

JOWITA MRÓZ

**SET FREE THE ARTISTIC ENERGY OF LODZ!
THE EVOLUTION OF THE URBAN FORMS
FOUNDATION**

In the last catalogue of the Urban Forms Foundation, Teresa Latuszewska-Syrda describes her initial inspiration in these words:

In 2008, the London Tate Modern presented on the façade of the building the works of six artists: Os Gemeos, Nunca, Sixeart, JR, Blu and Faile. At that point I thought to myself: why not do it here? Why not in Lodz? After all, the history of Lodz resembles the history of street art to some extent: Lodz is a young city, just like street art. Lodz is a city of revolution. Its golden age was in the period of the great industrial revolution, in times when artistic revolutions were so frequent as technical inventions. Its traces can be seen everywhere – in the brick walls of the factories, in the factory owners' eclectic villas, in the art nouveau tenement houses and villas, in the modernist housing estate of Helena and Szymon Syrkusowie and in the Strzeminski Art Museum, for which foundations were laid by the collection of the a.r. group – a group of revolutionary artists. The revolution is also reflected in the blank walls of tenement houses created as a result of clearances planned by communist planners. Political, social and economic revolutions built and ruined this city. The revolutions of the 1980s formed street art, which derives its own independence from them and is not limited by schematic formulas (Latuszewska-Syrda 2015: 2).

Those revolutions left their mark on the architecture of Lodz and impacted the current image of the city as the place with post-industrial atmosphere and multicultural traditions, full of artistic energy, but also as the place that is overwhelming, grey and struggling with various problems. Recently the restoration of neglected buildings and places has accelerated, which symbolises the rebirth of

the energy of this city (Latuszewska-Syrda 2015: 2). Unfortunately, many of these buildings could not be renovated in a typical way. Some of them have been just completely destroyed – leaving only sad, blank walls of outbuildings which have required a different kind of restoration. The Urban Forms Foundation, perceiving the enormous potential of the city seeking transformation and development, has chosen the artistic way of its rebirth. That is how the idea to change the public space and to set free the energy of Lodz by creating a gallery of murals was born.

The Foundation was established in 2008 as an independent non-governmental organisation created to deal with broadly understood urban art – urban art defined as a kind of creative activity performed in relation to the city life and undertaken by artists who live in cities or just like urban life. At the beginning, one of the primary aims of the Foundation was to change the current image of Lodz by aestheticisation of the public space. This fundamental goal was achieved by creating a permanent exhibition of murals in the city centre of Lodz – the Urban Forms Gallery – and by placing other works of art (3D, installations) in the public space (photos 4, 5, 7, 8, 35).

The concept of changing blank walls of old tenement houses into the typical canvas for large-format paintings, thereby allowing the inhabitants unlimited access to art, appeared in 2009. A high value of the works was provided by renowned artists and talented novices from all over the world who have created all the murals included in the Urban Forms Gallery. The Foundation does not limit artists in choosing form and content. The Foundation functions rather as a social and cultural institution, or a kind of patron – chooses the artists, raises funds (through competitions, from sponsors, subsidies, grants and business activity), obtains permission from the owners of the selected buildings, organises the paintwork, documents and promotes. From 2011 to 2014, as a result of the Foundation's activities, 37 murals appeared in Lodz. Most of the murals were created during the Urban Forms Gallery Festival, which was a cultural event and also a kind of attraction for the inhabitants and tourists who had an opportunity to observe changes occurring on the walls. For several years, the Foundation was consistently struggling with the current image of Lodz, as the place which is grey and overwhelming, by transforming it into a lively city with a great collection of large-format paintings.

Although initially one of the major goals of the Foundation was the aestheticisation of Lodz by creating a gallery of murals, after several years the organisation widened the scope of its activity and started to organise social and academic research, educational workshops, tours, debates, publications and conferences, as well as support other projects, for example, the Ogarna 2.0 or the New Szeroka Project (photos 12, 48), and the revitalisation of the Old Market in Lodz.

One of the first manifestations of the wider activities of the Foundation was supporting the research on the experience of art in the urban space. During the Urban Forms Gallery Festival 2013, the Department of Ethics at the University of Lodz and the Urban Forms Foundation formed an inter-disciplinary team of 9 students called "Streetartworkers" to deal with issues of culture by approaching them from different research perspectives and acting directly in the public space. The Streetartworker was a person who carried out a survey or a special kind of conversation with people accidentally met in the streets of Lodz. Every interview took place in the vicinity of a mural – the team carried out a survey around all the murals included in the Urban Forms Gallery (2013). In the survey, different questions were used – introductory, encouraging and developing the conversation about art. For example, the Streetartworkers asked people whether the mural could be called art and what its function was; whether the mural fit into the place where it had been painted. The respondents had an opportunity to express their opinions on the value of the murals and their importance for Lodz and its inhabitants (See Gralińska-Toborek, Kazimierska-Jerzyk 2014). Supporting the research, the results of which are presented in *Experience of Art in Urban Space...*, was a significant part of the evolution of the Foundation's activities and also a confirmation that the organisation is trying to do much more for the city and its inhabitants than only to create a great gallery of murals. The next step was to organise, together with the Department of Ethics (Institute of Philosophy, University of Lodz), the 1st International Conference Aesthetic Energy of the City in September 2014. The Foundation's participation allowed to link theoretical and aesthetic points of view at that time. Now it is the norm in its activities. The Foundation publishes research reports and includes the study of opinion or participating observations as important elements of projects in general (See Reports).

In the same year, the Foundation, as an organisation with experience in the area of urban art, was invited to participate in the project Ogarna 2.0. The City of Gdansk organised a project for renovation and artistic decoration of tenement houses in Ogarna Street. It is important that the project was not only a top-down initiative of the city, but it was also co-financed by the tenants' association. The great success of the Ogarna 2.0 has encouraged the City of Gdansk and the residents to also change Szeroka Street. The New Szeroka Project, which was similar to Ogarna 2.0, was carried out in 2014. The transformation of neglected façades of the buildings in Ogarna Street and Szeroka Street, by giving them artistic decorations and a fresh, new look, became another successful intervention of the Foundation in the urban space, this time not on the local ground.

The New Szeroka Project was only a part of the Foundation's activities in 2014. The Foundation also supported the revitalisation of the Old Market in

Lodz and organised student internships and study trips to partner cities – Weimar and Dresden. In 2014, the Foundation also organised a series of educational and creative workshops that became an important aspect of the activity of the organisation.

In the spring of 2014, the Foundation, in cooperation with the University of Lodz and the Public Lodz-Downtown Library (Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna Łódź-Śródmieście Filia nr 5), organised several educational workshops for children from poor neighbourhoods of the city. Although the programme of the workshops was concentrated around street art, children had also an opportunity to learn about different forms of art, or to develop their ability to work in a team for the common good. Another project in the form of workshops, which were also a type of student internships, was carried out during the music festivals: Impact Festival 2014, Life Festival Oświęcim 2014 and Open'er Festival 2014. The workshops were aimed at awakening creativity of the festivals' participants, as well as promoting the new image of Lodz as the city of great artistic energy. In the summer of 2014, supporting the project of the revitalisation of the Old Market in Lodz, the Foundation organised other workshops for children, during which the participants had an opportunity to design and create of cardboard a new frontage of the Old Market. The main ideas of all the workshops were similar: providing knowledge about street art, development of creative thinking about art in the public space and raising awareness of urban space experience. The workshops enjoyed widespread interest, which shows that people, especially children and youth, need also another type of contact with street art, much more involved and conscious than only passive admiration of art in the urban space.

For this reason, the project of educational and creative workshops was continued in 2015 during the Off Gallery project (photos 10, 49–51), which was organised to create murals that were interpretations of the pictures included in the Gallery of Polish Masters (Museum of the City of Lodz, 15 Ogrodowa Street). It also served to increase participation in culture and competence of the perception of art among residents of the areas threatened by social exclusion. In addition to the workshops and the creation of murals, the Off Gallery was enriched by participatory elements, which was a very new and non-typical form of the activity of the Foundation.

Although in the autumn of 2015 the 1st edition of the Energy of the City Festival, which was a continuation of the Urban Forms Gallery Festival, took place and new murals appeared in Lodz, the Foundation has modified its initial goals. From an organisation changing the current image of Lodz by creating a mural gallery, the Foundation became an initiator of participatory mechanism and an organisation to which other entities turn (Gralińska-Toborek, Kazimierska-Jerzyk

2014: 219). Reactions of inhabitants during social and educational research, as well as widespread interest in workshops, show that different forms of the Foundation's activities have met the needs of the city and its inhabitants who now proudly identify themselves with "the city of murals". The Foundation has set free the energy of the city in the area of urban art, but it is just the beginning of the artistic and social restoration of Lodz.

REFERENCES

- Kołodziej, Jan; Mrozek, Paweł (2015), *Nowa Szeroka i Ogarna 2.0. 2013–2014*, Łódź: Fundacja Urban Forms.
- Latuszewska-Syrda, Teresa (2014), (without the title), [in:] *Galeria Urban Forms. Łódzkie murale*, Łódź: Fundacja Urban Forms.
- Gralińska-Toborek, Agnieszka; Kazimierska-Jerzyk, Wioletta (2014), *Doświadczenie sztuki w przestrzeni miejskiej. Galeria Urban Forms 2011–2013/ Experience of Art in Urban Space. Urban Forms Gallery 2011–2013*, trans. Marta Koniarek, Łódź: Biblioteka/Fundacja Urban Forms.

REPORTS

- Dialogi wokół murali. Raport z badań opinii przeprowadzonych w ulicznych punktach konsultacyjnych* (2014a), by Qualio for the Urban Forms Foundation, online: http://urbanforms.org/userfiles/Dialog_wokol_murali_raport.pdf, accessed 10.12.2015.
- Raport z badań opinii dotyczących nowej aranżacji przestrzeni Starego Rynku w Łodzi* (2014b), by Qualio for the Urban Forms Foundation, online: http://urbanforms.org/userfiles/Raport_Stary_Rynek.pdf.
- Projekt Off Galeria. Dialogi wokół murali* (2015), by Qualio for the Urban Forms Foundation, online: http://www.urbanforms.org/userfiles/Raport_Off_Galeria.pdf, accessed 10.12.2015.