

Article

Countryside within the City: A Motivating Vision behind Civic Green Area Stewardship in Warsaw, Poland

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Abstract: In the midst of the epoch of the Urban Anthropocene, citizen engagement is an important step on the path of creating local and global sustainability. However, the factors that motivate civic urban dwellers to become voluntary stewards of nature environments inside cities need research. This is an empirical study based on deep interviews and a grounded theory approach focused on the “inner world” of people in Warsaw, Poland, that engage in green area stewardship. Our approach reveals a commonly shared vision as the prime motivator powering agency in green area stewardship. This vision was articulated as creating a countryside within the city characterized by a stronger sense of community, a shared sense of place and an enhanced connection with nature. While other studies have found inner values or direct benefits as motivating factors for engaging in urban stewardship, we instead found a green vision for re-designing what the “urban” could be like as the prime motivator for transformation—a vision with potential global sustainability implications.

Keywords: environmental management; community gardens; urban stewardship; social-ecological systems; qualitative analysis; grounded theory; green area activism; community; place; values

1. Introduction

To meet global and local sustainability challenges associated with the Urban Anthropocene [1], there is a need of a change of direction in cultural norms so that active engagement to protect nature by civic urban dwellers is politically supported [2]. Such a societal shift has been highlighted as a deep leverage point for sustainability transformations [3], as it could enhance the already globally occurring ubiquitous urban environmental protection activities, such as gardening, tree planting, the maintenance of parks, local food production and ecological conservation/restoration and even the creation of entirely new urban ecosystems [4–6]. The literature in psychology and sociology suggests that such pro-environmental behavior in turn could shape inner motivations for broad-based environmental action, such as fostering a stronger connection to nature and enhanced levels of place-based well-being [7–10]. The massive scale and pace of global urbanization may lead to an alienation process in which a significant proportion of the future human population will find itself separated from sensory interaction with natural environments, which may lead to a broad-based social–ecological amnesia [11–14]. Civic ecology and stewardship are two concepts that illuminate civic restoration and the management of urban natural environments, and they are also argued to lead to learning, a deepening of connections with nature, and strengthened social bonds [5,14,15].

Stewardship groups seem able to gather and pass on practices, knowledge and experience related to community building and how to manage local ecosystems through the preservation of social–ecological memory [16]. In this paper, we use the concept of stewardship due to its broad meaning as a governance approach [17,18], as it “involves work to conserve, manage, monitor, restore, advocate for, and educate the public about a wide range of issues related to sustaining the local environment” [19]. A stewardship initiative is here defined as a group of people engaged in protection, restoration or creation of a green area; e.g., a community garden or a park. Urban gardens are examples of stewardship arenas where people can re-connect with nature, attach to place and build social cohesion [10,20–23]. Such stewardship arenas also promote democratic values through cooperation and debate, which are much needed in the contemporary world [24].

We focus this study on stewardship initiatives in the city of Warsaw, Poland (Figure 1). The aim is to observe what kind of stewardship engagement exists, and further, to use a case-study approach to perform a deep qualitative analysis on why people engage in green-area stewardship. As civic groups often are self-organized [23], it is of interest to study the motivations behind the engagement of key individuals in such groups.

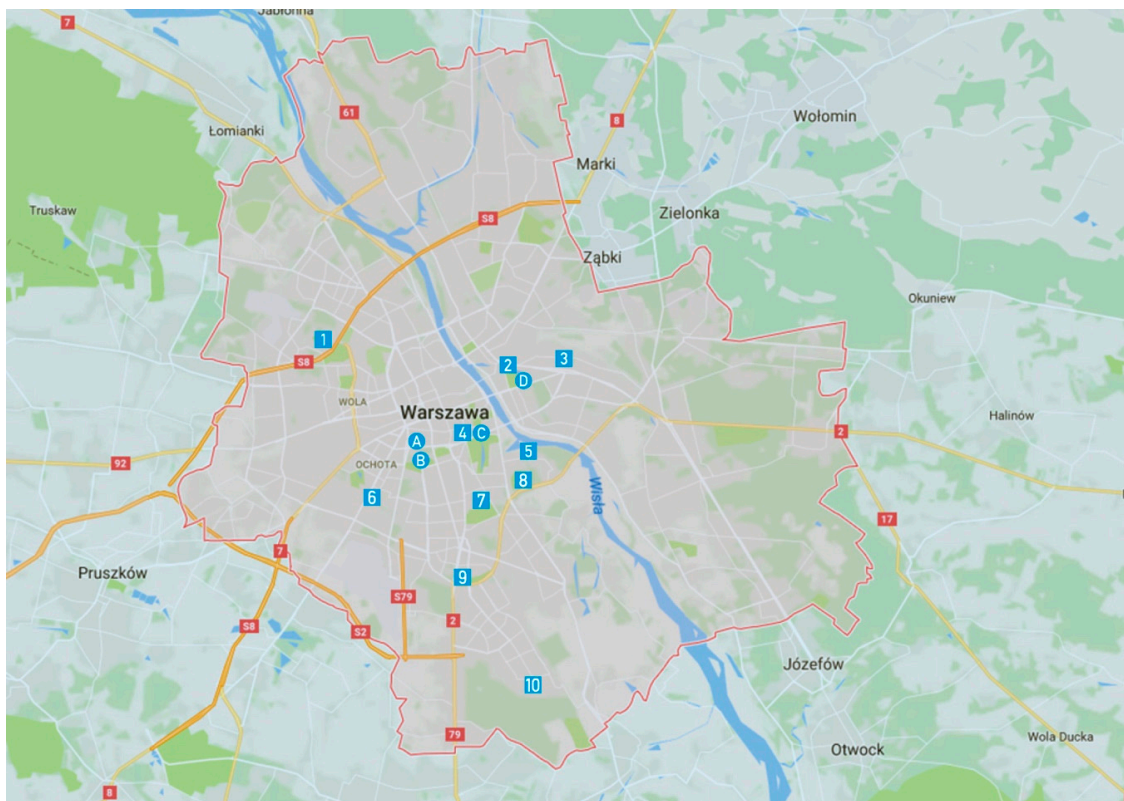


Figure 1. Map of Warsaw showing the locations of green areas and community gardens that were the subject of stewardship initiatives described in this study: A) Park Wielkopolski, B) Pole Mokotowskie, 3) Jazdów, 4) Park Skaryszewski, 1) Ogród Społecznościowy Fort Bema, 2) Ogród Powszechny, 3) Ogród na Paca, 4) Motyka i Słońce, 5) Radykalne Ogródki Działkowe, 6) Pixxe, 7) Ogród Wspólnotowy Jedność, 8) Wspólny Ogród SDK, 9) Nasz Park (Source: Google maps).

Our choice of case study is well advised since there seems to be a lack of research on community gardens in the post-communist countries of Europe [25] and as there is limited knowledge about what motivates urban volunteers to engage in urban stewardship activities in such countries [26]. When developing urban green areas in such countries, an enhanced understanding of people’s motives can help us to construct more efficient management strategies. We use a social–ecological systems (SES) lens of analysis [20]. Over the last decades, the concept of social–ecological systems has provided

a lens of analysis that sharply puts into focus “humanity’s dependence on nature, our burgeoning influence upon it, as well as our ethical obligations towards it” [27]. A social–ecological system, such as an urban garden, is one in which the ecological system is intricately linked with and affected by one or more social systems, including socio-cultural and economic factors [21]. Any urban SES is a dynamic entity restricted to the spatial borders of an urban ecosystem in which stewards are engaged in the management and protection of natural resources and where the behaviors of participants are conditioned by shared memories and rules-in-use [6,16,22]. While structural features such as shared memories and rights granted to civil society groups play a role in the resilience of stewardship action [23,28], we are interested in this paper in the motivations behind why urban people choose to participate in stewardship initiatives in the first place.

Previous research has shown that motivations behind the protection of green space may be ascribed to values related to environmentalism [29,30]. Other researchers highlight that motivations are based on worries about health, declining direct sensory nature contact and/or possibilities to learn about local ecologies [15,31–33]. Renewing communities and increasing social cohesion are also argued to be motivating factors, as previously highlighted in the literature [30,33]. Another highlighted motivating factor is the freedom to self-organize management practices when restoring degraded places in urban landscapes [5,34]. In addition, motivations may be grounded in lifestyle choices, in ideological bearings (for instance, activist, alternativist, environmentalist, and/or solidarity-driven) and in stress therapy [9]. Recent studies on urban food gardening initiatives in the Global North are indicating a plethora of coexisting motivations for such engagement, including access to superior or rare qualities of crops for consumption, supplementary incomes, health benefits, education and knowledge transmission, reducing environmental footprints, empowerment and strengthening community ties, and upkeep of cultural ecosystem services [5,35,36]. Additionally, negative life experiences may act as motivating factors; for instance, related to the loss or degradation of places seen as valuable [10,37]. In the following section, we present the study site and method, which is followed by a section in which we present our results based on qualitative analysis. In the discussion, we analyze the nuances of an articulated and shared vision that drive engagement in civic urban stewardship initiatives in Warsaw, Poland, and we conclude with some policy implications.

2. Materials and Methods

This is part of an original Masters project based on a qualitative research approach [38]. We conducted 32 interviews in total. We selected 16 interviews with key informants in the stewardship initiatives as the empirical material for deep analyses framed by grounded theory. Below, we describe in detail the study city, the method and its associated theory.

2.1. Study Site: Warsaw

The city of Warsaw covers an area of 517 km². The population of the city is ca. 1.7 million. [39]. Over the last decades, Warsaw has grown both in terms of space and in terms of population, encroaching on its natural environments. In the 1920s, the area of the city covered 124.7 km². Before World War II (1938) it covered 141.5 km², and in the 1950s (1950) Warsaw expanded to 427.5 km² and continued to grow to reach 516.9 km² at the beginning of this century (2002). During that time, the population of Warsaw grew from 0.9 million (1921) to 1.7 million (2008) [40].

The city faced nearly complete destruction during World War II [41]. After the end of the German occupation, Poland found itself under the control of the Soviet Union [42]. Rebuilding Warsaw from ruins took decades, and communist ideology had a significant influence on the spatial shape of the city. Poland regained freedom and democracy in 1989. During the following decades, unregulated development and poor urban planning has led to what some residents refer to as a “spatial chaos” [43]—a development also mirrored in other post-communist European cities [44]. The violation of the property rights of the prewar landowners during the Stalinist times and recent lack of formal legislation regulating growth form part of the initial conditions related to the evolution

towards such spatial chaos. Natural environments account for 28% (145 km²) of the metropolitan area of Warsaw. Such environments in turn consist of forests (72.6 km²), parks (11.7 km²) and allotment gardens (17 km²) as well as cemeteries, riversides, and land within 19th century fortifications [45].

Of late, attempts to convert green areas and edges of parks into constructions have become the subject of considerable negative media attention [46]. Poland is placed among the European countries with the worst air quality [47]. Cutting trees, construction in parks and development pressure on allotment gardens has been present in the public debate in Warsaw in recent years in relation to the problem of air pollution. There have previously been scientific studies on green areas in Warsaw; e.g., on green infrastructure [48], on urban agriculture [49] and on allotment gardens [50,51]. However, we have not yet come across studies articulating the motivations of key individuals driving stewardship initiatives in the city of Warsaw.

2.2. Method

The goal of our approach was to understand motivations behind civic engagement in urban green-area stewardship in Warsaw, since stewardship motivation in this geographical area is poorly studied. This study uses a grounded theory approach [52–55]. Grounded theory methods are suitable “for studying individual processes, interpersonal relations and the reciprocal effects between individuals and larger social processes” [56]. Furthermore, these methods are useful “for studying typical socio-psychological topics such as motivation, personal experience, emotions, identity, attraction, prejudice and interpersonal co-operation and conflict” [56]. The approach aims at generating a theory that is grounded in empirical data.

2.3. Data Collection

The first step in our empirical data collection was a pilot study with the aim of learning about the field. The approach included mass media analysis, social media analysis, and pre-study interviews with three city officials and three NGO representatives (snowballing). The respondents were chosen with regard to their knowledge about green areas and with regard to ongoing stewardship initiatives within the city of Warsaw. The total amount of information gathered during the pilot study allowed the identification and selection of the stewardship initiatives to be studied deeply with a grounded theory approach.

The next step was the empirical data collection of the selected green area initiatives. The aim was to conduct deep interviews with key informants: “people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic of interest” [57]. We selected our key informants with the criteria of being leaders or being known as experienced members of the initiatives in question.

Out of a total of 26 conducted interviews, 16 in-depth open-ended interviews with key informants were selected to be thoroughly analyzed using the grounded theory methodology [55,56]. All interviews were audio-recorded. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes. Some of the interviews were conducted on the sites in question. The three main questions asked were as follows: “What was your engagement for green areas in Warsaw?”, “Why did you do it?” and “Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your engagement?”. In some cases, questions were rephrased and asked again or followed up by questions for clarification or for additional information.

The 16 key respondents were members of 14 different urban stewardship initiatives. Ten of the initiatives were community gardens. A community garden is here understood as a plot of land gardened by a group of people. The gardens varied in size, number of people engaged, organization and in appearance. However, respondents often used the Polish term “ogród społeczny” for their initiative, which can be translated into English as “community garden”. Twelve interviews were conducted in such gardens (Figure 2). Four of the initiatives were centered on protecting and enhancing other types of urban green areas. Three of these were related to urban parks, and one was related to a residential green area (Figure 3). Four interviews were conducted with key informants of such initiatives. In summary, our key informants came from 1) all community gardens that could be

identified in Warsaw (Figure 2) and 2) from four out of five of other types of initiatives related to green area stewardship that were found during the pilot study (Figure 3). This approach allowed us to reach saturation [58,59].



Figure 2. Map of Warsaw showing the location of community gardens that were the subject of stewardship initiatives described in this study.



Figure 3. Map of Warsaw showing the location of the four green areas not classified as community gardens that were the subject of stewardship initiatives described in this study.

2.4. Analysis

Grounded theory views analysis as occurring simultaneously with the data collection. The interviews were transcribed and coded with open codes emerging from the data. First, the interviews were analyzed using initial line-by-line coding. The codes answered the following questions: "What is happening?", "What is the participant describing?" and "What is the motivation behind the action?". Here are examples of the initial codes: "establishing the garden", "learning new skills" and "opposing environmental loss". The second cycle of analysis (in grounded theory, called focused coding [55,56]), led to the most frequent and important themes being determined. The examples of the second cycle codes are "relaxing by being in nature", "wanting to be a part of a community" and "having access to a safe space". Rigorously following the grounded theory approach, constant comparison between codes and data and memo writing allowed for reflection on emerging concepts and connections between

them [55,56], and finally the core theoretical concepts emerged solely from the empirical interview data (see results).

2.5. Philosophical Positioning

This case study can be placed within the interpretative research tradition [60]. We strictly followed the constructivist approach to grounded theory [55,61]. As pointed out by Charmaz, “Research participants’ implicit meanings, experiential views and researchers in combination make up constructions of reality” [55] (p. 10). Such approach is useful for understanding our biases as investigators when searching for patterns of the “inside world” of respondents. However, the approach does not produce generalizable results beyond the scope of the study in question. Our biases were reflected in discussions and handled during the research process. As the first author was previously involved in a stewardship initiative in Warsaw, we took into consideration her potential biases and pre-understanding of the research area and reflected on her position as a researcher related to that background [62]. Moreover, all research respondents were informed about her previous role and about her present and separated role as a person conducting scientific research. Related information was provided in written form in the Plain Language Statement prior to interviews. Constructivist grounded theory calls for reflexivity, also providing “rigorous procedures for researchers to check, refine and develop their ideas and intuitions about the data” [56]. We strictly followed this logic throughout the research process. The transcripts of the interviews were sent to the respondents for their review and acceptance before being used here. Ethically sensitive information about respondents was handled in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Stockholm University.

3. Results

The stewardship initiatives in Warsaw entail a number of different activities with different outcomes. Included are initiatives such as the creation of a community garden, creation of a local pocket park, extracting funding for participatory budgeting for planting trees, preventing exploitation and ecological degradation of a park, the initiation of consultation processes for green area upkeep, broadening of societal knowledge about local ecosystems, performing comprehensive ecological assessments of a park by volunteering scientists and creating a plan for an urban ecosystem that was based on a consultation process. The vast majority of the initiatives were bottom-up and run by volunteers. The main finding responding to our aim is the concept of “countryside within the city”: a desirable vision for changing the urban environment that seems to be the driving motivation of respondents of all these stewardship initiatives. Below, we present the theoretical concepts that play part of this overarching vision. The three main categories of this vision are 1) nature, 2) place and 3) community.

3.1. Nature

The respondents expressed that they wanted to protect, maintain or enrich urban natural environments. This could be done by, for example, protecting a biodiversity-rich section of a green area from intrusion, saving trees from being cut down, cleaning a neglected ecosystem, planting trees or starting a community garden entirely from scratch. Rallying against cutting down park trees or street trees was a common activity:

“There were actions against cutting down trees. (...) We were fighting for it ... We wanted to save part of the trees that were supposed to be cut down. I don’t remember how many ... Like 40 trees? And in the meantime, there was guerrilla gardening. (...) The city authorities were not doing much, they were cutting down trees and not planting anything, so we were like replacing them in doing their job, planting trees and bushes.” (Respondent 3)

Respondents wanted to be able to experience being in nature in a more tangible way through sensory contact with the soil by planting trees, bushes, flowers and edible plants. They described pleasure

during gardening activities, and they liked being able to experience seasons and changing weather more profoundly.

“I just need to dig in soil from time to time. I wanted to have a place in my neighborhood other than a park where you can have more intimate contact with nature, it was very important to me. I also wanted my kids to have this opportunity to do something in the soil.”
(Respondent 5)

Observing nature, articulated as “seeing doing its magic”, was associated with sensations of awe. Respondents described, for example, the pleasure of watching seeds growing into plants, noticing bird nests on tree planted by the groups, experiencing the beauty of the garden during spring when fruit trees are in bloom, and the pleasure of harvesting the abundance of fruits and vegetables in late summer. Nature was seen as a source of relaxation and a source of mitigating stress related to work, family life and stress related to the hectic city life. Respondents explained that they could “breathe” in their green place. Trees were perceived as important parts of the city in preventing air pollution, providing habitat for birds, and as a source of visual beauty in their living environment. Respondents mentioned plant species related to childhood memories, plants useful for pollinators, and edible plants that they wanted to grow. They also articulated the value of having horse chestnut trees for the enjoyment of children to collect chestnuts.

3.2. Community

Members of the initiatives wanted to be a part of a community. This could be a group of friends, neighbors, gardeners, activists from an international movement, scientists volunteering to do an assessment of a city park, activists from an urban movement, a complex partnership between various groups and organizations gathered around a shared goal to prevent a green area from development or a struggle against changes seen as undesirable. Respondents liked to broaden their social contacts, be able to share work and responsibility with others, have fun together, learn from one another and to be liked and perceived as being useful to others.

“First, I noticed that I have this strong need to belong and I am happy to be in that kind of initiative. I like group work. I have never belonged to a community garden before but had gardens in various places where I lived, and I was missing that. Here there is a chance to develop this passion, be active outdoors. This group of cool people has come together.”
(Respondent 14)

Some interviewees wanted to prevent alienation and loneliness in the urban environment. Others wanted to use the civil rights of communities to take part in urban politics about changes in their living environment. Discontent about lack of a consultation process or about the city organizing “pseudo-consultations” were among the reasons stated for taking action. Shared work could be related to physical work: cleaning a neglected lot, building an infrastructure to a garden, cultivating vegetables or planting trees.

“No other project gets people together like planting trees. Nothing else. Kids, teenagers, families, single fathers, elderly people, everybody ... It is such an uncontroversial thing.”
(Respondent 11)

Other types of work included joint strategic planning, writing documents, collecting signatures, researching, and sharing information in media or social media. Many initiatives organized community events open to the public: concerts, workshops, lectures, flea markets and more.

Respondents talked about the emergence of a sense of community around an issue or an activity. Respondents appreciated getting to know their neighbors or inviting them to initiatives and they appreciated building trust among people. Protecting green areas or planting trees were perceived as

creating values for the children of their communities and for future inhabitants of the wider city. In two cases, respondents expressed disappointment when a bigger community failed to gather around a community garden.

3.3. Place

The third category was related to place. Respondents were willing to create places that would meet their needs, to renew nature in neglected places, or maintain places that served them well. The motivation was articulated to protect or create places where one could feel safe, at ease or relaxed, and a place where children could play freely. Some respondents were motivated by the historical and cultural heritage of places. Others wanted to create a place for cultural events and education. Also, it was articulated that there was a need for a place that could serve as an arena for experimentation and innovation towards a more sustainable urban environment. Places were generally articulated to provide a kind of spatial anchorage related to the identity of groups, and respondents were emotionally attached to them as if they were “their own”.

“Together with neighbors we started this community garden. (...) This place was full of garbage, overgrown, it was a lot of work to come to this point and still there is a lot of work ahead of us. (...) We wanted to protect this place from potential development, clean it from garbage, raise awareness of this place among people and make it a place for them to relax.”
(Respondent 13)

Respondents also wanted to prevent undesirable changes of places that were important for their place-based wellbeing in their local neighborhood.

“People suddenly felt that this is their place, the officials don’t come here, they don’t spend time here, why would they decide about this place? We are the inhabitants, we are here, we use this place in various ways and no one asked us what we want, what our needs are. (...) This is the kind of motivation of an empowered community that is being offended.”
(Respondent 3)

Motivations were also related to willingness to preserve a green place as part of the “lungs of the city”, a place rich in wildlife and biodiversity, and as an important part of the larger urban ecosystem.

3.4. A Motivating Vision: Countryside within the City

The level of engagement in activism could vary from running a community garden with a couple of people to taking part in establishing a multi-partner network and protecting a larger green area from changes seen as undesirable. The three elements of nature, community and place were intertwined in the stories of the participating key respondents. In some stories, the main focus was on, for example, the ecological integrity of an ecosystem. Others emphasized protecting a place of a rich cultural and historical heritage, or the right of their community to participate in the governance process about the development of a particular place in Warsaw. However, all three categories of nature, place and community were present in all stories as articulated by all respondents. They, for example, described planting trees with others to create a green place for the wellbeing of their community, or they articulated the emergence of a network community of people acting to preserve a green place perceived as being important for the entire city. The natural environment was articulated as being beautiful, abundant, magical and harmonious. Places were articulated as useful, safe and as belonging to their community. Negative aspects of stewardship or difficulties in collaborations within groups were rarely mentioned. The nature, place and community aspects taken together allowed for a meta-narrative to emerge by strictly following the grounded approach. The meta narrative was shared among the urban green area stewards that we interviewed: it was about a vision they were all struggling to achieve. We call this vision “countryside within the city” (Figure 4).

COUNTRYSIDE WITHIN THE CITY



Figure 4. “Countryside within the city”: a desirable vision for an enhanced urban environment that respondents were willing to act for—an idyllic countryside-like green space allowing for more profound contact with nature, enjoying being a part of a community in a nice place where you can feel safe and relaxed. Illustration: Dennis Wojda.

This vision of a countryside within the city involved being surrounded by natural environments (like in a countryside), and it concerned experiencing a more profound contact with nature. The vision also involved the enjoyment of being part of a community, and it involved having access to a place where you can feel safe and relaxed. Respondents used the expressions “country”, “country-like” and “city–country living environment”. Some talked about longing for rural nature and a more peaceful environment, but at the same time they were not willing to leave the city permanently. They expressed enjoying the possibility of having a garden-refuge “from the city” and being able to be outdoors with friends without the need to travel all the way out to the countryside. The below quote exemplifies how this vision was expressed:

“When we came here to work, a woman was heard talking over the phone saying, ‘It is so nice here, there are garden patches here, and vegetables are growing’. She didn’t go to a park to sit on a bench. She came here to experience a bit of the countryside we dream about. A blissful countryside. A substitute of it should be in the city. Some people . . . Eighty percent of Poles have their roots in the country. (. . .) Many of us are newcomers in the city. We left our roots, families somewhere else. To feel at home here... An example: your grandma had

peonies in her garden. Why can't you plant peonies next to your block of flats and talk with the neighbors about them?" (Respondent 13)

Some respondents were willing to incorporate elements of rural life to the city and create a new type of environment, as exemplified by the quote below:

"It is worthwhile to introduce what we traditionally call countryside to the city and create something new, something like a city–country living environment. Because it is good for people but also for the natural environment that we happen to live in". (Respondent 6)

4. Discussion

This study is likely the first attempt to study civic green area stewardship in Warsaw, Poland. Our aim here was to assess what motivates the urbanities of Warsaw to engage in stewardship. Our results indicate that the motivations of key individuals behind stewardship initiatives in Warsaw were related to the three intertwined categories of nature, community and place. Those motivations form part of the vision "countryside within the city". We found that this vision functioned as a common motivator of a desirable urban environment for which the respondents in the different initiatives were willing to act.

4.1. *Creating, Protecting and Learning about Urban Natural Environments*

Stewardship groups around the world aim at restoring and enhancing urban nature environments [5,18]. It has been argued that relational values related to environmentalism act as motivator for stewardship action [18,29,30]. Our results in Warsaw indicate that members of the greening initiatives were acting to preserve existing natural capital of the city (green areas, trees and a rich diversity of flora and fauna including endangered species). However, many groups were also creating entirely new ecosystems; for instance, by planting trees as well as creating new community gardens. Protecting and creating local nature was articulated as a motivation for such social action. There is a growing body of literature on the idea that sensory contact with nature is essential to human physical and mental wellbeing [31,32]. We found that key informants from Warsaw described several wellbeing benefits such as the sensation of being more present, relaxed, and being at one with nature.

It has been highlighted in the literature that urban gardens and other green areas can function as arenas for learning about local social–ecological systems [23]. This has, among others, been observed in community gardens in Berlin [15]. We found also in Warsaw that green-area initiatives seemed to result in a broadened ecological knowledge related to their places and about social systems impacting on them. For example, inventories of plants and animals were created by members of these stewardship groups that promoted not only individual learning but also wider learning in the respective community. Barthel et al. [16] show that groups of urban stewards gather and pass on a social–ecological memory: a collective memory related to management practices that sustain ecosystem services and which is an important part of community resilience [63]. As example, in two of the stewardship initiatives of urban parks that were assessed in this study, an interdisciplinary group of scientists conducted a comprehensive species inventory and a scientific ecological study that resulted in publications [64,65]. These publications spread ecological knowledge among the general public of Warsaw and within the scientific community. Thus, learning about local nature was articulated as rewarding and motivated participants to continue.

4.2. *Place-Making, Agency and Community*

The studied stewardship initiatives in Warsaw emerged from the bottom-up, indicating voluntary engagement with local urban politics—previously highlighted as an important attribute in the stewardship literature [4]. Such practices can be defined as "community-based, environmental stewardship actions taken to enhance green infrastructure, ecosystem services, and human well-being in cities and other human-dominated landscapes" [66] (p. 177). The civic ecology literature points out the importance of common engagement in renewing local communities [5]. In Warsaw, the studied

stewardship activists were willing to be a part of and support a community. They expressed joy related to working together, learning from one another, and just having fun together. The studied stewardship initiatives for example hosted concerts, hosted events where people could express common needs and they organized common picnics and other events that brought many people together. Thus, our results indicate that the studied stewardship initiatives in Warsaw led to creating, renewing and strengthening local urban communities.

Our results also indicate that communities had strong bonds internally and with places and thought of places as if they were “their own”. Elements related to the sense of place literature were articulated among our key informants, particularly place attachment [8,10,16,67], as they were active in maintaining places that provided a shared identity for their community. The aspect of restoring places can often be seen in the civic ecology literature [5]; for example, in a study of oyster gardeners in New York [68], the authors found that sense of place was a motivating factor, together with meanings and memories.

Respondents also articulated enhancing neglected places and creating new ones as motivators for action. Our study of Warsaw hence indicates that activists were motivated to create, enhance or protect places that were important for the empowerment and identity of their community; intertwining the meaning of place and community. Our findings are in line with those of Kent [34], who wrote that place-making is not only about the creation of physical places where we want to go and spend our time; it is equally about creating communities that have a greater capacity to self-organize—to create their own destinies, to express discontent or solidarity, to celebrate together, to exchange memories and accelerate social innovations [34]. Our interviews revealed a shared memory between initiatives about agency; a collective memory related to protecting places and community identities. The groups shared such collective memories between one another, and our interview data pointed to the idea that such collective memories formed important parts of their sense of agency, which have previously been highlighted as important ingredient in stewardship of social–ecological systems [4,18].

4.3. The Motivating Vision and Its Role for Wider Urban Sustainability

The relationships between rural and urban and the blurring distinctions between them are important questions for urban sustainability [63]. The traditional way of thinking about those two categories in terms of opposition is problematic [69] as “urbanity” in the countryside provides social services and since urban gardening and food production can be “a fully integrated urban activity” [70] (p. 232). The motivating vision that emerged from the interview data about the “countryside within the city” is precisely an expression of the blurring of the boundaries between traditional thinking about urban and rural [28]. Acting on such a vision could lead to the greening of cities and to a living environment for urban people that enables the broad-based development of pro-environmental values [13]. Drawing on the recent insights in ecological psychology, stewardship action may have a global sustainability implication in simultaneously shaping behavior and environmental attitudes among two-thirds of the global population in the urban Anthropocene [12,14,71]—a view with roots in Bem’s [7] self-perception theory of attitude change, which assumes that people acquire positive attitudes toward an attitudinal object because of what they do behaviorally (as opposed to the opposite assumption that people behave in certain ways because they like it). For instance, food cultivation activities are a sustainability issue of great importance especially for people in cities [9,23,69]. Urban gardening and agriculture could contribute to achieving higher levels of local food availability, to social learning about how food is produced and the emergence of environmental values from engaging in collective urban cultivation practices. However, activating such a deep leverage point for wider sustainability transformations [3,72] requires careful spatial planning, fully exploiting the potential of affordances triggering pro-environmental behavior and incorporating such knowledge into development plans by local authorities [35,73]. As in other dynamic cities, stewardship initiatives in Warsaw, especially concerning allotment gardens, are under threat due to the spatial expansion of the city. Four out of ten stewardship initiatives researched in this study were located inside

allotment garden areas. Allotments in Warsaw have a great potential for all sorts of initiatives related to broad-based learning about urban agriculture and urban greening; e.g., encouraging allotment gardeners to grow more edible plants, hosting school gardens, and public planting of ecologically important trees. In line with Ruggerini et al. [74], we noticed coexisting multiple sub-motivations behind participation in urban gardening and other greening initiatives in Warsaw. Our results indicate, however, that intertwined nature, place and community aspects related to gardening were present and articulated as important; however, food production and health benefits related to self-grown produce were not the main articulated motivations. It was articulated that creating or maintaining places where people could be together, surrounded by a rural-like natural setting, was more important than actual yields. Some community gardens actually did not focus on growing edible plants at all.

5. Conclusions

This study found a strong indication that a commonly shared vision was the prime motivator that powered agency in green area stewardship. This vision was articulated as creating a “countryside within the city” characterized by a stronger sense of community, a shared sense of place and an enhanced connection with nature. While other studies have found inner values or direct benefits as motivating factors for engaging in urban stewardship, we instead found a shared green vision for re-designing what the “urban” could be like as the prime motivator for transformation. Such motivation behind green area bottom-up initiatives seems to play a role by creating and protecting qualities of the acutely threatened green infrastructures of the city. While global urban expansion impacts biodiversity and encroaches upon landscapes of food production if not steered carefully [70], urban policy makers need to learn about what motivates residents to engage in the stewardship of urban natural environments [2]. Urban policy interventions that aim to increase civic engagement in the management of urban ecosystems should take into consideration grounded approaches to reveal the underlying motivations behind urban gardening and stewardship initiatives [36,74], as understanding people’s motives can help us to construct more efficient management strategies. We are curious whether the “countryside within the city vision” may be a commonly shared motivator for green area stewardship also elsewhere and urge urban scholars with an interest in green area stewardship to investigate that in local case studies across the spectrum of cities around the world.

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