

From Enclosure to Ecotone Reflections on Rewilding the Warsaw Zoo

The Rewilding Project I propose unfolds on the terrain of the Zoological Garden in Warsaw, a site on the Vistula River's right bank, mirroring the Old Town's cultural heritage. Nearly a century old, the Zoo is layered with stories that trace Warsaw's natural history, acting as both a witness and participant in the city's enduring narrative of war, destruction, rebirth, and resistance. Warsaw itself is a city of layers, and the Zoo embodies these strata - its ground holding memories of change and continuity, some visible, others buried.

Rewilding the Zoo is not just an architectural exercise; it is a layered exploration of humanity's relationship with nature. It questions our historical practices, challenges the limits of our control, and reimagines the boundaries between the urban and the wild. In reflecting on the project, I find myself considering not only its material and spatial components but also its philosophical and emotional underpinnings - its capacity to provoke change, to tell stories, and to embody an attitude of care and coexistence.

The Walled Garden: A Legacy of Control

At its core, the Warsaw Zoo is a paradox - a space that seeks to celebrate nature while simultaneously constraining it. This contradiction is evident in its physical form as a walled garden, a constructed paradise where "wildness" has historically been curated, categorized, and contained. The Zoo's very existence is rooted in a colonial legacy of zoological architecture, where animals were displayed as exotic specimens to satisfy human curiosity.

This project begins by acknowledging and critiquing that legacy. The walls of the Zoo, once impermeable, are no longer barriers of exclusion but tools of transformation. They evolve into porous boundaries that protect the rewilded landscape while inviting the broader ecosystem to permeate the site. The concept of an *ecotone* - a transition zone between ecological communities - embodies this shift. It reflects a world where control gives way to collaboration and where the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred.

Yet, this is not merely an exercise in dismantling. It is also an act of preservation. The Zoo's architectural relics (animal enclosures) carry with them the weight of history, serving as registers of past attitudes, both noble and flawed. Their adaptive reuse becomes a way to honor and reinterpret that history. Spaces designed for animals are rescaled for human use, offering opportunities for observation, education, and caretaking. While the Zoo moves away from entertainment and visitor access, it provides new ways of engagement - a transformed relationship where humans observe, learn, and even contribute as volunteers in maintaining the site.

This is a proposal for coexistence. It acknowledges that the wild deserves space within the city and that its presence enriches urban life. It's an architecture of interdependency, conceptually and structurally. Each intervention builds on what already exists. Structures reinforce one another in a symbiotic relationship - neither able to exist without the other.

The Temporal Dimension: Rewilding as Process

Rewilding is not an instant transformation but a gradual, often unpredictable process. The timeline of this project spans decades, acknowledging that ecological change unfolds at its own pace. My involvement situates me in the first ten years—actively shaping its initial phases. By the time the final pieces of the project are completed, I will have already stepped aside. The first phase focuses on architectural interventions - repurposing enclosures to create educational and observational spaces. These early actions set the stage, signaling a shift in how the Zoo is perceived and used, engaging the local community in initiating the rewilding process.

In the following phases, internal rewilding begins. Exotic species are gradually relocated, car access is redirected, and river water is reintroduced to restore wetlands. Hardscaping is dismantled, and sections of the boundary are redefined to create a dynamic threshold. Integration with local wildlife comes next, requiring legislative adjustments to conservation policies and

animal management. Finally, external infrastructure is transformed - the existing dike becomes an elevated balcony, pathways are introduced for limited public access, and the terrain is connected to citywide greenways.

This gradual unfolding mirrors the lifecycle of the animals that have long called the Zoo home. As the lion and elephant live out their days in redesigned spaces, their presence bridges the past and future. The timeline becomes both a practical framework and a metaphor for coexistence - an acknowledgment that rewilding requires patience, humility, and the acceptance of imperfection.

Attitudes and Actions: A Philosophy of Care

Throughout the project, certain attitudes have emerged as guiding principles - care, hospitality, and adaptation. These attitudes are expressed not only in the design decisions but also in the way the project engages with the site, the city, and the broader ecosystem.

Care is evident in the meticulous treatment of the Zoo's architectural relics. Each intervention respects the integrity of these structures while creating new elements that work together with what was already in place. The former bear enclosure becomes a greenhouse of local plants as well as an exhibition center, a space of renewal and learning. The lion enclosure transforms into a viewing pavilion, offering visitors a new perspective on the rewilded landscape.

Hospitality is central to the rewilding process. The Zoo becomes a refuge not only for animals but also for plants, insects, and people. It embraces the unpredictability of nature, creating habitats that welcome diverse species while limiting human intrusion. The dike, transformed into an elevated balcony, offers a controlled point of interaction - a way for humans to witness the wild without disrupting it.

Adaptation runs through every aspect of the project. From the use of on-site materials through coppicing to the reimagining of boundaries, the design embraces flexibility and imperfection. It recognizes that rewilding is not about imposing order but about creating conditions for life to thrive in its own way.

Moments of Liminality: The Power of the In-Between

One of the most compelling aspects of this project is its focus on liminal moments - the spaces and times where transformation is most visible. These moments capture the tension and harmony between the Zoo's past, present, and future. These moments are not merely aesthetic; they are didactic. They teach us about resilience, adaptation, and the beauty of impermanence. They remind us that rewilding is as much about storytelling as it is about design - a way to reconnect with the narratives of the land and the species that inhabit it.

Challenges and Reflections

The project faces significant challenges, particularly legal and legislative constraints. Current conservation laws and policies on animal import and export have to be challenged to enable rewilding. These obstacles are embraced as opportunities to question and reshape systems that define human interactions with nature.

Another challenge lies in communicating the project's complexity. Striking a balance between detail and abstraction, between specificity and universality, is critical. It requires careful selection of words, images, and actions to tell the story meaningfully. That said, it is not a totalitarian project. It offers strategies, moments of detail, and examples of what could be done, leaving space for future caretakers to continue the work. Maintenance becomes an open question, inviting collective participation and ongoing stewardship.

The Bigger Picture: A Vision for Coexistence

Ultimately, this project is not just about a single site; it is a vision for the future of cities. It asks fundamental questions about how we live with the wild - questions that are increasingly urgent in the face of climate change, biodiversity loss, and urbanization. The Warsaw Zoo becomes a prototype, a living laboratory for new ways of thinking about urban nature. It challenges the dichotomy between city and wilderness, proposing instead a continuum where the two are inseparable.

It is a space of radical hospitality, where boundaries are porous and alliances are interspecies. As I reflect on my work, I am confident with its capacity to inspire - not by offering definitive answers, but by opening up possibilities. It is a reminder that architecture is not just about buildings; it is about attitudes, stories, and relationships. It is about creating conditions for life to flourish, in all its forms.