The Dynamics of Underground Culture in Warsaw

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Abstract

This thesis examines the organizational structure, economic practice, legitimation strategy, and spatial challenge and tactics that underground art collectives in Warsaw adopt. It conducts semi-structured interviews with lead members across various cultural initiatives and demonstrates an in-depth thematic analysis. Research confirms that Warsaw's underground has horizontal governance, volunteer-based participation, mixed economic practices, and that it creatively occupies peripheral urban space. Interviewed collectives generate substantial cultural value based on grassroots movements, radical inclusivity, and artistic innovation despite limited institutional support. Their legitimacy is based on the care for excluded communities and the production of real cultural spaces rather than searching for popularity. The thesis also examines how collectives negotiate a highly hostile urban development context that includes ever-rising rents and overall spatial uncertainty. The results show that despite Warsaw's underground culture being burdened with systemic challenges, it is still possible to persist with authentic cultural production and community work. The study contributes to the existing literature on cultural entrepreneurship, subcultural capital, and urban grassroots innovation because it offers details regarding the adaptability and resilience of informal cultural actors in post-socialist cities.

Keywords

Underground art, Warsaw, cultural collectives, grassroots organization, subcultural capital, spatial precarity,

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of Studying Underground Art

Underground art arises to criticize social and political state of the world and to break limiting art aesthetic rules. Investigating these alternative scenes contributes to academic, societal, and urban policy debates.

Academically, papers written around topics connected to this type of cultural initiatives address gaps in the fields of urban sociology and cultural economics and entrepreneurship. Scott (2012) argues that this literature deepens the understanding of how creative practices interact with economic and social structures outside traditional cultural industries. This is followed by the description of how cultural innovation actually thrives in economic unpredictability and contributes to developing new theoretical frameworks.

Socially and culturally, underground art scenes represent communal identities, and innovative practices as they break mainstream norms. Becker's (1982) concept of 'art worlds' theorizes that all artists operate within an extensive network of cooperation where every actor even unconsciously make the existence of other possible. This perspective explains the formation of subcultural and countercultural spaces and positions Warsaw's collectives as nodes in a broader perspective. What differentiates them is that they challenge classical, dominant cultural structures, promote diversity, and cultivate freedom in artistic expression.

Similarly, Luckman (2015) discusses how do-it-yourself (DIY) cultural practices democratize cultural production by creating a safe space for participatory forms of creativity and how that positively affect individuals and communities what is even more than necessary in marginalized or non-institutional contexts.

From an urban policy perspective, underground art scenes provide the cultural sector with new urban regeneration and spatial development models. Grodach and Silver (2013) illustrate that these kinds of initiatives naturally bring authenticity and sustainability into urban cultural life and are much more effective than formalized creative-city programs. Novy and Colomb (2013) discuss the significance of autonomous cultural space and activist-initiated projects in fighting homogenization that results from commercialization and gentrification. Context of these changes is especially relevant in post-industrial cities because they are transforming more rapidly.

1.2 Case of Warsaw

When Poland entered the European Union in 2004, it experienced accelerated economic development, urban renewal, and cultural investment. The developments were stimulated by the availability of EU funds, that resulted in expanding cultural infrastructure, and the refurbishment of historic urban areas. The investments directly influenced an innovation-based cultural economy, state Szlachta and Zaleski (2012). Funding programs favored the competitiveness and internationalization of local creative practices (Murzyn-Kupisz & Działek, 2013). Warsaw, as the capital city benefited from high-profile cultural events and strategic urban policies that were meant to introduce cultural production into the city's post-industrial regeneration. These developments made Polish cultural sector more competitive in the international arena. An example of that growing international position is Warsaw's auction house Desa Unicum ranked 8th in Europe that in 2021 itself has generated over 76% of all art sales in Poland (Niżnik, 2023). Considering this and other examples where capital cities like Paris and Berlin have outstandingly flourishing cultural sectors it's safe to select Warsaw from all Polish cities to research and uncover its not-so-well-known underground scene. Though it's obvious that the city holds a serious position on the European map of art, its alternative, the underground art scene is academically not studied in-depth enough. Its example is worth studying for insight into grassroots art collectives also due to the city's intense urban evolution, and the powerful presence of political tensions. These factors continue to shape creative expression into something more raw and authentic.

The urban subculture of the city is rich and well rooted in Warsaw's long history of independent and avant-garde practices. As pointed by Gralińska-Toborek (2020), Warsaw's independent art initiatives reach back in history to the 1970s–1980s "independent artistic movement." It was that time when informal exhibitions were organized outside government-controlled institutions as a response to censorship and political oppression. Underground culture is an influential part of the cultural progression of artistic self-organization tradition in post-socialist Warsaw.

As noted by Czułość (2023), Warsaw's alternative art movements not only influence the domestic scene but are also a topic of the conversation in the European cultural landscape. Flash Art (2015) highlights that Warsaw's art scene is now definitely moving "beyond the underground," and its grassroots initiatives, informal spaces, and experimental practices interact with increasing urban development and international attention. Furthermore, Warsaw's street art culture, discussed by Cultura Obscura (2022), represents how art interventions continue to

redefine the city's urban landscape. They reclaim public spaces and introduce new, alternative narratives in the cityscape. Street-level artistic practices represent an important dimension of Warsaw's contemporary underground that showcases how creativity is deeply embedded in the city's public life.

In this context, Warsaw offers a highly relevant case for examining how underground collectives organize, sustain, legitimate themselves and navigate the spatial dimension in the cultural economy full of tensions and evolution at the same time. Investigating Warsaw's underground art scene contributes to a deeper understanding of how these creative practices interact with economic, spatial and social structures differently than traditional cultural industries. Despite existing research on underground cultural scenes globally, Warsaw's case remains weakly investigated. This thesis addresses these gaps by providing detailed empirical insights into Warsaw's dynamic and answers below research question:

How do underground art collectives in Warsaw organize, sustain, legitimize themselves, and navigate spatial challenges within the city's evolving cultural economy?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

Below theoretical framework integrates several interrelated theoretical perspectives and empirical cases of Paris, Turin, Bologna, Venice, Shanghai, Dallas, Berlin, Bilbao, and Sydney. Together, these concepts inform a clear and full overview of how underground art scenes organize, legitimate, sustain themselves and navigate the spatial level. This research will use them as a base to unpack dynamics of Warsaw's underground art scene.

2.2 Key Characteristics of Underground Art Scene

To investigate Warsaw's underground art scene, first, we need to clearly understand what is considered underground art and what are its characteristics.

Becker (1982) explains that all artists, regardless of their status, operate within "art worlds" that include networks of people, organizations, and resources. In this environment every artist depends on audiences and needs to participate within established networks to gain recognition. He states that many in fact want to avoid commercial promotion because they want to reach a more open-minded crowd that also consumes art different that they know how to appreciate. These individuals still rely on venues and word-of-mouth, which makes them undeniably bound to the part of the art world that they want to be far away from. Following his analysis that positions every actor in the "art world" as an interconnected, dependent player. Drawing on that framework, we could say that underground collectives can be seen as knots of the extensive and complicated network.

Vivant (2009) describes underground culture scenes as isolated, collective artistic acts happening outside of the mainstream without visible commercial value. Above that, she ascribes them no regular income and illegal forms of working, especially in the means of locations. Author characterizes them as spontaneous creative processes based on opportunities. What is more important, she points out that underground culture is free of commercial or academic constraints, leaving artists room and freedom to investigate new approaches to innovative creation. Therefore, argues that cultural innovation comes from these marginal movements what explains the crucial role of the underground in the mainstream.

Hebdige's (1979) analysis of subcultures zooms into the relationship between mainstream and subcultural (underground) particularly showing how mainstream media threaten their authenticity. He describes this phenomenon mentioned by Vivant where elements of subcultures are being taken up and neutralized through commercialization. The process

begins with mainstream businesses taking some subcultural elements, making them trendy and widely available, and making money on them. This results in taking away the rebellious aspect of it. Later, the mainstream starts controlling the meaning of these subcultural elements by making them more "normal" by trivializing the original meaning.

Drawing on the example of clubbing, Thornton (1995) shows the close connection between the term underground and subculture, where underground is the expression of subcultural things. She defines "subcultural capital" by applying Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Key components of this subcultural capital are insider knowledge, fashion choices, and participation in exclusive events which play a very important role in differentiating "real" underground participants from the mainstream "tourists". These are associated with authenticity and creation, not only outside of the mainstream but particularly against it. She further explains that undergrounds create exclusive art for more selective crowds. By any means they try avoiding mass production and mass consumption. Members of underground club culture actively construct barriers to maintain underground status clearly putting commercial media as the worst enemy of this art sphere. The paper highlights it by showing that commercial media disapproval is even celebrated as a quality indication or some type of achievement. Subcultural theory, therefore, highlights tensions that shape these underground collectives.

Hebdige (1979) also points out the opposite influence where subcultures are perceived as "threats to public order" because of their unique styles and rituals. The conflict between mainstream and alternative groups is reflected in these styles. Therefore, the meaning of "subculture," (and underground) can never be a fixed phenomenon because it is always shaped by ongoing clashes with what is popular.

More modern definition comes from Cohendet's et al. (2010) paper where authors differentiate three levels within the cultural class: the "underground" as emerging, grassroots artists, the "middleground" as networkers or cultural intermediaries, and the "upperground" that includes official institutions and government.

2.3 Introduction of Empirical Cases

This thesis's theoretical framework builds on similar city-specific cases already explored by academic researchers from all around the world. Below is a table with an overview of all empirical cases with the distinction of cities, authors, main theoretical frameworks that they used in their research, and analytical categories. In next chapters, I am exploring the cases findings organized by the four analytical dimensions: spatial, sustainability, organization, and legitimation.

City Case	Author(s)	Main Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts	Analytical Categories
Paris	Vivant (2009)	Off-culture vs. In-culture; Urban Regeneration and Gentrification	Spatial dimension, Legitimation
Turin	Bertacchini et al. (2022)	Ecological Community Theory; Specialization vs. Diversification	Organization, Sustainability, Legitimation
Bologna & Venice	Morea & Sabatini (2023)	Vital Urbanism; Imagining and Making Alternative Cities	Legitimation, Organization, Spatial dimension
Shanghai	Michel (2021)	Cultural Scenes Theory; Evolution from Lived to Institutionalized Spaces	Spatial dimension, Legitimation, Sustainability
Dallas	Grodach (2010)	Community Cultural Development; Legitimation through Community Engagement	Organization, Legitimation, Sustainability
Berlin, Marseille, Lausanne	Andres & Grésillon (2011)	Temporary Urbanism; Creative Placemaking; Informal Cultural Economies	Spatial dimension, Sustainability, Organization
Bilbao	Gainza (2018)	Grassroots Cultural Entrepreneurship; Socio-spatial Regeneration	Sustainability, Spatial dimension, Organization
Sydney	Shaw (2013)	DIY Cultures; Autonomy vs. Institutional Recognition	Legitimation, Organization, Spatial dimension

Table 1 Overview of the empirical cases

2.4 Grassroot Organization Dimension

The organizational aspect explores how urban creative initiatives are organized and managed. As discussed by Della Porta and Diani (2006) and Gill and Pratt (2006), grassroots artistic and cultural groups develop outside institutional orders. They employ flat organizational structures as horizontal governance that stands for equal and informal decision-making with the absence of institutionalized hierarchical powers. These structures rely on mutual respect and agreement. Thus, the choices made by them represent the voice of the collective perspective and not top-down commands (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Horizontal governance structures create a cooperative setting for underground activity that establishes open spaces for cultural innovation and artistic experimentation.

The equally useful prefigurative politics theory describes activities that effect the desired social or political change immediately in the current practices (Yates, 2015). As Boggs originally argued, prefiguration is not just a symbol, it's a practical adoption of desired futures in the present to demonstrate effective alternatives of practice. Yates explains that prefigurative politics is a radically transformative form of activism because actors do not simply cheer for

changes but make them happen. Underground art collectives typically take up prefigurative politics practices and create spaces with direct democracy.

Such approaches are closely connected with the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture defining the way of making modifications with self-sufficiency, creativity, and independence. For Juris (2008), DIY is in fact a pragmatic necessity caused by a lack of resources but simultaneously a powerful political act of anti-consumerism and creative autonomy. DIY ethics are applied in underground art scenes as a pragmatic response to commodified culture.

Empirical examples document varied governance structures and organizational styles. At one extreme are very autonomous collectively led initiatives and minimal hierarchy. Andres & Grésillon (2013) provide an example where Berlin art collectives actively resist external expectations. They decided to adopt a form of "organized anarchy". At the other extreme are institutionally driven projects like city creative hub initiatives. The majority of these creative spaces begin life as artist-led, informal ventures but become more commercialized over time. Gainza (2018) notices that in their development when there is too much formalization, the artists that gave the location its artistic spirit leave it. The author suggests joint models of governance including residents and artists in decision-making. Morea & Sabatini (2023) illustrate that grassroot initiatives in Venice and Bologna are quite active in using consensus based and horizontal decision-making processes. They also illustrate that conflict that arise in that area is a result of poor dialogue. Bottom-up organizations in their study felt that they need to oppos normal urban policies because plans that were adopted ignored their voices. It is the consensus of most studies that in order to ensure a successful cultural field, inclusive and participatory system of governance where every voice counts should be provided.

Bertacchini et al. (2022) identify two organizational models within Turin's scene: "specialised art centres" and "cultural aggregators." The second entails creative projects which are revenue-driven start-ups. They specialize in innovation and efficiency due to their entrepreneurial function. "Cultural aggregators" are informal organizations for which the highest function is to serve the community. The most prominent finding brought by authors is that models produce varying forms of social capital. First creates "bonding capital" that is a close creative network, competence, and trust. It results in the strengthening of the creative output of the scene. Second creates "bridging capital" through which artists get connected with residents, activists, and subsequently other segments. Both are definitely valuable and required in the overall cultural sector.

Diversity in organization is beneficial to a creative ecosystem, but the grassroots movements are fond of more independent forms of governance styles or adaptive hybrid forms.

The main intention of all surely is to organize these creative enterprises in a way that they can maintain their authenticity, stability, and inclusiveness.

2.5 Economic Dimension

Even though they generate vital cultural value, grassroots cultural initiatives face many challenges with sustainability because of operating under conditions of economic precarity. In the cultural and creative industries, work is typically project-based and unstable. Gill and Pratt (2008) famously outlined a profile that includes an "attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism" where artists and creatives constantly look for opportunities and undergo self-exploitation in exchange for doing what they love. McRobbie (2016) critiques how policy narratives celebrate this autonomy and decide to ignore the structural risks shift onto individuals. In consequence, lacking secure incomes makes grassroots artists work in post-industrial zones where space is affordable. Their sustainability is therefore inseparable from broader economic and urban conditions.

As mentioned, in the absence of stable funding, actors increasingly act as cultural entrepreneurs. Klamer (2011) observes that cultural entrepreneurship revolves around finding the balance between cultural, economic societal values. Many of entrepreneurs work with multiple income streams, happening between the market and the gift economy. The already mentioned case of Turin (Bertacchini et al., 2022) explains that "specialized art spaces" work with entrepreneurial logic, providing goods or services commercially to fund their existence. "Cultural aggregators" rely on public grants, volunteer labor, and gift exchanges. In both cases, grassroots groups need to find hybrid business models that work with their goals. Sometimes entrepreneurial drive comes from necessity but can also reflect an ideological desire to build alternative economies in culture. For example, Bologna's (Morea & Sabatini, 2023) art laboratories often blend informal funding like benefit concerts, and crowd-support with occasional municipal grants. These cross-sector improvisation strategies reflect the need to navigate structural problems of cultural world.

However, it's important to zoom out and acknowledge that sustainability is not achieved by grassroots initiative alone even if actors would often prefer that. It is strongly dependent on institutional power structures (Andres & Grésillon, 2013; McRobbie, 2016). Commonly, bottom-up cultural projects face the decision if they should get institutional support and critical resources even though it requires compromising their radical character that makes them themselves. Authors comparing cases of Berlin's Tacheles and Marseille's La Friche (Andres & Grésillon, 2013) show that first area began as a self-managed artist squat in a post-industrial

building fully rejected institutional forces and operated autonomously. Even after gaining public attention, it never decided on political or financial support. After some time, real estate pressures grew and collective lost its venue and their image was later used in the redevelopment of the area. Marseille's La Friche provides an opposite reflection as it partnered with city authorities and because of that received municipal funding. Integrated in official urban regeneration plans, it evolved into an important arts complex with its original community ethos. Its case shows that institutionalization can sustain grassroots culture without the need to fully compromise its alternative character but only when the cooperation is carefully negotiated and based on an open communication.

It's important to notice that managing the economic dimension of an underground collective also involves reducing external threats coming from other levels like organization and spatial dimension. Morea's and Sabatini's (2023) work show that the sustainability of urban grassroots culture is only possible when the balance between autonomous energy of collectives (risk-taking and creative entrepreneurial solutions) and an enabling institutional environment (policy recognition and material support) is sustained. They note two important conditions: policies need to value small-scale cultural innovation, and the material support can't force homogenization. This ecosystem perspective implies that sustainability comes from diversity, adaptability, and community roots that need to be supported on the level of policies.

Literature therefore positions sustainability of underground culture as an ongoing complicated process that involves many actors. Achieving a healthy and balanced cultural ecosystem requires patience and compromise from all sides.

2.6 Legitimation Dimension

To understand how underground cultural initiatives gain recognition and support, it is a must to review the policy and public perception of legitimation mechanisms as they reveal how cities justify support for cultural activities.

Vivant (2009) explains that the "creative city" idea evolved from a loose concept into a strong theory in urban policy. She notes that academic works helped to "institutionalize the fuzziness" of the concept and made a catchy slogan out of a complex idea. At the core of this discourse is Florida's creative class theory (Florida, 2002), which explains that cities need to attract artists and other creative professionals to actually thrive economically. Grodach (2013) finds that city plans in Toronto directly echo Florida's language and confirm that boosting cultural places is a good investment. These directives have led to city branding and marketing efforts to transform the city into a creative metropolis.

This top-down legitimation process is yet openly criticized by many. Firstly, creative city agendas only privilege a narrow group of people and organizations. Grodach (2013) observes while cities chase a creative image, they neglect the more important local needs. Unfortunately, affordable housing and accessibility of the culture usually don't go in pair with these initiatives. Morea and Sabatini (2023) show that interviewed by them grassroots initiatives often question the meaning of "urban attractiveness". They highlight the difference in the perception of the legitimate success of a creative city. For some actors, it can mean recognition and economic growth, while for others community well-being and cultural democracy. Vivant (2009) warns that "creative city" can successfully mask gentrification and precarity.

Secondly, legitimation typically reflects a process of gaining recognition by institutional actors. When a creative initiative an official label of "arts district," or UNESCO Creative City its audience shift with the status. Michel's (2021) case study shows that exactly this happened to Shanghai's M50 when it was officially recognized as a cultural industry park. It became a tourist attraction and gained the approval of investors and the public. Similarly, Andres & Grésillon (2013) describe that when city authorities promoted underground locations of Flon and La Friche official urban narratives incorporated those fringe areas. Literature lists positive effects of such transformations as increased financing, development of infrastructure, and promotion, but they name unreversible disadvantages too. Michel (2021) states that number of M50's visitors prompted landlords to raise rents what pushed some area's famous artists out. Andres and Grésillon (2013) also inform that the "alternative" image of Flon was hard to sustain.

Lastly, Bertacchini et al. (2022) points out that different actors frame cultural initiative legitimacy differently. That depends on their goals and position in cultural world. To high-end art spaces, legitimacy is a recognition and positive reviews of established curators. To, community-focused organizations legitimacy comes with social outputs like enriching the life of neighborhoods or representing minorities' voices. They may co-exist but their priority is quite distinct. Shaw (2013) argues that it is the government who should rephrase the things they find valuable in culture. She argues for support of independent, grassroots spaces for their social and cultural impart.

Purely, within the underground culture realm, legitimation revolves about achieving equilibrium between autonomy and visibility. Given that these projects operate outside the institutional frameworks they have to legitimate themselves in alternative ways. They come with the challenge of either being overlooked or co-opted. Special position of the grassroots

initiatives makes legitimation a crucial element in underground studies because it points to how such projects negotiate their place in more and more commodified city culture.

2.7 Spatial Strategies and Issues

To research the spatiality of underground art environments, one must first understand theories of urbanism like the creative city, vital urbanism, tactical urbanism, and urban commons.

Concepts explain how grassroots movements shape urban life, how cities apply this phenomenon as a tool for revitalization, and how collectives resist commercialization and gentrification. The spatial dimension in empirical cases is usually the most challenging aspect of functioning of these underground cultural initiatives.

The creative city model was popularized by Landry (2008) and it positions creative industries and cultural resources as the main actor in rising economic value, urban revitalization, and innovation. The author states that because of that cities increasingly implement policies and strategies that try to drive this cultural aspect and integrate these grassroots initiatives. However, this idealized framework tends to often masks deeper contradictions that Cohendet et al. (2010) list. They warn that this comes with eroding collectives' authenticity and autonomy. Bottom-up cultural innovation turns into top-down logic with the consumption as a final goal.

Multiple works address the theory that artists act as the starting signal of gentrification. Shaw (2013) documents this in Melbourne where independent music and arts venues placed themselves in low-rent city districts but were increasingly squeezed by gentrification. This led to tighter and tighter clustering of remaining venues while others were disappearing. As documented by Michel (2021), the case of the M50 district in Shanghai provides another example of this process. Originally a grassroots artist-organized enclave located in a post-industrial zone thrived as a place for creative experimentation. Unfortunately, later, after being noticed by the city, it became integrated into city branding and tourism strategies. Following this, it faced many tensions between underground creativity and urban economic objectives and became a curated consumption zone for middle-class visitors and international tourists. This evolution seems to not be unique to Shanghai as Andres and Grésillon (2013) developed the concept of "cultural brownfields" to describe similar happenings in European cities. Term explains the evolution of abandoned industrial zones occupied by artists into formalized or redeveloped paradoxically causing evictions. Authors exemplify it with case studies such as Tacheles in Berlin, La Friche la Belle de Mai in Marseille, and Flon in Lausanne. Spatially, these creative interventions often take place in overlooked areas like old warehouses, garages,

and decommissioned buildings. These spaces are often called in the literature "liminal" (Andres & Grésillon, 2013) or "in-between" zones (Gainza, 2018). Their marginality provides freedom, flexibility, and room for experimentation, but it also results in temporariness. Gainza's study on Bilbao's La Ribera shows this dual character of places being dissolved once the city's long-term plans took effect.

Bishop (2012) explains that artists use temporary urbanism (garages, stairwells, and abandoned buildings) not only in an opportunistic way, but they also frame it as a response to exclusion from institutionalized cultural systems. In Paris, (Vivant, 2009) many informal, even illegal artistic squats evolved into dynamic cultural hubs what represents their responsive and improvisational model. That goes hand in hand with Bishop's (2012) "aesthetics of precarity," that's stans for incorporation of the instability of the space into the identity of the collective. Mechanisms like these describe informal occupations as an interesting alternative to mainstream cultural venues.

It is useful to look into "vital urbanism" (Morea & Sabatini, 2023) that focuses on everyday urban life. Theory positions spontaneous, and community-based practices as a living force in local networks. Morea and Sabatini (2023) compare how this type of cultural initiatives operate in two cities: Bologna and Venice. In Bologna, autonomous collectives have appropriated and repurposed not used buildings as self-managed cultural spaces and created what Stavrides (2016) calls "urban commons" meaning spaces run by collective decision-making and sustained with local solidarity. Not only do these initiatives increase urban vitality but also defend cultural autonomy from institutional and market pressures. On the other side, the Venetian case illustrates how grassroots creativity needs to navigate a city dominated by tourism-driven urbanism that strongly marginalizes alternative cultural uses. Despite constraints, they still manage to produce flexible cultural interventions that reanimate overlooked spaces. The comparison of the cities conceptualizes vital urbanism not as a fixed model but as a set of practices that can work across different urban landscapes. Bertacchini et al. (2022) document how in Turin informal initiatives revitalize neglected urban areas and positively influence local urban fabric by improving participation and social incorporation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Question and Theoretical Framing of Empirical Work

This study is guided by the question:

How do underground art collectives in Warsaw organize, sustain, legitimize themselves, and navigate spatial challenges within the city's evolving cultural economy?

To answer it, I conducted interviews that explored themes such as Horizontal Governance and Informal Roles; Volunteerism, Community and Cultural Value; Hybrid and Informal Economic Practices; Institutional Ambivalence; Evolution of the "Underground" and Spatial Precarity, Improvisation and Politics.

The interview guide for this study was directly based on the theoretical framework. Detailed interview guide can be found as an Appendix 1. Questions related to collective's structure and decision-making processes were shaped by theories of horizontal governance and prefigurative politics (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Yates, 2015). Theories of subcultural capital and identity boundaries (Thornton, 1995; Bourdieu, 1984) guided my questions about identity, and the negotiation between underground and mainstream. Spatial practices and challenges were built on literature connected to theories of creative cities, temporary urbanism, and urban commons (Landry, 2008; Andres & Grésillon, 2011; Stavrides, 2016). I added questions about funding strategies, resource access to investigate economic survival reflected by theories of cultural entrepreneurship, precarity, and informal resilience (Klamer, 2011; Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). Finally, questions concerning visibility, institutional collaboration, and public perception were rooted in theories of legitimation, institutionalization, and subcultural authenticity (Michel, 2021; Vivant, 2009).

Additionally, comparative cases from cities including Marseille, Lausanne, Berlin, Bologna, Venice, Paris, Bilbao, Sydney, Turin, Dallas and Shanghai helped me contextualize Warsaw in a cross-case reflection.

3.2 Research Design

This research uses the qualitative approach of in-depth semi-structured interviews. It aims to provide rich, detailed insights into the organizational, legitimation, spatial practices and sustainability dimension of the Warsaw's collectives. I followed outlined by Wengraf (2001) guide on how to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to maintain flexibility and depth. This method is especially needed to understand the importance of the balance between prepared questions and the adaptability. Just as recommended, I made sure to follow an earlier prepared

interview guide but allowed flexibility and actively listened to interviewees to study deeper and catch important nuances. This qualitative method is suited for capturing and exploring complex, socially embedded phenomena such as the topic of my research (Creswell, 2007).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active membership and importance in Warsaw-based underground art collectives. This technique is suited for qualitative studies aiming for information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). My research is aiming for depth, not breadth, so I decided on interviewing seven of the most important underground players in Poland's capital city. Interviews were conducted with specialists in the field - key members of the collectives. Even though all collectives have very flat structures and none of interviewees carries an official "director" title each was a founder or core organizer of their initiative. This means that they possess the knowledge of its operations and history. Their deep involvement despite flat structures makes them no less of experts as it is the experience not the title that frame the expertise. Leveraging internal trust networks, snowball sampling was used to access harder-to-reach collectives that value privacy. Below is an overview of each interviewed person and collective itself.

V9 (Vlepwnet) is an artist-run print studio and gallery that mostly focus on screen printing, self-publishing and exhibitions. This Warsaw's initiative is strongly grounded in street art tradition. It puts emphasis on authenticity, self-organization, and artistic autonomy, preferring informal networks, and a quiet but consistent public presence. They currently operate in two venues. First one is a studio and a venue at ADA Puławska with a very communal ethos while second one is a shop and an exhibition place in the center part of Warsaw. The interviewee is one of three core members involved in all spheres of action like co-managing the space, financial planning, handling screen printing, organizing events and supporting the shop/gallery with artist collaborations.

Narocz13 is a grassroots cultural venue and a music collective that originated in a semi-legal building placed near the Służewiec horse racetrack in Warsaw. Collective is now undergoing registration processes. It specializes in organizing genre-diverse cultural events like experimental art parties, exhibitions and movie screenings. Inclusive and ideologically open place, despite increasing popularity it's mission to preserve their subcultural identity is crucial for them. The interviewee is a part of the organizing core ("the board") that coordinates logistics and are deeply involved in both physical maintenance and decision-making.

Stacja Praga, registered as an association, before managed by city eviction few months ago was a vibrant hub for concerts, street art and alternative education, located in historical garages in Praga-Północ. Now displaced collective operated as a radical community center offering free or low-cost access to creative resources and artistic self-expression. Deeply dedicated to activism continues to challenge cultural marginalization and calls for attention to neglected grassroots spaces in urban planning. This interviewee started as a volunteer but now plays a formal part in the association and is actively involved in organizing, helping with coordination, and managing daily tasks.

Turnus emerged from a group of young artists that started throwing self-organized events in non-institutional settings. Over time, it transitioned into a curatorial collective and hybrid venue that blends art and hospitality on Wolska Street. They focus on exhibitions, community events and cross-sector collaborations. Approach represent adaptability as they balance underground ethics with openness to institutional partnerships like grants and brand collaborations. The interviewees are two founders and current organizers that handle every aspect of the organization together by themselves.

Fringe is not a traditional collective but a fluid, network-based initiative that organizes and reinforces Warsaw's independent art spaces. Initiative started as a counter-event to the Warsaw Gallery Weekend, that offered visibility to off-scene spaces through curated maps and mutual support. It functions horizontally with institutional support from Old Town Cultural Centre. Fringe represents a response to the city's uneven cultural infrastructure. The interviewees are: one key coordinating member and a person that is responsible for the project from the institutional level.

Zaczyn is a self-organized squat and grassroots cultural-social initiative founded in response to mass evictions and rising housing precarity in Warsaw. Before the eviction more than one year ago it was based in an abandoned bakery in Praga district. Now operates next door to V9 at ADA Puławska and it blends urban activism, community-making while offering artistic and cultural programming. Zaczyn emphasizes political resistance and anti-mainstream ethos by rejecting formal recognition in favor of grassroots autonomy. The interviewees are part of the organizing group involved in squat's operation, event coordination and political activism.

Przyjaźń is a tenant-action-based collective formed as a response to the planned liquidation of the section of Przyjaźń estate. Initially identifying as a tenant advocacy group, it evolved into a collective reclaiming urban space, self-governing it and bridging social activism with artistic practice. Members engage in infrastructural maintenance and artistic interventions

that hosts cultural events and fosters a strong ethic of mutual aid. Therefore, Przyjaźń operates both as a cultural entity but also as a political and social service in neglected city margins. The interviewee manages the collective cultural programming, coordination and advocacy with external entities.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between the 14th and 28th of April. Each interview lasted between 34 and 87 minutes, was recorded, transcribed and translated to be submitted with the thesis as another file.

The sample includes interviews with seven experts from Warsaw's underground art scene and that were carefully selected to provide the research with diversity in terms of artistic disciplines, organizational structures, and experience. Overview of collective's profiles are presented in Appendix 2. From seven interviews, two took place face-to-face in informal settings. The rest were conducted via google meet. As a data collection tool, I had an interview guide, but it remained flexible. I made sure that the conversations felt natural for the interviewees and that every question was covered at the same time. Questions explored topics related to organizing, sustaining, legitimizing, and navigating spatial challenges in Warsaw. If answers were insufficient or I could understand from them that there are some aspects still not explored deeply follow up questions were asked.

Some of the collectives experienced pressures from Polish public institutions and encountered legal issues. Some members witnessed drug abuse and violence. For these ethical considerations to ensure some level of anonymity, I am not going to use full, real names of members of the collective and to protect the reputation of collectives I am gonna refer to them just as the collectives, interviewees or members in the data analysis part.

3.5 Data analysis

This method was selected as it suits the needs of the study in terms of depth and flexibility in pattern identification. It allowed a detailed investigation of the empirical data while still providing room for the incorporation of both theoretically driven and data-driven conclusions. The interviews were all transcribed carefully and translated from Polish to English, with no loss of integrity of the original stories.

Then a familiarization with the data was performed by reading the transcripts, noting preliminary observations, emerging patterns, and highlighting valuable insights and citations. Next, the data were both deductively and inductively coded. Deductive coding drew directly

from the theoretical framework, and it provided a structured approach to examine all dimentions. Simultaneously, inductive coding was performed to capture new themes that were not described and researched but showed up during the interviews and analysis. Codes were systematically grouped into themes that captured a significant pattern across the dataset. This resulted in six established themes: Horizontal Governance and Informal Roles; Volunteerism, Community and Cultural Value; Hybrid and Informal Economic Practices; Institutional Ambivalence; Evolution of the "Underground"; Spatial Precarity, Improvisation and Politics. Full coding tree is available in Appendix 3. Each theme summarizes a set of coherent codes. Results clearly aligned with the theoretical perspectives but also discovered emerging insights coming directly from the interview material. The representativeness of each theme was carefully checked against the original interview data and their relevance.

Finally, the results of thematic analysis, including detailed quotes and descriptions, were deeply examined in the following in Chapter 4: Results and Analysis. They are clearly linking back the theoretical framework to provide interpretative depth and coherence.

3.5 Limitations and Reflection

The limitation of this research is generalizability caused by access and sample size. I encountered access restriction as many collectives didn't want to participate in the study. Even though the sample size is not huge, the depth of the interviews did even more than compensate for it. Getting the chance to interview collectives that present such a strong resentment towards Polish governmental institutions makes it special just in terms of precious, secret data that is far away from publicly available. It is worth mentioning that I had to introduce my detailed position and aim of the research to gain member's trust. Because of stated honest intentions and degree of insider knowledge interviewees shared many details about their organizations that are normally kept silent and underground. I integrated reflexivity throughout the research process, following Berger's (2013) recommendations: acknowledgment of researcher's position and its evaluation, balance between personal interviewer experience and objectives, revisiting data for reflections on mentioned and finally transparent and detailed reporting. The researcher's positionality as an outsider yet historically passively involved in the underground scene was critically examined to not influence outcomes in any way. I am fully aware that some unconscious reactions and behaviors are sociologically coded and could have influenced data collection. I made sure to present a neutral yet encouraging stance as I could to avoid potential biases, emotional reactions, and shifts in perspective. During interviews, I gave attention to how relational dynamics (especially familiarity and shared language) may have influenced narrative

construction. In analyzing, memo-writing was employed to challenge early, not confirmed interpretations and be alert to alternative meanings, which maximized the study's transparency and credibility.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study organized around seven interconnected themes: Horizontal Governance and Informal Roles; Volunteerism, Community and Cultural Value; Hybrid and Informal Economic Practices; Institutional Ambivalence; Evolution of the "Underground"; Spatial Precarity, Improvisation, and Politics. Each one showcases insights that were developed through a combination of analysis of the interviews with members of seven Warsaw-based underground art initiatives. These themes are closely tied to the theoretical framework and empirical cases of Marseille, Lausanne, Berlin, Bologna, Venice, Paris, Bilbao, Sydney, Turin, Dallas, and Shanghai.

The aim of this chapter is to reveal how Warsaw's case presented by interviewed collectives is similar and yet differs from other cities. While grounded in theoretical concepts, this analysis is deeply rooted in the realities of the collectives. Therefore, research reveals many nuances and tensions happening in the scene. Rather than treating these layers in isolation, each subchapter takes a close look at one area of collective experience while tracing its connection with others. Collectively, they answer the research question of how underground art collectives in Warsaw organize, sustain, legitimize themselves, and navigate spatial challenges within the city's evolving cultural economy.

4.2 Horizontal Governance and Informal Roles

All interviewed collectives made a conscious decision to reject hierarchy. Instead, they make use of collective decision-making processes. One group notes that it is important to the extent that *"within our inner group we did full-day workshops... to fight against this hierarchization"*. Some initiatives have deducted formal leadership but only to meet bureaucratic and legal requirements. One participant emphasizes, *"We don't have an appointed president anymore - the team transitioned to a flatter structure where responsibilities are shared."* This reflects Della Porta & Diani's (2006) conception of horizontal grassroots governance, where participation is both ethical and strategic. Other collective adds up, *"There are two of us... we talk to each other every day... we always just chat about any decision... and sooner or later we come to some common ground."* Decisions come from consensus and inclusivity, but participation is never forced. Therefore, the dynamic naturally creates decision-making cores that consist of participants who take on more responsibility and sacrifice more time and energy. Secondary involved individuals contribute irregularly. One interviewee

described their group as having *"three of us [who] are holistically involved in all… zones,"* surrounded by a looser network. Others explained: *"Nine of us… make the decisions. We discuss it thoroughly,"* but noted that the larger circle of less active participants is always informed. If someone disagrees, their opinion is not overruled but addressed: *"If someone disagrees… there's another discussion."* This consensus-seeking advocates for prefigurative politics (Yates, 2015), where the process itself embodies the desired future which is the inclusion of every voice. The flexible organizational structure so common in grassroots collectives in Warsaw resembles what Bertacchini et al. (2022) found in Turin as cultural aggregators. As the authors explain such initiatives are bonded by shared values, rather than formal positions. Contrarily, collectives of Shanghai or Marseille initiated structural formalization after increased recognition (Michel, 2021; Andres & Grésillon, 2013). Warsaw collectives appear to maintain strong opposition against bureaucratic structures.

Interviewed groups self-organize in naturally formed and fluid roles wherein segregation of responsibilities is improvised - "everyone did everything." Over time they note specialization is reinforced because members steer towards roles most appropriate to their skill set or passion. For example, one group's *"project brain"* took charge of grant writing, because she is simply the best in it as other participants noted, *"She is absolutely irreplaceable."* This dynamic where roles evolve with and because of the constant dialogue was also seen in Paris (Vivant, 2009). Despite evolving specialization, very often members to step in to help each other's with different tasks. One member described their job as *"boss of our bar, although I can't really use that word actually. […] just I'm more probably from the organization"* pointing to the aversion to formal role titles and further explaining *"it's complete freestyle... we have split into groups already, which is a big success"* but *"we don't have these specific roles of our own."* This overlapping of responsibilities reflects Becker's (1982) idea of "art worlds," where artistic production is sustained by cooperative labor. The flexibility that comes with such a working scheme supports learning and resilience. Evolution of collectives come with growing complexity and some collectives introduce light structures like shared calendars or task lists. One group created *"a document where we have daily tasks"* after opening a permanent venue. These mechanisms are like strategies used in Venice's art centers (Morea & Sabatini, 2023), where informal systems support operational processes without abandoning horizontal values.

4.3 Volunteerism, Community and Cultural Value

Membership in Warsaw underground collectives is generally fluid, volunteer-based, and ideologically inclusive. Individuals often move from audience to contributor through initiative: proposing an event or helping with some aspects of organizing. One interviewee put it, *"If you want to organize something, just write to us - we'll find a date."* However, conditions of working in such underground collectives that include unpaid labor or problems with sustainable venues definitely create vulnerability. Burnout is very common in this environment. One collective described how the stress of losing their venue led many people to simply *"give up… because it stopped being [fun]."* Other notes *"Always someone has a breakdown... and says, I need to switch off for a week or two."* This reflects Gill & Pratt's (2008) observation of the emotional labor that stands behind cultural production under such precarities. Despite the risks, it seems that sometimes this type of work is often seen as liberating: *"Emotionally? Definitely. Artistically? Also. It's just with the underground that the underground feeds itself generally."* Collectives are openly very committed to diversity and anti-discrimination. They position themselves openly as queer-affirming, anti-racist, and open to all age groups. One participant put that in words *"We have queer people too, [...] we definitely have a lot of people who are very involved in the working-class issue [...] who work very activistic,"* and confirms further *"I think we succeed, to be an open space, some kind of safe space. All in all, we always emphasize that this is a space that does not tolerate homophobia, racism, and other views that restrict some minorities."* In contrast, Warsaw's emphasis on social diversity is more politically situated than in many empirical cases but has a strong resemblance to Parisian squats (Vivant, 2009), where radical inclusion was embedded in the political identity of the space.

Each of the initiatives has a shared set of values like autonomy, authenticity, and solidarity. These are continuously being expressed in the decisions these collections are taking. There is one quotation that summarizes the unbreakable strength of this autonomy: *"The underground works on its own rules - you can question everything."* This stands as a shared perspective among the majority of interviewees and culminates in the active rejection of mass culture and commercialism. Collectives refuse sponsorships or patronage from any entity that makes them change or give up their worthwhile ethics. Collective's member explained: *"We try to shy away from big companies, big money..."* Few accept "safe projects" with minimal institutional oversight. This approach goes hand in hand with Michel's (2021) findings on cautious institutional engagement and Thornton's (1995) insights on underground resistance against commercialization. Spaces are described as *"community centers"* or *"safe spaces,"*

because they focus also on emotional support. Events are undoubtedly value-oriented not volume-oriented as they openly prioritize inclusivity and participation. This affects the outreach and forms of marketing that they use. Collectives mostly use Instagram and posters but avoid more serious advertisements. One member joked, *"We are cavemen. We operate quietly."* Yet, it's important to note that specific visibility is essential for survival and reputation. To sustain their position, groups are only using types of promotion canals that reach their wanted audience. One collective even mentions particular underground social media platforms that are unreachable to mainstream audiences:

"We also have Mastadon, that's kind of a grassroots a la Instagram, but well yeah, just created by grassroots groups. We also let know about events on squadradar.net, that's so grassroots too." They emphasize authenticity and collective identity over individual fame and one interviewee happily stated, *"People don't even know if we're two or ten people."*

Many collectives define legitimacy through serving their communities and bringing inclusivity, safety, and participation. As one member explained, *"We always emphasize that this is a space that does not tolerate homophobia, racism… we try to make sure that no one feels excluded."* Another exemplifies, *"During this last edition we did things like guided tours... for children, for seniors, for some migrant people."* All groups try to offer accessible products of their activity like workshops, concerts, and events. This mirrors findings from Bologna and Venice (Morea & Sabatini, 2023), where grassroots initiatives provide cultural services often overlooked by formal institutions. Warsaw's collectives position themselves as legitimate cultural actors, especially among marginalized publics. Another collective explained that *"we give our space to initiatives that are totally grassroots… refugee rights, queer dance, even experimental film groups."* Other states that before eviction, it was described as a community refuge, where *"children from the neighborhood came in… and found safety, found meaning."*

Collectives also gain legitimacy through subcultural capital like insider knowledge, experimental aesthetics, and authentic practices. One collective recognizes this pattern, *"underground… is about the sincerity of action.";* *"People don't come for mainstream techno… it's dub, trap, jazz fusion, things you won't find in big clubs."* This authenticity functions as a form of cultural legitimacy in the alternative scene sector. Thornton (1995) and Hebdige (1979) argue that subcultural identity is defined against the mainstream. Being "underground" therefore often includes proposing something completely different than what is popular in broadly consumed culture. This is visible in Turin and Berlin as collectives try to stay away from the mainstream by rejecting external branding.

Despite the autonomy collectives still need and try to gain recognition. Many promote themselves selectively via Instagram or word-of-mouth. One confidently stated, *"Visibility is very important for us… it's hard to do events in a space completely for nobody."* But their Instagram account is curated for niche audiences. Other collective operates in a venue whose walls face busy Warsaw Street. They use monthly changed murals as a creative tool for visibility. The wall is kind of a "public gallery" that invites attention but on collective's rules. Such tactics mirror Sydney's (Shaw, 2013) DIY scene's tactics to gain niche approved reputation. Michel (2021) names it "controlled permeability" meaning engaging with visibility mechanisms that attract only like-minded publics.

4.4 Hybrid and Informal Economic Practices

Commonly collectives described a constant struggle to tie the ends together when it comes to resources: "Money is probably the biggest problem." Other highlights, "It's very hard to make money as a collective... and also hard to win grants." Next expresses gratitude for being "In a privileged position, being in Warsaw, doing art events." The collective's approach has a very mixed character and goes hand in hand with Gill and Pratt's (2008) statement that creative workers blend bohemianism and entrepreneurialism. This pattern is vividly present in Warsaw's underground scene. Initiatives commonly accept crowdfunding and donations: "We put this big jar... and say, whoever wants to... contribute a penny to the building." One explained "We mainly finance it with our work… we just have to get on with making money too, so that we can then use that money for more pleasurable, explicitly mission-oriented purposes" and "I think it's mainly print that's the thing that allows us to do other things afterward". These statements tie back to how economic and cultural values need to be carefully balanced (Klamer, 2011). Beyond entrepreneurial tactics, the budget sometimes needs to be supplemented with personal contributions as one stated, "We don't have a lot of funds… sometimes someone will even pull in their own private money and buy a piece of fabric to hang somewhere". Their events are often created out of found materials like for example old chairs. They repurpose them as cinema seating or tables for the DJ set. "It's one big improvisation always," the interviewee laughed. This DIY creativity compensates for their lack of money and is the actual essence of many underground spaces. Another collective's organizer explained "Our idea was to show that it is possible to turn an empty building, of which there are many in Warsaw, … into a nice space" They occupied an abandoned bakery and transformed it into a very alive cultural venue without any external funding. This exposes two sides of grassroots reuse: the potential and fragility. It did provide a cultural space for "a whole bunch of underground artists" while it lasted, but its

survival was precarious from the beginning as it lacked legal security. This reflects Berlin in which even iconic art squats face the same issues (Andres & Grésillon, 2011).

Income in underground economies comes from multiple chaotic sources rather than one steady. Examples of the income sources list entry donations or bar revenues from events. One collective that functioned as a community arts space in a set of old garages sustained themselves partly by running a bar and café: "We also just made money on drinks… coffee, tea," but they do not hide that creating a safety net wasn't the priority: "We don't make money from [art] selling… we're not focused on that at all. We show it, art for art's sake". Cultural mission over profit is an undeniable rule here but it often means the need to use personal funds to sustain some projects. Other states that constant unexpected repairs ate up whatever spare funds they had and "it's about to break down again". Tough conditions like these create a never-ending cycle of "rallies and downfalls" as another interviewee phrased it. The fact that these spaces still manage to function undoubtedly shows their determination, resilience, and commitment. Despite acknowledging the difficulty of tying ends financially in the underground, one interviewee says that maintaining long-term survival is possible: "The underground feeds itself… There's not a lot in it to take out. If someone cares about making money or becoming famous, well… it might be difficult… But if you're humble, it's possible". Warsaw's underground artists continue to passionately create alternative culture but are always on the edge of financial collapse. Comparative cases show that the Polish capital city is not the only place that needs to face these challenges. Morea and Sabatini (2023) documented that in Bologna many collectives have strong networks of local solidarity that support their survival but Venice in contrast stays under extreme precarity in the city's tourism-driven economy. Warsaw's collective's situation lies somewhere in between – it lacks the support that some Bologna projects have but is not as pressured as Venice's landscape.

Many collectives adopt hybrid strategies that blend entrepreneurial and DIY (do-it-yourself) approaches. They do not fully operate as informal hobby groups or formal businesses either but use tactics from both dimensions. Hybridity is a way for them to survive and grow without "selling out" completely. As theories of cultural entrepreneurship suggest, they mobilize resources in unconventional ways and monetize some particular aspects of their work to sustain the rest. The Warsaw collectives illustrate this by combining commercial gigs, grants or brand collaborations, and DIY cultural production. One collective that started as an independent art gallery and event collective, has gradually built itself into a recognizable "brand" in the local art scene. They state to pursue visibility and professionalism:

"We're happy that (name of the collective) is a kind of brand […] it lives a bit of a life of its own. And I think it's super important… that you put a lot of energy into making sure someone remembers the word (name of the collective) and associates it with cool things that you do".

This branding mindset is a good strategy to build trust among audiences and partners which leads to funding and other opportunities. Collectives participate in curator competitions, art fairs, and collaborations that many purely "underground" ones might want to avoid. They state „Everything. We do everything… we don't have this cringe that, for example, we don't collaborate with brands… We do everything that we think we want to do and that will be useful for (name of the collective) to grow". This pragmatic approach led them to many surprising partnerships: "For example… we just had a collaboration with Ikea recently. We are also trying to get a grant now from Orlen for the program of events". "If you want to do something, you have to agree to everything for a long time," the founder explained their openness to keep their collective alive. They note that of course, they won't agree to something that exploits them for nothing, but it does show that they blur the lines between underground and mainstream tactics. They do not position themselves in the opposition to mainstream: "It's cool that we try to be two feet in different places… we don't forget those origins". Other interviewed collective expressed more ambivalence about professionalization and started to take on funded projects or grants "from time to time," but "I wouldn't treat that as some kind of main vein" of support. Their ideal scenario is "to be absolutely, totally independent of everything and do our own thing" but they do navigate a middle path "If there are projects, we have an idea for and someone can give us money for them, then… we take them".

Warsaw's underground collectives might lack formal support, but through a mix of creative self-management, small-scale enterprise, and opportunistic approach, they find ways to function and stay above the water. One collective observed that groups like theirs often have short lifespans because "life gets there" – people age and need incomes so "we've dedicated our whole lives to this consciously and we really wanted to develop it, so we hope it lasts as long as possible".

4.5 Institutional Ambivalence

The collectives undergo a constant negotiation about where to draw the line between staying underground and going mainstream. Several groups showed strong skepticism of state or institutional funding. *"Taking money from someone who is doing something we don't like, we don't like it either,"* reflected one on the topic of public grants. That collective generally

avoids municipal or government subsidies because it morally clashes with their views. Even though *"sometimes it makes life easier,"* government money is seen as something bad. This might be the result of even stronger aversion to government mentioned by one collective: *"We don't like too much of the politics of this country and what is happening here."* Other haven't even had much opportunity to work with institutions because was (until recently) an unregistered group: *"We sort of didn't even give anyone the opportunity to exclude us. We only collaborated with some other places, but they're not places that can be considered institutions,"*. Group is stating *"Once we finish all the things concerning registration… so that there will be a bank account, so that the activity will be legally defined… then I think we'll be smiling at the different institution,"* acknowledging that *"there are a couple of institutions that are more open to some of these alternative things"*. This insight suggests that not all institutions are viewed in a bad light. It's not the case with government itself as the same collective highlights: *"the city being totally unsupportive, working with some institutions is just an abstraction"*.

Another initiative represents a model of institutional partnership. What began as a spontaneous, collective effort essentially: *"turned out that a lot of people… were interested in what it was about… our… spontaneous activity turned out to be an expression of some broader need… for a broader platform [for] more grassroots activities"*. Recognizing this, one of the city's cultural institutions decided to step in with help: *"Kaja thought Fringe was a great initiative and that maybe it would be worth supporting it with our ability to apply for grants. …We wrote it down… and we managed to get the money"*. Through this partnership, initiative gained resources *"that only institutions have access to"*, like larger grants and formal venues and became a platform co-produced by the grassroots and the institution.

This collaboration is a local example of institutional support done right and did not impose a top-down agenda but facilitated its own goals. This suggests that when institutions respect the autonomy and vision of the grassroots actors, collaboration can occur without the usual loss of authenticity. I managed to document a whole spectrum of different perspectives around institutional cooperation. One collective articulated completely opposite view stating here clear boundaries explaining *"the point at which someone… starts to cooperate with some bigger companies… more commercial ones,"* is the point they have effectively *"come out of the underground."* That collective's position is strictly anti institutional/commercial cooperation and states strongly that when the motivation shifts toward profit or external approval, they feel the underground spirit is lost. Narocz13's member concludes this hopefully, *"there should be… cooperation with the city, so that… local clubs [not] profit-driven… promoting sincere art"* could have secure spaces.

We can see that many collectives stay away from institutional recognition. Majority of interviewees do not trust government support and highlightes cases of eviction and neglect. One stated, "The city is very much in favor of developers." Another said, "we're not invited to the table when policy is made… we are tolerated at best." This reflects the experience of collectives in Berlin and Shanghai, where many underground spaces were co-opted after their cultural value became noticed by the city. Warsaw groups fear losing authenticity and control if they become too visible or reliant on institutional funding. One collective note that the key element of resistance is to not define success by institutional metrics: "if people keep showing up, if artists want to play here, if ideas keep coming - then we're doing something right. We don't need to win awards." Same were Shaw's (2013) findings in Sydney legitimated by community validation.

Still, some groups have begun exploring institutional partnerships. One is formalizing as an association to access grants. Another has accepted small-scale sponsorships while trying to keep their creative control. They manage to participant in the Warsaw city-run "Constellations" festival, but only "under the condition that we curate the event our way and host it in our space." One interviewee's initiative is an ongoing collaboration with one of institutions. The rest strongly positions themselves in the opposition "We don't like... the politics of this country... Taking money from someone who is doing something we don't like... sometimes it makes life easier, but generally it's so sketchy." Another strategy is to partner with sympathetic institutions rather than commercial sponsors. Some collectives report positive experiences with independent cultural centers or foreign cultural institutes, that tend to allow more artistic freedom.

4.6 Evolution of the "Underground"

The meaning of underground is shifting, and few collectives view controlled institutional visibility as compatible with underground values. One notes their presence, *"Certainly nowadays we are more often, at least minimally, taken into account by the mainstream... we're more within the frame of attention by the mainstream, but I wouldn't say we're in the mainstream."* This mirrors transitions documented in Paris (Vivant, 2009) of squat-based collectives that with earned city support managed to keep their alternative character. Collectives are conscious that legal recognition and minor funding are necessary, but they want to define their terms of legitimation. Hybrid identities allow collectives to move between scenes and navigate these tensions. These movements blur the line between marginal and recognized. As Vivant (2009) and Michel (2021) note, legitimation can happen by reframing underground

work as civic innovation or cultural heritage. Warsaw collectives remain divided on this topic. Some worry that growing too large or seeking public legitimacy will crash with their values stating, *"The underground... is strongly linked to anti-capitalism, anti-commercialism... something you do out of passion and for other people and not for profit."* Others argue that the only way to survive is to create a legitimate underground that sets its criteria of value, collaboration, and impact. Across all empirical cases, Warsaw shares a resistance to institutional absorption with Sydney and Berlin. Compared to Bologna or Paris, it lacks sustained municipal support or cultural policy frameworks that accommodate underground arts. One collective highlight *"For me at least the underground is strongly linked to anti-capitalism, anti-commercialism… it's something that you do out of passion and for other people and not for profit".* That passion-driven, community-oriented organizing explains the core of what they see as a real legitimation - patching together livelihoods in the face of constant uncertainty.

Although collectives prefer informality they adapt when conditions change, and it gets necessary. Common is registering as an associations to receive grants and sign leases or launching revenue-generating side projects. These adaptations are not ideological but tactical. One collective explained that registration only occurred *"when we had to apply for grants."* Another described starting a café because *"we couldn't stay underground forever,"* and explained how they position themselves *"We are underground, but we're not invisible. We don't want to be a secret club for 30 people anymore."*

Collectives that decided to formalize avoid letting this change the internal governance. This structure - external formality, internal informality - is also found in Marseille's La Friche (Andres & Grésillon, 2013). Adaptations are often a response to financial scarcity therefore many decide to diversify including merch sales, ticketed workshops, or grant-funded programs. Collectives innovate, and staying underground is another problem. Some expressed concern over "mainstream tourists" attending events and explained that they force internal debates on authenticity. Collectives keep events low-cost and in participatory formats to counter merging with mainstream and preserve subcultural character. Shaw (2013) also presents this concern in the context of Australian DIY venues.

Collectives participating in my research can be seen as what Yates (2015) and Morea & Sabatini (2023) describe as prefigurative or vital cultural spaces: constantly evolving but deeply rooted in values of mutual care, autonomy, and resistance.

4.7 Spatial Precarity, Improvisation and Politics

Not surprisingly, interviews revealed that collectives in Warsaw like many other cities worldwide operate under a condition of spatial precarity. One states *"Premises in Warsaw are a very difficult thing. Prices have risen a lot... it's hard to keep [a venue]."* Venues are often temporary and legally ambiguous. They collectively expressed how difficult it is to find or hold on to a location, particularly in a city that quickly develops. *"Warsaw is an absolutely unfriendly city for the alternative scene,"* one interviewee stated. Several collectives work in buildings that were never intended for cultural use like a former car workshop: *"There's a ramp going down to the stage, grates in the floor, and a constant problem with flooding… it's a garage, not a gallery"*. Others organized in used garages in a historic tram depot before being evicted by the city due to *"safety concerns"*. The situation revolves around redevelopment just as described by Andres and Grésillon (2013) as so-called "cultural brownfields" - industrial or neglected spaces that artists temporarily occupy before being displaced by current urban development plans. Similarly, Berlin's Tacheles or Shanghai's M50 district presents the conclusion that grassroots use is tolerated only when it goes hand in hand with aestheticized narratives of urban renewal. Legal ambiguity creates more stress as one member explained, *"Half of our building belongs to a guy who died in Australia… no one knows who owns it anymore."* This not only limits access to funding but also produces constant anxiety about eviction.

Despite constraints, Warsaw collectives display extraordinary inventiveness in their spatial practices. Improvisation was framed as a necessity and a defining characteristic of underground practice. This aligns with Bishop's (2012) framing of temporary urbanism as both a material and symbolic response to exclusion from institutional systems. One collective described their aesthetic and infrastructural strategies as *"literally better than [crap],"* as they use found objects, borrowed fabrics, and handmade installations to transform space for each event. These special tactics closely connect to the DIY ethos that pervades underground culture (Juris, 2008). Collectives do not wait for access to officially designated cultural spaces but create whatever they can on their own. Members from one collective built their entire studio after relocating from a centrally located gallery: *"It involved all sorts of renovations there, remodeling, redecorating and generally building up the whole studio from the beginning."*

The tension between underground collectives and dominant urban regimes has a strong political background. One member described the situation bluntly: *"Warsaw is a city that is very much in favor of developers and the rich in general… eliminating all the small,*

unprofitable, maybe not aesthetically pleasing, but deeply needed spaces". Confirming findings from Paris (Vivant, 2009) and Bologna (Morea & Sabatini, 2023), grassroots cultural actors struggle against city branding policies that privilege revenue-driven creativity. One of the very important collectives in the Warsaw underground scene lost its venue following government stigmatization based on allegations of drug use. A member noted the irony: *"They told us kids from the neighborhood will become drug dealers anyway, so it doesn't matter if they lose this space. That's when I realized how they see us"*. Collectives are treated as disposable because their spaces fall outside official cultural planning. Yet these spaces are crucial to what Morea and Sabatini (2023) call "vital urbanism" - the spontaneous, participatory cultural life that makes a city truly alive. In Warsaw, this urban vitality is systematically sabotaged by spatial exclusion. One states *"We lost space several times due to redevelopment projects. The city never offers us viable alternatives."* Another collective *tried* working within city structures as they rented city-owned garages, and every year negotiated with the municipal landlord to extend their lease. Organizers wanted to renovate and make the space safe in partnership with the city every time they appealed for investment the response was negative. Each year, rather than support, they got only a temporary permit to continue, and vague maybes about minor funding that never materialized: *"No, we probably won't. But maybe we will? ...And at some point, they decided... we thought you would be operating there for a shorter time"*. Eventually, the city referencing safety issues as a pretext decided to shut down the place. The collective member's frustration was understandable: *"We've been saying for three years that there are technical problems. Can you help us with funding to fix these...? The city [said] no, this is an unsafe space, you have to get out of here"*. Instead of working with the community, officials gave an eviction notice. *"They want to demolish these garages and sell this space to a developer... it's been happening a lot lately."* Authorities even spread damaging rumors accusing the space of harboring drugs to justify the closure. The critic is strong, as one interviewee put it,

"The city is trying to create a pathology where these houses just stand empty... We're betting they'd stay so that they'd be destroyed to the end and then... an opinion could say it's already so damaged it might not be a monument anymore and it could be demolished."

5. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate the ways in which Warsaw's underground art collectives organize themselves, sustain their work, legitimize their practice, and negotiate the spatial constraints of an ever-changing urban environment. Drawing from the extensive qualitative interviews with key members from seven grassroots initiatives, this research provides a detailed picture of Warsaw's underground as an entrepreneurial, community-based cultural system operating under chronic precarity.

The findings confirm that such initiatives are largely organized through horizontal forms of governance and decision-making through consensus. Involvement arises organically aligning with what prefigurative politics attempts to accomplish: a different system of organization reflecting shared values.

The economic dimension suggests a complex play between of ideology and necessity. The collectives balance anti-capitalist ethics and cultural entrepreneurship to find a balanced middle ground. The majority use a combination of individual investment, small-scale income generation, and sporadic institutional or brand alignments. The hybrid model confirms that cultural labor is a mix of passion-fueled creativity, resource improvisation and structural insecurity. Most significantly, the study shows that such hybrid models are not compromises per se, but conscious approaches to upholding authenticity and securing continuity.

Regarding legitimation, the study illustrates a tension between institutional cultural policy and underground value definitions. Most of the collectives avoid official legitimation or state cooperation, that might result in co-optation and losing the underground ethos. Nevertheless, some show openness to institutional support if autonomy is assured. One example provides an outstanding insight as it is coordinated with public cultural center on an arrangement of curatorial control. One is clear - legitimacy needs to evolve from top-down, to increasingly co-constructed by grassroots actors who define success in their own terms like inclusion, creativity, and service to community.

Spatial issues that Warsaw's underground must deal with are essential. From occupying squats and old garages to being evicted on a regular basis, collectives are plagued by instability that consistently threatens their work. These challenges mirror urban dynamics of bigger cities. Warsaw artists, like Berlin or Shanghai artists, are invisible city assets, only to be displaced once their spots gain economic or symbolic value. The findings support the argument that spatial policy is, indeed, cultural policy.

This thesis does not simply validate theoretical claims but supplemented them with empirically informed observations. My findings enrich theoretical descriptions of subculture,

spatial exclusion, and economic precariousness, as well as in the under-theorized context of post-socialist cities like Warsaw.

Study had some limitations including sample size. Seven interviews even though are content rich, they do not give a representative sample of heterogeneity of Warsaw's underground world. The sampling also encountered access barriers, which made the data potentially biased towards more visible or active groups. Second, as it is qualitative research, the outcomes are not measurable or generalizable on a scale. Future mapping of the landscape more fully, measuring impacts, and testing hypotheses posited by this research can be done with a more quantitative or mixed-methods design. Additionally, the research captures the situation in spring 2025. Political and economic conditions in Warsaw are susceptible to rapid changes, impacting both the sustainability and plans of such collectives. The depth of the interviews compensated for the modest sample as interviewees provided highly contextual, often unstudied insights. Their perceptions illuminate adaptation, resistance, and meaning-making processes that go unrecorded in policy reports or institutional files. Therefore, the thesis gives readers a rich, inside-out view of Warsaw's underground that contributes to scholarly as well as cultural policy discussion.

This study seeks to address a clear gap in existing scholarship on urban cultural dynamics in the cities of Eastern Europe, mainly on informal, non-commercial art spaces. It combines cultural sociology, urban studies, cultural economics, and offers an example for studies on similar grassroots institutions in post-socialist settings. It also inspires further directions of future research: more detailed mapping of Warsaw's autonomous cultural infrastructure, longitudinal monitoring of single collectives, or comparative analysis across Eastern European cities. Further research could investigate role of the digital grassroots' social platforms.

Considering the future of Warsaw's underground, the conclusions arrive at both alarm and cautious optimism. Although threats from development, political hostility, and burnout are real, the collectives also demonstrate fantastic capacity to reinvent and transform. New dialogue with collaborative institutions and increased acceptance of their role in culture could provide more secure support. If Warsaw's policymakers consider the conclusions of this research and genuinely realize the public value of underground culture, they might enact blueprints that promote rather than erode it.

Finally, this thesis has established that Warsaw's underground art groups are where resistance and resilience meet. They emerge in democratic order, survive on artistic innovation, legitimate through social impact, and constantly transform to overcome spatial issues. They

showcase cultural diversity constructed outside dominant institutional frameworks. To protect them policymakers, and cultural institutions should reassess the calculation of value and the allocation of space within the Warsaw's future cultural economy.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide

Interview Introduction:

"This interview is part of my master's thesis on the underground art scene in Warsaw. I'm interested in your experience, perspective, and how you navigate this space – whether as an artist, organizer, or participant in cultural life. There are no right or wrong answers – feel free to speak openly, skip questions, or expand on the ones that matter most to you."

Interview questions:

- Tell me how your collective started (or your participation in it)? What was happening at the time? What motivated you? What did the beginnings look like?
- How would you describe your collective and the people who make it up?
- What does "underground" mean to you?
- Do you feel like you're part of the mainstream, or more outside of it? In what way?
- How is the work organized within the collective? Are roles divided? Who makes decisions?
- Are you speaking for yourself right now, or as a voice of the collective?
- Are there people from different generations involved?
- How do people find their way into your space? Are there any groups that are missing?
- Does your collective include people with diverse identities (e.g., queer individuals, migrants, working-class folks)?
- How do you share your work or events with others?
- Do you use social media, zines, posters? Why or why not?
- Is visibility as a group important to you, or do you prefer to operate more "quietly"?
- Is your work or space meant to question something or offer an alternative?
- Have you experienced pressure or restrictions from institutions or the state?
- Are you trying to create something different from what's offered in cultural institutions or mainstream society?
- Where do your activities, events, or meetings take place? Why those places?
- Does the space or atmosphere of the place influence what you do?
- Is improvisation or making use of what's available part of your practice?
- Have you noticed changes in where the underground scene happens in Warsaw?
- Are there neighborhoods or places that have become more (or less) open to this kind of activity?
- Do you operate in buildings or spaces that weren't originally meant for artistic activities?
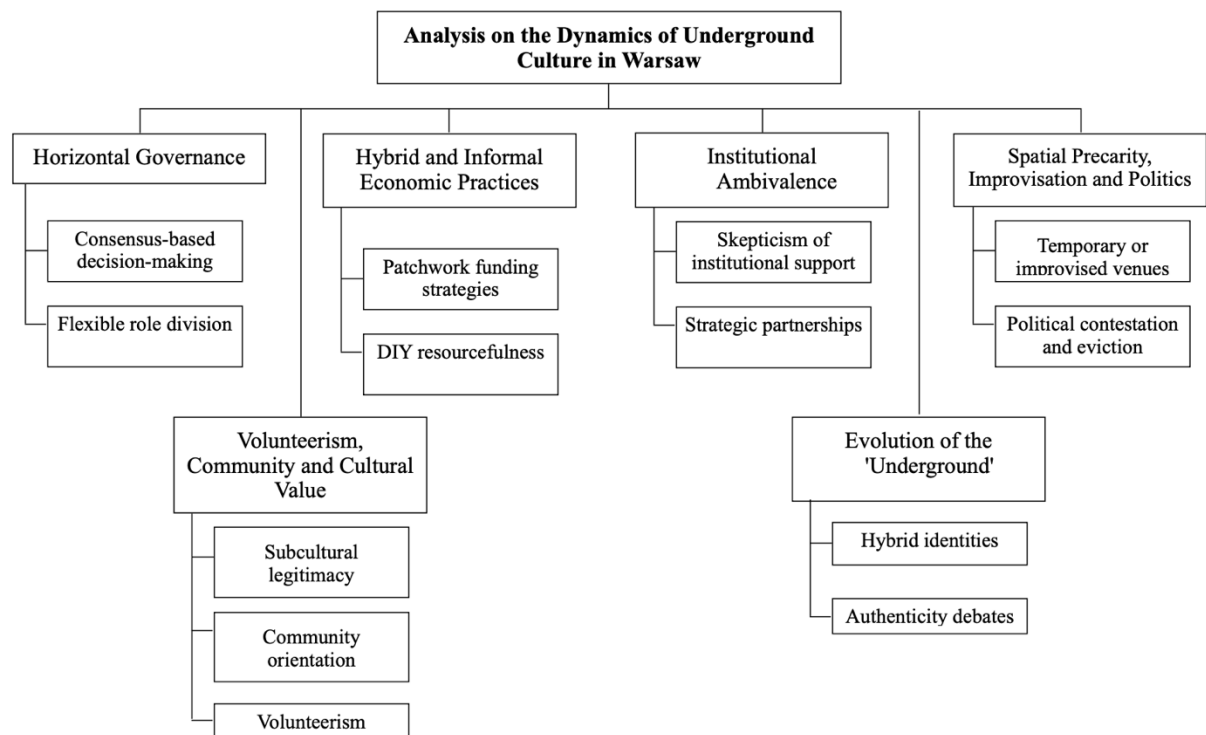
- Do you work in temporary spaces – e.g., squatted or otherwise provisional spaces? Is that a conscious choice or more out of necessity? How does that affect your group identity?

- How do you fund your activities? Events, donations, grants, subsidies?

- What resources are difficult for you to access – money, space, equipment, support?

- Do you collaborate with institutions? Do you receive any kind of support? If yes – how did that feel? If not – why?

- What do you gain or lose by collaborating with external entities?

- Do you seek visibility – e.g., through media, curators, competitions, grants?

- Is being "underground", something fixed for you, or more of a strategy/temporary phase?

- Do you think it's possible to sustain yourself in the underground scene in the long term – financially, emotionally, artistically?

- Is there anything I didn't ask, but you think should be included here?

- What would you like people outside the scene to better understand about your work?

Appendix 2

Nr	Collective name	Interviewee role	Type of space/event they organize	Interview date	Interview duration
1.	V9 (Vlepwnet)	Organizer	gallery, shop, exhibitions, screen printing studio	30th of April	34:18
2.	Narocz13	Organizer	exhibitions, concerts, music events, movie screening, community space	22nd of April	01:02:16
3.	Stacja Praga	Organizer	exhibitions, music events, workshops, community space	24th of April	01:21:13
4.	Turnus	Organizer	gallery, exhibitions, community space, coffee place	14th of April	43:04
5.	Fringe	Organizer	network, exhibitions,	14th of April	01:24:04
6.	Zaczyn	Organizer	exhibitions, music events, workshops, community space	14th of April	01:27:57
7.	Przyjaźń	Organizer	exhibitions, community space	24th of April	01:08:25

Table 2 Complete table with full interviewee profiles.

Appendix 3

Graph 1 Coding tree