

Beneath the Surface

Facilitator support sheet for youth workers, teachers and civic educators.



Tour Title: **Beneath the Surface: Disease, Waste, Fear, and Urban Control in Warsaw's Old Town**

General Information



Primary Themes:

Difficult heritage, urban hygiene and health, fear and boundaries, Difficult heritage, urban sanitation and hygiene, spatial boundaries and exclusion, myth vs. historical evidence, and responsible heritage interpretation.



Target Audience:

Ages 16 to 26; optimal group size is 8 to 20 participants. Suitable for high-school, university, and civic education groups. No specific prior historical knowledge is required, but an openness to critical thinking and sensitive ethical topics is highly recommended.



Languages:

English, French, German, Serbian, Hungarian, Polish.



City / Country:

Warsaw, Poland.



Starting location:

Heritage Interpretation Centre, Brzozowa 11/13



Distance:

Approximately 2 km by foot.



Estimated duration:

Before: 20 minutes (Introductory Hook & Framing)
During: 80–100 minutes (On-site Walk & Interactive Tasks)
After: 25 minutes (Debriefing, Reflection & Transfer)



Material needed:

Essential: Charged smartphones (one per sub-group or individual), digital or printed copies of the Beneath the Surface Companion Booklet.
Optional: Clipboards for writing on the move, quote/reflection cards, and weather protection (umbrellas/raincoats).



Accessibility level:

Medium. The route is geographically compact, but features historic cobblestones, narrow passages, steep outdoor stairs, and emotionally demanding discussions on plague, social inequality, and death.

Support Material

Learning Objectives

This guide is designed to help facilitators transform the "Beneath the Surface" walking tour into an active, critical, and civic learning experience. Rather than serving as a passive historical sightseeing tour, this material guides young people through a deep exploration of how historical societies managed fundamental vulnerabilities - such as disease, waste, fear, and social exclusion - and how those structural decisions continue to shape our modern civic lives and contemporary cities.

By the end of this tour and its associated activities, participants will be able to:

1. Identify how historical societies managed urban vulnerabilities (sanitation, defense, disease, and social order) and recognize the invisible labor and socio-economic exclusion built into those systems.
2. Distinguish responsible, evidence-based public history and heritage interpretation from sensationalized "dark tourism" or unverified urban myths.
3. Analyze how physical monuments and spaces elevate certain narratives (e.g., elite memories) while erasing or marginalizing others (e.g., ordinary workers, women, outcasts).
4. Connect historical structures of care, fear, and control to contemporary issues, such as modern-day social boundaries, public health ethics, and equal access to science.

Practical Information

(Placeholder for the route map image showing the 10 stops within Warsaw's Old Town)



Stop sequence:

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| 1. Heritage Interpretation Centre, Brzozowa 11/13 | 6. St John's Archcathedral, Świętojańska 8 |
| 2. Gnojna Góra, Brzozowa Street | 7. Antonina Leśniewska Museum of Pharmacy, Piwna 31/33 |
| 3. Warsaw Barbican and the city walls, Nowomiejska 15/17 | 8. Old Town Market Square |
| 4. Krzywe Koło and the Basilisk story | 9. Mermaid Monument, Old Town Market Square |
| 5. Pałac Pod Blachą, the so-called Masonic Lodge | 10. Museum of Warsaw, Old Town Market Square |

Route at a glance: Heritage Interpretation Centre → Gnojna Góra → Barbican → Krzywe Koło and the Basilisk story → Pałac Pod Blachą → St John's Archcathedral → Museum of Pharmacy → Old Town Market Square → Mermaid Monument → Museum of Warsaw.

Support Material

Accessibility

- **Physical Navigation:** The Old Town features highly uneven cobblestones and steep slopes (particularly around Gnojna Góra and the Barbican). Facilitators must advise participants to wear sturdy footwear and watch their step, especially during wet, icy, or rainy conditions.
- **Emotional Readiness:** The content addresses sensitive historical themes, including devastating plagues, public execution, extreme poverty, and social exclusion. Facilitators should establish a safe space early on, informing the group that they are always welcome to "pass" on personal sharing if any reflection becomes uncomfortable.
- **Crowd & Weather Adaptations:** In case of heavy tourist crowds or inclement weather, move group discussions into quieter nooks (e.g., quiet courtyards or building recesses) or conduct the final synthesis and debriefing indoors at the Museum of Warsaw.

Safety

- **Traffic & Public Spaces:** While the Old Town is largely pedestrianized, watch out for delivery vans, horse-drawn carriages, and official service vehicles. Keep the group gathered together and avoid blocking narrow passages.
- **Respecting Active Spaces:** Remind the group to maintain absolute silence and respect inside active spaces, particularly inside St. John's Archcathedral and when visiting active museum exhibitions.
- **Group Cohesion:** In highly crowded areas, ensure that sub-groups do not wander off. Keep a clear head-count at the transition between each stop.

Support Material



Before the Tour

Group Organisation: Whole group, transitioning into pairs.

Facilitator Role: Inquiry leader, discussion guide, and safe-space builder.

1. The Hook (5 mins)

Stand in a circle with the group at the starting point. Ask the participants:

- "When we look at a beautifully restored, colorful, and clean historic Old Town, what kind of stories do you think are hidden behind the pretty makeup of these outer facades?"

2. Pair Brainstorming (10 mins)

Have participants turn to a partner and list four fundamental challenges that every human city in history has had to manage, but which it prefers to keep completely out of sight.

- Expected concepts: Garbage and waste, infectious diseases, the poor/outcasts, collective public fear, and dead bodies.

3. Framing & Ground Rules (5 mins)

Establish the core mindset of the walk:

- Not a Ghost Tour: Clarify that this is not a sensationalized ghost tour or a spooky storytelling crawl. It is a civic and historical investigation into how our ancestors managed risk, vulnerability, and power, and how their solutions left physical marks on the city.
- Rule of Respect: Curiosity and critical questions are encouraged; mockery of past human suffering is not. We use respectful language when analyzing history.
- Mindset: Encourage the group to look at the city not as a flat museum, but as a deep, layered archive of survival and human adaptation.

Support Material

During the Tour

Stop 1 : Heritage Interpretation Centre



Facilitation tips

If possible, stand where the brick foundations are visible. Ask: "What changes in our understanding of history when we study the layers under our feet instead of looking only at the monuments above?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes:

The basement cellars show authentic 14th-century foundations that survived the near-total destruction of Warsaw in 1944. The post-war reconstruction did not erase these ruins; it integrated them, turning the basement into a physical archive of the city's survival.



Solutions: Strong reflections recognize that history is not flat; the foundations hold the raw, unpolished truth of physical survival, while the surface is often styled, curated, or politically selected.

Stop 2 : Gnojna Góra, Brzozowa Street



Facilitation Tips: Let participants look at the beautiful panorama of the Vistula River first. Then, read the description of the former dump. Ask: "How does the cleanliness of a wealthy city centre rely on pushing dirty, dangerous work to the physical and social margins?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: This scenic overlook was Warsaw's main trash and nightsoil dump until 1774. The labor here was performed by outcasts, prisoners, and the poorest citizens under terrible sanitary conditions, keeping the inner streets clean.



Solutions: Participants should connect historical outcasts with modern-day sanitation workers or global waste issues, reflecting on how easily societies ignore the human cost of their own comfort.

Stop 3 : Warsaw Barbican and the city walls



Facilitation tips: Stand under the stone arch of the gate. Ask: "If you were a traveler arriving after curfew and the gates were locked, what message does this wall send to you? Who is being protected, and who is being excluded?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: Medieval city walls provided physical safety but acted as tools of social control. Curfews kept "undesirables" and potential plague-carriers outside. Defense was also a mandatory civic duty for all inner-city residents.



Solutions: Help the group draw connections to modern-day "walls" - gated communities, passport borders, and invisible social boundaries in contemporary cities.

Support Material

During the Tour

Stop 4 : Krzywe Koło and the Basilisk story



Facilitation Tips: Highlight this stop as a study of myth vs. science. Ask: "Before microscopes and germ theory, how did communities use myths and monsters to explain real, invisible biological dangers?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: During the devastating epidemics of the 17th and 18th centuries, citizens did not understand how pathogens spread through damp, dark cellars. While the legend has many roots, a compelling interpretation is that the Basilisk served as a symbolic personification of biological fear and sudden, unseen death.



Solutions: Ensure participants understand that the legend is not just a children's fairy tale; it is valuable cultural evidence of collective panic, serving as an ancient coping mechanism for biological fear.

Stop 5 : Pałac Pod Blachą, the so-called Masonic Lodge



Facilitation Tips: Gather near the descent to the cellars. Ask: "Why do spaces with restricted access or elite societies inevitably breed rumors and conspiracy theories? How do rumors serve as a form of public control?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: The myth of a Masonic lodge operating in these specific cellars is popular, though direct historical evidence is highly fragile. Ancient, classical sculptures in the basement testify to the rich, allegorical decoration of former aristocratic residences.



Solutions: Participants should discuss how a lack of transparency breeds conspiracy theories today (e.g., on social media) and why humans prefer simple, hidden-enemy narratives over complex systemic realities.

Stop 6 : St John's Archcathedral



Facilitation Tips: Inside, prompt the group to observe the monuments quietly. Introduce the shortened reflection: "Notice how some names are carved in grand marble to endure forever, while the ordinary people who built this cathedral lie nameless beneath the cobblestones."



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: Crypts and cathedral burials reflect strict social hierarchies. Only the royal, wealthy, or highly influential were buried close to the altar, securing their "monumental memory," while the poor were placed in unmarked mass graves.



Solutions: Discuss whose memory is curated as "national heritage" today. Guide the group to reflect on whether quiet, everyday acts of survival carry more historical weight than grand monuments.

Support Material

During the Tour

Stop 7 : Antonina Leśniewska Museum of Pharmacy



Facilitation Tips: Stand near the museum entrance. Ask: "When public health is threatened, what kind of authority are we willing to surrender to medical experts? Does professionalizing medicine create new barriers?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: Highlighting Antonina Leśniewska, who graduated in 1900, exposes the historical exclusion of women from scientific institutions. Pharmacy transitioned from unregulated, near-magical alchemy to a systematic, state-controlled science.



Solutions: Discussions should touch on trust in science, the ethics of public health, and how gender and economic class historically limited access to both medical care and professional knowledge.

Stop 8 : Old Town Market Square



Facilitation Tips: Look up at the tenement facades. Ask: "This square was completely rebuilt from rubble after WWII. Does this perfect reconstruction make it an authentic piece of history, or a beautiful theatrical stage?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: The square was also the historic site of the pillory, where public punishments were staged to enforce social order through visibility. The reconstruction incorporated original salvaged stone portals and niches into the rebuilt facades.



Solutions: Guide the group to find "fragments of truth" (original portals) embedded in the rebuilt walls, discussing how a community reconstructs its identity after catastrophic loss.

Stop 9 : Mermaid Monument, Old Town Market Square



Facilitation Tips: Gather around the monument. Ask: "Why did the city choose a figure with a sword and shield as its ultimate protector? How does a community protect its core symbols when its physical structures are destroyed?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes

Designed by Konstanty Hegel. The Mermaid's physical relocation and survival of war damage reflect the shifting protective identity of Warsaw. The current sculpture in the square is a durable copy, keeping the fragile original safe inside the Museum of Warsaw.



Solutions: Guide participants to inspect the monument and spot Hegel's original design elements (such as the 'spirally twisted tail' and 'classical facial features'). Reflect on how symbolic identity survives catastrophe.

Support Material

During the Tour

Stop 10 : Museum of Warsaw



Facilitation Tips: Stand in the courtyard or foyer. Ask: "Now that we have explored waste, fear, disease, and control, how should public museums present these uncomfortable truths without turning them into cheap entertainment?"



Cultural Heritage Support Notes: The Museum of Warsaw is structured around authentic, physical fragments of the city. Rather than offering a single, simplified heroic story, it encourages visitors to grapple with the raw material traces of survival and loss.



Solutions: Strong reflections focus on accuracy, empathy, and avoiding sensationalism, recognizing that understanding difficult heritage is essential for responsible modern citizenship.

Support Material



After the Tour

Group Organisation: Sitting in a circle (indoors or in a quiet outdoor space).

Facilitator Role: Active listener, synthesis guide, and debriefing leader.

1. Debriefing Activity (15 mins)

The Keyword Circle: Go around the circle and ask each participant to choose one keyword from today's walk that stuck with them most: Care, Exclusion, Memory, Fear, Repair, or Waste. They must explain their choice in one sentence.

The Difficult Heritage Dilemma: Ask the group:

"Did you find this tour difficult because of the raw facts of past suffering, the emotional weight of the spaces, or the ethical questions it raised about our present society".

2. Transfer & Active Citizenship (10 mins)

The Challenge: Invite the participants to think about their own modern neighborhoods, schools, or hometowns.

Ask: "What is the 'Gnojna Góra' or 'Barbican Wall' of your current environment? What are the invisible support systems or social boundaries that we actively use today but prefer not to talk about?"

Closing Message: Remind the group that a city's strength does not lie in a perfect, flawless facade. True urban resilience is built on our collective willingness to look beneath the surface, care for our vulnerabilities, and take civic responsibility for how we interpret our shared past.

3. Optional Extension Output

Design a New Stop: Invite participants (individually or in pairs) to research and sketch a blueprint for a brand-new tour stop in their own town, titled: "What the City Prefers Not to Show." They should outline the location, the difficult history it holds, and an interactive question for future visitor

Support Material



References

1. Heritage Interpretation Models: Specifically Model 2 on interpreting difficult, controversial, and uncomfortable heritage (EYES Project internal pedagogical framework).
2. Museum of Warsaw Archives: Historical records of the Old Town Market Square post-war reconstruction (1949–1953) and municipal public punishment records from the 16th -18th centuries.
3. Go To Warsaw (Municipal Information Portal): Architectural and municipal documentation of Gnojna Góra, its sanitary transitions, and historical city wall curfews.
4. Antonina Leśniewska Museum of Pharmacy Core Exhibition: Archive records on pioneering women in early 20th-century pharmaceutical sciences and medicine in Poland.
5. Warsaw Barbican & Defensive Walls: Core historical records regarding medieval defensive duties and social curfews, curated by the Museum of Warsaw.