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CONCRETE BACKYARDS
– TRANSMUTATIONS OF CONCRETE
IN THE AREAS FOR THE YOUNGEST

BETONOWE PODWÓRKA
– TRANSMUTACJE BETONU
W PRZESTRZENIACH DLA NAJMŁODSZYCH

Abstract

This article deals with issues related to the possibilities of using concrete in designing objects intended for the youngest.

In the first part of the article, the author analyzes the reasons for the negative attitude towards this building material, which can be observed among Polish investors. Then, he tries to find the right place for concrete in the architecture designed for the youngest, with particular emphasis on playgrounds and courtyards.

Keywords: concrete, architectural education, playground

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę związaną z możliwościami zastosowania betonu w projektowaniu obiektów przeznaczonych dla najmłodszych.

W pierwszej części artykułu autorka analizuje powody negatywnego nastawienia do tego materiału budowlanego, jakie można zauważyć wśród polskich inwestorów. Następnie podejmuje próbę znalezienia właściwego miejsca dla betonu w architekturze projektowanej dla najmłodszych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem placów zabaw i podwórek.

Słowa kluczowe: beton, edukacja architektoniczna, plac zabaw

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There is no free love in the concrete homes

Martyna Jakubowicz

For years, concrete was considered a second-class building material – less noble than steel, common and prosaic. Designed exclusively for civil engineering use – bridges, tunnels and dams. In 1909 at Paris' Ecole des Beaux-Arts, students did not allow the representative of a construction company to speak about the possibilities of concrete – after all, such material cannot be used for a work of art!¹ There are no noble veins that marble has or characteristic grain of wood.

Its remarkable plasticity was first noticed by the modernists. Le Corbusier, Max Berg, Pierre Luigi Nervi and Felix Candela pointed the way, which others followed. Smooth, polished surfaces gleaming in the sun next to the rough and folded, create a real kingdom of forms, still undiscovered possibilities and applications. In the world of architecture, concrete has been experiencing its renaissance for some time now. Its great capacity for creating objects that are simultaneously technologically advanced and meet the high aesthetic requirements, mean that the interest in this material grows.

Concrete still reveals new faces to the designers – thanks to the modern technologies and high-tech admixtures, once underestimated material, now comes back to grace. But is it fully accepted by investors?

1. Concrete houses – unwanted heritage of the Polish People's Republic (PPR)

In Poland, the majority of people not connected with architecture on a daily basis would probably be in favour of the attitude presented by Parisian students in the early 20th century. Concrete is associated primarily with the pre-fabricated concrete slabs system and the grim grayness of the PPR panel-blocks. In no other western country behind the iron curtain has this phenomenon grown to such enormous proportions – they started to withdraw from the provisions of the *Athens Charter*² and look for other solutions in the multifamily residential architecture much earlier than Poland. In communist countries, it was not possible until the last years of the regime's reign. Straight buildings, set in parallel, were relatively easy to construct (especially in the face of construction industry failure), while block housing helped the totalitarian authority to maintain the "atomization" of society.³ Unification and anonymity of buildings helped to create a social system based on the principles of communism. It reduced the existing social divisions and put individuals into the role of cogs in a larger machine. The anonymity of panel-blocks can be considered in the scale of dwellings – in which the uniform scenery beyond the window did not allow to identify the city in which the object was located. The repeatability of the flats and their enormous quantity, coupled with the lack of

¹ P. Goessel, P. Leuthaeuser, *Architektura XX wieku*, Taschen, 2006.

² Athens Charter (French: Charte d'Athènes) – adopted at the Fourth CIAM Congress in Athens in 1933, a document containing the postulated principles of modern urban design and the division of functional zones in the city.

³ A. Basista, *Betonowe dziedzictwo. Architektura w Polsce czasów komunizmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa – Kraków 2001.

choice of the way of living (therefore people with a completely different social status were neighbours), were not conducive to making contacts in the neighbourhood. Currently, long and dark corridors are often closed with bars, giving a semi-private space in which rights and rules are determined only by the nearest neighbours. Anonymity also appeared at the level of the apartment block – the monotony of repetitive solutions, flat roofs, blunt rhythms of balconies and windows, mutes the freshness of the Marseille Housing Unit (1947–1952), designed by one of the greatest masters of concrete – Le Corbusier. Although often referred to as the prototype of housing estates from the first half of the 20th century, its poetics, sophisticated composition and attention to detail are completely different from the repetitive solutions of the PPR. Le Corbusier was the first to compare the raw concrete wall, its imperfections, crevices, thickenings and cracks, to the human face: “*Does not men and women have wrinkles and moles, hooked noses, innumerable special signs?*”⁴

Unified solutions across Poland have destroyed the faces of many old cities and the landscape values of their surroundings. Functional and formal uniformity was derived from the adopted technology of mass production of prefabricated elements from reinforced concrete. At this point, there is another difference between the solutions used in western and communist countries – even in the worst of times for construction, western settlements have never been as monotonous as in Poland. Buildings were more diversified, at least in terms of type and height. They had higher standards and a more careful execution. The apartments were larger and spaces intended for common use (stairways, halls and lifts) as well as complementary facilities (nurseries, kindergartens, schools, playgrounds) were important issues in design and implementation. In Poland, the standard was to settle unfinished neighbourhoods, lacking basic equipment and complementary facilities, where the design and construction of green areas were most often forgotten.

General unification and monotony of buildings did not bypass rural areas either. New buildings were usually box-shaped, their size often exceeded the needs of the residents and the standard of finish was dependent on the acquired building materials. At the same time, in the western countries, there was a greater diversity of rural development and partial adaptation to the local conditions and building traditions. In Poland, the conditions of real socialism, its centralization and reluctance to local initiatives were not conducive to this. Basically, throughout Poland, from the Baltic Sea to the Tatry Mountains, a single building was built – box-shaped, badly scaled and, very often, unfinished. This model has been ubiquitous for years, which is difficult to explain simply by the lack of adequate financial resources. The unfinished buildings have witnessed supply problems – partly made of bricks, partly of concrete blocks (often made directly on the construction site), proudly displaying successive stages of construction. Those, which have made it through the finishing works, also did not look best – covered with colourful baubles, broken mirrors or painted in abstract, geometric shapes, became a pseudo-certificate of the prestige of the owner. Further redevelopment, added fragments and the devastation of the greenery to unveil the home clearly showed how the communist regime was destroying the old system of values⁵.

⁴ T. Małkowski, *Piękno brutalizmu*, GW Katowice, added in: 01.01.2000 <http://sztuka-architektury.pl/article/4471/piekno-brutalizmu> (access 1.06.2016).

⁵ A. Basista, *Betonowe dziedzictwo. Architektura w Polsce czasów komunizmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa – Kraków 2001.



III. 1. Concrete train on one of Poznan settlements (photo by B. Świt-Jankowska)

The widespread use of concrete as the easiest to use and most available building material, coupled with its poor quality and often harsh manufacturing practices (in ubiquitous concrete mixers), created bad associations with this material.

The consequence of such treatment of concrete is the widespread dislike of this material, which characterizes modern Poles. “Unfinished” architectural concrete walls are not awe-inspiring in the eyes of ordinary users – their aesthetics are associated with years of deprivation, enslavement and anonymity. And yet, as Louis Kahn said, *concrete is a very refined material, it does not tolerate when it is treated as secondary, woe betide the creator who does not respect his specificity and destiny!*

The average present-day investor wants modernity – glass, steel, stone and polycarbonate facings, but without raw concrete. Jaroslaw Kozakiewicz’s “*Nature off/for living*” project addresses the problem of unwanted “concrete heritage” – an architectural legacy of the Polish People’s Republic⁶. In his futuristic vision of “living after life,” the buildings of Warsaw’s *Za Żelazną Bramką* housing estate, built in the second half of the 1960s, abandoned by the inhabitants and covered with greenery slowly change their function from residential to ecological – they become huge lungs of the city. His vision coincides with the dream of the majority of Polish cities inhabitants, who would like the hideous concrete boxes to disappear from their surroundings. But what if they do not disappear? What if it is not possible? Then

⁶ <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/jaroslaw-kozakiewicz> (access 1.06.2017).

maybe at least cover them, hide under coloured parquet, cover with plastic mock-ups, subject them to the phenomenon of common *pastelosis*⁷.

Concrete heritage, the legacy after years of Polish People's Republic, created a different attitude towards this material in Poland than in western countries. Investors are hard to convince to the use of concrete, and emerging projects are frequently a source of controversy and discussion, and, unfortunately, relatively often, lead to changes in the way the building is finished. This trend is noticeable especially in the design of space intended for the youngest.

2. Concrete for the youngest

Designing space for the youngest users involves many aspects, in which the problem of ensuring the safety of children is usually on the forefront. In this context, concrete as the finishing material is usually the last that comes to mind of a potential investor. Warm, natural materials such as wood are preferred, but also – which is somewhat contrary to the idea of naturalness – diverse plastics and synthetic polymers, which tempt with low price, availability and a wide range of colours. Their disadvantages – static electricity, relatively low durability and the use of artificial additives and dyes – do not deprive them of their attractiveness or reduce their popularity among users. The widespread use of this type of finishing makes children's spaces – nurseries, kindergartens, schools, and playgrounds filled with colourful plastic toys, furniture and accessories – often look more like a tawdry stall than a place of education and formation of basic spatial competence and aesthetic attitudes. Their apparent diversity, in fact, contributes to the further uniformization of the space – most of the solutions are actually repeatable, and designers use the ready-made solutions offered by toys and furniture manufacturers with “attestation”.

Children's spaces are often designed for parents and for realizing their utopian vision of childhood – as an idyllic, risk-free, colourful, and filled with predetermined, safe games. At this stage, the needs of children are often forgotten. Seen from the child perspective, these spaces lose their natural beauty and attractiveness. The multi-coloured decorations do not go hand in hand with the diversity of textures and materials. Contemporary childhood is filled with boredom – an alternative to reality are the computer games, which give children a substitute for real challenges and dangers. Pre-school rooms, filled with soft rugs, protected corners and plastic tables, do not give such opportunities.

3. Concrete backyard

Children's needs are one of the more difficult and complex design issues. The space dedicated to the youngest should, in addition to the aforementioned safety, provide the young generation with the right conditions for mental and physical development while preparing for active participation in the future of the community. Understanding social norms is linked to

⁷ F. Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą. Reportaże o polskiej przestrzeni*, Wydawnictwo czarne, Wołowiec 2013.

understanding cultural background, aesthetics and attention to the protection of the broadly understood cultural heritage.

All that surrounds the child – the people and the results of their work, their attitude and their actions – is the child's educational environment. Nothing can replace free spontaneous fun in the group of peers. Therefore, spaces for children, including playgrounds, are essential for their proper development. In the course of such fun, there are important processes of spontaneous education or secondary education. These processes sometimes have a greater impact on the development of the character and personality of the child than the planned impact of school and home. Depending on what educational values can be created by the environment, such will be their direction of impact on the development of the child's psyche⁸.

The society should create conditions for children to ensure that educational processes are in line with their educational assumptions. It is also about giving the spontaneous processes of upbringing the characteristics of directed, planned education. Paradoxically, the urban space, equipped with all the civilization achievements, such as cinemas, theatres, shopping galleries, great transport arteries and even parks and squares, is not a space friendly for the youngest users. Mostly designed for the needs of an adult, they endanger the mental and physical health of the child, and sometimes even his life. Children, at the beginning of the twentieth century, commonly present in the streets of the city, are becoming rare today – they are pushed into specially spaced, plastic, coloured and usually very similar spaces in which the adult rules are imposed.

The concrete backyard from the title is often synonymous with grayness and sadness in the Polish People's Republic, which "lasted" between the concrete walls that the ball hit and the carpet hanger; sometimes among the concrete "residues" after the construction of the last panel-block. Deprived of the certified swings and slides, in the ordinary grass, which does not necessarily cushion all falls. Concrete field devices diversified the space of the settlement, making it an excellent training ground for experiencing space and improving motor coordination – after all, contact with them usually ended painfully. Experience in this matter was gained quickly, with subsequent scratches and bruises.

Today concrete has no entrance to the playground. Safety Standard PN-EN 1176 defines the rules for the creation of playgrounds for children, specifying under which devices safe and cushioned surfaces should be used. Although the synthetic surface is only one alternative, lately it has been dominating. Despite its high price, it is often used in excess, on all surfaces of playgrounds – in the opinion of most parents, only this solution adequately solves the security issue in the playground, while being aesthetic, clean and comfortable. Alternative solutions – wood chips or sand – are used less often. At first glance, they seem to be less safe, besides they require cyclical replenishment, and sometimes they are problematic for parents (who likes sand constantly falling into shoes?). Synthetic materials are colourful – they fit in a vision of childhood in which no fall is a greater threat.

This sometimes leads to absurd situations. On the one hand, developers exploit every loophole in the law to minimize the size of children's play areas – the playground becomes a small metal cage, lined with rubber, one or two swings, one small swing, maybe a small sandpit. On the other hand – children in the square are deprived of one of the basic forms

⁸ *Urządzenia terenowe dla dzieci. Poradnik-katalog*, Zakład Wydawnictw CRS, Warszawa 1968.

of acquiring knowledge about the world around them – free play, during which anything can happen.

The concept of the natural playground is not new – its traces can be found in the garden concept of Friedrich Fröbel's children and in the works of Maria Montessori. At present, it is developed, for example, by Anna Komorowska⁹. In her projects, we find the familiar atmosphere of Astrid Lindgren books, full of confidence in the child's innate wisdom, adventure, and open to nature. Research confirms that staying in nature, in the woods, significantly reduces stress levels – at the same time most parents do not allow their children to wander in the forest alone. The natural playground is an alternative to “urban children” – a safe compromise, half-wild, with bushes, sticks and cones, with butterflies and worms, without the overwhelming supervision of adults and plastics.

Concrete in the playground can be an interesting complement to this convention – it can be extremely plastic and graceful, rich in colour and unlimited textures. It can be rugged and smooth, sterile white or fabulously coloured, devoid of additives, clean or full of aggregates and fillers – and the printed concrete surfaces of Herzog and de Meuron show that there are many more possibilities in this material. Metamorphoses of concrete allow you to find it an interesting source of completely new aesthetic and physical experiences – its authenticity, so much appreciated by Le Corbusier, will probably also be appreciated by children, sensitive to all insincere. Although sometimes you can get a scratch, contact with concrete can be a source of additional sensations – the stimulation of the sense of touch develops the spatial skills of the child. An additional benefit may be mutual (for both, parents and children) overcoming of the bad reputation of concrete. This may make investors more sensitive (after all, every child is a potential investor and client of an architectural office) for its beauty. After all, the title concrete transmutations do not take place in the physical space, but in the minds of the users – when appropriately selected examples allow us to look at the reality in a different way, from different sides. Un-enchant the concrete courtyard and give it a new rank.

Is concrete suitable for designing children's spaces? It is hard and dangerous – but is not the world around? The opportunities dormant in concrete, which are rediscovered by designers around the world, allow you to look at it from a new perspective. This material should not be considered as a threat to the baby's sensitive skin, but also as an opportunity for the young person to open up to new sensations, physical and aesthetic. Concrete unveils its beauty slowly, but once the man becomes captivated by it, he sees it more and more clearly.

Children are the capital for the future, including the future of architecture. The way in which the environment will grow generates their future aesthetic needs, allows them to expand or narrow down the spectrum of means of expression that they will have and accept in the future. Providing children with ready-made solutions not only limits their ability to develop emotionally and physically, but also limits their development in the future.

So maybe defiantly – make a concrete yard? Use concrete in children's design? Maybe it will make its transmutations even more interesting in the future.

⁹ A. Komorowska, *Ścieżka bosych stóp. Trzy drogi do naturalnych placów zabaw*, pracownia k., 2017.

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