

Sebastian Latocha

sebastian.latocha@uni.lodz.pl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4226-9131>Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej
Wydział Filozoficzno-Historyczny
Uniwersytet Łódzki

*Animation of a Local Urban
Community. Sebastian Latocha
Talks to Remigiusz Kaczmarek,
the Chairman of the Józef
Montwiłł-Mirecki Community
Council in Łódź*

*Animacja miejskiej społeczności lokalnej.
Sebastian Latocha rozmawia z Remigiuszem Kaczmakiem,
przewodniczącym Rady Osiedla im. Józefa
Montwiłła-Mireckiego w Łodzi*

Remigiusz Kaczmarek – Chairman of the Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź (2019–2024 term), student of law at the University of Łódź, who has lived in the district since he was born.

Sebastian Latocha – Member of the Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź (2019–2024 term), Assistant Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Łódź, who has lived in the district for the last three years.

The pre-war modernist housing estate named after Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki is one of 36 administration units in Łódź. In comparison with this big city, the district is tiny – one can walk around it in fifteen minutes. It is situated in the north-west part of the city, between Srebrzyńska, Jarzynowa and al. Unii Lubelskiej streets. It is neither the city centre nor its outskirts. Its spatial borders are clearly

defined, which contributes to thinking of it in the local context and the activity of the residents within an anthropological space – in the sense of the type of space, a category introduced by Marc Augé (see 1992). The eastern border of the housing estate is a green belt of allotment gardens and a railway line, in the south it borders on Józef Piłsudski Park, while in the north and west it is encircled by the Łódka River, which is now hidden under the ground.

According to statistics, in the 1920s in Łódź, there were 3.6 people living in one room, which was the worst rate among all the big cities in Poland (Ciarkowski, Stefański 2018: 62–63). As a result, the authorities of Łódź decided to make numerous housing investments. One such enterprise built on the grandest scale was this housing estate, located in the so-called Polesie Konstantynowskie (this part of the city took its name 'Polesie': (*po* = after) + (*lesie* [las] = forest) from clearing a forest that used to grow here). The city authorities chose a design by Jerzy Berliner, Jan Łukasik, Miruta Słońska and Witold Szereszewski, who put into practice the ideas of the avant-garde and modernism, which were at the time popular in urban design in Western Europe, but up to then unprecedented in Poland. The housing estate – the first modern housing project in Łódź and moreover, one of the first such projects in Poland and Europe, was constructed between 1928 and 1933. The architects decided against the dense frontage developments and courtyard-wells that were typical features of 'traditional urban planning' and instead chose to construct separate blocks of flats, scattered over the area. "Flat-roofed cubic forms were ornamented with avant-corps, balconies and mullions made of unplastered brick" (Ciarkowski, Stefański 2018: 70). In 1933, the authorities named the housing estate after the Polish socialist Józef Monwiłł-Mirecki (1879–1908). The biographies of several avant-garde artists are related to this modernist estate: Karol Hiller, Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński.

At present, the 'avant-garde identity' of the housing estate is overshadowed by the 'martyrdom identity'. During the Second World War, this estate in Polesie Konstantynowskie was marked with repressions and the displacement of about 5 thousand of its residents. This nightmarish event, which Dorota Fornalska described as "the night that changed everything" (Fornalska 2018: 97–110) took place on the night between 14 and 15 January 1940.¹ After the war, some of the

1 "On the morning of 15 January 1940 the Estate was deserted, solidified in the terror of the night. There were some stray dogs left. How did the ones who stayed feel? Was it a relief for them to know it had been someone else this time, or did they fear their turn would come? They certainly worried about what happened to their friends with whom they had talked not so long before,

displaced residents returned to the estate. There are still people among those living in the 'Montwiłł' Estate that remember the night, as well as the bearers of the memory – their children and grandchildren. People living there preserve that heritage of martyrdom in time and space: they commemorate anniversaries of the January tragedy (by means of local secular celebrations) and collect documents and tokens housed in a small museum at 2, Perła Street in the Estate Memorial Exhibition Room (their 'sacred' space).

Both identities – complementary and parallel – trigger intensive animation activity in the public sphere, the common denominator of which is heritage. The situation is paradoxical as there are surprisingly many projects involving social animation in this "smallest district of the city" (around 1,500 people). The residents cooperate with NGOs² and the Community Council, focusing on matters related to the housing estate. In virtual space, there are websites and social media profiles of the estate. A large number of the residents also take part in public consultations, local picnic events, themed walks and the so-called 'flying café' bringing neighbours closer together over a cup of tea or coffee in the space between their blocks of flats. Without a permanent location, it springs up here or there, but always within the housing estate, integrating the local community. The residents apply to the City of Łódź Office and other entities for grants in order to develop local mini-projects. And these are only some of the housing estate animations, but even such a brief outline may well serve to illustrate just how strongly residents identify with their estate.

The neighbourhood initiatives show the idea of animation itself on specific examples, as described by Mateusz Konieczny: "animation activities develop and strengthen social bonds between residents, also contributing to the development of social capital" (Konieczny 2018: 60). An interview with Remigiusz Kaczmarek, the Chairman of the Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź, shows the benefits of replacing the word 'with' with 'for' in the context of animation and working as part of the local community.

played bridge, exchanged political news, walked their children together to schools and kindergartens. Many of them would try to help their neighbours already in the early days, bringing them food and warm clothes, duvets and pillows to the camp" (Fornalska 2018: 110).

- 2 Such as: Stowarzyszenie: Inicjatywa dla Rozwoju Osiedla im. Józefa Montwiłła-Mireckiego w Łodzi and Stowarzyszenie Mieszkańców Osiedla im. J. Montwiłła-Mireckiego "Polesie".

A local community, from a sociological point of view, consists of three dimensions: the spatial, the social, and the sociological one. A local community also performs at the axiological plane, for example by means of local patriotism, activism, commitment to community, activity in the public sphere. What is the Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate in Łódź like in this respect? As far as I remember, during a meeting in our Institute³ you compared this estate to a village. What did you mean by that?

This housing estate reminds me of a rural community, because its residents are interrelated in a multi-dimensional network. I remember how it worked on a football pitch when we were children. We preferred playing in 'district' teams, for example our estate against our friends from Koziny District, so as children we were close, we were aware of our separate estate identity. The residents are not anonymous. Seniors meet to play bridge, they know one another very well. One neighbour approaches another, we don't have the barriers common in the typical big housing projects. For this reason I compared our estate to a village community.

In what other ways is being part of a local community expressed in an urban estate?

First of all, in the negative sense, I face the same problems as all the other residents of the housing estate: too few parking spaces, poor public transport connection with the rest of the city, traffic jams, lack of public space, no shops, neglected blocks of flats, courtyards and little streets. I experience it myself, being part of the local community. I think common experiences form the basis for being part of it. On the other hand, there are positive aspects, reflected in relationships with neighbours, mutual support, organising of joint local initiatives, taking care of the common space, or participating in the local organisations such as the Community Council and associations that want to do something for the benefit of the local community. The most important here is the border between the negative and the positive aspects. In order to cross the border, it is enough to leave your flat and go to a picnic organised by your neighbours or a lecture in the local library. The culmination of this positive dimension of being part of

3 A meeting with Remigiusz Kaczmarek, the Chairman of the J. Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź, entitled *A Square in the Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate. Tensions – Discussions – Disputes*, took place on 30th October 2019 as part of the research and animation project *STACJA BADAWCZA: Osiedle im. J. Montwiłła-Mireckiego w Łodzi (RESEARCH STATION Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate in Łódź)*, which is a result of cooperation between Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Łódź and the J. Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź.

the local community is working in groups, the aim of which is either reviving the historical core of the housing estate or organising a neighbourhood event. In my opinion this sphere looks fairly good on our estate, when compared to Łódź as a whole, and this is also due to relations between the residents and the involvement of local activists and committed residents in the public space.

And what is the difference between activism and commitment to social community?

In my opinion activists want to achieve a particular aim or serve an interest, while a committed resident acts for the benefit of the community, whose will he may, or may not, like; the interest of a local community is not necessarily different from the interest of a committed resident. In the real world the two terms may intersect, but they may also have two completely separate meanings.

How would you characterise a good committed citizen, an animator, an activist acting for the benefit of a local community – or, to put it more precisely – cooperating with it?

I would rather talk of a general predisposition that you either have or don't have. As far as I am concerned, I think I am a good organiser, I have good managing skills, I know the law. It is at the Law Faculty that I learned that being a lawyer is a kind of a duty. Us, the lawyers, have the duty to serve by explaining the law to other people. Legal practice is not limited to making your living – the better-than-average knowledge of law makes us, lawyers, public servants, for example in the place where we live, in our district. This idea motivates me to social work. An animator should be flexible. When I had an idea to organise dancing classes for the residents of the housing estate I learnt that individual dancing was not popular among the elderly, so I am looking for another form of activity for them. Ballroom dance, for example, worked very well. An animator should have an open mind and be sensitive to the needs of the group s/he cooperates with.

The housing estate experienced a trauma during the Second World War. Is the difficult heritage a value activating the local animators and committed residents today?

I will try to explain it on my own example. The story of my family is related to the Purtal family. Antoni Purtal⁴ died in Auschwitz, after the war his wife and

4 Antoni Purtal (1895–1943), an activist in the Polish Socialist Party, the Deputy Mayor of Łódź in 1939, a resident of the J. Montwiłł-Mirecki Estate in Łódź.

daughter returned to the housing estate. Those who returned, promoted the idea of opening to other people and acting against individualism, although it was not entirely the question of heritage and difficult war experiences. It was also the architecture that promoted integration and still does today. For example the fences along the Srebrzyńska Street and courtyards between the blocks of flats support joint neighbourhood activities. There is no centre, no market square here, unlike in a medieval town, but people used to meet and still meet for example in the local shop. The truth is that we are historically rooted in this place. In the flat in which I now live my father was born. My great-grandmother lived here, so did my grandmother and my father. Opposite to my flat, there lives my aunt, the daughter of my great-grandmother's sister. Another member of the Community Council is my cousin. You can feel the heritage, the respect for several generations that expect you to act for and to the benefit of the housing estate. This is the soil which nurtures the citizens movement.

The 'old' residents of the estate have the family memory, the postmemory, which is an ethical category, they share difficult childhood, tradition, the heritage which obliges them to act, as you said. And how about the 'new' residents? What attracts them to the 'Montwiłł' Estate? I am such a 'new' resident of the estate. Nowadays modernism has become culturally in vogue. The Art Deco style in industrial design and the modernist architecture of 1920s and 1930s 'age in style' (Jarząbek 2010: 78). Marcin Jarząbek, when doing his research on the paradox of modernity which becomes historical, writes that modernist architecture has nowadays become part of the cultural memory, that "we feel much greater respect towards the past that we do not remember than towards the events that we have witnessed" (Jarząbek 2010: 81). Is the participatory animation, which takes place in the Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate among the 'new' residents, related to the identity of the estate and its architectural heritage, with the now fashionable pre-war modernism? Why don't other Łódź housing estates experience a similar participatory boom?

Personally, I don't know what it looks like in other districts of Łódź, because I have lived here since I was born. However, I hear from people moving to our housing estate from other parts of the city, that they have not experienced such neighbourhood activity as they see here. The reason is partially the fact that after the war some people returned here and over generations local families were established, that have lived here up to now. The comfort of living in blocks of flats after the war is one thing, another thing is tradition and memory. The residents of Łódź, whose family biographies interweave with the Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing

Estate, do not forget the fact. Family connections and sentimental factors are very important, because they function as an existing social infrastructure which does not have to be developed from scratch. The whole dignity, the fact that we are facing the heritage of old-time 'heroes', and that the legacy remains – this fills me personally with pride, I was brought up like this, because we are the heirs to the Purlal Family. The pride makes it easier to continue thinking about passing the baton from generation to generation. This certainly inspires in the committed residents respect for the heritage of the estate. In my work for the benefit of the estate I was inspired by Krystyna Trojanowska, whose cousin is also a member of our Community Council. She was this active spark, involved in so many things. She is such a good spirit of this estate. She worked until her last days. Such is the resilience demonstrated by this place. At the moment there are many newcomers buying flats here, instead of inheriting them from their parents and grandparents. What connects them with the estate is its attractive location, and not family tradition, but they also adopt attitudes of respecting the atmosphere of community and the heritage, for example some of them rescue old, historic doors and windows from the rubbish collection shed during the night. I know you are one of them.

Yes, I moved in 2017. For me the Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate consists most of all of its historic architectural core, which attracted me here. I did not inherit the stories or experiences relating me to this place from my great-grandparents, grandparents and parents, my family photo album lacks pre-war photos of the estate, and yet I am filled with the need to protect this core, to respect and be responsible for the material heritage. That is why my basement is like an antique shop with historic windows and doors from the whole housing estate. Maybe the 'old' residents have the tradition, the heritage that legitimizes their present life in the estate and gives a meaning to it, but I act for a different cause, rescuing the windows and doors, and since 2019 I have also been a member of the Community Council. But it was you who invited me.

When creating the Council I thought, first of all, about the people who are active in the public sphere for the benefit of the estate. Also, taking advantage of the surveys and public consultations related to revitalisation⁵ of the estate, I wanted

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5 The project of the Community Council *Developing a Uniform Public Places Revitalisation Project within the Premises of the Historic J. Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate and Its Implementation* was the winner of the 13th Contest for Investment Projects, organised by the City of Łódź Office. In the first half of 2019 public consultations took place (and questionnaires were distributed) in

to pinpoint the residents whom I did not know but who led initiative. Their other motivations, apart from the willingness to act for the common good, were of no interest to me. I involved the whole estate in the consultations. I printed as many questionnaires as there are flats in our housing estate. Walking from door to door, I delivered them personally to the residents. Only if someone was not at home, I would put the survey to their mail box. During the consultations, I singled out social representatives of each block of flats; today some of them are members of the Council.

Social animation, as we know, is a process of reviving and developing a certain community. In the dimension of an estate, it boils down to activities that the residents design and implement themselves together, for their own benefit. In order for such projects to really work, the ideas must be based on social capital ready to work for the benefit of the common good, by which I mean the local animators (from the estate). Since you compared the Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate to a village community, let me mention here an animation project *The Communities on the Edge*, implemented in three rural communities in Southern Scotland. As part of it a handbook was developed for rural social animators. The authors of *Unlocking Potential. A Handbook for Community Animators* conclude that it "hopes to present itself as a useful and perhaps even inspirational tool for those fortunate enough to be playing out similar roles in their own communities" (Gavin et al.: 4). They underline the role of communities from which the animators come as such, focusing on the very fact of working with people, instead of focusing on authorities and natural leaders or working for the people. The wording is the key – 'with', and not 'for'. Sharing their own experience in animation, they give the following advice to other local animators:

We are local people who are employed to animate other local people into action. We are primarily concerned with the ideas, concerns and ambitions of local people – they shape the agenda. (...).

We cannot and will never be everything to all people and it is important that we are not seen as the local 'one stop shop'.

It should be continually stressed that we are here to work with people, not for them. Every project which we are involved in requires one vital ingredient – the support and active participation of local people at all stages. If this local support

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relation to the project, initiated and performed by Remigiusz Kaczmarek, the Chairman of the J. Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź.

falls away we must firstly pass the ball back into the play of local people in a final attempt to reactivate local support, and then make an objective decision as to whether we continue to support the project. (...).

We must strive at all times to maintain a dialogue with the wider community about our work. Openness and transparency is key to the success of building positive relationships. (...).

We must work with people on the basis that if our contracts were to end tomorrow, the work of the group should be able to continue without us. We should never be relied upon to the extent that the success (or otherwise) of a project is attributed to us (Gavin et al.: 10–11).

What do you think of this advice? Does it seem relevant in the context of an urban local community? There would be no education, animation or activity in the public sphere of the estate if not for specific individuals with their go-getting energy, temperament, contacts, competences and talents, but also if not for the people who are aware of the importance of their participation in the whole animation process, would there?

It is the people that make up the Community Council. The administrative competences of the council are one thing, but the other are specific people that really want to do something. I know such councils that exist but do nothing. The councillors see their membership as a matter of prestige, but they do little or nothing for their district. It is really the people that decide about the competences of their Council. It is us who develop social education and animation through our ideas and willingness to work. We have many active citizens in Łódź, but in large housing estates, the residents of which hardly know one another, a sense of community is hard to create. There are leaders able to engage people in some activity at the level of one street. One of them is Paweł Jędrachowicz, whose charisma led to the renovation of Zacisze Street. Many people with great ideas lack the charisma that is necessary to integrate the residents. Also the people you work with are important. This is not difficult for us, since social alertness in the Montwiłł-Mirecki estate is high. I have a feeling that our Council is very active in comparison to the rest of the city. Our residents are really involved in the local matters and many of them participate in, for example, public consultations which we organise together with them. In neighbouring Councils there are strong leaders acting with the help of a few people, but this is not real participation and social alertness, which are a fact in our housing estate. In my view our Council reflects great involvement of all the residents. We have more people

willing to do some work than other estates. Participation plus leaders taking on the burden of organisation satisfy the needs of the local community that cannot be purchased in the market. The City Office can organise some event for the residents of the estate, but the Office works in a conventional way and is overworked, it does not know the characteristic features of the estate nor the particular needs of its community. Due to the fact that some people here are rooted in the local context and know their neighbours, they can meet the needs of residents better than any office.

And what is social alertness?

Alertness, or in other words readiness, mobilisation, being prepared to take part in something. Our residents expect some activity, such as a survey on some subject. They are familiar with this kind of participation and are not afraid of it. They are aware of the fact that their opinions matter, that there are people who would act on their behalf. Our success is that people know their Community Council. This looks different in other districts. In our estate we have a kind of an English democracy model, where councillors are not anonymous, they knock at the doors of the residents to ask them about problems related to the estate and the public sphere. Our housing estate is small and compact and it is possible to knock at every door. We have some 1,500 residents, to compare with for example Retkinia that has forty thousand of them.

What are the tasks, competences and tools for education and animation of the local community held by Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council?

The role of the Community Council, as specified in our charter, is to initiate, support and organise activities in order to satisfy the needs of the estate residents. In my opinion this sums up the aim of committed residents' activity. Due to its administrative status, a Community Council can settle many matters in the City Office more easily than other entities. A city clerk treats a member of the Community Council differently than an average resident. Community councillors can provide opinions. On the one hand, a Community Council facilitates the access to the City Office for residents, on the other hand, it bonds together the whole housing estate and makes the residents feel that they can decide about their matters. The Council also has resources to cover the costs of fulfilling the social and cultural needs of residents by organising community picnics.

Didn't the decision of the city authorities to transfer the money from the Community Councils' budgets to the Participatory Budget discourage social activists and animators of the social and cultural life of the estate from acting?

Centralisation of the resources does not build a civil society. In my opinion it was a wrong thing to do in the context of social participation. We have less money in the estate budget now, which is a discouraging factor, but paradoxically with us it works the other way round, because we take matters into our own hands. This is evident in case of the square in Jarzynowa Street and our fight to keep it, against the City of Łódź Office and the developer. Also the questionnaires and public consultations related to the revitalisation of the estate prove it. The notion of agency, dignity, subjectivity and a real impact on what happens in our area is the key to engaging the residents into the matters of the estate. It is my mission to stimulate this activity in the residents. As an estate we unite above the divisions in face of crisis.

Does the estate have its central part?

I wish the Community Council, as a group of people who want to act, was one. It could act as an advocate representing the interests of the residents, but the truth is we lack such a central space, a common area, in the estate. This could potentially be the square in Jarzynowa Street, but at the moment it is an urban wasteland. There are various concepts for spatial development of the place. The centre of our estate keeps moving together with local initiatives, such as *Mirecka Flying Neighbourhood Café*, and the square itself is not permanently, but can sometimes turn into a centre when we organise community events, such as the picnic *Miłe chwile na Motwille (Nice Moments in Montwiłł)*.

What is the model of activity in the public sphere that you use in your social work?

I wish my model was contradictory to the stereotypical Polish mentality as far as public and political life goes. I have a feeling that for Poles the public sphere is a place of personal debate of very few people. It is therefore my aspiration to base my model on human dignity, subjectivity and dialogue. It is also about eliminating fear from human relationships, so people stop being afraid of public officials, they respect the work of the officials as well as opinions of particular members of the local community.

Do you have moments of doubt?

There are such moments. I face lack of time, fair and unfair criticism, even online hate speech. Public sphere activity affects family life, but to tell you the truth, this activity is fun for me. Commitment to community is my hobby. I am glad I create something for the estate.

What is special about local community animation in a city?

In my opinion the urban environment is complex. Its division reflects the political and world-view divisions present in our country. A situation in which the differences do not count in local matters is an unlikely utopia. We have to take them into consideration. On the level of repairing a sidewalk the division into the left and right wing should not matter. This is the absurdity of needless divisions. However, despite a certain discouragement resulting from constant attempts of the City Office to centralise management of public resources, urban movements and social activism as such keep growing. Local communities organise a growing number of picnics, meetings, lectures. So there are both symptoms that give hope and those that raise some concerns about the future.

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Summary

How do you nurture common welfare in a modern city? What is the role of local urban communities and the networked cooperation of numerous bodies like community councils, district NGOs, neighbourhood initiatives and particular individuals (animators, activists, involved citizens) – in creating a community, which, being subject to the municipality's activity, does not patiently await its fate, but takes matters into its own hands? What impact does the history, tradition, urban planning and architecture, local symbols, rituals and institutions of a location have on creating a sense of identity for that given place and for creating an atmosphere of education, animation and activity in the public sphere in cooperation 'with' (and not 'for') the local community? How do Community Councils support and develop neighbourhood communities? An interview with Remigiusz Kaczmarek, the Chairman of the Józef Montwiłł-Mirecki Community Council in Łódź, reveals how the difficult heritage of this district provided the residents with a model of collaboration and social participation. The case of this modernist housing estate constructed in Łódź before the Second World War shows the dynamics of urban local community development based on the common experience of its residents.

Key words: neighbourhood, local community, animation, participation, heritage, city, modernism, modernist architecture and urban planning

Translated by Karolina Ojrzyńska

Streszczenie

Jak dbać o dobro wspólne we współczesnym dużym mieście? Jaka jest rola miejskich społeczności lokalnych i usieciowionej współpracy wielu podmiotów działających w przestrzeni publicznej miasta – rad osiedli, osiedlowych organizacji pozarządowych, sąsiedzkich inicjatyw i konkretnych osób (animatorów, działaczy, społeczników) – w budowaniu wspólnoty, która jako podmiot działań miejskich nie czeka pokornie na to, co się stanie, ale bierze swoje sprawy w swoje ręce? Jaki jest udział tożsamości miejsca – jego historii, tradycji, urbanistyki i architektury, lokalnych symboli, rytuałów i instytucji – w konstruowaniu atmosfery edukacji, animacji i działań w sferze publicznej we współpracy „ze” (a nie „dla”) społecznością lokalną? Jak rady osiedli wspierają i rozwijają wspólnoty sąsiedzkie? Z rozmowy z Remigiuszem Kaczmarkiem, przewodniczącym Rady Osiedla im. Józefa Montwiłła-Mireckiego w Łodzi, wynika, że trudne dziedzictwo tego osiedla ukształtowało określony model współpracy i partycypacji społecznej. Przypadek łódzkiego przedwojennego modernistycznego osiedla pokazuje dynamikę kreacji miejskiej społeczności lokalnej na bazie wspólnych doświadczeń mieszkańców.

Słowa kluczowe: sąsiedztwo, społeczność lokalna, animacja, partycypacja, dziedzictwo, miasto, modernizm, architektura i urbanistyka modernistyczna