MACIEJ JANOWSKI*

OPENED/CLOSED
– THE CONCEPTIONS OF THE PRIVACY
IN A SUPER-URBAN HOUSE

OTWARTE/ZAMKNIĘTE
– KONCEPCJE PRYWATNOŚCI
W DOMU SUPERMIEJSKIM

Abstract

The archetype of the house is a shelter, clearly defining the boundary between private and public space. In the historical architecture, the insulated private area embedded in the structure of the city was considered the epitome of order and a counterweight to the chaos existing on the outside of the house and the city. Today, the complexity of urban structures leads to the use of different, often conflicting approaches of developing the relationship between the home and the public space. On the one hand, the separation and keeping distance from the others, creation and defending ones "own world" are an understandable response to the worrying and stressful diversity of human types and lifestyles occurring in the contemporary city. On the other hand, the perception of the city by its residents as a safe space with a high aesthetic value makes their actions cause the blurring of the boundary between private and public zones.

Keywords: house, city, private space, public space, safety

Streszczenie

Archetypem domu jest schronienie, wyraźnie zakreślające granicę między przestrzenią prywatną a publiczną. W architekturze historycznej osadzona w strukturze miasta izolowana strefa prywatna była uważana za uosobienie ładu oraz przeciwwagę chaosu istniejącego na zewnątrz domu i miasta. Współcześnie, złożoność struktur urbanistycznych prowadzi do stosowania zróżnicowanych, często sprzecznych ze sobą strategii kształtowania relacji między domem a przestrzenią publiczną. Z jednej strony, odseparowanie i zachowanie dystansu wobec innych, tworzenie i obrona „własnego świata" są zrozumiałą reakcją na niepokojącą i stresującą różnorodność typów ludzkich i stylów życia, występujących we współczesnym mieście. Z drugiej

* Ph.D. Arch. Maciej Janowski, Urban Planning and Heritage Protection, Institute of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Poznan University of Technology.

strony, postrzeganie miasta przez mieszkańców jako bezpiecznej przestrzeni o dużych walorach estetycznych sprawia że ich działania powodują zatarcie się granicy między strefą prywatną a publiczną.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, miasto, przestrzeń prywatna, przestrzeń publiczna, bezpieczeństwo

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the ancient times, through the Middle Ages and the modern era, closed space of the house and its extension – the city, were considered to be an exemplification of the order, as an imperfect, but existing counterweight to the chaos outside of it[1]. Such perception of space, which survived to the modern era, has been significantly revaluated in the last two centuries. The traditional opposition between culture and order, the exemplifications of which were the city and home, and the wildness of nature, has been erased. Overgrowth of the natural landscape with the network system of the urban structures led to the situation where both the city and the house ceased to bear the function of a fortress.

On the other hand, the city as a spatial and social construct has undergone transformation that resulted from both rapid and uncontrolled growth of them and reformative ideas being the response to the accompanying pathological phenomena. These ideas were aimed at improving the broader functionality (including the comfort of residents), which resulted in changes in urban structures and their specialisation. The city has become more diverse also in terms of the pace of development of the individual areas of non-uniform density and spatial composition. **Overlying, replenishment and colliding** of successive different urban structures caused the traditional urban tissue to lose cohesion for aesthetic pluralism and spatial porosity. Rational geometry of squares and streets, derived from antiquity, created by the tight building quarters, has been confronted with the modernist geometry of the open spaces surrounding the functional objects. Another, more quiet disasters of gradually smaller meta-ideologies made the city become a collage of different, often conflicting fragments; collection of realised, often not completed ideas – but variable enough for everyone to be able to find their place in it. Everyone can also develop a particular idea in an individual way, as the greatest achievement of urban civilisation, its inalienable value, is the individual and therefore the pluralistic formation of living environment, despite the presence of significant restrictions.

---

[1] In the Middle Ages areas outside the city they were treated in two different ways; on the one hand, as a dangerous wilderness inhabited by strangers (bandits, madmen and heretics), on the other, as a place of voluntary seclusion of exiles (hermits and knights-errant), for whom loneliness and danger were the method for self-improvement. Over time, communing with wild nature has come to be equated with the escape, the result of which was the separation of the individual from the *granular structure of feudal society [Historia życia prywatnego, 1998, vol. 2, p. 542–543]*.

2. SUPER-URBAN HOUSE

In the urban environment, constraints are strong and clearly defined, among other things, due to the fact that the city is a structure that is developed in a discordant way, which is often contrary to the interests of part of its inhabitants. In the conditions of market economy, this development is not balanced and does not affect all parts with the same force. Usually, some areas, plots or undeveloped fragments remain forgotten because of a size that is too small, preventing the location of multifamily housing and public buildings there, or the unattractiveness on the market because of their shape or surface. Weaknesses of these specific sites are a catalyst for innovative architectural solutions at the scale of a private home. However, this is a house whose typology belongs to more intensive downtown development than to a villa with a garden. Therefore, they can be described as **super-urban houses**, the architecture of which is an expression of celebration of urbanity and the city, with both positive and negative characteristics used to increase the comfort of living, but also to make an individual expression of the living space.

Thus, the super-urban house may be a precise tool to complement the urban fabric, even more perfect due to the fact that its architecture is negotiable. Function and form can be adapted to a broad context in a far more free way than in the case of multi-family houses and public buildings,[2] while taking into account individual needs and personality of the inhabitants. Therefore, a large variety of strategies adopted to shape the relationship between public and private space, between the exterior and the interior, between the closure and openness, fundamental for the living environment.

3. CLOSENESS

Separation and keeping distance from the other residents, creation and defending one's "own world" are a response to the bewildering, worrying and stressful diversity of human types and lifestyles occurring in the contemporary city. This reaction seems understandable to the point where the idea of a safe house connects to the recognition of the street as a hostile territory, undesirable and dangerous, and its members as a potential threat. Private space is limited to the area where the subject / citizen may exercise unlimited control, which in practice means a space, the boundaries of which are defined by the walls of the house. They cease to be "only" elements of architecture, and become part of the security system. The form of a closed house is massive, transformed in order to graduate contact with the outside, separate the residents from, in default, disorder and chaos. Aesthetic quivering and diversity creates tensions resulting from annoying, stressful and disorienting sense of alienation and lack of acceptance of the environment, which in turn may increase the tendency to seek just such homogeneous living environments, whose basis is the idea of home as a refuge. In traditional terms, stability and constancy (the archetypal features of the house) are obtained by isolation from the outside or the feeling of *being inside*, reinforced by the identity of the place (historical continuity) and the perception of its diversity and uniqueness (*genius loci*).

---

[2] Moreover, the specifics of a private house resulting from the scale allows its implementation in violation of building regulations as in the case of Legal / Illegal by Manuel Herz. A large part of this building was built based on the obtained exclusion from the applicable building and fire regulations.

The form of the Elektra House designed by David Adjayee is a reference to this archetype. Impenetrable front elevation has been deprived of any elements encoding a function of living – it does not have an accented entrance area, doors, windows, cornices and eaves. The smooth surface of the wall isolates residents from the public space and the geometry of almost a perfect cube inserted between conventional buildings accentuates the strangeness and the extroverted character of the house. Referring to the views of Christopher Alexander, Adjaye explains that *wall* [of the Elektra House] *is a kind of mechanism in the middle of the city that reacts to the environment in a specific way.* […] *The wall is like a threshold that separates the two worlds.*

Indeed, Adjaye is developing this theme in his next realisation; behind the walls of the Dirty House covered with dark paint protecting against graffiti, lies a private art gallery of Sue Webster and Tim Nobile; their apartment on the top floor was accentuated with light, glass form and a white roof surface emerging from behind the massive walls. In both cases, Adjaye uses the aesthetics of absence of elements encoding function, creating an inaccessible solid, which is ostensibly foreign to the environment, also by its purist geometry.

The opposite of conspicuous strangeness of the Dirty House is the absence of the Brick House designed by Adam Caruso and Peter St John. The plot, on which it was built, is an urban waste area resulting from the rapid development of Notting Hill – it is such densely surrounded by walls of neighbouring buildings that the only entrance to the house is through the gate of a Victorian building. The result of the impact of space with so strongly defined boundaries is the house almost completely devoid of elevation, which stems directly from the brick walls and garden walls of neighbouring buildings, and at the same time, imperfect because it is reflecting the triangle-like contour of the plot. Thereby, the Brick House remains invisible to outside observers thus becoming a house, which is completely private, even intimate. Closure and stealth strategy adopted by Caruso and St. John caused the representativeness to disappear together with the information layer of the building belonging to the public zone.

Ill. 1. House of A. Mantegna, Mantua 1476–1496. Circular courtyard as an area for privacy and an extension of the public space (author's own photograph)

Ill. 2. D. Adjaye, Dirty House, London, 2001–2002. Basic form geometry and reduction of detail as a manifestation of inaccessibility and estrangement from the surroundings (author's own photograph)

Ill. 3. A. Caruso and P. St John, Brick House, London, 2001–2005. Ground floor plan; the design is determined by the localization of the plot, which is wedged in between three other buildings (author's figure)

Ill. 4. Ch. Pottgiesser, Galvani House, Paris, 2002–2003. Compact composition of architectural elements creating a half-open design structure of the house (Bahamón, 2006)

Ill. 5. R. Nishizawa, Moriyama House, Tokyo, 2005.The house can be deconstructed into ten objects, the interrelations of which are an idealized interpretation of the chaos of the surrounding buildings (author's own photograph)

Ill. 6. P. Peerings and S. Mertens, sculp(it), Antwerp, 2009. The interior design is an extension of the urban space, moving both work and personal life into the public space (author's own photograph)

Paradoxically, architectural elements belonging to this layer may be used as part of a strategy to hide the building. The front elevation of the house Designed by Christian Pottgiesser Galvani is created by a garage, entrance garden and the office of the owner located in the cuboid stretched between the adjacent buildings. These three elements belong to the public sphere, while the right house was hidden in the basement and in an adopted building located in the rear part of the plot. This *collage* of clearly outlined forms (folded plane, solid form of the office, courtyard), interspersed with elements of nature (protected trees, entrance garden, green roof) creates a bucolic refuge for the inhabitants of the modern metropolis. This is possible thanks to the relaxation of the structure of the house, which is reminiscent of a compact composition of Le Corbusier [Jencks, 1982, p. 94–96]. Blank space, separating the underground storey and garage from the office blocks, clearly traces the various architectural objects, and at the same time, connects the courtyard with the street, not showing any of the essential parts of the house. Despite the partial opening of the Galvani House, it remains a closed home[3].

4. OPENESS

In the dimension of the closed-open strategy, the concept of a house is located closer to the closeness and **residing** within certain limits and **continuity** of *being inside* a space marked by both individualism and having common characteristics with the environment. At the same, today, this closeness is a relative term resulting from the liquid relationship between the public and the private zone. The house, being subject to individual rights, can be a space, which is a continuation of other spaces. The break of the form of a house, indicated already in the Tugendhat's villa, favours seizing of these seemingly fundamental differences between the inside and the outside. The house, traditionally perceived as a stabiliser of the daily life of the inhabitants, today is also a sensitive recorder of its changes. Thus, the concept of home is becoming more dynamic, processual. The Moriyama House, designed by Ryue Nishizawa, is no longer a static, closed system, but an attempt to bring community relations in the micro scale of ten autonomous objects, four of which form the loose structure of the house owner. The remaining buildings are rented as studio apartments. All elements combine traditional Japanese *engawa* space having the features of the garden and the grid of narrow streets and passages, which Nishizawa perceives as a medium between the city and the home, due to which the human environment is changing. Therefore, the Moriyama House is an open structure, in which the customer is free to decide which part of this group of rooms he will use for living and which for renting. *He can move between living room and dining room, or temporarily use several rooms, depending on the time of year and other circumstances. The place of residence changes his whole life*[4].

---

[3] In part, this is due to weave of all sorts of restrictions. The Galvani House was built on a plot of land on which there are two trees protected by the Department of Parks and Gardens, and in the gable walls of adjacent tenement houses windows were shattered, which had to be kept. It was necessary also to take into account conservation guidelines concerning, among others, colours and materials [Bahamón, 2006, p. 48].

[4] El Croquis 121–122, *Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998–2004*, p. 286.

The Moriyama House is a compilation of space with varying degrees of openness intended for a small community,[5] which brings to mind *a group* in social media. The issues of community and privacy are reinterpreted in a personal way – for Moriyama, it is a continuous process, for the others a temporary experience.

Even more radical approach to the subject matter of privacy is evident in the sculp(it) home built by Pieter Peerlings and Sylvia Mertens on a long and narrow plot of land in the port area of Antwerp. The form of the sculp(it) has been reduced to a structure divided into floors-rooms. There is no base (theoretically one can change the order of the rooms), entrance (door is a glazed wall of the ground floor) or windows (front elevation is fully glazed). The external aspect of the architecture becomes secondary, which comes at the forefront is the performance of life of two inhabitants introduced to the urban space. Furniture and paintings seem to be a part of the theatrical stage design, in which the inhabitants of the action, actors, are moved from the home zone into the public one. Transparency of the form, its "absence" and the enigmatic nature of the means used cause the house to become a carrier of images from the life of a pair of architects. This brings to mind the project by Bernard Tschumi – the Glass House in the Sky, in which the carrier images of private life was to be a liquid wall-screen. In the case of sculp(it), life of the inhabitants is seen in the version, which prevents any manipulation. The carrier (generator) of the image is the architecture itself, and the neon light is the mean used to produce the distance through creation of unreality between the participants and the observer.

This concept of *fretless* connection of the home interior with urban space is a response to changes in the human lifestyle in the modern metropolis, related to the erosion of privacy and the need for open spaces while fascination with various manifestations of urbanity. Tschumi, referring to his unrealised project – Hague Villa, wrote: *the house can be seen as an extension of urban events and temporary pause in the flow of digital information. The boundaries between the living room and space to work are devoid of ornament camouflage and extended beyond the boundaries of ownership[6].*

However, shocking it may seem, voluntary exhibitionism of Peerings and Mertens, can be assessed as a result of previous architectural experiments of the "transparency" of private life (Farnsworth House by M. van der Rohe or P. Johnson's Glass House), but above all, it must be regarded as proof of change taking place in the architecture of a private house. It ceases to fulfil the historic function of a shelter, to conduct a complex "game" with the environment. At the same, that environment is perceived in a multi-value way – rather not as a source of threat, but as a complex environment in an important manner complementing the personalised home space.

5. (NOT) FINAL CONCLUSIONS

In the 90s of the twentieth century, Terence Riley used the term *un-private house*, specifying a house, where rooms have many functions, not necessarily related to the

[5] With the construction of his house, Moriyama became a "*local celebrity*" and the informal leader of a tiny community living in five other boxes. cf. Gregory, 2007, p. 41.
[6] Description of an unrealized project of 1992 Quoted from Riley, 1999, p. 16.

sphere of domestic life. In the image of the medieval "big house", the public zone, connected with work, and the private one, associated with family and leisure, intertwined with each other. The reason for such departure from the settled model of separation of work and living was the dynamics of changes in the information society, aimed at increasing work effectiveness, liquidity of its duration (and as a consequence its extension) while maintaining the comfort of its performance. The result of combining the work area and the private area and interchangeability of functions was a smooth combination of rooms and limiting the growth of their surface, offset by an increasing volume and transparency of forms. The consequence of this process is the expansion of the house beyond its borders, creating a hybrid of the characteristics of both the private and the public sphere.

The form of the house is not clear from the convention or of the aesthetic system, but is the result of multi-stage negotiations of the solutions. Urban space is continued inside the house and does not lose the local character of the interior. The Brick House is an extension of the garden walls of the neighbouring buildings, the form of sculp(it) was designed taking into account the specific atmosphere of the port area of Antwerp. Dialogue with space and more and more new interactions between the resident and the observer are possible thanks to the changing architectural language. Traditional types of buildings are used to introduce the public to the structure of the house (Moriyama House). The outer wall is a structure whose properties – transparency or porosity, allow the connection of various types of space (Nested House). Emptiness becomes equivalent to the architecture (Galvani House). The form of the house ceases to be a conventional carrier of meanings; what occurs is the reduction and disappearance of traditional architectural elements that are replaced by transparency of a solid and treatment of the façade as a cross-section (sculp(it)).

The lifestyle of residents is often quite radically changed; they must adapt to the new conditions, to accept its new position in the residential space, change the reference point or the perception of spatial relationships and perception of architectural codes fixed by tradition. The use of often controversial solutions requires the acceptance of the residents and compensation for nuisance by other values.

It also requires, according to another author's believe, the most important factor that is replacing thinking about an urban house in divergent terms of "either closed or open", by thinking in terms of "how closed and how opened." Thanks to the individual strategy choices, the designer and resident of a private house can take part of the responsibility for urban space, thus co-creating its wealth.

R e f e r e n c e s

[1]   Adjaye D., *Material is like reading*, Detail, no. 11, Monachium 2005, p. 1234–1236.
[2]   Alexander Ch., *Język wzorców. Miasta, budynki, konstrukcja*, GWP Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2008.
[3]   Bahamón A., *Sketch: Houses. How Architects conceive residential architecture*, Loft, Barcelona, 2006.
[4]   El Croquis 121–122, *Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa 1998–2004*, p. 286.
[5]   *Historia życia prywatnego*, ed. Ph. Aries, G, Duby, vol. 3–5, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław, 1999.

[6]   Jencks Ch., *Le Corbusier – tragizm współczesnej architektury*, translation: M. Biegańska, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa, 1982.

[7]   Gregory R., *Cubic commune*, The Architectural Review, 1326, Emap Communications, Londyn. 2007, p. 41–45.

[8]   Riley T., *The Un-Private House*, The Museum of Modern Art, Nowy York, 1999.