

SŁAWOMIR GZELL\*

## THE BAUMA PAVING BLOCK

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### KOSTKA BAUMA

#### Abstract

The modernist pursuit of simple designs has had some unfortunate consequences, such as depleted forms. Constantly “refined”, thus increasingly primitive although retaining the same cubical shape. This is how the buildings known as “the Polish cubes” were created and this is also how the paving block came to be. Luckily, despite this, we also have examples of the cube form being a symbol of architectural success.

*Keywords: Modernism, minimalism, cube*

#### Streszczenie

Modernistyczne dążenie do uzyskiwania prostych form znajdowało niestety swoją realizację również w formach zubożonych. Były stale „udoskonalane”, czyli coraz bardziej prymitywne, choć stale były tym samym sześcianem. Tak powstawały budynki o nazwie „polska kostka”, tak powstała kostka Bauma. Szczęśliwie dysponujemy przykładami, gdzie forma sześcianu jest symbolem architektonicznego sukcesu.

*Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, minimalizm, sześcian*

### 1. Architectural modernity – turning dreams into reality in simple form

Modernists – dreamers all, from the day they perceived that cities fail to meet the requirements of hygiene and their sense of order, mixed with the need for new aesthetics, strived to create a new beauty in which order and the aforementioned hygiene would find their place. A play of free-standing building bodies in the sunlight, enveloped in delightful breezes, framed with greenery, between which cars (preferably of the Voisin company) would move on flyovers – they believed that this image of the world, transformed from pre-modernist to modernist, should dominate anywhere where people live. Many attempts were made to achieve this utopia and each of them hoped to fulfil expectations. This was not the case, but the experience accumulated, to be exhibited most grandly at the very end of the existence of CIAM, in the projects of Brasilia and Chandigarh. Remember Lucio

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\* Prof. D.Sc. Ph.D. Arch. Sławomir Gzell, Department of Urban Design and Rural Architecture and Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology.

Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's axis of ministries in Brasilia, completed with the assembly of parliament buildings, or the Capitol in the capital of Punjab, with its blocks of buildings set up in open space by Le Corbusier. It can be said that the new Brazilian capital, created on the Goiás plateau, together with the new capital of Punjab, have fulfilled the dream of transforming emptiness, transforming nothingness into a perfect urban space, at least as it was understood by the creators. We must also remember that neither Niemeyer nor Le Corbusier, until the end of their days, abandoned their faith in modernist principles of processing common spaces into perfect spaces. They utilized the most basic, mass-use materials to create perfection – simple buildings, cubes of various proportions; moreover, these were predominantly concrete buildings. Thus, we were witnessing a bold undertaking to reconstruct the world with concrete as the material from which this new world was supposed to be created. Both architects had, of course, and perhaps more importantly, constructed buildings with forms other than cuboid, creating outstanding concrete sculptures of buildings, beautiful in their rawness, but their cities were to be filled – are filled, mostly with these frugal and geometrically simplified living spaces. However, it seems that if we were to follow the thought process of Niemeyer and Le Corbusier, then the perfect world would require perfectly simple forms of buildings, not even cuboids, but perhaps just cubes, akin to dice. And if indeed such houses were built anywhere, they perhaps best embodied the dreams of perfection of the great modernists, even if those who had them in their neighbourhoods thought quite differently.

## **2. The Polish cube – a single-family house constrained by modernist theory and humble practice**

The Polish landscape throughout the years, until somewhere around 1990, was dominated by single-family houses called “Polish cubes.” They were an expression of ill-designed attempts at the architectural modernization of both rural areas and urban suburbs. This is today's universal opinion regarding this phenomenon – constructional, economic and artistic – whatever it was we thought of each of these aspects of the appearance of “Polish cubes”, concrete elements were not very much present in them. There were balconies, window lintels, stairs – all necessary accessories for the usability of houses. But there were also more ambitious ideas, most commonly castings made of concrete and shaped in the likeness of the elements of Renaissance or Baroque palaces. There were also desperately pragmatic ideas, such as the use of streetlight concrete pillars cut in half to make two columns for supporting balconies located above the entrance to a building. After construction (most often using bricks), “Polish cubes” were plastered, which resulted in the grey colour of concrete, sometimes called mottled grey – certainly not a compliment. Sometimes those faux-concrete blocks had extra adornments, such as pieces of broken, multicoloured dinner plates glued to the plaster; or pieces of mirror or glass. The designs for these buildings were most often taken from catalogues, so as to obtain an official basis for a building permit, or they were built applying the “local way”, by a bricklayer practicing in the municipality. Designs of buildings were borrowed from the neighbourhood, which also included the designs of ornaments adorning the buildings.

An additional concrete element, likely to appear on developed plots, was a fence – a wall around the house, constructed of prefabricated concrete slabs inserted one on top

of another between concrete pylons with the final, top slab usually having a fancy finish. Of course, the construction of “Polish cubes” at the time had nothing to do with modernist architectural thought; these buildings did not have a free ground floor, visible columnar supports, walls suspended on the structure, long windows allowing extensive views of the surroundings, and the flat roof saw no action aside from annual lubrication of the tar-paper roofing with glue. In short, none of the features of Modernist architecture recommended by Le Corbusier were present. The buildings had nothing to do with the villa in Poissy (one might playfully state that maybe it was for the better, as their owners did not have to battle the architect for years for compensation for the damages caused by persistent roof leakages, like Eugenia and Piotr Savoy). They had nothing in common with the Mueller, Tugendhat or Wittgenstein villas. But the question of whether they had anything to do with the houses from the exhibition estates – the Werkbund in Stuttgart (1927), Brno (1928), Wrocław (1929), Zurich (1930), Prague (1932) and Vienna (1932) – is not so easy to answer unequivocally. The situation is similar when it comes to comparison with the giant estates of detached houses in new towns (e.g. Zlin). It is true that the advent of the “Polish cube” caused no changes in the methods of construction, from craft to industrial (construction of detached houses from prefabricated elements in Poland is rather marginal), but certainly the inhabitants of “cubes” lived differently than their forefathers, although the appearance of the new lifestyle was unrelated to the form of the buildings, quite the opposite, these new lifestyles and fashions required the construction of “cubes” – as in the years 1990–2000, yet another style and yet another fashion caused the “Polish cube” to disappear. The longing for simplistic forms had dwindled, replaced with postmodernism and the necessity for “showing off”, not only through the multiplicity and the density of architectural forms, but also by paving whole plots. It was neither cheap – if one were to use stone – nor fast in execution. And this is where another invention came into play – the so-called paving block, a concrete cube (or cuboid), measuring approximately 10 x 10 x 10 centimetres. Another perfect, minimalistic, modernist form.

### **3. The paving block – irritating perfection**

For more than a quarter century, the Polish landscape has been formed using concrete faux-pavement materials, called “Polbruk” or “Bauma blocks”. Nowadays this type of block is not considered a very elegant way of paving surfaces, opposite to when it first appeared on the market. Today, “Bauma blocks” are referred to as the synonym of national bad taste. In Warsaw, the City Hall would actually like to go as far as banning their use, aside from non-important and out-of-the-way areas, with other cities perhaps having similar thoughts on the matter. No one (supposedly) wants to use “Bauma blocks” anymore, which is quite strange in an era of dominant architectural minimalism.

Meanwhile, “Bauma blocks” are the perfect gadget made with a mass of concrete, tormenting the eye and soul of the creator with their lack of shape and irritating heavy fluidity. And as there are millions of these gadgets, so our satisfaction should be multiplied as well. But this is not the case because the excellence of “Bauma blocks” is too easily attainable. In architectural reality, this is a defect and it is a valid view.

#### **4. The hollow cube – a path through Lublin’s Boleslaw Stelmach theater**

The theater in Lublin, referred to as the Center of Cultural Encounters, has several entrances. Two of them are connected by an internal road, crossing the building. Since both entrances are constantly open, this creates a shortcut used instead of walking around the building. It is an interesting way to attract passersby to the cultural life of the city, unwittingly making them observers of the everyday life of the theater. They may see it as day-to-day performances, being spectators of which they also become (all the time unwittingly) actors – or at least participants. The stage of the spectacle is surrounded with concrete cubes, hollow inside, marked only with rows of vertical columns and horizontal beams, perfectly aligned between the entrances. There are several floors, with something happening on each one. On the ground floor, there are exhibition halls, cafes, bookshops, entrances to theater facilities. The curious can travel between the floors, getting to know their secrets, with stairs and elevator at their disposal. Those with imagination will feel like they are in a great playset, remembered from a childhood playground, where flipping from level to level was fascinating and opened up new perspectives. The same effect has been achieved in the Lublin theater where, once again, the cubic form, straight and perfect, torn off again from the shapeless masses of concrete, provides astonishing impressions. A cube, granted airiness through getting rid of its concrete innards, replaced with ourselves.