

MACIEJ OLENDEREK*

THE AESTHETICS, UTILITY AND BEAUTY
OF THE ACCESSIBLE CITY HOUSE
– CHOSEN DESIGNS AND CONSTRUCTIONS
– 2010 TO 2015

ESTETYKA, UŻYTECZNOŚĆ I PIĘKNO
DOSTĘPNEGO DOMU MIEJSKIEGO
– WYBRANE PROJEKTY
I REALIZACJE AUTORSKIE 2010–2015

S u m m a r y

The article describes designs and constructed accessible city houses. The compilation consists of low-energy houses for the average client and presents the difficulties the architect has to overcome meeting the requirements of the accessible city house concept. The article focuses on creating city structures with the use of small accessible or tenement houses with similar programmes. The designs described are an attempt at creating a set of rules which the architect and investor have to follow unquestioningly if they want to build houses for the average client.

Keywords: city house, accessible house, utility, architecture, aesthetic

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

Artykuł omawia koncepcje projektowe i realizacje autorskie miejskich domów dostępnych. Tekst skupia się na domach niskoenergetycznych wznoszonych dla niezamożnego klienta, omawia realizacje prezentując problemy jakie napotyka architekt chcąc uzyskać realizację odpowiadającą zamierzeniom projektowym związanym z koncepcją miejskiego domu dostępnego. W artykule zwrócono szczególną uwagę na tworzenie struktur miasta za pomocą małych domów dostępnych czy budynków wielorodzinnych o tożsamym programie. Omawiane projekty stanowią próbę sformułowania katalogu zasad, jakim bezwzględnie musi podporządkować się architekt i inwestor jeśli chcą tworzyć domy dla niezamożnego kręgu odbiorców.

Słowa kluczowe: dom miejski, dom dostępny, użyteczność, architektura, estetyka

* Ph.D. Arch. Maciej Olenderk, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering, Technical University of Lodz.

The concept of the accessible house constructed within the city limits unfolded in the first half of the twentieth century. The free standing houses under construction, tenements or building complexes were an answer to high demand in the real estate market, with the focus on small, aesthetic living space for the poorer inhabitants. The design of these houses impresses with its simplicity and utility, at the same time possessing architectural and technological solutions. This idea was often realized in architectural competitions between famous architects of the time and talented “youth” (educated in free RP). They represented new technological thought and dominant architectural ideas in Europe. The designs were to answer the most pressing functional problems (usually the design space was between 80 and 100 m²). They usually consisted of day and night complexes, with the focus on hygiene space. An important part was to maintain at least a small garden space. Currently we are faced with a similar need to provide poorer inhabitants (especially the young) with living space. As the European architects say we should, as societies, follow certain rules and preserve historical achievements: “On the building scale the quality of design requires solidity, longevity, harmony with the surroundings and appeal. Appeal – the elegance of proportions, satisfaction from good design, smart use of colour, chiaroscuro, shape, contour, cultural and symbolic signification, through the respect for the heritage and regional identity as well as belief in the cultural sense of contemporary times.”¹ What should the modern accessible city house be? Where can it be built? How to use it to create contemporary architecture? The analysis of the authorial designs and constructions will answer these questions and present a set of rules the author uses to answer the modern expectations of form, function or energy saving and ecological solutions. Establishing one of the formulas of the city as a basis for the discussion of architectural function and maintaining that: “the essence of the city is randomness, change and movement. The cities are not constructed from stable structures. They are a constant happening of various fragments.”² The location of accessible houses can be either in the centre or on the outskirts. An example of a simple shaped, non-accessible house is the design from the studio of an artist by the name of Monika Sosnowska (constructed in the Warsaw Praga district by the team: Piotr Brzoza and Marcin Kwietowicz). It integrates perfectly into the cultural context of the place and an example of the creation of the city. How to create a place for the inhabitants according to Jan Gehl in his book: “a city with low and close buildings, pedestrian and outside space (...) There is a possibility of watching the buildings, the passing people and the ones who stop outside, since the space is friendly and welcoming.”³ Designing buildings with a balanced form and detail in the regional character, with the use of local materials will be most fitting for investing in friendly urban space for everyone. Buildings should be adapted to the rising social needs of good architecture, in the meaning which is attributed to art and creation: “The used and respected form in art is the one which serves some purpose; such form (...) can be found in works of utilitarian art, houses or chairs.”⁴ Houses have to be constantly adapted to modern requirements and at the same time fulfil the needs of inhabitants. The requirements which were the same for

¹ Architects’ Council of Europe, *Europe and architecture tomorrow*, Bruxelles 1995, p. 28.

² Scientific editor Sylwia Kaczmarek, *Town, the jubilee book 70 birthday anniversary prof. Stanisława Liszewskiego*, Lodz 2011, p. 329.

³ J. Gehl *Life between building*, Cracow 2009, p. 31.

⁴ W. Tatarkiewicz, *The history of six concepts*, Warsaw 1988, p. 43.

every space and functional layout are: the house and apartment size should not exceed 50 to 70 m². Such space enabled the creation of the main part of functional houses, which were divided into two parts: hallway, restroom and living room with a kitchen annex (usually with stairs leading to first floor or mezzanine and second part – bedrooms (usually two) and a bathroom. There is also a terrace and hardened surface for parking. It can be covered with a pergola in the future. Providing the access to gardens and open, non-fenced space in front of the house is a rule adhered to during the construction phase. The house and area costs between 200,000–275,000 PLN and consists of a finished building with basic amenities which makes it ready to move into. All of this was possible due to an innovative construction technology, built from precast on the basis of wooden construction. The 40 years of experience from the Czech company “RD RYMAROV” was of invaluable help. Cooperation with this company enabled the costs of construction to be reduced and at the same time the technical aspects of an energy saving house were kept at a very high level. For example: the average cost of heating and heated water for the last two years (in an apartment) costs around 350 PLN. The profits gained during the house construction should be taken into account. The construction takes seven days, the finishing work takes two to three weeks. This is a very good time and a cost-effective strategy. There is no handicap in shaping the form and the type of detail work. This freedom was one of the main requirements to sign the contract with the house factory. The architects, who worked for the social good, could not allow the lack of design freedom – the creation of varied (in expression) city houses. The aesthetic is more important than cutting costs, but it is a compromise for the inhabitant. This sort of building is dedicated to a group of poorer, usually younger people and is probably the first place they live after leaving their parents. The responsibility of the designers is to introduce new social groups to architecture and giving a guarantee of developing good examples of creating space without details or forms which do not fit the surroundings. Creating a form with spare detail is a big challenge for the designer. The shape must meet various specifications – the real estate market, the financial programme restrictions. Such borders limit many choices – which in turn influence the creative process of the design. The architect is often involved in a complex process of design decisions and limited time frame, which turns the design phase into “production” phase. The wide “price dumping” (most often found in design competitions) is another reason for poor work. It is imperative after all, to reach the goal of house design for the low price of documentation, without looking at the social context of the architect’s work. Furthermore, there is an absence of open (really open not just called like that) competitions for young architects. There is an obscure requirement for three year (usually) practice experience in designs similar to the competition contracts. After all, as academic teachers we educate young architects to independently pursue topics such as housing complexes or other projects. Without such competitions we will lack a fresh look at shaping contemporary architectural forms. We will have to come up against a similar dilemma, which took place during the interwar period, when young and educated creators in an independent homeland had difficulty reaching the market with their ideas. The architecture of city housing (the cubature shaping the surrounding space) is supposed to give us a feeling of belonging to the European community, stand out of the crowd with flair, present a new avant-garde approach to life and urban community and at the same time show modern technologies for today and tomorrow. When designing city houses an important goal to reach was to achieve a harmonious cooperation between neighbours in the inhabited



- III. 1. House complex at Stare Złotno St. in Lodz
- III. 2. Social houses in Stryków and Poddębice
- III. 3. Social house at Kołodziejska St. in Lodz
- III. 4. City house in Cracow

complexes. The architects educate how to use and develop the ability of shaping site-specific areas in order to make use of cooperation in introducing and modifying new technology in houses or apartments. In the last six years (the investment programme) a number of single and multi-family houses were constructed. Six representative designs, most characteristic of this idea will be presented. The first is a design for low, accessible and energy saving city houses (construction starts in 2016). This complex is located in the western part of Lodz, near green areas and a park (ill.1). It includes over twenty houses with two apartments each – 50 to 60 m². The houses are designed in a classical one family style with multi-hipped roof. The general rules were set by the local plan for this area. As usual, it strictly regulated the rules for the building space, which made it difficult to customize the building character. These houses, according to the designers, are to harmoniously merge into the open green surroundings while being similar to the buildings located in urban space bordering the neighbouring boroughs. The aim was to achieve the city street character of the buildings while maintaining a varied composition for individual identification and keeping the form of a single urban design. A similar character is maintained by complexes which are being built in Strykow or Poddebice (ill.2). The main characteristic of this complex was also to highlight the style of the city design in relation to shape, height, materials or the facade colour and delicate detail. The topic of both projects was social housing. The social house in Strykow has very small rooms – 36 m². The designers decided to use a gallery house design – it was the result of social consultations. Meetings with chosen future inhabitants provided an answer to preferred living solutions (e.g. common spaces). The Poddebice area design was an interesting challenge – an accessible social house between single-storey buildings and urban housing. Furthermore, the local plan and modest funding by the investor greatly limited the architect's creativity. Only the cubature was adapted to the surrounding forms and minimalistic detail was used. The house was constructed on a small allotment (the street was originally in the city suburbs), surrounded by tenements from the beginning of the 20th century (ill. 3). The building was designed with the existing scale in mind to restore the character of the street. The house consists of small apartments constructed with low energy wood technology. An interesting challenge was the design for a Cracow developer, who built houses near the city bypasses (ill. 4). The idea behind a housing complex (built between 1960–1990) contains a simple form similar to neighbouring houses, which organizes the urban structure. The walls were filled with vertical gardens to “humanize” the space around the new shape. The last one is the multi-family complex in Konstanytown Lodzki. It consists of five multi-family houses built on a creative (restoring the frontage character of street buildings) layout, keeping the city style through a tree line, street alleys and front gardens. While meeting the local plan requirements, the allotment is largely accessible. Semi-private spaces were divided with small architecture and low greenery. During the 3 years since it was built the authors notice positive tendencies in neighbour relations, creating rules of conduct characteristic of identification and local community identity. The design allowed the inhabitants to adapt every stairwell decor and agree upon the terrace, balcony and garden housing. The communities kept the house proportions while customizing private space and avoided the drop in quality of the whole design.

When designing the aforementioned houses, it was essential to plan a specific catalogue of architectural rules in order to achieve the desired goal of an accessible building based on a non-invasive spatial architecture. It is important to notice the cooperation with

“enlightened” investors, who are searching for “decent” and widely accepted form, while maintaining competitive house and apartment prices. It is important for the architects of both accessible and social houses to remember that it is they who have the ability to add new values and keep the continuity of city building. One of the main rules is the necessity to use questionnaires and social research to achieve the optimal function. Often during social consultations we cooperatively created spatial and functional designs which were accepted by the majority. Such an approach seems to be the only correct one, since the designer is an associate of the inhabitant in shaping the aesthetic acceptance. The architects are the only occupational group best prepared for promoting high quality dialogue between the user, investor and society. Designers have to look for optimal solutions to user needs, especially the social house groups. The architect’s love for beauty, nature, respect for history and tradition guarantees their pursuit of an optimal choice, design quality, construction time and the cost of the project. The SARP and IARP (architecture organizations) have a huge role to play in maintaining public trust for this occupation. It will strengthen the architect’s position in the investment and construction phase, which will result in following good practices during these phases and provide society with quality city house architecture. The key factor is the present architect’s position in society. How well can an independent architect responsibly create a hierarchy of goal importance. The manner of communication between three sides – designer, investor and contractor – is required for the creation of beautiful living space available to everyone.

Taking into account all these aspects of the design process as crucial elements of city house creation (in various locations – city centre and outskirts), the shaper of space, the architect, should always follow the rule of openness and responsibility. House design, especially the solutions, should support uninhibited, informal social contact. It should also influence the creation of social bonds. Here, the role of creative imagination, design and organizational abilities the architect possesses are invaluable. Investors and users, recipients (society) must be granted the highest quality. The value of the lowest cost the investor has to take is of the lowest priority. What should be focused on is the design quality and the construction durability in the contract the designer signs with society. The house, as the closest place we live in, must meet the requirements of utility and consistency. Consistency will always be the relation between the investment costs and (lately very strict) costs to the environment. Furthermore, the house should possess (due to architectural ingenuity) the qualities of elegance and style. The important issue is that a large group of people (several dozen or even hundreds) take part in the designing, constructing and investing process. Tens of thousands of people witness the final result. It is this group that decides the public perception. They do not care about the investment costs or technology used, what matters is the aesthetic experience. It accompanied society since the beginning and influences the reception of form and the beauty of architecture. It is important that the architect, when creating the aesthetics of his next work, remembers the continuity of the art development process while being faithful to the Vitruvian set of rules.

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