

Notes on a forthcoming Parking Lot project:
Reverse Archaeology – Semi-buried objects from Nowy Port

About Nowy Port

From a general research we could gather that Gdańsk's Nowy Port (New Port) district was initially a port settlement founded by the Prussian government in late XVIII century. Set in at the mouth of Vistula River, this favourable location allowed the dynamic development of the area.

Nowadays, Nowy Port still counts with a very high potential, it is however underinvested, both in infrastructure and social issues. The district faces big problems, with a very high rate of unemployment and alcoholism. At the same time it has an extraordinary high ratio of young people, and so a lot of potential for change and for overcoming difficulties.

A new branch of Gdańsk's public Łaźnia Centre for Contemporary Art was inaugurated in a former bathhouse building of Nowy Port in 2012. One of its goals is to create a long-lasting connection with the local community. This has already started in different ways, for example through the public library on the ground floor, a cinema, education projects and the artist's residency.

A parking lot for Łaźnia 2

For its residency programme, Łaźnia 2 seeks socially engaged projects and works that stimulate the public space of the district; artists are asked to establish a collaboration/discussion with the community and get involved in some way. Responding to this specific context we proposed "semi-buried objects from Nowy Port neighbours". The project consists of intervening in the yard in front of the entrance of Łaźnia 2, to transform part of this space into a parking lot (11 x 20 meters big).

This will not be however a regular parking lot, as objects donated by the neighbours of Nowy Port will be embedded in the layer of concrete –or a similar material–. Only a small part of the objects, visible from one side, will emerge from the surface of the concrete. Abstract shapes, circles and squares on the ground will appear to the viewer, making it difficult at first sight to recognise what is buried in there, preserving however some signs and details of the objects. These items will be perfectly integrated on the flat surface of the parking lot, not interfering the normal use by cars. The installation of the artwork is set for 2014. This particular space at Łaźnia 2 is open to the public; we thought it was important that contributors can visit and see their donations whenever they want.

During our residency stay we devoted ourselves to the collection of objects from neighbours of Nowy Port district, and to photograph and document the stories related to them. Many of these personal items have a special significance to the donors. We got all sort of objects: cups, watches, a tennis racket, and our highlight: an electric guitar to be embedded in the parking lot.

In order to mobilise people and contribute, we came with an idea of distributing leaflets and posters with a call for participation. As this was not enough, we decided to hit the streets and talk directly to people at the bus stops, in the restaurants, in the shops. We also took part in different initiatives to help spread the word, like setting a stand on a two-day fair/festival organised by Łażnia for the people of Nowy Port; we had meetings with citizen groups that are active in the neighbourhood; and also importantly, we contacted the local church, which has a key role in the district. A word spread about our project on the Sunday mass did probably more than many hours of walking around the neighbourhood and handing out leaflets.

Reverse Archaeology

Some months before the residency started, during our research stay in Gdańsk, set as part of Łażnia's programme, we devoted ourselves to gather all possible information about the context of Nowy Port and the city: historical, political, social, anything! Big stories, and also small ones. And of course we got to know about amber, very typical from the Baltic Sea region. The fossilized tree resin can sometimes contain animal and plant material that have been there for millions of years. Amber preserves otherwise unfossilizable parts of organisms, and as such has a high scientific value. While thinking for projects to realise, amber was one of the concepts that came into our minds; and as a matter of fact the project became somehow similar to a giant amber piece preserving everyday objects in its interior.

"Semi-buried objects from Nowy Port neighbours" also reminds of the ruins of Pompeii, where layers of ash and lava covered and perfectly preserved Pompeian culture for almost two thousand years now. Tools, kitchen utensils, cloths, etc. remained underground with little to no deterioration, like frozen in time. This project will also, at a very reduced scale and in a controlled environment, freeze one moment in time of Nowy Port's everyday objects, preserve and expose them to the public.

This project is also a monument. The characteristics of it are actually quite anti-monumental: it is not a common sculptural form but just a layer of concrete in the ground, and it will have a daily use as a parking lot. Examples of monuments placed on the ground can be found around, and some of them with a purpose to be stepped on. The most glamorous case being the stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A parking lot is not something nice or honourable as a monument, really, but there is something they have in common: both are dedicated to some important person or event. In this case, this unusual monument would not be dedicated to one individual, but to the whole community of Nowy Port.

Maybe the most accurate comparison would be however with a time capsule. Probably everyone knows about the experiments where people collect personal items, messages, photographs, etc; seal them in a box, and bury them for a length of time. Time capsules are to be opened only on a fixed date yet to come; so they function as a tool for communication with the future, and have a goal of preserving

the culture of a particular time and place for study. No one is allowed to see what is inside until the day of the opening.

“Semi-buried objects from Nowy Port neighbours” would rather be an “exposed” time capsule, as objects are only semi-hidden in concrete –or a similar material– and visible at all time. Actually, we are more interested in the moment where time capsules are already opened, rather than when they are kept sealed. This project is for neighbours to experience and enjoy in the present time by visiting the place and admiring their donated objects.

In what could be called a "Reverse Archaeology" procedure, instead of digging we will be burying, and instead of studying human activity in the past we will be working with the present, about our contemporary everyday. Through this project all kind of today's material culture of Nowy Port will be buried in concrete, objects that can be seen as an evidence of present human activity and provide a detailed insight into the life of Gdańsk.

The selection of objects included in the project is based on the particular meaning and significance for the participants, and so unlikely to be relevant to future archaeologists to carry out an excavation here. However, if not for the past, we are not working for the future either! We would be happy if at least, and that would be good enough, the project could be meaningful for Nowy Port's people today. Our idea was to create an artwork that people of the district could feel part of, and that this project would find its place in the neighbourhood's everyday life.

But, who knows? Maybe those personal objects will indeed be interesting to future historians for interpreting our daily lives. And maybe the yard in front of Łaźnia 2 will become some day a "reverse-archaeological" site to excavate in search of information about what was life like in Gdańsk in the year 2013.