

Barbara Ewa Gronostajska\*

## LARGE CONCRETE SLAB – ARCHITECTURE STILL ALIVE

Looking at contemporary architecture I often ask myself “Do we leave behind something permanent, a lasting”? Or we leave “Something” – slabs housing – symbol of a bygone era, a symbol, which in Poland can stay almost unchanged! Nevertheless, the block housing estates are a common “standard of the living quality” in this part of Europe. Hence, in recent decades people have been thinking of solving the ubiquitous “block estate” problem..

*Keywords: big plate, contemporary architecture, housing*

*A bird is sunlit in the heat,  
lizards grace the scattered columns.  
The shadow of a plane tree diminishes like the  
sound of a flute.  
We stop in the thirteenth room  
with a colourful mosaic of plants  
Nikos Chadzinikolau*

Strolling along the streets of Rome, we often stop and stare at beautiful tenements, enraptured by the Renaissance basilica dominating St Peter’s Square. Next we can refresh ourselves at a fountain in Navona or di Trevi Square, admire the “Baroque” spatter of gushing water which plays with the stone statues. We leave the Coliseum behind and get to the Palatine feeling the ancient spirit enchanted in the brilliant art, we look at Rome from above sensing the delicate gust of wind. More or less, a walk across Rome looks like this. The architecture of this city – from antiquity to contemporariness – is still alive and “breathtaking”. Participating in numerous meetings and conferences, we wonder what will be left of contemporary architecture which is so impermanent and fleeting as well as controversial as far as functionality and esthetics are

concerned. Will we leave anything durable, imperishable behind? Will anyone be walking in the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> architecture in 300, 400 years’ time with the thrill? Probably not because our building materials are less and less durable, while our tastes and fashions evolve so quickly that we wish to demolish the old and build the new. We wish to change, transform and improve continuously.

Perhaps, however, we will leave “something” behind – large concrete slab “hammered” in mass housing estates – a symbol of the bygone epoch which can persist in its virtually unchanged form in Poland!

Mass housing estates include houses built in the technology of large concrete slab. Poland’s first house of this type was implemented in 1957 in Jelonki, Warsaw. This technology was imported from Western Europe. Such a building method was used in France, Sweden and Finland from the early 1950s. It became very popular in Germany, especially in Eastern lands. The technology meant unification – houses looked similar, flats had got a twin layout. Identical flats were furnished with identical wall and shell units, sofas and desks. It efficiently eliminated their lodgers’ individual tastes.

\* Gronostajska Barbara Ewa, Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Ph.D. Arch., Wrocław University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Division of the Design of Residential Architecture.

The society often complains that mass housing estates “produce” people who grow up to be criminals devastating what their parents received from the state. There is a series of pathological phenomena directly caused by the material and spatial organization of life in the city. The popular notion of blockers has developed in recent years [1].

Incorrect space management may make normal existence difficult. The elementary problem is the residential question. Its main aspects are: the overpopulation of some flats, the low quality of their equipment, the distortion of the efficient functioning of a flat as a place of work and study. A lack of access to these service units causes the abovementioned pathologies in cities. It was observed that young people’s aggressive behaviour is a direct result of the material and spatial structure of a city [2].

All in all, mass housing estates make a common “quality norm” in our part of Europe, therefore specialists have been trying to solve this problem for the last several decades. Discussions were held in two aspects. One of them aimed at the total demolition of the existing tissue and the introduction of new buildings adjusted to the residents’ contemporary needs. The other aimed at modernizing the estates. As usual, the most important question is finance. Contrary to a popular opinion, these buildings do not mean impending collapse but require gigantic refurbishments and modernizations. Obviously, the biggest problem in slab houses is heat loss caused by faulty thermal insulation, draughty doors and windows. Buildings must be weatherized, loggias must be furnished, flat roofs must be winterized, window areas must be decreased. Mass estates have got some positive aspects, too:

- location – they are often situated in the city centres or next to them,
- recreational space – estates designed when urban aspects were more important than the price of

a square metre of the ground have got vast spaces of recreational areas, both public (parks, squares, sports fields) and semiprivate (playgrounds, benches for elderly people, gardens),

- infrastructure – schools, kindergartens and services appeared in the neighbourhood after many years.

The modernization of housing estates seems to be much more attractive and effective than demolishing them. It can be proved by modernizations carried out in Germany [3], France and other European cities which are now evaluated very positively and should be acknowledged as justified and experimentally confirmed. In the former German Democratic Republic, slab houses are refurbished practically from the foundations with the exchange of windows, doors, thermal insulation, sometimes even external architecture. In spite of rich foreign experience, Poland does not take any integrated actions which would aim at modernizing them. We also lack a general housing policy which would lead to the modernization of large concrete slab estates.

Modernizing operations in Germany, mainly the former GDR, are large-scaled and approved by the authorities, politicians and inhabitants themselves. One of such examples is the Kräutersiedlung estate in the district of Gorbitz in Dresden (Ill. 1). Its location on a hill guarantees a beautiful view of the city and the river [4]. The main objectives of this design were:

- to transform the estate complexly,
- to use the existing buildings,
- to design flats with nonstandard projections keeping up with times, with suitable equipment responding to the residents’ needs.

Another interesting example is Sachsendorf-Madlow located in the southern part of Cottbus. It is an enormous estate, constructed in the years 1976–86, with 12,000 flats having the full infrastructure of services, shops, objects of culture, schools. It includes tall 8- and 11-storey buildings and low 5- and 6-storey

1. Drezno, housing Kräutersiedlung – "Gorbitz", 2. Cottbus, housing complex Sachsendorf-Madlow 3. Hamburg, modernization of dwelling house, a) before, b) after 4. Brno, modernization of dwelling house, a) before, b) after



1



2



3a



3b



4a



4b

ones. The percentage of high-risers in the estate is considerable [5].

Within the IBA project, as a result of many debates, the estate was modernized to a large extent. Some buildings received “cosmetic” operations on a relatively small scale which positively changed the reception of this estate. They included: rebuilding the balconies, the entrances to the buildings, introducing interesting greenery and making the recreational grounds more attractive, introducing modern façade materials and interesting colours [6]. In the case of tall buildings: redesigning the layout of the flats, introducing balconies, loggias with sliding glass, rebuilding the entrances to the staircases, changing the colours. The buildings received more modern character owing to the application of glass, steel, unprocessed concrete, illumination. It is a pity, though, that the flats on the ground floors have not got any gardens besides the balconies, whereas the green areas between the buildings are losing the form of neighbourly spaces on account of their large scale (height), excessive size and the openness of the spaces between them. The facades were solved in an interesting manner with the use of glass and linings as well as solar collectors in the southern walls. The entire rebuilding is complemented with carefully designed greenery, recreational fields and playgrounds for which the Germans have special respect.

Different architectural solutions were applied in a residential building in Hamburg which was designed by the Blauroom group (Ill. 3a, 3b). From the outside, this object looks like a contemporary housing unit with very modern solutions of detail. Actually, it is the effect of modernizing an office building from the 1970s. The building is located in a quiet, residential part of Hamburg. Bringing an abandoned office building back to life enlivened the whole district and facilitated the modernization of the adjoining buildings. The modernization included introducing

changes which adjusted the new layout to the existing construction. The flats were remodelled in accordance with the inhabitants’ new needs. Apart from changes in the facades and the functional layout, there were some corrections in the construction allowing for alterations in the manner of using. The new façade was solved with additional balconies. A considerable shortcoming of this object was the height of its rooms – only 2.55 metres – which was levelled optically by designing quite big glassing and separate, smart balconies from the street side and loggias from the yard side. Thanks to diversifying the object with balconies and nice wooden lining, the object presents interesting architecture now.

A lot of interesting solutions of rebuilding large concrete slab objects can be found in Germany. In recent years, the Czechs have carried out a number of noteworthy modernizations of slab buildings, too. Architects from the Maura studio in Berne rebuilt two blocks of flats in their hometown. Both of them dated from 1977 and were located in a typical mass housing estate. Owing to the introduction of new elements, the object received a completely different appearance as well as sixteen new flats (Ill. 4a, 4b). The standard of finishing the entire object was raised. It was impossible, however, to introduce certain changes, such as producing a new rhythm on the façade by introducing new divisions of the window woodwork. For some unknown reasons, an office in Berne ordered the construction of a new gable roof upon the whole. In spite of those significant changes, the objects still look presentable and even stand out above the unchanged identical blocks of flats in the neighbourhood.

Modernizing actions, which are very popular in the West, bring satisfying effects. Thus, we should ask the questions: Why are they underestimated in Poland, a country with such housing shortage? Why is large concrete slab housing not the object of politicians,

authorities, developers' interest? Mass housing estates have got certain undeniable values – their space, the fact that they already exist, that they often have good locations and valuable several-decade-old greenery. The programmes of saving slab estates ought to consist in their complex revitalization, not just the technical modernization of blocks of flats. New city planning assumes the creation of multipurpose estates with decorative structures which will create friendly surroundings for the inhabitants – with playgrounds for children, spaces for elderly people and adolescents.

We began our journey in architecturally diverse Rome, justly acknowledged as “the eternal city”, feeling the spirit of history and bygone grandness. It ended in contemporary mass housing estates

which will certainly go down in history. But will they delight with beauty, at least a little bit? To a large extent, it depends on us: architects, politicians, investors.

We may also ask ourselves if we should leave them in the unchanged condition for our descendants or perhaps – having the future users in mind – make an attempt to modernize them. There are not any unambiguous answers to this question and it is difficult to predict what will happen in the future. Maybe all the contemporary objects will be demolished after years and then replaced by different, more modern, much more surprising ones. Our legacy for the descendants will include photographs, sketches, designs and – last but by no means least – virtual tourism.

## ENDNOTES

[1] Blockers – term invented in the late 1990s by the photojournalist Maria Zbąska, popularized by the press, referring to frustrated young people without any perspectives for whom a bench in front of a block of flats is the centre of social life, often abusing alcohol and marijuana. The linguist Bogusław Kreja defines them as *uneducated and unemployed young people inhabiting urban mass housing estates*. Blockers are often associated with the hip-hop subculture (<http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blokersi>).

[2] I. Borowik, *Blokowiska, miejski habitat w oglądzie socjologicznym*, Arboretum, Wrocław 2003; B. Gronostajska,

*Kreacja i modernizacji przestrzeni mieszkalnej*, Wrocław University of Technology Press, Wrocław 2007.

[3] Large-scale modernizing actions in Germany brought the expected effects. Large housing estates, e.g. Gropiusstadt (the southeastern part of West Berlin), Markisches Viertel and Thermometersiedlung in Berlin, were rebuilt.

[4] Dresden Garbitz ([www.ddgorbitz.de](http://www.ddgorbitz.de)).

[5] [www.sozialestadt.de/en/veroeffentlichungen/zwischenbilanz/2-cottbus-english.shtml](http://www.sozialestadt.de/en/veroeffentlichungen/zwischenbilanz/2-cottbus-english.shtml); [www.cottbus.de/buerger/dezernat\\_IV/stadtplanung/stadtumbaukonzept/index.html](http://www.cottbus.de/buerger/dezernat_IV/stadtplanung/stadtumbaukonzept/index.html)

[8] [www.bryla.gazetadom.pl](http://www.bryla.gazetadom.pl)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Borowik I., *Blokowiska, miejski habitat w oglądzie socjologicznym*, Arboretum, Wrocław 2003.

Gronostajska B., *Kreacja i modernizacji przestrzeni mieszkalnej*, Wrocław University of Technology Press, Wrocław 2007.

Kaltenberg-Kwiatkowska E., *Czy inteligentny architekt sam wie najlepiej, jak ludzie mieszkać powinni?*, [in:] *Co dalej z budownictwem wielorodzinnym*, SARP, Warsaw 1986.