individual activists has given a new outlook on the role of social participation in the city. For several years there has been an increase in social responsibility for public spaces, whereas about 10 years ago most in Polish society felt that they only had the ability to decide about shaping private spaces. The last decade has been a turning point for the development of the concept of the “citizen’s city” which Warsaw may become.

There is no doubt that the future shape of the city landscape will be more dependent on the voices of citizens. Observing the types of social activities taking place in the city space, we can foresee that because of the stronger and stronger position of NGOs and local activists, these will have a great impact on the further development of cities, and this can be hoped to result in more sustainable and people-friendly landscapes.

Appendix. Examples of participatory activities for landscaping in Warsaw

No	Name of activity	Main organizer	Place	Year	Target group	Duration	Category
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	“Dotleniacz/ /Oxygenator”	Joanna Rajkowska	Warsaw, Grzybowski Square	2007	local residents	summer season	Green streets and city squares
2	Rock bombing	Kwiatuchi	Warsaw, next to the Central Artistic Pool	2009	city activists	1 day	Green private gardens and terraces
3	Backyard Gardens	Measure High, (Mierz Wysoko)	Warsaw, Brzeska Street	2010	local residents, city activists	summer season, 1 year	Green private gardens and terraces
4	Urban gardening	Kwiatuchi	Warsaw, Chmielna Street	2010	city activists	1 day	Green private gardens and terraces
5	M3	Unlock Association for Local Communities	Warsaw, Służewiecka Valley Park	2011	local residents, open access	1 month, summer season	City parks
6	Neighbourhood Festival in Sielce (Sielecki Festyn Sąsiedzki)	My Sielce (Moje Sielce)	Warsaw, Sielce area	2011	local residents, open access	1 day, summer season	Green streets and city squares
7	Powiażenia	Partnership for Powiaże	Warsaw, Powiaże area	2011	open access	summer season	Green streets and city squares
8	Bowls of Raspberries	Kwiatuchi	Warsaw, Sady Żoliborskie	2011	local residents, open access	1 day	City parks

## Appendix, continued

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	M4	Unlock Association for Local Communities	Warsaw, Zasława Malickiego Park	2012	local residents, open access	2 months, summer season	City parks
10	Sielce for Architects exhibition	Sielce for Architects (Sielce Architektów)	Warsaw, Baza Theatre	2012	local residents, open access	2 weeks, winter season	Green streets and city squares
11	Social Garden by Konopacki Place	city activists	Warsaw, Praga Północ district, Konopacki Palace	2012	local residents, open access, city activists	summer season (1 year)	Green private gardens and terraces
12	Come On and Plant	Kwiatuchi	Warsaw, Za Żelazną Bramą residential area	2012	local residents, open access	1 day	Green private gardens and terraces
13	Garden for Birds (Ogród na Ptak)	Polish Birds Association	Warsaw, Finnish Cottages area	2013	city activists, open access	summer season (1 year)	Green private gardens and terraces
14	Social Garden (Ogród społeczny)	Krzysztof Herman and Art. Group Parque-no	Warsaw, 4, Wilcza Street	2013	open access	autumn season	Green private gardens and terraces
15	Grounded (Uziemieni) – a miniature garden and water garden	Kwiatkibratki and Copernicus Science Center	Warsaw, Copernicus Science Center	2013	open access	2 months, summer season	Green private gardens and terraces
16	Garden of the Senses (Ogród zmysłów)	Iga Kołodziej Mint & Lavender for Ujazdowski Castle Museum	Warsaw, Ujazdowski Castle Museum	2013	open access	2 months, summer season	Green streets and city squares
17	Actions and letter-writing concerning the situation of Krasieński Garden	Green Power (Zielona Moc)	Warsaw, Krasieński Garden	2013	nature of the initiative prevents identification of the main target	--	City parks

Appendix, continued

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
18	Open letter concerning the situation of Krasiński Garden	M20	Warsaw, Krasiński Garden	2013	nature of the initiative prevents identification of the main target	-	City parks
19	City Garden	Alter Eko foundation	Warsaw, Cypel Czerniakowski	2013	local residents, open access, city activists	summer season (1 year)	Green private gardens and terraces
20	Misy Żywiciela	Kwiatuchi	Warsaw, Żoliborz	2013	no guests, city activists	1 day	City parks
21	Barren of Art – Królikarnia Museum (Nieużytki Sztuki)	Królikarnia Museum in cooperation with Elżbieta Jabłońska Nieużytki Sztuki	Warsaw, Królikarnia Park	2014	open access	summer season (1 year)	City parks
22	Blocks, Courtyards, Townhouses Revive Neighborhoods (Blok podwórko kamienice ożywiły się dzielnice)	Unlock Association for Local Communities	Warsaw, Praga Północ district	2011, 2012	local residents	summer season (2 years)	Green private gardens and terraces
23	May Picnic on a Slope (Majówka na Skarpie)	Warsaw Culture Road / coordinator Artur Jerzy Filip	Warsaw, Rydza Śmigłego Park	2012, 2013	open access	recurring event, spring time	Green streets and city squares
24	City Sports Square (Skwer sportów miejskich)	Group of volunteer architects and city activists	Warsaw, design theory	2011, 2012, 2013	city activists	3 years	City parks
26	Green Jazdów (Zielony Jazdów)	Green Jazdów (Zielony Jazdów)	Warsaw, Ujazdowski Castle Museum	2012, 2013, 2014	open access	recurring event, summer season	Green streets and city squares

## Appendix, continued

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
27	Wola – Action In Place	In Place Foundation (Fundacja na Miejscu)	Warsaw, 3, Krochmalna Street, Za Żelazną Bramą residential area	2012, 2013, 2014	local residents, city activists	2 years	Green private gardens and terraces
28	Mariensztat – Action In Place	In Place Foundation (Fundacja na Miejscu)	Warsaw, Mariensztat	2012, 2013, 2014	local residents, open access, city activists	2 years	Green streets and city squares
29	Open Jazdów	Open Jazdów	Warsaw (Jazdów area, Finnish Cottages area)	2012, 2013, 2014	local residents, open access, city activists	summer season since 2013	Green private gardens and terraces
30	Count on Green (Licz na Zieleń)	Sendzimir Foundation (Fundacja Sendzimira)	Warsaw, Poznań, Łódź, Kraków	2013, 2014	open access, experts, officials	2 years	Green streets and city squares
31	Żolibuh 3.0, 2.0, 1.0 / Plant the City	Kwiatuchi	Warsaw, Żoliborz	2011, 2012, 2013	local residents, open access	recurring event, several days each year	Green private gardens and terraces
32	Protection of trees in Wielkopolski Park from felling	People of Ochota District (Ochocianie)	Warsaw, Ochota, Wielkopolski Park	since 2010	open access	5 years	City parks
33	Tea House (Domek herbaciany)	Michał Mioduszewski and Paweł Althamer, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Nowa Fala Theatre Foundation	Warsaw, Bródno Park, Targówek District	since 2011	open access	summer season, for 4 years	City parks
34	Planting Ursus Rail Station	Urban Gardeners group	Warsaw, Ursus rail station	since 2012	city activists	recurring event, 1 day each year	Green streets and city squares

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**Streszczenie:** *Inicjatywy społeczne jako sposób uczestnictwa w transformacji przestrzeni miejskiej.* Prezentowany artykuł jest opisem specyfiki oddolnych działań na rzecz krajobrazu miejskiego, gdzie działania na terenie Warszawy posłużyły jako studium przypadku. Przegląd działań społecznych na rzecz krajobrazu rozpoczyna akcja budowy “Dotleniacza” Joanny Rajkowskiej. Działanie to rozpoczęło trend inicjatyw społecznych mających mieć wpływ na krajobraz Warszawy. Od tego czasu obserwować możemy stopniowy wzrost liczby chęci społeczności lokalnych do wprowadzania zmian w ich najbliższym otoczeniu. Może być to reakcją na brak akceptacji niskiej jakości otaczającej przestrzeni jak i zauważenie możliwości wpływu na to, w jakim otoczeniu żyjemy. W niniejszym artykule opisano zbiory tematyczne organizowanych inicjatyw, opisano ich specyfikę, a następnie zaprezentowano wybrane przykłady. Narzędziem do monitoringu inicjatyw oddolnych na rzecz krajobrazu było ich mapowanie.