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BETWEEN RATIONALISM IN ARCHITECTURE AND POETRY

MIĘDZY RACJONALIZMEM W ARCHITEKTURZE A POEZJĄ

Abstract

Recent years have seen a fashion for reminiscing about the architecture of the second half of the 20th century. It brings back from oblivion all the architectural accomplishments, including the less interesting, but some myths are also created about the past times and opinions about them are often controversial. Reminiscing about the architecture of People's Poland brings to mind a certain regularity that the present epoch fails to appreciate the relics of its predecessor. We seem to have reached the moment when the architectural achievements of People's Poland have got appreciation and their relics that survived demolitions and radical transformations will receive due conservator's protection provided they deserve it, of course.

Keywords: post-war, architecture, evaluation, preservation

Streszczenie

Ostatnie lata przyniosły modę na powrót do wspomnień o architekturze zrealizowanej w drugiej połowie XX wieku. Z zapomnienia wydobywa się wszelkie dokonania; zarówno te wartościowe, jak i mniej ciekawe. Tworzone są też mity, w których oceny minionej rzeczywistości są dyskusyjne. Powrót do wspomnień o architekturze PRL-u przypomina pewną prawidłowość, że następująca epoka nie docenia reliktyw poprzedniej, minionej. Obecnie wydaje się, że doszliśmy do czasów, gdy dorobek poprzedniej, peerelowskiej epoki został doceniony, a pozostałe relikty, ocalałe z wyburzeń i radykalnych transformacji, zostaną otoczone opieką konserwatorską – oczywiście te na nią zasługujące.

Słowa kluczowe: powojenna, architektura, ocena, zachowanie

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1. Introduction

The history of architecture after World War II covers over 70 years of very diverse achievements. Although they remain basically unchanged, the way they are perceived and assessed has varied over the years.

In the 1980s, owing to my work in the contemporary architecture team led by Professor T. Przemysław Szafer, I could watch closely how the architecture of the time was created: cities, housing estates and individual buildings. I also had the pleasure of meeting a large number of creators, their design teams, and of listening to comments on the conditions of project implementation, difficulties in making them, the exploitation of built objects, and their evaluation by critics. In those years, there was a widespread belief that criticism as such did not exist, and yet there appeared several important bibliographical items. It is worth mentioning that access to all articles on town planning, architecture or construction was facilitated by the GLOB¹ Press Excerpts Office which did a query of newspapers and periodicals appearing on the market.

Currently there are a growing number of various publications concerning those years and the architecture of the time. They differ with respect to relating facts and the expressed opinions are sometimes reliable. However, they often describe events that never happened or present facts that are not true while their evaluation of the architects of the time and their achievements seems groundless. Unfortunately, confabulation and misinterpretation dominate. It seems that unwillingness to engage in a dispute and to clarify problems has long favoured a pluralistic vision of the past and creation of excessively subjective opinions. In the end, it is worth taking up the subject in order to address the experiencing of architecture from the late 1970s until today. Therefore taking up the theme of the housing estates that were built after World War II can be a voice in the discussion about their real values in terms of town planning, architecture, function and social significance, particularly in the era of the new, ever faster growing development projects.

2. The World

Many architects have strived to create rational architecture that would meet the clients' needs and bring the alleged happiness. They based on their work on knowledge, talent and a willingness to design a space where people would see architecture as a work of art: perfect, functional and beautiful. Despite their efforts and skills, their projects failed to meet social expectations. Examples can be seen across the world.

Those that are worth mentioning are the pioneering housing projects in Casablanca in the 1950s and the 1960. The city was then a place for testing innovative solutions in the field of architecture and urban planning. The modernism that emerged there was the first step to the expressive style of urban planning which prevailed in the second half of the 20th century and consisted in designing cities, and principally their marginal areas, according to rigorous geometrical rules and often using the precast panel technology. Such housing developments appeared in Casablanca and were experiments in every respect: urban,

¹ Prasowe Wydawnictwo Dokumentacyjne RSW „P-K-R”, Warszawa, pl. Starynkiewicza 7.

architectural, and social, that were conducted in an area where modernity coincided with still surviving colonialism. To begin with, wide streets were planned to adjust the city to dynamic traffic and the first underground car park was also built. The housing development was designed with the intention of improving people's quality of life. At the same time it became an avant-garde urban and architectural solution later recommended for many European cities.

The development known as *Carrière Centrale* came to be defined as a *monster plan*. It was designed on a geometrical grid by Michel Écochard², Le Corbusier's pupil, for rural migrants looking for work in industrial areas of port towns. Initially, they settled on the outskirts of towns in makeshift slums called *bidonvilles*. Such places became a source of anti-colonial protests and huge social conflicts. Therefore the colonial administration replaced them with mass housing for thousands of people delimiting separate areas for Europeans, Jews and Muslims. The architect Michel Écochard with the support of CIAM members, who helped with zoning, and in collaboration with geographers and sociologists conceived a project which he called *Carrière Centrale* after the adjacent slums. The development consisted of *Cité Horizontale*, which had a carpet-form layout and *Cité Verticale* situated centrally and comprising three tall buildings. The urban layout of *Cité Horizontale* has for years remained a model for residential neighborhoods and was successfully used in Morocco until the 1980s, years after the country had regained independence.

In the design of *Cité Verticale* the architects referred to the traditional, vernacular type of housing where an important role was played by inner open spaces – patios. Their inspiration were the nearby *bidonville* houses. The architects analyzed in particular the points of transition between private and public space. They combined the elements of traditional construction with modernity while piling up the housing units. In this way, they created multi-storey buildings equipped with modern technical appliances. The project was completely functional and referred to the concept of a house as 'a machine for living in' but also based on studies of the local architecture and its links with the specific culture. The departures from the rigorous principle of 'a machine for living in' and making allowances for the local climate and culture provoked fierce criticism on the part of the followers of pure modernism. However, it soon turned out that the architecture proved too obviously European and the dwellers made their own corrections. In the first place, all the open spaces were walled in and converted into the living space of the flats, then the white colour of the elevation was replaced with bright shades of yellow and pink, finally terraces were arranged on the roofs and the spaces between the blocks of flats were filled with shaded gazebos and small gardens. In retrospect, it seems that austere, simple architecture, or functional modernism, served to control the inhabitants and became a tool to attract the migrating Algerian population to urban centres. Despite the designers' efforts, it did not have much in common with a traditional Moroccan house which could be extended if necessary to accommodate a growing family. It was disliked by the people it had been intended for. The carefully planned experiment of European architects was considered arrogant because it made no clear reference to the local tradition or cultural and aesthetic models. *Cité Verticale* has been acclaimed as the most misguided project of modernism.

² The housing development was designed in 1946 as part of the activities of the French colonial administration *Service d'Urbanisme*.



Similar versions of modernist housing appeared on the outskirts of European metropolises such as Paris or London as mass housing projects that started in the colonial towns of North Africa spread across Europe with the influx of migrants. And just as the first anti-colonial riots and outbursts of social dissatisfaction began in the modernist housing developments of Casablanca, similar modernist neighbourhoods in France also saw such events happen. The Le Mirail³ development in Toulouse was a scene of violent riots in 1998 and so was Paris in 2005. So, on the one hand, North Africa became an experimental laboratory for modernism but, on the other, a place from which there came opposition to the movement and its criticism. That was also where some negative aspects of modernism were revealed as evidenced by the experience of the independence movements.

Another decidedly misguided investment was the housing complex of Pruitt – Igoe on the outskirts of St. Louis in 1954⁴. It was to a large extent Le Corbusier's dream come true as it could house thousands of people in residential blocks arranged in rows with military precision. However, the failure could have been foreseen, given the specific social and economic conditions in the US and the country's tradition of suburban housing which is neither durable nor solid.

3. Europe

World War II was a major influence on the history of contemporary European architecture. Due to military operations, city centres, industrial facilities, entire housing estates and single houses perished. The resulting shortage of housing created a demand for industrialized prefabricated construction which had no match in terms of efficiency, speed, simplicity of manufacture and assembly. Le Corbusier's ideas of housing complexes equipped with all essential functions such as commerce and services were a great inspiration. Their thoughtful, functional, pro-social and egalitarian urban planning created living conditions for several generations of Europeans, e.g. the ones from the so-called Eastern Bloc. Similar socio-economic and political conditions in those countries resulted in the emergence of characteristic, suburban housing estates. A similar type of development also appeared on the outskirts of many cities outside Europe.

Prefabricated housing complexes in Poland were built based on the assumptions as well as urban and architectural plans that met the best criteria and standards in the field at the time. Their authors were teams of well-educated and dedicated architects. Their concepts followed the guidelines and principles of the time.

³ As a result of a competition in 1961, a satellite development of Le Mirail was built near Toulouse two years later. It was designated for 100 000 people. The authors of the project were Candilis-Josic-Woods.

⁴ B. Chomątowska, *Betonia. Dom dla każdego*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2018.

Ill. 1, 2, 3. The J. Słowackiego housing development in Lublin (photo by author)

Ill. 4. The Podwawelskie housing development in Krakow, accessed 30/06/2018, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b8/Widok_na_osiedle_podwawelskie_2.jpg

Ill. 5, 6. The Podwawelskie housing development in Krakow (photo author)

4. Poland

WWII disrupted the activities of the Polish architectural circle and cut its ties with the centres of modernism in Europe. In the late 1940s, and in the changed social and economic circumstances, the development of modernist architecture was discontinued. Only some of its aspects were selected for use in designing in order to address the post-war reality and its priorities. One of them was the concept of modernist housing developments which met a demand for mass housing and social programmes. The modernist typification and use of prefabrication technology gained recognition as means of rapid implementation of more and more housing units created as part of a functional, modernist city.

5. Lublin

The J. Słowacki housing development in Lublin⁵ is an interesting example of the 1960s modernist project designed by Zofia and Oskar Hansen. Its characteristic feature is reference to earlier experiences and achievements of modernist architects and Hansen's innovative vision of settlement units based on the concept of the so-called Open Form and Continuous Linear System. This utopian project envisaged the urbanization of the entire country from the north to the south. The country was divided into four belts: Eastern, Mazovian, Western I and Western II where communication, industrial and housing zones were combined into one coherent whole which was supposed to ensure life in comfort and hygiene without endangering the natural environment. It was one of the ideas of searching for new forms of planning housing complexes that were supposed to meet all the needs of the residents. As in other formal propositions, this concept of organizing social life and urban space was aimed at finding one universal and ideal solution that would guarantee proper living conditions of the population in connection to nature and open space.

The project assumed a division of the housing development into zones with a separate function each. The central element of the complex was the southern zone where residential blocks and a public garden were situated and only pedestrian traffic was allowed. The service area for the zone included two separate parts with access roads to the blocks, car parks, garages and utility spaces.

The houses in the center are a sequence of five-storey cuboids forming a semicircle. On the east and west sides there are more five-storey buildings and six eleven-storey high-rises. The only deviation from the rigorous cuboid form of the blocks are the roofs of the pavilions and the kindergarten building which have been inspired by the shape of the hyperbolic paraboloid.

It is worth mentioning the so-called Open Form of architecture which allowed the residents of the blocks to make some changes in the living space. Technical solutions made it possible to combine several flats into one thus creating an opportunity for improving the standard of the flats to the residents' satisfaction. Half a century on, the technical condition of the buildings requires a general review and major intervention.

⁵ B. Szmigin, *Osiedle im. J. Słowackiego w Lublinie jako przedmiot ochrony?* [in:] Post-war modernism (1946–65). Modernizm powojenny (1946–65), Katedra Historii, Teorii Architektury Konserwacji Zabytków, Wydział Architektury Politechniki Gdańskiej, post-session materials, vol. 3, Gdańsk, 2006/7.

6. Kraków

One of the more visible phenomena, especially in the last decade, is the urban infill on the existing housing estates. Once carefully designed with consideration for public space, they are now deliberately destroyed. In place of lawns and recreation grounds there appear condominiums, usually fenced off with utmost care. The condition of many older housing estates requires intervention. At present, programs are set up with the aim to rehabilitate the residential block estates from the 1960s and 1970s. The programs address the problems of the large panel housing estates such as social exclusion, noise, access to communication⁶.

One of the programs was developed in the Institute for Urban Development in Kraków. Its authors selected some housing developments and pointed out the threats and areas with the highest influence of crisis factors⁷, indicating the direction of changes in order to transform residential block housing into a better and friendlier place to live. Out of the 19 developments under analysis, 9 were chosen to be included in the rehabilitation program in the first place. These were: Olsza II, Azory, Ugorek, Wzgórza Krzesławickie, Ruczaj, Podwawelskie, Wola Duchacka, Złotej Jesieni and Kurdwanów. The housing developments considered the best were: Bieńczyce, II Pułku Lotniczego, Niepodległości.

One of the abovementioned housing estates is worth attention because of its location and the utmost care with which it was designed. It is called *Podwawelskie*, formerly *Osiedle Tysiąclecia (the Millenium Estate)* and was built between Komandosów Street and Słomiana Street in the late 1960s. It was divided into two units: Ludwinów and Zakrzówek. Due to the closeness of Wawel Hill, the designed scale and layout assumed hiding the buildings in greenery. A promenade runs through the estate and ends at the church of Our Lady of Fatima situated on a former fortification earthwork.

Nowadays, the former orderly spatial layout is hardly visible; high-rise buildings tower over the estate. Other blocks – just as the designers had intended – are immersed in lush greenery but new investments, like cancerous tissue, take over every empty space. It is amazing that they got building permits. The narrow streets are congested with traffic most of the day as they had been designed for fewer users and according to different norms and standards.

As for the technology itself, the prefabricated structures can survive for another several decades as studies show the steel joints and concrete shells to be mostly in good condition. However, the biggest drawbacks of this kind of housing seem to be the layout of the interiors and their small size as nowadays people expect more space and comfort. Moreover, urban infill becomes increasingly popular on this kind of housing estates. What used to be public space is now being rededicated to new functions. Residents protest but deficient legal regulations result in degradation of those housing complexes. This poses a serious threat to their old character unless they receive protection as conservation areas.

⁶ M. Kursa, *Zaskakujący raport o krakowskich blokowiskach*, Gazeta Wyborcza 26.07.2012, http://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/1,35812,12193366,Zaskakujacy_raport_o_krakowskich_blokowiskach.html#ixzz4GoFbB2VQ, dostępny: 28/06/2018.

⁷ J. Jeżak, M. Nejman, M. Wierzchowski, *Wielokryterialna analiza dziesiętnastu osiedli zabudowy blokowej położonych na terenie Gminy Miejskiej Kraków*, Instytut Rozwoju Miast, Kraków 2011, https://rewitalizacja.krakow.pl/aktualnosci/13344,210,komunikat,wielokryterialna_analiza_dziesietnastu_osiedli_zabudowy_blokowej_polozonych_na_terenie_gminy_miejskiej_krakow.html, dostęp 27.06.2018.

The abovementioned housing development is one of many such places in Kraków alone requiring more care on the part of its administration but also legal regulations that will impose protection of the original design concept, e.g. vast recreation grounds. The changing housing standards call for architectural alterations but they must be made under the supervision of the conservator and his officials. The degradation of these spaces seems to continue in the absence of appropriate countermeasures.

7. Conclusions

The establishment of the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning was one of the government initiatives undertaken to stimulate social awareness of architecture and urban planning and to shape new approaches to public space, as well as to strengthen local cultural identity, and to popularize Polish architectural and urban thought. The intention of the organizers is to indicate valuable planning and architectural solutions whose preservation will require creating the appropriate institutional and legislative foundations. If the housing estates that have been built in the last 70 years and are still a significant part of the built environment in Polish cities are to survive, it is necessary to define and introduce a new framework and guidelines for conservation while reevaluating social perception and awareness of the need for joint efforts to improve the living standard in those areas. For this reason, current transformations of space should be governed by the new principles of urban planning that will ensure a balance between preservation of resources and heritage, on the one hand, and social and economic needs on the other.

The aim should be the creation of common space, the common good within a housing estate, a quarter, where the residents will feel comfortable. The quality of the entire built environment should be the main strategic goal. Cultural heritage which also includes contemporary creations is an entity which must be preserved and protected together with the buildings, the infrastructure and public space. It must also be treated as an element that continues to change and develop.

It thus seems justified to suggest some actions that would create a favourable climate for protection of the postwar architecture provided it deserves to be protected which is not always the case.

First, the principles of protecting the existing cultural, historic and aesthetic values of urban and architectural complexes should be redefined and their institutional protection should be established.

Second, society should be made aware of the values that were created by previous generations of architects, urban planners, authors of post-war realizations, most of which have great aesthetic and emotional significance and form part of the local cultural heritage. Their recognition should become the basis for interpretive presentation of the site and for everyone's conscious participation in community life.

Third, in the era of mass global migration, it becomes necessary to preserve important fragments of intangible social heritage in the form of local communities with their diverse cultures shaped by many decades of living in the same locality. Their continuity bears witness to the identity of the place.

Fourth, such communities' age structure changes dynamically. New residents arrive. Even without the approval of the settled residents' administrative structures, the newcomers can access the existing social values of the place and housing estate. If the atmosphere of the residential structures they enter suits them, they gain access to specific urban-architectural-cultural values, the social value of local community, participatory values shared by a narrow circle of interested resident insiders.

Finally, it is worth mentioning some literary figures such as Zbigniew Herbert who noticed the link between poetry and other arts including architecture. He wrote some excellent lines about beautiful new worlds, buildings, paintings and sculptures. Postwar housing developments with their formal simplicity, downright plainness, stripped of details and decorations do not deserve poems and are not mentioned in any verse. Yet this kind of architecture, useful, functional and necessary was also realized according to some rules of composition, style or a fashion. It emerged to serve a particular purpose and at the same time followed all the Vitruvian principles. The projects could hardly be called revolutionary or compared to Le Corbusier's but it is a good thing since the implementation of *Plan Obus* for Algiers would have done more harm than good.

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