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A HOUSE AND A BUILDING MASS

ZABUDOWA I DOMY

A b s t r a c t

A building in a city has its urban position and this leads to its architectural programme and functional programme. However, there are objects standing beyond this classification.

Freestanding solitaires, corner buildings, frontage buildings and internal buildings are essential types of urban structure. After all, there are objects, which stay away of these categories and in classic urban doctrine, they damage a city order, but the contemporary tolerance must accept the objects as new houses, new crystallising focuses forming bridges to the new future city shape. We sense the disequilibrium of a composition as a disorder, but the majority of cities in the world have exactly this unbalanced composition, have they not? Indeed, we should accept exactly this composition as an order, or a new order, which testifies our tolerance and acceptance of a post-contemporary lifestyle.

Keywords: urban composition, tolerance, cityscape, cities, towns, adjustment, city house, spatial order

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

Budynki w mieście mają swoją pozycję urbanistyczną, z której wynika ich program architektoniczny i program funkcjonalny. Są jednak obiekty, które wymykają się tej klasyfikacji. Budynki wolnostojące, budynki narożne, pierzejowe i wewnętrzne są podstawowymi typami zabudowy miejskiej. Istnieją jednak obiekty, które stoją poza tymi kategoriami i w klasycznej doktrynie miasta psują one jego kompozycję. Współczesna tolerancja musi jednak zaakceptować te obiekty jako nowe domy, nowe punkty krystalizujące, które mogą być pomostami do nowego przyszłego kształtu miasta. Niezrównoważenie kompozycji odczuwamy obecnie jako brak ładu, ale czyż nie jest tak, że większość miast świata ma właśnie taką, niezrównoważoną kompozycję? Tę kompozycję powinniśmy uznać za ład, albo nowy ład, który świadczy o naszej tolerancji i akceptacji życia ponowoczesnego.

Słowa kluczowe: kompozycja miejska, tolerancja, panorama miasta, miasta, dopasowanie, dom miejski, ład przestrzenny

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Cities consist of buildings only theoretically.

In a city, specific houses are independent properties and contain different functions. Dwelling houses, residential houses, private houses, whorehouses, warehouses, houses of culture form a tissue where particular elements have a mere specific meaning; they matter as a system only. They form a town system and become a building settlement. It is hard to examine a single house because its value makes sense as an element of the whole entity and depends on the urban position it takes. It not only concerns the physical position in the city plan, but also the position in the social hierarchy and on a mind map of a city remembered as spots essential for our memory.

While walking in a city, we do not see houses, because they are hidden behind the city, behind the building settlement. We remember cityscapes and particular elements, which are perceived in the context of the geometry of an urban composition.

A city can have its orthogonal geometry, which is derived from the Greek, or may have a rectangular plan on the basis of *Castrum Romanum;* can have an apparently chaotic plan of the medieval European city or a multi-layer geometry of Paris or Rome. It can have a plan based on a different geometry, which is not listed above, derived, for example, from rural settlement systems, or resulting from an unusual terrain. A city can also be distributed according to the modernist concept, the buildings are loosened, the houses are called blocks, and blocks (quarters) are called settlements. There is also no tool to measure whether the city of a geometric plan offers better life conditions than the free plan city system. You can only say that the modernist scattered city was deeply criticised, especially during the beginning of the personal car transportation crisis. The car, seen as a polluter and a killer, became a target of attack of conservatives who dream of returning to the drudgery of walking and torture of horses transporting people.

Meanwhile, the flagship free compositions of Fiminy-Vert type returned to favour, were widely used and visited, and became the pride of the residents. Firminy – Vert is a housing estate designed by Le Corbusier where sport, spectacle and religion are the natural base, located on the hill Unité d'Habitation. This unit is supported by a sports stadium, house of culture, a social house and a church. Four-wheeled transport is separated from the two-wheel and from the pedestrian and the city operates in a modern and safe way, at the same time. A similar example is de Lichtenberg in Weert in the Netherlands by Pierre Weegels, where a sport village was constructed, including tennis courts and swimming pools, tracks training and a chapel and an amphitheatre with a backstage. The whole composition is modernist, safe and contemporary. The legacy of modernism has become the value of the local architecture, and various objects scattered in the open terrain do not constitute a dense urban composition of the city centre, with dominants and boundary elements. But this is an exception.

In all these systems, geometry is less important than the spatial order of the plan, which does not have to be of a regular character, but must be comprehensible for the members of the cultural community, or more broadly for all users.

The concept of order is culturally conditioned, where in an Asian city, the Chinese can easily find their way home, a European or a resident of Havana is lost for good. The cultural codes are different and the sense of order is different. However, the order is not only an aesthetic value leading to prettiness, so we can say that something is nice. Order is a higher value, leading to a sense of hierarchy and law, in spatial and social comprehension. The highest category of order is perfection. Władysław Tatarkiewicz wrote[1]: (…) *it was believed*

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[1] W. Tatarkiewicz, *O doskonałości*, Instytut Wydawniczy Daimonion, Lublin 1991, p. 52.

that not only are the perfect proportions for each kind of art and nature, for the temple, the statue, the living man, but there are also the shapes and proportions in themselves perfect, in every case excellent, superior to others. Plato thought that the most perfect ratio is the ratio between the side and the diagonal of the square. His seriousness contributed to the fact that artists, especially architects, even in the Middle Ages used this proportion, though they could not know whose idea they implemented. So the concept of proportion is felt, for example, in cities built on the basis of old Roman or *Castrum Romanum* concept because wandering across cities like Ptuj, Pecs, Trier, Cluj, one feels this unusual harmony of compositional order of the original Roman plan saved. The original regular plan, despite multiple subsequent transformations, still breaks on top, giving the city an extraordinary spatial order.

Order of space is so valuable that it has a commercial nature now, it may be sold, which is happening both in Venice and Barcelona.

In all these building systems, we are dealing with positive complexes of buildings cut with negative voids of a circulation space. Complexes of buildings representing building mass are surrounded by a negative space constituting the circulation infrastructure and technical supply. The proportion between the solid and the void is of an anthropomorphic nature and is related to the dimensions of the human; these proportions are similar even in different cultures, although they occur when a person is supported with a device, such as a boat or a car. Venetian boats need more space than a passing man, and cars in the Le Corbusier's cities of the future need more space in the street to absorb the high speed of rushing machines.

However, the principle in these cities is the same and makes that the building blocks are cut with circulation space for pedestrians, bicycles, machines; which means streets (channels) supplying dynamic movement for static blocks.

So elements of urban tissue have different positions in their tissue, they can be either frontage, or contact with a street as a corner, or are hidden inside a block. So can you explain the fact that the buildings in the city are freestanding, have a corner position, boundary or internal.

Stand-alone buildings are relatively rare, although they often play a key role in the city. Camillo Sitte writes that, in Rome, even churches are not free-standing buildings and he attempts to analyse this problem. Sitte writes[2]: *No city is better suitable (to be examined, aut.), than Rome, with its abundance of outstanding examples of religious architecture. Result of the analysis of their position with respect to the church square is surprising indeed. Of the 255 churches, 41 are adjacent to the neighbouring building with one wall, 96 with two, 2 with four and 6 are free-standing objects.*

As you can see, the churches that nowadays are free-standing buildings, stayed in the structure of Rome as buildings associated with the compact structure of the city; most of them had a character of a frontage building. Stand-alone buildings in a traditional city usually take the most prestigious positions, at the close of viewing axes, or their intersections and are such an important element in the structure of the city that often they have no utility function, but only symbolic one. That happened with both the Arc de Triomphe (Jean François Chalgrin, 1806), the tower in Paris (Gustave Eiffel, 1889), or the Cloth Hall in Krakow (Tomasz Pryliński, 1875). These buildings form the character of the city, are the pride of the

2 C. Sitte, *Der Städtebau nach seinen Künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Nachdruck der 3. Auflage, 1901 Wien und des Originalmanuskriptes aus dem Jahr 1889, Springer-Verlag Wien-New York, Wien 1972, p. 28, trans. Lukas Olma.

Ill. 1. Torre Velasca, Milan, 1958, Gianluigi Banfi, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgijoso, Enrico Peresutti, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, photo. by P. Gajewski

locals and are frequented by tourists. Their position is so important in the city that it is not possible to grant them a different function than a symbolic one; none of the above objects has any useful function, and both the Cloth Hall, and Arc de Triomphe are more sentimental treasury of the local culture, than the art museum.

Corner buildings are present in cities of all ages, both in compact and scattered systems. The intersection of routes always generates corner positions, which offer two fronts, are well exposed and easy to remember. Corners are well visible. We remember a sequence of urban corners, forgetting what is going on between them. The corner building is more important than the houses between the corners. Therefore, at this position are situated palaces, department stores, museums, that is, objects that define and limit building blocks. These objects define the city and its structure, they define the urban fabric.

Boundary buildings are those that are standing at the edge of the street, acting in their frontages or stand at the edge of settlements in the front row. Their position is not as privileged as in the previous categories, but is determining the expression of the city. Buildings built along routes define blocks of urban development and *de facto* provide a definition of the circulation space.

Finally, there are inner buildings that are hidden inside the urban composition, and which we find upon closer study of the structure of the city. It's hard to deny the matter, but one must admit that it is of local importance. There are all kinds of objects housed in a second or subsequent row of buildings, outbuildings or passages. A good example is Lyon, boasting its boulevards and housing magnificent squares, but also intimate spaces of the internal blocks of the city. The local specialty, whose role in shaping the city is difficult to diminish are traboules (narrow passages leading to small inner courtyards in the old Lyon) housed inside the dwelling quarters. Their meaning is extremely intimate, but it is the local specialty and the charm of Vieux Lyon.

Buildings located in the urban positions described above can hardly be called houses. Yes, there are Municipal houses, like those designed by Richard Meier (Stadthaus Ulm, Stadhuis Den Haag), but we do not find such houses much more.

Although the word house means a cathedral in German, the association of the word with the House of God is not entirely clear; Slavic word Tum does not explain this issue. Is the German word Dom a house where the god lives, and therefore it is written with a capital letter? Can you point out that the Dom / Tum means a freestanding secure property, which homes a specific function forever and is its domicile? Does the seat mean that the function is sitting there, and is a permanent resident there?

The problem is that the concept of the house has its own attributes. It seems that a real home is private, safe, waterproof, closed, it has all the attributes needed for survival, so it is a shelter guaranteeing basic functions, such as sleeping, eating and physiological functions, it is equipped with water, light and air. To fulfil these functions, it is a standalone house, heated (cooled), freestanding (of course, English semi-detached house, or terraced house, the Dutch row-house have to be treated as a stand-alone house), and offering at least some sort of natural space inside the property. This can be a garden surrounding the house, or atrium, as in the case of the Roman House. House, as the seat and shelter must be autonomous and safe.

Safety functions are determined in the United States by the so-called *Castle doctrine*, the doctrine generally represented by the expression *my home is my castle*. This doctrine points out the safety of the house, which may be defended in the American society from intrusion

even by the use of (excessive) force. In Polish law, there is a similar concept of domestic peace, which can also be protected.

The concept of home involves some expectations that are unduly expanded to other objects. Can we assign attributes of a house to the home of books, home of work, house of beekeeper, house of angler? It is specific for the Polish culture, but also happens elsewhere. Are we really attributing the features of the house to other beings?

Speaking of a house, we think of a model of a house supposing it has the attributes understood by all. We understand the features of the house and we find them to be repeated in other beings, so the house becomes a model for them. This model is common intellectual property understood by everyone in the society, and for commercial purposes, we want to emphasise the repetition of characteristics of the house in other facilities, such as a youth house or a house of culture. The model of a house we use for other beings to suggest that within the walls of the object, the youth or culture will feel at home. This observation of repeating features is excessive and is commercial in nature, although there is nothing reprehensible. In a similar way, a big store has been called a gallery recently, to be associated with the culture of an art gallery, a liquor store is called the world of beer, although the world has nothing to do with it and a fish bar is called the herring embassy, although herrings know nothing about it. It seems that the concept of a home is the subject of abuse and houses, including the houses of culture, do not repeat the characteristics of the house, which is aimed to be their model. They do not defend culture to home it, they are not safe and do not correspond to the model, which is in the name. Also, these houses are not free-standing objects.

The houses mentioned above form urban settlements, urban tissue, where the individual elements in a freestanding, corner, frontage or inner position and build a city order as well as its internal organisation. This image of the city is optimistic and idealistic. Objects stand in the positions assigned to them and this picture shows its harmony and pleases the eye.

But the same eye sees that the described image is nice, but untrue. The order relying upon building settlement strictly subordinated to the parent rule, holding in advance imposed standards, is an idealistic vision of a utopian city. They tried to do this in Karlsruhe or in Palmanova with similar results: the constructed city is hopelessly dull and lifeless. Vincenzo Scamozzi designed the city of Palmanova (1593) as an ideal city, as a perfect city. Being a student of Palladio, who built almost everything what he designed, Scamozzi had to know that he designed a real city, which sooner or later will be erected for the people. It is difficult to suspect him of an idea of an experiment aimed only at a scientific study. The city is built on a sophisticated plan of a regular nonagon and is beautiful on the plan, but not for real life (use). Being there, wherever we turn, we have the same view of the starry city excogitated by the utopian architect. In the city, there are no orientating directions, it isn't possible to turn anywhere, because there is a ruling refined geometry of a polygonal Scamozzi star. Perhaps a city dweller is orientating himself in directions of the world after characteristic architectural details well-known to him and they are facilitating in the orientation. The alien is getting lost, because all radial directions are the same and are heading towards one focus, which is being found in the centre. The city doesn't offer the wealth of diversity and seems sad. Since the time of the project, four hundred years had passed and the city survived the way it was designed. Perhaps it could develop against the Scamozzi plan, but this way didn't happen. Probably the planning corset controlling the city development restricted the diversity and the

freedom of the individual. This rule is regarding not only ideal cities of the Renaissance, but can be a canon of the urban planning design.

Overregulation in planning leads to persecution of diversity, which in turn is a limitation of civil liberties. Lack of freedom inhibits the development of spatial and economic development. Nice city, offering a spatial order guaranteed by the protection of conservation, has not developed over four centuries because it has been strangled by the urban doctrine. Today, it is a dead city, looking for a visit of tourists not very much interested in arriving.

Freedom is also expressed by an individual who, growing above the average, does not apply to the average accepted standards.

Translating it into the language of architectural forms, one can say that sometimes there are houses that do not apply to the common standards adopted in the zoning plan. Such houses do not respect the plan given. An example of such implementation is Torre Velasca in Milan. This property is designed by a group of BBPR (Gianluigi Banfi, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgijoso, Enrico Peresutti, Ernesto Nathan Rogers) in 1958. The building was completed within a just 10 min walk from the Duomo in the city centre. The location of the property makes no sense: it was placed in the middle of the building block, neither at the intersection of important urban axis or the position of an object detached discussed above. The near Pirelli tower, located in a major urban planning point of the city was already built (Gio Ponti, Pier Luigi Nervi and others, 1956) and was an example of free standing skyscraper designating a focal point of the urban metropolis. Meanwhile, the tower Velasca was established in the middle of nowhere and had no function. The office function of the building and its location in no way justifies the unusual shape of the object dominating the very centre of Milan.

The building has the shape of a Hercules' club; the core base expands upward and supports the culmination of clubs spidery cantilevers. The brown colour of the facade enhances the strangeness of the structure. It seems that the tower mimics the medieval stone and brick structures extending upward through the brackets constructed with wood. It is said that the authors were inspired by the Sforza Castle in Milan, but by its scale, these connotations are not legible. The thing is out of scale and unhistorical.

But why should it be wrong.

Bad it is rather the state of the tower today, which is partially abandoned and one feel fear approaching it. Brave structure raises doubt as to whether it is still stable after 50 years of construction. There is a concern that the lack of quick intervention may lead to the necessity of dismantling the building.

Arriving to Milan, I run to check if the tower stands in its place. It stands there alone as a free-standing object, highly autonomous, a little defensive, certainly safe in the sense of a plague, contact with strangers, attack. The absurd location and the very brave form is not counting neither on any context nor on the old city or Duomo, the colour of the old brick, which does not match the skyscraper and this trivial function, partly offices and partly living, not outstanding, and not giving a pretext for so shocking form. But the landscape of Milan is richer thanks to this form of post-war modernism, which left its desperate mark on the shape of the city, making it richer. It left its mark in the city, perhaps the house in the city.

R e f e r e n c e s

[1]   Tatarkiewicz W., *O doskonałości*, Instytut Wydawniczy Daimonion, Lublin 1991.
[2]   Camillo-Sitte, *Der Städtebau nach seinen Künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Nachdruck der 3. Auflage, 1901 Wien und des Originalmanuskriptes aus dem Jahr 1889, Springer-Verlag Wien-New York, Wien 1972.