
Waterfronts of a post-socialist city: questioning the ‘wild’ and the development in Riga

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Abstract

Waterfronts are unique spaces with a considerable importance in the urban environment since the establishment of human settlements alongside a body of water. Although waterfronts have always been ‘out there’, researchers and professionals from such fields as geography, urban planning, sociology and cultural studies have started to pay attention to these sites relatively recently, since the 1960s. Since that time, urban planners and city authorities all over the world have recognized waterfronts as the sites of an enormous significance within a city. Waterfront, as Marshall (2001) has put it, ‘becomes the stage upon which the most important pieces are set, [...] that enrich life, offer, decency and hope as well as functionality’. However, most of the authors working on waterfronts have dealt only with those sites which are, have been or are going to be ‘developed’, by that understanding only particular ways of development usually characterized by top-down interventions, clearly visible and functional transformation of a site and significant investments. ‘Development’ is the word that typically collocates with ‘waterfront’, thus many waterfronts falls outside the scope of researchers.

Meanwhile, Riga, a post-industrial and post-socialist city, has enormous resources of waterfronts alongside the shoreline of 456 km due to its location in the inland delta of the River Daugava. However, the city planning authorities have only recently shown specific interest in these significant areas, variously affected by such complex aspects as the inherited Soviet land management and planning practices, the issues regarding land ownership (privatization, denationalization) and the abandonment/demolition of industrial sites. Moreover, the city has developed or is going to develop only 8 % of the waterfronts as public spaces. Therefore, I provide a preliminary study of Riga’s waterfronts that have not been considered as developed and recognized by a broader audience: these waterfronts include abandoned and operating sites of industry and a cargo port, the land alongside allotments, protected nature areas, back sides of buildings, semi-private waterfronts along residential areas, and spaces without specified use, but with diverse and dense, sometimes impassable vegetation; hence, I use the name ‘contested waterfronts’.

I use the framework of ‘urban wilderness’, (e.g., Vicenzotti and colleagues (2009, 2015)) as the lenses to describe waterfronts as activity spaces. Activities and structures, representing at least three interpretations of ‘wilderness’, can be found at Riga’s waterfronts. Firstly, protected nature areas alongside waterfronts, including bird nest sites, clearly show that, what I call, ‘ecological’ wilderness. Secondly, ‘metaphorical’ wilderness is embedded in the chaotic processes of land management and the ‘non-development’ of waterfronts. Thirdly, a combination of both can be applied on many cases, where an abandonment of an industrial site has taken place and vegetation combining with human structures, creating certain

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meanings, values and activities.

My research aims to evaluate importance of ‘contested’ waterfronts as activity spaces in Riga, the social processes taking place there and the use of these specific sites. Initial findings gathered through different techniques, from participant observations to the content analysis of social media, show various and diverse practices being carried out at these sites. These activities encompasses both ordinary practices, such as walking, picnicking and fishing, and peculiar activities, such as winter swimming, drinking in public, geocaching and temporary dwelling, characterised by a particular level of privacy and secrecy, an another facet of urban wilderness, thus confronting the idea of a waterfront as ‘the stage’ of the city.

Literature

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