

## THE ALCHEMY OF THE URBANITE'S HOUSE

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### ALCHEMIA DOMU MIESZCZANINA

#### Abstract

Alchemy is “the art of creating something that has a mysterious character”. In the case of architecture, it can refer to the creator’s use of aesthetic means of expression in such a way as to create a work evoking a specific mood and emotions that intrigue the viewer, stimulate their imagination and curiosity, and can sometimes cause anxiety shrouded in the mystery of the house’s form. Providing things with a shape is the domain of architectural art. One can perceive the alchemy of the urban house’s architecture as the ability to evoke specific emotions through the compositional means and appropriately selected material. The aesthetic success depends primarily on the architect’s talent. The house belongs to a set of personal belongings, despite the externalisation of its form in the urban space. Every house is said to hide some secrets – these may be secrets confided to the building by its inhabitants – collections and family mementoes, stories, tales, traditions; they may also be the arcana of professions and crafts practised there.

*Keywords: alchemy of the house’s architecture, house in the town, properties of the urban house*

#### Streszczenie

Alchemia to „sztuka tworzenia czegoś, mająca tajemniczy charakter”. W przypadku architektury można ją odnieść do posługiwania się przez twórcę estetycznymi środkami wyrazu w taki sposób, aby stworzyć dzieło budujące określony nastrój i emocje, które intrygują widza, pobudzają jego wyobraźnię i ciekawość, czasem potrafią wywołać niepokój owiany tajemniczością formy domu. Nadawanie rzeczom kształtu jest domeną sztuki architektonicznej. Za alchemię architektury domu w mieście można uznać umiejętność wywoływania określonych emocji przez zastosowane środki kompozycyjne i odpowiednio dobraną materię. Powodzenie estetyczne gwarantuje tu przede wszystkim talent architekta. Dom przynależy do zbioru rzeczy osobistych, pomimo uzewnętrznienia jego formy na przestrzeń miasta. Mówi się, że każdy dom skrywa jakieś tajemnice – mogą to być tajemnice powierzone budowli przez jego mieszkańców – zbiory i pamiątki rodzinne, historie, opowieści, tradycje; mogą być nimi także arkana uprawianych tu zawodów i rzemiosł.

*Słowa kluczowe: alchemia architektury domu, dom w mieście, właściwości domu miejskiego*

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## 1. THE ESOTERICISM OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE URBANITE'S HOUSE

In his book *Experiencing Architecture*, Steen Eiler Rasmussen claimed that “[e]ven things which in no way suggest organic forms are often invested with human characteristics”. Referring to Charles Dickens’ work, he writes: “buildings and interiors acquire souls in some demonical way corresponding to the souls of the inhabitants”<sup>1</sup>. “To Dickens a street of houses was a drama, a meeting of original characters, each house speaking with a voice of its own”<sup>2</sup>. Rasmussen’s observation to a large extent reflects the nature of the phenomenon which can be described as the alchemy of burgher houses. It comprises the ability to create a unique atmosphere that accompanies communing with the house’s original form and aesthetics, as well as its impact on a specific climate of urban space. The creators of architecture often used the phenomenon of a subconscious attribution of certain esoteric forces to buildings, influencing the visitor’s imagination. The basis of this phenomenon is sometimes a projection of some associations between architectural forms and organic forms, even if they refer to abstract aesthetics. An important determinant for the structure’s shape is usually its place in the structure of the city. The creator’s ability to use the advantages resulting from the context of the place in order to give the form an individual expression is important to obtain the effect of the work’s recognizable identity. The appropriate use of aesthetically useful materials, which provide the building with a specific type of materiality, is not without effect either. A skilful combination of them could strengthen as much as weaken the impression of the building’s uniqueness. This is particularly visible in the development of the tenement houses’ façades from the turn of the last century. Their compositional harmony was usually imitated in stone, brick or cast iron matter, simultaneously becoming emanation of the cultural heritage of the architectural legacy from the previous epochs.

Certain immeasurable values determine the esotericism of the burgher house’s architecture – architectural imponderables – contributing to the mysterious atmosphere and aura of urbanity. These include a comprehensive, co-existing set of aesthetic-material and compositional, but, above all, cultural and social factors and conditions resulting from tradition and history of the place. They allow for the existence of a sense of uniqueness of a given interior and give the structure a recognizable character, thus contributing to the phenomenon of the unique climate of such a place, which was described as *genius loci* in Roman mythology – the spirit of the place, a kind of belief in the existence of a protective force which watches over a given place.

Today, burgher houses seem to be relics of the past. However, it is owing to them that we find the essence of the urban historical centres. The houses’ patrician façades reflect the social status of their owners. Each of those houses hid some secrets – those may have been secrets confided to the building by its inhabitants – collections and family mementoes, stories, tales, traditions; those may also have been the arcana of professions and crafts practised there. Before it became a residential tenement, and finally a modern multi-family building in the course of the typological evolution, the burgher house constituted

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<sup>1</sup> S. E. Rasmussen, *Odczuwanie architektury*, Warszawa 1999, p. 37–38.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

the emanation of the phenomenon of urbanity, creating a physical framework for life in a middle-class community. The creators of the architecture of such houses carried out orders, thinking about specific individuals and their families, taking into account their social status and the profession or craft they practised. That became the turning point of the design alchemy, giving it a unique expression of the form's personalization. It was a creative impulse to seek original solutions, caring for detail, often of an individual nature, saying something about the people who dwelled and lived there, and held determined values and possessed specific skills. The cultural crucible of historical cities formed this way, shaped by their basic element – burgher house – built highly coloured esoteric atmosphere of life in the urban community. The present, not devoid of anonymity, uniformity and standardization of solutions known from multi-family housing development, seems to still pursue models from the past for the modern burgher's house, being an expression of nostalgia for the lost idea of the urban model of life.

## 2. “MY HOME IS MY CASTLE”

Regardless of the factors determining the aesthetic sensations and emotions associated with perception of the architecture of houses in the city, it should be considered that their alchemy is – “the art of creating something that has a mysterious character”<sup>3</sup> – the domain of the creators of architecture, and is actually hidden behind the arcana of their profession, as well as the skills and experience acquired. In turn, obtaining an intriguing effect of the structure's mystery is connected with talent, design intuition, and a certain creative impulse, which allows one to find an appropriate and original solution in imagination for the body and the space it conceals. This space is equated with the privacy of the owner in the natural way and it constitutes a part of the set of personal belongings. Form, which is externalized to the city's space, becomes the main feature of the urban house's aesthetics. The building's façade, specially formed for this purpose, happens to be its carrier less and less often. It presents a created image of its inhabitants' social status. The space within the body of the building could be defined as: a shelter, territory, or kingdom. It is most often an emanation of the Anglo-Saxon motto “my home is my castle”. This phenomenon is particularly evident in historical building development, where the house in the city gave a sense of stability and continuity of the existence of urban fabric, rooted in the local material culture. Adolf Loos was one of the creators of architecture who saw the need to separate the issue of the external image of the house from the intimacy of its interior – which gives a moment of respite, rest and protection against the pressure of social life. That balance between the external image of the house and the way of the formation of the spatial specificity of interiors dependent on their purpose has become Loos' leading doctrine and, at the same time, a recipe for a successful house design.

“The primary objective of the architect is to create a warm living space”<sup>4</sup> wrote Adolf Loos in the pages of the *Neue Freie Presse* at the turn of the nineteenth century. The creator of the *Raumplan*<sup>5</sup>, did not perceive architectural activity as a kind of artistic art,

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<sup>3</sup> [After:] *Słownik języka polskiego* PWN, retrieved from: <http://sjp.pwn.pl/>.

<sup>4</sup> A. Sarnitz, *Adolf Loos. Architekt, krytyk, dandys*, Warszawa 2006, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> M. Risselada (Ed.), *Raumplan versus Plan Libre*, Rotterdam 2008.

except for two of its cases – the tomb and the monument. Perhaps his thinking about the “living space” is so versatile owing to the fact that it resists various revolutions in housing and successive ideological transformations of architecture. In 1910, he wrote in the essay *Architecture*:

A building should please everyone, unlike a work of art, which does not have to please anyone. A work of art is a private matter for the artist, a building is not. A work of art is brought into the world without there being a need for it, a building meets a need. A work of art has no responsibility to anyone, a building to everyone. The aim of a work of art is to make us feel uncomfortable; a building is there for our comfort. A work of art is revolutionary, a building conservative. A work of art is concerned with the future and directs us along new paths; a building is concerned with the present. We love anything that adds to our comfort, we hate anything that tries to pester us into abandoning our secure and established position. We love buildings and hate art<sup>6</sup>.

The words quoted above gain particular significance especially after one reads his earlier – dating from 1900 – essay entitled *The Poor Little Rich Man*<sup>7</sup>. It tells the story of a man who is happy and fulfilled in life, and wished to have “a house filled with art”. He hired a prominent architect who turned the man’s house into the thing that was almost perfect in every way and finite in its concept, abounding in numerous objects that were works of art. Yet, the dream house soon became a curse for its owner, as it suppressed all the aspects of family life and the joy of dwelling. The excellence of the house’s interior created by the architect, decorated in a way fit for the complete and finished work of art, and the establishment of the principles governing in it made the happy man a hostage of his own dreams. He no longer got joy out of dwelling because everything was already completed. In this short story, in the shadow of the main events, Loos also draws a somewhat tyrannical figure of the architect entrusted with the noble task – of bringing art home. The architect – trustee of the dreams of a perfect house – who consistently enforces implementation of the rules prevailing at home and does not allow for any violations of the spatial order of things designed there, eventually becomes the main source of misery for the rich and fulfilled man. This moralizing story also carries a message for the architects themselves so that they do not forget the human dimension of the house’s architecture while realising their creative ambitions.

### 3. THE CULT OF THE ARCHETYPAL FORM OF THE HOUSE

The twentieth-century modernist movements permanently disrupted the notion of a traditional house in the city in favour of the popularisation of a new model of multi-family housing development freed from the burden of historical urban conditions. The new model of housing was designed based on the so-called Corbusieran three essential joys of urbanism, i.e. access to sunlight, space and greenery<sup>8</sup>. The aesthetics of residential architecture emerging in this way, which was a new kind of a multi-family house in

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<sup>6</sup> A. Loos, *Architektura*, 1910, [in:] *Adolf Loos, Ornament i zbrodnia. Eseje wybrane* (transl. A. Stępniewska-Berns), Tarnów 2013, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> A. Loos, *Biedny bogaty człowiek*, 1900, [in:] *Ibidem*, p. 120–124.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Warszawa 1987, p. 9.

the city, was subordinated to the rationalism of functional solutions and the economic diktat. Standardization and uniformity of mass-production residential architecture were confronted with the traditional model of an urban house whose aesthetics and spatial solutions had an appropriate scale and individual expression, derived from the context of the place. Today's image of the multi-family architecture seems to be completely different – devoid of this unique architectural atmosphere that was conducive to a sense of continuation of the historical continuity of the city's structure. That which had built the spatial position of the traditionally understood burgher house in a quarter of urban development – that is the urban context of a street, square, plaza – began to gradually fade into oblivion. All the more so because the contemporary city stops evolving on the basis of urban planning standards developed over the centuries. Rem Koolhaas even goes as far as to state that “[n]ow we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture”<sup>9</sup>. It seems that the modern house in the city follows these planning trends and becomes an element of – as described by Koolhaas – “junkspace”<sup>10</sup>, and not the “real” city. Burgher houses, villas, and tenement houses have been more and more often replaced with the architecture of a multi-family residential building. Even when it is reinterpretation, repetition or imitation of a traditional urban quarter development, an infill completing street frontage development, or a residential tower, it has lost its Vitruvian authenticity, which was expressed in the unity of the following three attributes: *durability*, *purpose (utility)* and *beauty*<sup>11</sup>. Today's progressive commercialization of urban development, including primarily the residential one, has eventually led to the blurring of the picture of the so called “townscape” whose reestablishment was called for already in the 1950s and 60s by the conservative communities of architects and urban planners, such as Gordon Cullen in his publications *Townscape* and *The Concise Townscape*<sup>12</sup>. Today, Leon Krier is considered to be one of the advocates for the return to traditional ways of building cities and houses in the city. He is a conservative known for his criticism of the modernist ideology; his writings often denounce the legitimacy of aesthetic, moral or economic modern architectural and planning solutions.

Houses constitute the basic material of the city. They build its space, order and aesthetic diversity, even if their architecture happens to be modest and inconspicuous. It is said that “ugly houses can create a beautiful city”. Looking at the unsophisticated building development of the houses composing the frontage of the *Piazza del Campo* in Siena, or the modest, but colourful houses that form the development on the island of *Burano*, one can conclude that this statement finds its confirmation in the urban reality. Therefore, a number of the demands presented by Leon Krier that called for the return to architecture and urban planning understood in a traditional way according to the concept of New Urbanism has many supporters and is reflected in such implementations as *Poundbury* in Dorchester (England), or *Cayala* in Guatemala among other things. In Krier's theories, the issue of the house in the city seems to be the battleground for the spirit of authenticity in the traditionally understood concept of architecture, becoming the carrier of a certain material culture which is testimony to the existence of the civilizational diversity in the

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<sup>9</sup> [After:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Warszawa 2013, p. 342.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 407–410.

<sup>11</sup> Witruwiusz, *O architekturze ksiąg dziesięć* (transl. K. Kumaniecki), Warszawa 2004, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> P. Wilkinson, *50 teorii architektury, które powinieneś znać*, Warszawa 2011, p. 176–179.

era of increasing globalization. In his critical attitude, Krier treats modernist accomplishments with regard to housing issues as a temporary rejection of the form of the archetype of the house.<sup>13</sup> He points out a type of creative hypocrisy among the contemporary creators of architecture reflected in a dissonance between the principles that guide their designs of houses for other people and the conditions in which they themselves prefer to live and relax. According to Krier: “After fifty years of brainwashing, citizens may be resigned to the banality of modern buildings but, when they have the choice, a majority (including modernist architects) would prefer to live, work, spend their holidays and their retirement in traditional homes (just like François Mitterrand, Ieoh Ming Pei, Mick Jagger, Pier Boulez and Norman Foster). This gives rise to a phenomenon which may be called *public vice, private virtue*.”<sup>14</sup> This may indicate that the issue of the house still remains a part of some kind of cult, strongly rooted in the public consciousness and material tradition, which resists experimenting with its iconic expression of form, being in constant creative confrontation with its archetypal image-model.

Not only was the aspect of a modern house a matter of creating a healthy, friendly, ergonomic and comfortable space, constituting man’s direct living environment, but it also became an ideological battleground for the spirit of modernity and a new social consciousness, which was used by the modernist movements. Le Corbusier wrote in his work *Urbanisme*: “The house requires one to address the problem of architecture anew; it raises the issue of completely new means of production, a completely new plan, adapted to the new mode of life and aesthetics resulting from the new state of mind”<sup>15</sup>. In turn, in the publication *Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier discusses the true cult of the house and the language of symbols associated with it: “But men live in old houses and they have not yet thought of building houses adapted to them. The lair has been dear to their hearts since all time. To such a degree and so strongly that they have established the cult of the home. A roof! then other household gods. (...) Houses have not changed. But the cult of the house has remained the same for centuries. The house will also fall to dust”<sup>16</sup>. In the end, although it strongly existed in the minds of the creators of architecture and in the official mainstream of the residential architecture of urban housing estates, the Corbusieran idea of the house, understood as a “machine for living”, did not find sufficient social acceptance, especially in the building activities based on private initiative – and thus, it touched on the issue of the idea of one’s own home in the city to the greatest extent. Perhaps hence the popularity of suburbs as a kind of space free from the official architectural doctrine. In the book entitled *Learning from Las Vegas*, illustrating it with an example of Levittown, the architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour discuss the issue of the phenomenon defined as the “silent-white majority architecture” – people of the middle-middle class, being the epitome of the old urbanites who decided to live in the suburbs out of conviction, rejecting the dominant standards of the housing industry and social life in the city to a large extent established by the actions of the modernist architects. “Most suburbanites” – the authors conclude in the book *Learning from Las Vegas* – “reject the limited formal vocabularies architects’ values promote, or accept them twenty years later modified

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<sup>13</sup> L. Krier, *Architektura. Wybór czy przeznaczenie*, Warszawa 2001, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Le Corbusier, *Urbanistyka* (transl. T. Swoboda), Warszawa 2015, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Le Corbusier, *W stronę architektury* (transl. T. Swoboda), Warszawa 2012, p. 69–70.

by the tract builder: The Usonian house becomes the ranch house. Only the very poor, via public housing, are dominated by architects' values. Developers build for markets rather than for Man and probably do less harm than authoritarian architects would do if they had the developers' power"<sup>17</sup>.

#### 4. THE TWO FACES OF THE HOUSE'S ARCHITECTURE

The house belongs to a set of personal belongings, despite the externalisation of its form in the urban space. Since it ceased to be constructed by the hands of particular craftsmen – masters of their trade – such as architects, sculptors, masons, bricklayers, carpenters, joiners, etc., it has lost its traditional nature of a craftwork. The story about the birth of the house begins already at the stage of erecting the building – a spatial event that is important for its future inhabitants. Alchemy understood as the “craftsmanly art of building, hidden behind the arcana of the mysterious knowledge of the profession” has now been significantly devalued due to the technological imperative of the construction industry. The evident differences between the craftsmanly ways of erecting buildings, possessing a particular magical causative aura of the creative process, and industrial mass production appears to have a crucial influence on the character, aesthetics and quality of the architecture obtained.

The establishment of the rules for composing architecture of the past centuries has been strengthened in the public consciousness owing to a recognizable language – the code of forms, details, ornamentation and sculpture. More often than not the language of those historical patterns arouses a sense of nostalgia for the legacy of the past. Therefore the archetypal image of the form of the burgher house has gained the status of the cultural icon which appears to be still valid despite the aesthetic revolution begun by the modernist movements. The compositional means, constituting developments and quotations from the historical heritage of architecture, as well as the Art Nouveau inspirations or references to the organic forms known from nature, have become a part of the material culture building the identity of the burgher house. This is confirmed by the constantly historical city centres that attract visitors of the present with their esoteric force of the past. Leon Krier notes that: “In fact, there exist today two kinds of modern architecture. An official, standardized, international-style architect's architecture that may be perceived as arrogant or even provocative; and a private architecture, often based on regional models, which attempts to blend naturally and harmoniously with the architecture of existing landscapes and cities.”<sup>18</sup> In the former, Krier included housing estates implemented in accordance with official dogma and architectural standards, understood as a mass product, usually targeting the so called “statistical” i.e. an anonymous citizen and their family. The second type of architecture includes mainly private houses, which are usually the result of an individual initiative whose nature and aesthetics reflects the particular needs of specific people. These two completely different facets of architecture show that the question of the form of the house still remains the field of an open ideological struggle between the creators of architecture and its users.

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<sup>17</sup> R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Uczyć się od Las Vegas*, Kraków 2013, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> L. Krier, *Architektura wspólnoty*, Gdańsk 2011, p. 7.

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