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“MY DREAM HOUSE”
– A HOUSE IN A CITY IN CHILDREN’S IMAGINATION

„DOM MOICH MARZEŃ”
– DZIECIĘCE WYOBRAŻENIA DOMU W MIEŚCIE

A b s t r a c t

Children’s sensitivity to colours and shapes as well as their magic imagination accompanied by infallible artistic instinct can create ideas, which leave us, adults, speechless. We are very familiar with the world of houses created by grown-ups. What remains a mystery is the children’s world of imagination and their visions of a house, their dreams about this basic, civilisational “thing”. We will show and analyse the effects of children’s search and imagination of the project “My dream house”, which took place in several primary schools in Krakow and the Malopolska region in the last few years during Architectural Education Days.

We will show the relation between almost a fairy tale plasticity and the cultural environment created by us, a place of growth and education for the youngest ones, who are following their spontaneous and pure sensitivity. Why does it usually end for most of the people on the early education level? Where do the sources of children’s inspiration come from? Children often come back to this inspiration during their adult architectural creativity, when they are already grown-up, wonderful architects, who never stopped dreaming about their “house”. This can be seen clearly in their architecture, where the boundaries and shapes are blurred, as if it was in an opposition to the globalised world.

Keywords: dream house, children’s work contest

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Wrażliwość dzieci na urodę barw i kształtów oraz ich magiczna wyobraźnia połączona z nieomylnością plastycznego instynktu potrafią zrodzić koncepcje, wobec których, my dorośli stajemy niejednokrotnie w niemym zachwycie. Świat domów ludzi dorosłych znamy aż za dobrze, natomiast nie znamy domów dzieci, ich wyobrażeń i marzeń o tej podstawowej “rzeczy” cywilizacyjnej. Pokażemy i przeanalizujemy efekty dziecięcych poszukiwań oraz wyobrażeń na temat: Domu Moich Marzeń, jaki

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zadano w kilkunastu krakowskich i małopolskich szkołach podstawowych w ostatnich kilku latach podczas Dni Edukacji Architektonicznej.

Pokażemy związek, jaki istnieje pomiędzy niemal baśnią o plastyce a środowiskiem kulturowym, jaki sami tworzymy i w jakim wzrastamy i edukujemy naszych najmłodszych, którymi włada spontaniczna, czysta wrażliwość zmysłowa. Dlaczego ona kończy się dla większości na etapie wczesnej edukacji? Skąd biorą się źródła dziecięcej inspiracji? Często powracają też do tych inspiracji w latach dojrzałej twórczości architektonicznej jak wielu znakomitych architektów, którzy mieli siłę marzyć o “domu” niemal całe życie. Widać to wyraźnie w ich architekturze – jakby w kontrze do globalizującego się świata, w której zacierają się granice i odrębności form obiektów.

Słowa kluczowe: dom marzeń, konkurs prac dzieci

Everything that we build is called “an architectural thing”. In children’s language, that would be called “a house”, as they are often unaware of other names until informed by us, adults, mainly professional architects. Our cultural environment, designed and built by grown-ups, is hardly ever outstanding in terms of architecture. Residential construction is the prevailing theme and it is also a reference point for children, who treat it as a “model house”. This is at least what we thought before the education programme called Architectural Education Days. We were wrong and that is the general conclusion from the last few years of the programme realised in Krakow since 2008 by Malopolska Regional Architect Chamber of Poland¹.

It turns out that the surrounding, both adults and children, “architectural things” do not always have an influence on children’s imagination and their visions of a dream house. They are perceived as a reality that we must accept, but they do not necessarily have an impact on the youngest generation, unless there is a house different than all the others surrounding it. But there are few cases like this and they reach young people’s mind accidentally or hardly ever. That is why they can rarely have an awareness-raising role or help to discover a different “housing” reality.

On the other hand, the aesthetic awareness of the youngest children in a primary school that took part in a photo competition was a big surprise. Their task was to capture the most beautiful houses in a Krakow’s district called Wola Justowska and the results were very appreciated by the jury in terms of spotting the most interesting housing architecture within this part of the city². It was very interesting that the photographed houses date back to the best architectural years of the district, 40s and 50s of the 20th century, which is the final period of modernism, or of a style generally called traditionalist. Houses from the later period (60s and 70s) as well as the 80s were not included. That was the period of resentments manifested in the final stage of real socialism. There were “pseudo manor houses” appearing all over Poland. Featureless architectural buildings from the 90s did not make it on the list either.

¹ During the years 2011–2013 the author was a curator in an annual education programme of the Malopolska Regional Architect Chamber of Poland. The children who participated in the “My dream house” project were from 1–3 grades and in some of the programme’s editions there were 700–800 works.

² The competition took place in 2010, in Primary School number 72 which lies in the heart of Wola Justowska and it was initiated by the author of this article.

These two general observations lead to an important question from the point of view of an architect and “architectural things” in raising an aesthetic awareness of the youngest Polish generation, in the context of degraded and often architecturally indistinct environment. More and more frequent criticism towards the image of our cities and the alleged responsibility of architects and urban planners for this state in the recent years have made the professional association of the Malopolska architects look closely at the real responsibility. Putting aside other factors influencing the quality of architecture and urban planning, it is important to ask about the period during which aesthetic competences of the young generation are formed. Do chaos and plainness of the architecture of contemporary cities come from the fact that yet another generation of Poles with no aesthetic and plastic education have poor awareness of space, order, harmony and architecture?

It was decided that these competences should be examined more closely in a group of young children, with the assumption that three years of national education still leaves them aesthetically “innocent”. The same task was given to the children few years in a row, during an art competition at school, without the presence of an architect speaker, but with the organisational help of art teachers. The project was called “My dream house”. The results are very interesting from the sociological point of view, but having no qualifications in this field, we must concentrate on the visual and formal (architecturally) part of the subject³. The evaluation criteria for children’s art works were of course different to those presented below. The evaluation and qualification of works for awards were done by all architects-speakers. There were no limitations as to the function and the scale of a “dream house”, neither to the painting techniques. The only limitation was the imagination and a uniform A3 format of the drawings.

The analysis of the drawings presented is a subjective one and it aims to present a wide spectrum of children’s views; in this case, the views are concurrent with the subject of the conference – “House in a city – characteristics of an architectural thing” by children.

What are, then, the characteristics of an architectural thing in a city in children’s dreams? They are extremely diverse, as diverse as the artistic invention, imagination and emotional development of the authors. These elements, undoubtedly taking part in children’s artistic creation, on the one hand, make it easier to identify intentions visually; on the other hand, they make it more difficult to read the complexity of psychological nature. This difficulty was defined by Alfred Ligocki some years ago: “Experiencing children’s paintings shows us that the aesthetic value decreases as a child enters the reproductive phase and as they learn the means of illusionistic representation. The “golden age” for this type of painting is usually between 6 and 11 years old”⁴. In accordance to this rule, the age limit was introduced in the programme. The children were from the first to the third grade of a primary school, so that there would be freshness on the subject with as little influence of adults as possible. “This infallibility of an artistic instinct merged with magic imagination can create paintings that make us speechless. There is one limitation though – there is no road connecting a child’s painting with our life and its problems”⁵.

The analysis of the selected art works presented below, all of them on a given subject, shows some groups of issues, which we, adults, create for ourselves as well as for our children. The characteristic groups chosen by the author are subjective and have nothing in

³ Art historian Alfred Ligocki published an interesting work on the subject, *Malarstwo dzieci*, 1962.

⁴ See: A. Ligocki, *Malarstwo dzieci*, p. 39.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 46.



common with the previous results of the jury's decisions of this annual competition. It is also a vision of a practicing architect who, unfortunately, is not free from the evaluation system, the code of our values, present in this profession.

1. HOUSE AS AN ARCHETYPE

A house in its original, archetype version is rare. For this reason, we can assume that it is not a dream subject, but more of a favourite place to be or a favourite type of architecture. If it appears, then it is presented exactly as it was remembered, quite precisely reflected from the nature, a house of clearly defined Podhale architecture in a place of leisure. A single-storey house, the classic high roof with defined eaves and characteristic decoration (Karolina from Krakow, Ill. 1). It does not include any architectural, material or aesthetic innovation. Usually, presented flat, from the front, no spatial shortcuts, with the symmetrical plan of all main components, such as roof slopes, windows, entrance door situated on the main axis, crown structure of the walls visible in the elevation. Mainly the houses are detached and surrounded by natural landscape. This version of a house might imply that the author has no invention and is afraid to dream.

Another example from the same house group of little invention proves that the author is deeply rooted in their family tradition or even cultural tradition of their home place. In the majority of these cases, houses have a timber architecture of their outer walls (Edyta from Kroscienko n. Dunajcem; Ill. 2). The reality remains a dream!

2. HOUSE REFLECTING A CHANGEABLE REALITY

This reality is a spatial, architectural and stylistic chaos. Basically, there is no space for dreams, and there is no imagination and method as to civilising of the surroundings. This conclusion results from one of the works (Piotr from Zakopane; Ill. 3). There is a well spotted messy architectural reality of the town. It is a pity that this kind of reality serves as an example, because it is definitely not a dream. Various architectural layers from many past years, where commercial premises have replaced a proper "house", thus, eliminated a dream of one. The consequences of commercialised family and social life of the recent years are too visible and they leave no "me" space. The fact that this work was awarded in 2011 by the mayor of Zakopane remains controversial.

Defining one's dream as a semi-detached house leaves little space for CREATIVITY (Grzegorz from Stary Sacz; Ill. 4). Shortage in this area is probably compensated by dreams of living in a warm country, and a house in such climate, without underlying its shape and individualising its architecture.

3. „MY HOUSE IS MY FORTRESS”

The definition of a house as old as the humanity, where the fortress cannot be conquered (Jakub from Tarnow; Ill. 5). This is a multi-storey, hence probably a multi-family house. Safety is ensured by the flanking corner towers and the construction is placed in green, park surroundings. The electricity for the house is produced by a wind farm in the vicinity. "My dream house" is safe in almost every aspect – a symptom of unsure future (2010).



A house in a tower represents the same existential fears, not only in adult generation (Arkadiusz from Nowy Sacz; Ill. 6). The house is in a monotonous mountain landscape and monotonous sky with no sun, which is rare in children's art works!

4. HOUSE AS A SYNONYM OF FREEDOM

This is one of the most beautiful art works on the subject of a dream house I have ever seen in the last few years of the programme (Kaja from Krakow; Ill. 7). There is a charming lightness in the use of the artistic expression means to represent the dream. The dream itself refers to the motive of personal freedom represented many years ago in "The Grass Harp" by Truman Capote. I do not think that the author was familiar with it at her young age, unless parents or grandparents helped with it. A tree house can be a consequence of a happy childhood. Especially that there are a lot of artefacts of happiness painted in a beautiful way. The colouristic value and delicate graphic language of the girl's dream are wonderful. Not only this special art work presents communicative language of the message, but it is also of high artistic rank and full of positive emotions.

Similar in terms of freshness and authenticity is another painting of a house – in the shape of an open flower (Dominika from Krakow; Ill. 8). The space of the flower's calyx is adapted almost ideally for a living space, the central part is furnished. Four petals close down for the night, the fifth one is open and has a garden adjacent to the house. The sun in the corner complements the happiness. This beautiful form, plot and the composition of the painting create a sublime and authentic dream of a fairy-tale house.

5. FANTASY HOUSE

One of the fancy works on the "house" turned out to be very surprising, undefinable and incalculable (Mikolaj from Krakow; Ill. 9). There is a colourful story about a house presented in a simultaneous way. It is a great means of artistic expression, a mature choice for such a young author. The way to illustrate his dreams with the use of puzzle convention is even more mature. There are two houses, but "the architectural life" seems to be shared. In one of the houses, the staircase ends on a floor with door facing "downwards"! In the fantasy language, there are two characteristic elements that define houses – inhabited attics with intrinsic life attributes. Expressionistic convention of the method tells us not so much about the dreams, but more about the excellent painting skills of the young author. The most important thing here is a child's mystery, with no direct access from the adults' world, as previously mentioned Ligocki could be paraphrased.

6. TRANSFORMED TRADITION

This category seems to be a bit complicated, as it is not clear to what extent "the house" originates from the dreams and to what extent it is borrowed from the surrounding reality. One of the painted houses is a synthetic fairy-tale and reality composition (Marta from Zakopane; Ill. 10). An element linking the house with reality is just the building material in

the form of traditional timber wall construction. However, the spatial structure is a product of the author's imagination. A big asset to the work is the awareness of the local construction tradition mixed with the possibility of free architecture composition. It is more of a house project with the intention to present it in the third (flat) dimension. The architectural form does not prove the rooting in the local Zakopane style. It proves freedom in the means of expression, borrowed maybe from the buildings that appeared in the area recently. We could mention here the architectural apartment curiosity in a pseudo-baroque style situated in the town centre. If this example was the inspiration for the painting, then it is a failure of our generation that is professionally active, and we are not talking here only about architects!!!

Speaking the professional language, one can say that the work awarded in 2008 (Wojtek from Nowy Targ; Ill. 11) contains the transformed local construction tradition. It is a praise for this young author for compositional consequence in a bit commercial version of a house, which could be called "nouveau-riche". But this is also a proof that such are our standards in the public space, or maybe tastes as well, and they are being accepted not only by the young but also by the broader public opinion.

7. HOUSE IN A CONTEMPORARY CITY

In this group, we can find mainly "reports" on the actual state of architecture and residential areas in cities. In case of one beautiful work (Apolonia from Krakow; Ill. 12), there is no doubt that it is not about the dream, but more about the image of what lies in the young minds' awareness. It is what we have designed and constructed few decades ago in our country and what, unfortunately, remains in the landscape and is still trashing the imagination of young generations. A personal input from "the dreamer" in civilising two identical residential towers (presented in an original way, from the elevation and from the inside) is the use of the open space between them for the "dream" needs and designing a glass skylight. In other words, a wise suggestion of activating unused public spaces in our more and more cramped residential areas. This type of space planning proves to be successful in residential areas in the cities of Western Europe. In my opinion, it is hardly possible that one of them was the inspiration for the work! For this reason, we should appreciate even more the young author's innovative and purely architectural dream of "a common house".

The dream presented in a work awarded by the Main Architect of the City of Krakow in 2011 (Dominik from Krakow; Ill. 13) was to overcome the crisis of high greenery in Krakow. Despite already green and dense towers, trees should be even taller. But will their green reach us? It would be a slight exaggeration. This is probably the message hidden in this work. We can never know for sure, though, and this is the most interesting thing about children's dreams, where our access is limited. Anyway, the author tackled, with reasons, the ecological aspect of our city, and he was rightfully awarded a prize.

8. NIGHTMARE HOUSE

Nightmare visions of "a dream house" also happen, but they are very rare. This is of course a subjective opinion and it might not be fair to the author (Zuzanna from Krakow;

III. 14). What stands in a way to an objective opinion on this image of “a dream house” is a prize awarded in 2011 by... the Association of Home and Apartments Builders in Krakow. What seems important is the image of a storied architecture in the house presented, most probably made of brick; however, there are no windows on the ground floor and no access to the house from the ground. An irregular line is closing the building from the top. Next to the first house, there is another one without access to it, and it is connected with the first one by a symbolic vine with grapes. The sun is shining strong, though, and this is the only hope for survival for a house without architecture, but would it be nice to live in it? It is an interesting dream! Is that really the world of modern residential areas which we create in hardship in our cities?

CONCLUSIONS

The reality of children’s imagination world is much more mysterious and complicated than the “organised” pragmatics of architects’ views in the matter of a house in a city. The previously mentioned and described works are, according to the author, the most interesting in their artistic aspect and with the best message transfer. They are also very communicative in terms of the attitude towards the constructed reality surrounding us.

However, most of the visions of “a house” presented in subsequent contests represent a fantasy having its origin in the real world. There are very few paintings with immaterial, fairy-tale world connotations. These result may indicate that arts are taught in a too conservative manner, where children imitate, but do not create. A very positive phenomenon is the richness of means of expression, drawing and painting techniques.

References

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