

Raimund Fein\*

## ARCHITEKTURA A MIASTO WSPÓŁCZESNE: NOWY ZŁOTY WIEK CZY WYKORZYSTANIE UTRACONEGO SNU?

### ARCHITECTURE AND THE CONTEMPORARY CITY: A NEW GOLDEN AGE OR EXPLOITATION OF A LOST DREAM?

W wielu miejscach zaobserwować można tendencję do powrotu do życia w mieście. Niestety, ekonomiczne spekulacje bardzo często wykluczają z tej nowej możliwości gorzej sytuowanych i nieustająco zakłócając cenną istniejącą strukturę socjoekonomiczną i równowagę miast. Tak czy inaczej, renesans miasta powinien pokrywać się z powrotem kwestii piękna, jako przeciwieństwa aspektu funkcjonalnego, który dominował przez niemal sto lat. Wiele miast próbuje dziś “ubrać się” w znakomite budynki. Fakt ten pokazuje, że potrzeba magii miasta została ponownie dostrzeżona. Miasto to stale zmieniający się organizm; w tym znaczeniu zawsze odradza się z własnej przeszłości i kontekstu. Nowe budynki w mieście powinny szanować kontekst: równocześnie jednak nie możemy zapomnieć, że są one zarodkiem nowego, miejmy nadzieję, że lepszego, porządku.

*Słowa kluczowe: ekonomia miasta, piękno, kontekst, funkcja*

A tendency to return to live in the city can be observed in many places. Sadly, economical speculation very often excludes the less privileged from this new potential and continues to disrupt valuable existing socio-economic structures and balances within the cities. In any case, the renaissance of the city should coincide with the return of the aspect of beauty, as opposed to the aspect of functionality which has been dominating for almost a hundred years. The fact that many cities nowadays try to “dress up” with outstanding buildings shows that the need of magic of a city is being recognized again. A city is a constantly changing organism; in this sense, it is always regenerating itself out of its own past and context. New buildings in the city should respect the context; at the same time, however, we must not forget that they are the nucleus of a new, hopefully better context.

*Keywords: urban economics, beauty, context, function*

In our days, cities seem to be living an age of renaissance: Back to the city is the tendency to be observed almost everywhere; the tendency to move out of the city seems to have been inverted. A century-

long epoch of exodus from the city, of uncritical modernity and boundless mobility seems to come to an end; the worst for the city seems to be over. Live is coming back to areas within the cities that seemed

\* Fein Raimund, Prof. dr ing. arch., Lausitz Universität Cottbus.

to be lost for ever. No longer is it accepted to make long trips by car to some shopping mall out in the middle of nowhere. Shopping centres and entertainment are coming back into the city, and most people dream to live right in the centre. Is it a new golden age for our cities?

We all know that over the last 200 years, starting with the industrialisation and continuing into the last century of dominance of functionalism, the European city has been put into question in the most radical ways. The city has been first seen as an economical matter in as far as it contained a reservoir of cheap workforce for employment in factories within the city boundaries. Later, and as a consequence of this, it became an object of functional separation, of dissolution of its functional and social complexity as part of a socio-political program that criticised the previous industrialisation and the following social decline within the cities. While the early industrialisation ruined the image of the cities and turned them mostly into slums, the following technocratic social reformism helped to empty them from their most vital essence: Social and functional complexity.

Many of our city centres have been functionally and socially ruined to a point that they have been deserted because nobody wants to live there any more. This way, they have become economically interesting for speculation, because the prices to buy are low, while at the same time individual mobility is becoming more and more difficult and economically unaffordable, and there is a lot of money available through public programs aiming to make neglected areas disappear. This is the new interest in the cities: Buy cheap now and make a lot of profit by chasing out the poor who still live there, redevelop and bring in the rich who find it chic to have a place in the romantic old city centre. Part of the speculative stimulation of interest in the city is to provide the new

inhabitants with all the things they have got used to during all those years when that they lived somewhere outside the city: Shopping centres, parking space, services, entertainment facilities of all kinds etcetera.

Kraków's new shopping mall by the train station exemplifies this: It is part of a strategy of urban conversion from popular to upper class: The rationale is that the expected or existing new rich class in the city centre will provide the clientele for the shopping mall, while at the same time it is calculated that the presence of the shopping mall will make it more attractive for even more well-heeled people to move into the city. Those new inhabitants don't travel by bus or tram; they don't do their shopping in the old traditional mom-and-pop store; they don't spend their leisure time in the smelly old pub around the corner. They need sheltered private parking space for their expensive cars; they shop in the franchise stores for fashionable brands, and they need fitness centres, hip party lounges and exquisite restaurants to spend their leisurely hours.

There is nothing wrong with live coming back into the cities: It would just be better if it was not in the name of an economical exploitation of the beauty of cities, of a beauty that belongs to everybody and not just to a privileged few, and not at the cost of a new overthrowing of existing socio-economical structures, excluding the less privileged. Only a socially complex city is a living city.

These current speculative developments have to be watched with a critical eye. A new social mono-functionalism is threatening, a new violation and exploitation of one of the most fascinating and important cultural and social heritages that mankind has produced, of the city. If only there was an intellectual and political class powerful enough to withstand the blandishments of individual economical interests and quick solutions!

But this is a conference on architecture, and I reckon I should rather stay with the subject.

It would be very desirable that the city is no longer seen exclusively as a functional or economical entity, but as a matter of beauty. A beautiful city is a liveable city. Beauty is not an individual property. It can be enjoyed independently from social status. Beauty is the true richness of any city. As much as the city is concerned, I do not agree with Gottfried Semper who said that only what functions well can be beautiful. I would invert this line and say that only what is beautiful can function well, or, in other words: what is ugly can not function well. Experience shows that this is certainly true in the case of cities. Ugly cities have always been more prone to social problems.

But what is a beautiful city? I think we all agree that the beauty of a city goes beyond its mere technical and economical functionality; a beautiful city is a city that offers sensual qualities, a richness of public spaces, strong experiences of strong spaces and spatial situations, adventures of shapes, forms and spaces, of sequences of spaces. A city has to be breathtaking to look at, and to walk through, from space to space and from point to point. A city has to be a promenade architecturale, dramatic, poetic, musical, touching our senses. That is the beauty of a city. Children are usually the best in feeling the magic of a city: They expect a magician to live in any tower that they see or a fairy behind any decorated façade they pass by. Why do we become so practical and prosaic once we grow up? Is it really so hard to maintain this sense of magic?

Not that the magic of cities has all been lost. Kraków itself can truly claim magic for itself, and many other cities can do so too. Moreover, not only ancient cities maintain their magic; modernism has also

brought about some truly magic cities, Chicago being just one example. It is true that terrible destruction has happened in the name of modernism, more so probably than through wars, but in most cases, it is still possible to build on existing beauty.

In fact, there is generally more sensibility today towards the qualities, the heritage and the meaning of city. There is a tendency and a general desire to move back into the city. City and its living qualities are being rediscovered and that is a good thing, except from the consequences that I was mentioning earlier on. So it is only logical that cities look again for signs of their newly found vitality, for symbols of their new pride and identity, for elements that make them unique and unmistakable, just like Paris has its Eiffel Tower, like London has the Tower Bridge, and like Berlin has the Brandenburg Gate.

After all, it is a proven principle to interweave into the urban fabric focal points that stand out from it. They can offer identification, orientation, and make the city memorable. If today many cities try to make themselves unmistakable through buildings, this is not a bad thing. Bilbao has done well with its Guggenheim (by which I don't mean that I like its architecture), Sidney has done well with its opera house in the harbour area, etcetera etcetera. It can not be a bad thing that many cities "dress up", that they stick a feather to their hat. I am not worried about that at all, as long as it is done with the right amount of respect and sensibility.

This brings us to the question of context. While I think that it is true that building in a city will always, in a way or another, bring forward the question of confrontation with an existing built context, and while I think that context has a meaning and that it has to be respected, I also feel that about the dealing with context there is an inherent risk of a fundamental

misunderstanding: A new architectural work within a built context should not and does not only receive impulses from its surroundings; it also sends out impulses into the context. It is always a two way affair of radiation. Mimicry, the change that does not want to be seen, is by any means conceptually impossible: By inserting a new element a place does not stay the same; it will be a new place. The old place will disappear, and a new one will be born. We never construct in a place; we will always construct a new place that includes what remains of the old place. The quality of the new place is what we should look and aim at, not the quality of what had existed before. I think that Luigi Snozzi is right when he says that an intervention within a context is always destruction, and that it is all about destroying wisely.

Also, I agree to a certain point with Rem Koolhaas when he says "Fuck the context!" He just reminds us, in his usual provocative and radical way, that we should not forget that any project has to radiate the beginning of a new order, and that any project can

be a means to criticise an existing order or to make a lack of order visible.

Any building radiates context, and it certainly has to do so when it is meant to offer identity and orientation. For any architectural sign or landmark, this is its purpose and reason of being. Imagine a cathedral whose plan and façade is merely a result of its context; that would certainly be a miserable cathedral. We rightfully expect more from a prominent building; it has to do something for its surroundings, if not for the entire city. It has to command, to impose, and not to hide and be shy. By mimicking it would completely miss its real role and function within the city.

So welcome back, radiating magic of architecture! Welcome back to our cities! For too long, we have been denied to wonder and to be mesmerized! Let the century of dullness and anonymity be over! Enough of functionalism! What is needed is innocent fantasy and imagination, not reason. Let there be magic! That could be the rebirth of our cities.