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A HOUSE AT THE TURN OF 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES IN BAKU

DOM NA PRZEŁOMIE XX I XXI WIEKU W BAKU

A b s t r a c t

The article concerns forms of residential buildings against backgrounds of general trends in the area of Baku, Azerbaijan. The architectural situation is complicated in this city. The reasons are, among others: rich history, legacy of seventy years of domination of Soviet Union and current processes occurring during the last 25 years. There exist dissonances, contrasts and huge differentiation in the characteristics of construction at various levels: affluence, scale of structures, quality of architecture etc. The impact of the European culture, especially in centre from 19th century, the impact of the Asian culture in historical building and in details as well as contemporary extravagant vision are visible in the town.

Keywords: residential architecture, urban planning in Baku, development of Baku

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy form zabudowy mieszkaniowej na tle ogólnych trendów na terenie Baku. Sytuacja budownictwa w mieście jest skomplikowana ze względu na między innymi: bogatą historię, spuściznę po siedemdziesięciu latach panowania Związku Radzieckiego oraz obecne procesy zachodzące w ciągu ostatnich 25 lat.

W charakterze zabudowy dostrzec można ogromne zróżnicowanie, dysonanse i kontrasty na różnych płaszczyznach: zamożności, skali zabudowy, jakości architektury itp. W mieście widoczne są: wpływy kultury europejskiej, zwłaszcza w XIX wiecznym centrum miasta, kultury środkowowschodniej w zabudowie historycznej i detalach oraz współczesne ekstrawaganckie wizje.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura mieszkaniowa, urbanistyka Baku, rozwój Baku

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1. INTRODUCTION

Azerbaijan – the country which lies on a mental border between Europe and Asia, here the European culture and the Eastern culture have been meeting together, so here a combination of Western and Eastern architecture has been occurring. It is visible especially in construction, which has been occurring since the second half of 19th century. Baku – the capital city of Azerbaijan – is a town full of contrast and dissonances, it does not cease to amaze, one can say it amazes more and more over time as changes in architecture and urban planning take place. The daze is awoken by extraordinary structures, the scale of rebuilding, far-reaching plans, and simultaneously, an existing spatial disorder, a lack of respect for historical, preserved urban structures and historical buildings, for the town and its citizens. When moving to Baku, in the beginning, one has to take into account its location, the natural lay of the land, existing natural resources and the landscape. A deserted, rocky site with natural salt lakes, but without greenery – Absheron peninsula, on which basis, on the sea shore that Baku is located, is jutting out into the Caspian Sea. The natural, landscape of craggy hillocks, salt lakes and mad volcanoes and with greenery rarely appearing near watercourses and reservoirs has been changed by human activities, though its austerity still can affect imagination. In the past, when oil was not extracted in the commercial scale and when its resource could be reached with a bucket from the surface of the ground, when the gas coming out from the soil was self igniting spontaneously, this moon-like landscape had to have a strong impact on the merchants travelling via this land (one of the variants of Silk Road led by through this land). Salt resources, extracted even today from salt lakes, were the great wealth of this region and inducement for merchants, oil was used to protect fur of camels against parasites. Moreover, climate with mild winters and warm summers as well as the Caspian Sea had considerable influence on the fact that settlers and inhabitants appeared in many places of the peninsula. Nowadays, salt is still being obtained from salt lakes. The oil production on the great scale is carried out from the ground and from the seabed; it caused disappearance of naturally burning flames and destruction of the landscape. In the meantime, people settled on a large part of the peninsula, and Baku has become a two million-city. It is difficult to examine the city and its development without taking into consideration the whole area of the Absheron Peninsula. The city constitutes the separate administrative unit. However, small towns and villages located along the sea shore are often the places of living for citizens of Baku.

2. HISTORICAL AND LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

Baku has always been the important harbour on the Caspian Sea shore. Here, in the medieval times, the fortress was founded, surrounded by defence walls (the oldest part of the walls came from the 12th century), behind which, besides residential building, there are: Shirvanshah palace, mosques, baths and caravanserais, which are still proving the magnificence of this place. In 19th century, Baku suddenly started to grow, and because of the development of oil production and industry, its citizens enriched. In the second half of 19th century, around the city wall, there emerged quarters filled with the building mirrored trends of European architecture of these days: buildings in historical styles, though on the elevations one can find art nouveau details and details connected with the local tradition. The substandard

architecture, which still covers huge areas in the centre of the city, appeared at the time as stately, impressive edifices.

To summarise: The edifices and compact urban quarters, the huge area of the small building covering every empty space and of course industrial buildings are the result of 19th and 20th century.

During the twenties and thirties of the 20th century, there was the kingdom of constructivism architecture in Baku. A few hundred buildings representing modernism (mainly public buildings) were erected; nowadays, they are neglected or completely rebuilt¹. Later, similarly as in all of the Soviet Union, the socialist realism reigned. Residential buildings from this period usually have five stories, and they are set in the quarters surrounding the internal yard. The flats with several rooms are rather comfortable, spacious, with relatively high ceilings. After the socialist realism, there emerged the so-called “khrushchevsky”, buildings, which were erected during the reign of N. Khrushchev, the least desirable by buyers of flats on the secondary market. The ceiling in these flats is located just above the doorways and window openings. Probably, these were intended to reduce costs and accelerate the construction of new flats. A connection bathroom with toilet was the other innovation, which was introduced at that time. So, it is told that Khrushchev succeeded with connecting the bathroom with the toilet, but not with the ceiling and the floor. The era of residential erecting in the underground was the next stage. The typical blocks of flats with rows of repeating buildings then appeared. Balconies and loggias are one of the most characteristic details of Baku’s architecture, irrespective of the period in which they originated. In the Old Town, balconies growing out of the wall (often enclosed) frequently roofed row streets. Spacious balconies also are the elements of 19th century buildings. Therefore, balconies (often two or loggias) have occurred in multifamily blocks of flats in the 20th century. Here start the problems: because of the lack of living space, this additional space of balconies or loggias often was lawlessly enclosed and added to the flat. Moreover, from time to time, there are extensions of the flats on the second or the third floor. These added cuboids overhanging about 1–1,5 m were as cantilever or eventually supported by thin, steel tube post, which stood on the lawn or just on the pavement in front of the building. Fortunately, the climate of Baku allows for the use of lightweight cladding.

The changes in the construction of the capital city started in 1991 after regaining the independence and the stabilisation of the economic and political situation. In the early nineties of the 20th century, there was a huge influx of refugees, inter alia to Baku, as the result of the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia².

Architecture and urban planning are two arts, which mirrored the political and the economical situation of the country. Without doubt, economically, the country is doing well. This is evidenced by the investments, which were made. While the resolute, uncompromising and extensive interferences in urban structure and landscape of the city proclaim the lack of democracy. Baku has the zoning plan titled Greater Baku Regional Development Plan (Böyük Bakının Regional İnkişaf Planı), showing planned functions in a 1:25000 scale on all areas of the Absheron Peninsula (over 282 000 ha). The plan takes the year 2011 as a reference and covers the period until 2030. The Proper Land Use and Zoning Plan (Məxsusi Bakının

¹ E. Aliyev, *Nekrolog arkhitektura konstruktivizma v Baku* <http://www.radioazadlyg.org/content/backgrounderfullpage/24447177.html> (access 02.06.2016)

² T. Świątochowski, *Azerbejdżan*, Wydawnictwo Trio Warszawa 2006, p. 171–173.



- III. 1. Contrast in Baku; to the right Baku City Villas, to the left single-family housing [19]
- III. 2. The office building in White City. (photo: Fazil Aghayev)
- III. 3. In the foreground and the background new architecture in Baku – White City. (photo Fazil Aghayev)

Ərazidən İstifadə və Zonalaşdırma Planı), prepared in a 1:10 000 scale and covering over 33 000 ha, is one of the elements of the zoning plan. Both parts of the plan were presented for public discussion in 2014³. The publication of the World Bank from February gives information that there is no master plan in Baku⁴. However, it is possible to find a master plan concerning the very centre of Baku. It covers 1500 ha, among others: Old Town with its surroundings, boulevards. There is specified scale of building, layout of the street, and also main rehabilitation and development directions of the city. The plan is prepared in a 1:2000 scale⁵.

Though only little more than twenty years passed since Azerbaijan regained independence, there have been many spectacular changes in the city. The vista of Baku from the Caspian Sea has changed dramatically. That change could be compared with the changes, which took place during the previous century. The transformation of the city is still going on, the character of the city is changing; particular parts of the city changes their significance. Works are carried out extensively, entire quarters are evicted, demolished and new green areas: parks, boulevards, new buildings appear.

3. NEW TRENDS IN BAKU

One can divide the new architecture in Baku into two opposing trends, two basic groups. The first one is the modern architecture, which uses details and forms of contemporary architecture from last 20–30 years. The second one is the “traditional” architecture that draws handfuls from historical forms and details. However, only a few of the new realisations deserve to be called outstanding. The public buildings frequently are designed by European firms and often are built in the contemporary style. Some famous buildings in Baku: Flame Tower (conceptual project by HOK International, construction design by DIA)⁶, Heydar Aliyev Cultural Centre (by Zaha Hadid), concert hall built on Eurovision Song Contest (Alipne Bau Deutschland AG in cooperation with NUSSLI, and also in the project team were involved gmp International GmbH, Basler & Hofmann AG and SSF Ingenieure AG)⁷. Rich Baku attracts famous architects. Besides the abovementioned, a group of foreign firms is involved in the transformation of one of the industrial districts, the Black City, into new a residential district, the White City. The master plan for these changes for over 200 ha was prepared by Atkins and one can find information about the fact that Foster and Partners and F+A Architects are also involved⁸.

The second trend concerns residential architecture (although there are some exceptions, for

³ <http://bdli.az/ru-opennews/50.html> (access 27.05.2016); <http://bdli.az/ru-opennews/48.html> (access 27.05.2016).

⁴ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2015/02/18/never-too-late-planning-for-bakus-explosive-growth> (access 03.06.2016).

⁵ http://www.arxkom.gov.az/100/baki_seheri.html (access 02.06.2016).

⁶ <http://www.diainsaat.com/projeler-detay.asp?LanguageID=2&cid=89&id=92> (access 30.05.2016)

⁷ http://www.nussli.us/projects/project-details/news/crystal-hall-2012-baku-2345/334.html?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=5&cHash=80004b73d6e8094688c5022e473f000d, (access 09.01.2014).

⁸ M. Agajew, *Baku – wizja przyszłości miasta. Vision of the future of city*, Czasopismo Techniczne Politechniki Krakowskiej (Architektura), Politechnika Krakowska, z.1/A/2012, Kraków 2012, p. 9–16.

example, Four Seasons Hotel or State Border Service Academy); here, the description as *an Alice-in-Wonderland quality*⁹ is fully justified. Undoubtedly, architecture referring to the historical details and forms has its supporters in the town, but contemporary functional requirements, technology and materials caused that caricatures of historical buildings are created. It is not creative or abstract processing of historical form, but it is decoration in the way of the wedding cake.

Two opposite trends are the best visible in the abovementioned transformation of the Black City to the White City and just finished free form office building (by Atkins)^{10,11}. The object designed in such fashionable current parametric architecture, which is modern and is using advanced technology, is surrounded by quarters of new residential housing. The architecture of the neighbouring buildings alludes to the architecture of the 19th century city; for instance, Paris. Seven-story tenement houses with the last floor hidden in the mansard roof are built in the historical style. The rustication, balusters, pilasters with decorative capitals, arches with underlined keystone, create an unreal world and a contrasting background.

Public spaces, parks and squares get a new look¹², the old ones are refurbished and new ones are created even at the expense of demolition. One of the very new parks, the Winter Park, appeared on the area where several quarter had been demolished (between Füzuli and Şəmsi Bədəlbəyli Küçəsi streets). The second one is enlarging of the boulevards on the sea shore.

4. THE FORMS OF RESIDENTIAL HOUSING

Residential housing should be examined on the background described above. Many citizens of Baku have decided to build their own houses, which is caused by shortages in the availability of flats and the influx of displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh. The detached one floor houses, one floor with basement, or sometimes two floor houses, are built on the plan of a rectangle, with very a simple layout: two rows of rooms on both sides of the corridor. The houses have a useful floor area ranging from 100 to 200 m². The local lime stone is the most popular building material for the walls. Occasionally, the lime stone disappears behind plaster. The houses are covered with hipped roofs (envelope like) with slopes ranging from 20° to 30°, and with clad of corrugated steel. In conjunction with the lack of urban planning, it is difficult to find the rules of locating the ridges in relation to streets, and what is most important is the fact that sometimes buildings are built without proper access. Vast tracts of land are filled with the simplest and the most widespread buildings, courses of the street are impossible to recognise on the views. Of course, it is only one of the processes, which is visible in Baku. The regular

⁹ Binney Marcus *Baku to the future: changing architecture in Azerbaijan's capital* Financial Times <https://next.ft.com/content/65a27da2-d873-11e4-ba53-00144feab7de> (access 27.05.2016).

¹⁰ <http://www.designmena.com/insight/first-building-by-atkins-inaugurated-in-baku-white-city> (access 30.05.2016).

¹¹ In the presentation of the awarded design on the website www.archdaily.com the authors hide themselves under name ADEC Azerbaijan Development Company <http://www.archdaily.com/374517/baku-white-city-office-building-proposal-adece-nil-azerbaijan-development-company> (access 01.06.2016).

¹² The author's article *Creating the city* concerns the changes of some public spaces. Agajew Maria Baku – *Creating the city*, [in:] monographic: *Culture of the city*, red. Elżbieta Przesmycka, Elżbieta Trocka-Leszczynska, Wrocław 2012, p. 191–200.

parcels are also set along straight streets. In both cases, the house is surrounded with high walls made of stone with a big gate, sometimes decorated. Near buildings, the greenery of trees and grapevines can be visible, which undoubtedly is the decoration for these simple buildings.

In the city, the parcels are built up in 80–90%, while outside the city, where new plots are set, areas of the plots remain as the gardens. There are fruit trees: fig trees, mulberry, thorn, grenades but also apple and of course vines. There were no naturally grown trees, they required a lot of effort, care and watering. The fact that, just beneath the surface of the ground, there is the solid rock is the additional difficulty.

The dachas are the other type of buildings. The citizens of Baku have always enjoyed the delights of the Caspian Sea. Rich people built their residences outside the city in the 19th century. The proximity to the sea, good aeration and draughts make it possible for residents to withstand the heat during hot summers, when the temperature rises to over 40 degrees. The dachas of contemporary citizen of Baku were simple, but spacious, on the whole, two floor-building with similar simple layout as small houses – the corridor in the middle and room on both sides of it, necessarily porch and balcony often located one upon another, creating loggia. The porch is the living room and the place of work; here, the shared life of the household members and guests takes place: women's works, washing, cooking, playing, men's rest after work, and eating meals with guests. The porch is opened from three sides. Perfectly ventilated, it gives shadows and serves its purpose completely. The dachas stand besides high walls (approximately 2–2,5 m), which protect the privacy of the inhabitants.

Together with the enrichment of investors, they open up more carefully designed villas to the world – modern rather than traditional. These villas are hidden behind the walls from the eyes of a passer-by, similarly to more modest housing. The settlement called Baku City Villas (designed by Various Turkish Architect Groups & DIA)¹³ could serve as an example. The settlement consists of 55 buildings with a useful floor area of about 1000 m² each, and is located on parcels with an area of about 2500 m² each. The houses are equipped with pools and all contemporary facilities. The developer advertises every house as having a unique architecture, but they are all in one style. The aesthetics of these houses could be associated with traditional American suburbs: porches or decorated entrances, wide driveways, columns, cornices, window surrounds, historical ornaments. As another case, we can choose buildings erected around the Dreamland Golf Club (Master Plan and the design prepared by American firm DORSKY + YUE INTERNATIONAL LLC ARCHITECTURE)¹⁴, though it is located about 25 km to the East from Baku. Still, this is the area of influence of the city and the offer is dedicated to its inhabitants. There is very good connection with the club from Baku via an express road (motorway) leading from the city to Heydar Aliyev Airport. The ornamented style of objects, rich in details, even drawing on with the local tradition, evokes the architecture of Las Vegas.

Similar trends can be noticed in multifamily houses, though in this group more often includes objects built in contemporary and modern architecture. Generally speaking, the decorated, traditional structures that are built in the centre of Baku, but on the outskirts, are settlements of high blocks of flats built in a more modest architecture, sometimes in modern styles.

¹³ <http://bakucityvillas.az/en/> (access 26.05.2016); <http://www.diainsaat.com/projeler-detay.asp?LanguageID=2&cid=89&id=95> (access 30.05.2016).

¹⁴ <http://dorskyue.com/portfolio/dream-island/#> (access 27.05.2016).

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The character of city building strictly follows the conditions, in which it develops. On the one hand, bold refurbishments, expensive investments, and extravagant architectural works; on the other hand, new traditional buildings, one can say copies of a historical town from a foreign culture that create chaos. It is impossible to see freedom, creative openness and courage. If one looks for courageous decisions, they concern technical solutions. On this background, the single-family housing appears further more grotesque. It oscillates between simple, small houses and nouveau rich, huge villas. It can be assumed that the first ones are built without the help of an architect, while the second ones were very carefully designed with attention to the client's taste. The choice of the style shows that the patron, which in this case, becomes an investor, has no preparation for perception of modern and innovative architecture. There may be a lack of the middle class in the society – the people who, on the one hand, can afford to build a house, and on the other hand, have a sense of aesthetics and are open to new trends in architecture. If and how it can be change in Baku, you never know. It is obvious that they do not take advantage of the European countries' achievements, where respect to existing values prevails upon the desire for profit, where specialists decide about the visage of the city and its architecture, and where democracy and good legal instruments have an indisputable value and importance.

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