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## THE UNTRADITIONAL TOWN HOUSE

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### NIETRADYCYJNY DOM MIEJSKI

#### Abstract

How to combine the desire to live in the bustling centre with the dream of a home atmosphere, freedom, peace and quiet, which living in a single family home gives? The most creative designers are able to use the narrowest gap between buildings, on rooftops, backyards, on abandoned land and bring out the unnoticed potential of unappreciated and forgotten places. New homes constructed in such places are often very far from the mould of a traditional house. At the same time, they are searching for space, privacy and a homely atmosphere. Sometimes they pretend there are none and stand facing away from the street; at other times they attract attention with their unusual architectural form.

*Keywords: city, house, infill building*

#### Streszczenie

Jak połączyć chęć mieszkania w tętniącym życiem centrum z tęsknotą za sieliskością i spokojem, jaki daje mieszkanie w domu jednorodzinnym? Najbardziej kreatywni potrafią wykorzystać najwęższą szczelinę między budynkami, na podwórkach, na dachach, na opuszczonej ziemi czy poprzemysłowych gruzach i wydobyć potencjał niedostrzeganych, niedocenianych czy zapomnianych miejsc. Nowe obiekty powstające w takich nietypowych lokalizacjach często są bardzo dalekie od formy tradycyjnego domu a jednocześnie poszukują prywatności i domowej atmosfery. Czasem udają, że ich nie ma i stoją zwrócone placami do ulicy, innym razem przyciągają uwagę niecodzienną bryłą architektoniczną.

*Słowa kluczowe: miasto, dom, zabudowa uzupełniająca*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**The House**, the basic unit of living, shaped by centuries, is the best model illustrating the changes, breakthroughs and trends in the approach to design. Moreover, the house – as a symbol of its time, is a perfect example showing the differences in lifestyle at the turn of decades and centuries. History shows us how, along with social development, the residents and living environment changed.

Nowadays, the traditional approach to the subject of the family seems to be disappearing. Young people become independent at an earlier age and move out of the family homes; they want to be independent, or share a flat with their peers. Divorces are more and more common, the long-term marriage and large families are starting to be in the minority. Single parenthood, couples with no children, singles, a growing number of single elderly people – all this leads to changes in the definition of the family, and consequently in our understanding of the house's meaning. We cannot talk about conventional homes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now is the time of breakthrough, a time of experimentation and innovation. First of all, this is a time of individualism, flexibility and convenience. Today, everyone wants to have and to be. Contemporary man needs a modern environment. He expects an interesting, safe and comfortable space. This modern environment is of course **The City**, a vibrant space where everything we can think of is near, even at our fingertips. It is a space that changes and provides newer and newer experiences and impressions where there is no room for boredom, because something is continually happening. It's a place that gives you plenty of opportunities and depends only on the inhabitants whether or if they benefit from them, because big cities never sleep. Here in the middle of the night you can not only go to a club, but you can do shopping, go to the hairdresser or to the gym. Here, especially the young, childless people live twice as much, and usually spend the predominant part of their time outside the home. For them, home is primarily a bedroom. Therefore, not the interior, form, space, but the **location** plays the leading role and is the key to the dream townhouse.

## 2. DREAM LOCATION

Why do people want to live in the city so much? The answer is simple, here the world is developing; here there is work, money and people, and here is the past and the future. Here, everything is near. You can choose and decide, just adapt the world to yourself.

What is the dream location? Of course near work, close to the city centre so that it can be reached on foot, preferably in up to ten minutes. Nearby are the best cafes, bars and restaurants, so you can go for breakfast almost in slippers, or to arrange a date. Best to have shops and supermarkets nearby, so as not to have to drive away after shopping. Necessarily near school, kindergarten and park, to go for a walk and take a breather, or just walk the dog. It should be next to the clinic, gym and parking. Oh, and to be safe and cheap, lots of space, light and privacy, a nice view and cool neighbours. Is it only so much, or maybe too much?

How to fit in a dream location, a house that will meet the expectations and satisfy all the needs of demanding citizens, and do it only for half price? Here begins the real problem. Such a task seems to be impossible to solve. If you have managed to find a piece of free land in a dream location in the intensive urban tissue, it usually is a place which no one wanted

for various reasons. The main reason is usually that it is too **small** or its **complicated shape** means a traditional house cannot be created therein. Another reason could be the **surroundings**, for example, too high buildings around, may obscure the site and block **access to light**, which is always an important criterion when we are designing residential buildings. And if you want to live in a vibrant city and have everything at your fingertips, then the surrounding of bustling pedestrian streets, traffic arteries and strangers around is an indispensable part of your location. That is why it is so difficult here to feel privacy, security and homely atmosphere. But there are also advantages to such a situation, because this type of unwanted terrain is usually relatively cheap, and economic considerations are often a dominating issue when we are building a house.

So the townhouse on a small complicated parcel and in an unfavourable environment is a real challenge for an architect, which requires forgetting schematics and traditional thinking about the architecture of the house and its inhabitants. It's also a chance to create, an outstanding architectural realization in a unique location. Therefore, very often architects adapt unwanted spaces and build unconventional homes for themselves, as in the case of the known to all *Bolko Loft* in Bytom – the own of architect Przemko Lukasik, from the *Medusagroup* (il.1.). It also happens that in the face of lack of understanding of the concept by investors, designers themselves are becoming developers. Because to create a non-traditional house we need knowledge, above average imagination, and creative courage. At the same time, future residents specifying the criteria of a dream home often forget about the limitations associated with urban locations where the available space is tiny or complicated. Reality, however, shows that you need to make a choice and to determine the priority criteria, and some dreams concerning your home, you need to minimize or opt out of in favour of other non-standard solutions, which are an added value. That is why it is so difficult sometimes to explain and convince prospective residents to trust the architects. And as it turns out, even the most specific but finished product, in this case **non-traditional house**<sup>1</sup>, is easier to sell once you enter it and feel the internal space, than to try to explain the concept which is far from what is commonly known. For example, the architects from the studio *Bow Wow* in Tokyo are doing so. They specialize in finding and developing extremely difficult and extraordinary places in the city. They create unique small and micro buildings squeezed somewhere on scraps of space, as the temporary *Mini House*, which stands on an area reserved for future investment projects (il.2.). This project is a kind of manifesto and shows the theories proclaimed by designers of *The Void Metabolism*<sup>2</sup> and *The Fourth-Generation House*<sup>3</sup>, concerning the form of the proposed building located in the space between existing facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> The term introduced by the author to determine various housing construction other than traditional free standing house, build on the optimal size plot, the definition is not fully specified, it includes a number of unusual housing solutions resulting from difficult conditions of location.

<sup>2</sup> New part of *metabolism* theory, quite different in content than the 1960s architectural thought. Defines the phenomenon of individual infill constructions in the spaces between existing buildings in the city. Tsukamoto Y., Kaijima M., Wan A., *Behaviorology*, New York 2010, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Fourth-Generation House* is the product of three important conditions: "...that the interior space be inviting for those who are not members of the family; that quasi-exterior spaces be introduced in a positive manner, coaxing inhabitants out of their homes; and that the gap spaces between neighboring buildings be redefined.", *ibidem*, p. 14.



Ill. 1. *Bolko loft* w Bytomiu – dom własny arch. P. Łukasika / *Bolko Loft* in Bytom – home of arch. P. Łukasik; Ill. 2. *Mini Dom* w Tokio, arch. Atelier Bow-Wow / *The Mini House* in Tokyo, arch. Atelier Bow-Wow; Ill. 3. *Dom Wieża* w Tokio, arch. Takamitsu Azuma / *The Tower House* in Tokyo, arch. Takamitsu Azuma; Ill. 4. *Dom Odbitego Minerale*, arch. Yasuhiro Yamashita / *The Reflection of Mineral House*, arch. Yasuhiro Yamashita; Ill. 5. *Dom NA*, arch. Sou Fujimoto / *The NA House*, arch. Sou Fujimoto; Ill. 6. *Dom Dziennego Światła* w Yokohamie, arch. Takeshi Hosaka / *The Daylight House* in Yokohama, arch. Takeshi Hosaka; Ill. 7. *Dom Andersonów* w Londynie, arch. J. Fobert / *The Anderson House* in London, arch. J. Fobert; Ill. 8. *Apartamenty NE*, arch. Yuji Nakae / *NE Apartments*, arch. Yuji Nakae; Ill. 9. *Dom Plecak*, arch. Stefan Eberstadt / *The Backpack House*, arch. Stefan Eberstadt; Ill. 10. *Mini eko-farma* na dachu wieżowca na Manhattanie / *mini eco-farm* on the roof in Manhattan; Ill. 11. Teoretyczny projekt *Miasta Świń*, arch. MVRDV / theoretical project of *The Pig City*, arch. MVRDV; Ill. 12. *Miasto wertykalne* w Singapurze, arch. OMA / *The vertical city* in Singapore, arch. OMA;

This type and many similar town houses are arising all around the world in large metropolitan areas. They often stand out from the surroundings by their otherness, disturb the familiar order of the street, sometimes blend into the surroundings and pretend either that they do not exist or that they were always there. Regardless of form, material and scale of extravagance they always seem to be from a dream, like a small island on the urban ocean.

### 3. SMALL SPACE – SMALL HOUSE?

**Small houses** accompanied man forever, but their scale did not stem from space limitations but rather from poor function and the small needs of the inhabitants. The house was just a shelter; man lived in contact with nature. Nowadays, residents have greater expectations, the function of the house is becoming more and more complex, and at the same time the cityscape is becoming increasingly tight. For Europeans a small property in the city is associated more with simple function, such as a point of information, bus stop or public toilet, usually cheap, not nice and not matching the surroundings.

However, in the crowded Asian metropolitan areas, very small houses, economical in function and Interior Decoration (mockingly called *rabbit houses*) are a common and fully accepted phenomenon that results from the prevailing conditions of urban planning, but also a deeply rooted tradition of minimalism. Cities such as Tokyo especially are a true pattern of various solutions, astonishing and inventive housing structures located in a small or micro-plots. It seems that the Japanese are an exceptional nation that can find and appreciate the aesthetic value of miniaturization. You can even observe the fascination and adoration of micro-objects and Small Forms, and this probably also translates into general acceptance of a small living space. The most inventive designers from Tokyo are able to build a house in the narrowest gaps between buildings, and to create **mini infill objects**. They can take advantage of even the smallest piece of free land; enlarge its capabilities through expansion upwards, creating **thin tall houses** like *The House Tower* designed by Takamitsu Azuma (il.3.). And if the investment is surrounded by low buildings and levels cannot be added upwards, architects create several storey **underground homes**.

Regardless of whether they are building up or down, they try to multiply the small available area and fit all the most necessary functions in it by adding space on several levels. And what if the space is limited and cannot be conjured up from nowhere? It's possible to create **micro-house** in which you live as in a cabin on a small ship. Such amazingly small houses seem to be a new trend in the residential architecture of Tokyo metropolis. Designed with low-cost materials, they take a simple but artful form, draw the attention of passers-by and create a charming atmosphere of the place. One of the authors of such micro-houses, architect Yoshiharu Tsukamoto from Atelier Bow-Wow, calls such small buildings *The Pet Architecture*. These houses do not compete with the more dignified buildings. They put into surroundings, relaxing atmosphere and put passers-by into a good mood. As small pets, tiny cottages are small *favourites* of the city. Their presence is surprising, but meets with full approval, because their scale is so close to humans and coherent with the original idea of a house – a shelter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Y. Tsukamoto, *Pet Architecture Guide Book*, World Photo Press, Tokyo 2002.

The limited cubature of micro-houses forces more flexible solutions to the interior, and opening to the outside world. The space of the house is multifunctional or built from sliding walls, rotating and folding elements. The interior transforms depending on the needs. Such **house-transformers**<sup>5</sup> draw the inhabitants into some kind of interaction. Three-dimensional cubature becomes four-dimensional space, which changes and evolves over time, just as a changeover of activities, time of day or users. The house can also open up, mainly in terms of enlarging and it may temporarily occupy an external space, not necessarily owned by the residents.

#### 4. SHAPELESS AND DIFFICULT TERRAIN – SEARCHING FOR SPACE, LIGHT AND PRIVACY

Not only can the size of the parcel be a challenge. In the search of space for a dream home, you may notice empty spaces, which are not small but difficult to develop, and consequently unwanted by anyone. The creative mind is able to exploit even the most complicated location. This may be empty space **on a cliff, at fortifications, next to blind walls, on the edge** of the roadway or **at the interface** between spaces. Most of this type of implementation concerns the **extremely narrow**, freestanding houses, which are just squeezed into an imaginary gap, or in-fill buildings filling small spaces between neighbouring buildings. You may even notice a kind of fashion for such houses. Of course, filling even the narrowest spaces in the city is nothing new, it's quite a natural process of evolution of the city, but today this phenomenon is further intensified, and the resulting objects are quite fascinating because like never before they cross the limits of our imagination about the house, its function and scale. Only in this kind of extremely narrow space, we are able to understand how important every centimetre of floor area is, and how difficult it is to solve the problem of internal communication, how important the thickness of the walls and their construction is, and how great the challenge to ensure optimal illumination of the rooms is. Each issue provokes designers to a creative search for the best possible solutions, and the result is a whole group of innovative ideas that will impress and amaze at the same time. And what if the plot is not only narrow but also crooked and simply strange? Then the houses also have a strange, **irregular plan** corresponding to the shape of the land upon which they are located. Then, there are more unusual, sculptural forms, geometries seemingly inappropriate – as triangular homes in the sharp angles of intersecting streets. Apparently nothing new, but the extravagant forms, as in the case of cubic form of 44-square metre house, designed by Yasuhiro Yamashita, called *The Reflection of Mineral House* (il.4.), associates to us more with the function of the museum of contemporary art or the opera house. And here, in miniature scale of a detached house it acquires a completely different dimension and does not remain unnoticed by passers-by. The house perversely becomes a micro dominant feature, the spatial hallmark of a fragment of the city and sometimes even a tourist attraction.

So, in such a situation, the problem of **privacy** and **security** occurs. In the search for space and light, it is sometimes difficult to hide interiors from the eyes of passers-by, especially when the architectural form is attractive and is a real eye-catcher. That is why some people intentionally opt for small **glass houses**, showing the intimate world of household

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<sup>5</sup> House-transformers, a term introduced by the author, it is inspired by the name of Transformers – toy robots with the ability to transform their bodies into other forms, like: vehicles, animals or other objects. In fiction many of those robots can change their mass and size.



members, like in *The NA House* designed by Sou Fujimoto (il.5.). This house looks like a cluster of several aquariums. It's like living on a shop window. But is it enjoyable? It seems that this solution suits only a few. For most people it would be a difficult challenge, regardless of their nation. That is why we observe a number of ideas for modern shutters, curtains, blinds and other mobile solutions that can increase the separation of household from the outside world, at least temporarily. These solutions, allows designers to create variable and possible for **opening and closed architecture**.

There is also a large group of people who want to hide their private world, fence off from the city, to be on the other side of the wall, where there is peace, quiet and a homely atmosphere. All around the globe we can observe a trend in housing design where the front elevation has no windows; sometimes it is even difficult to find the door. Such **houses behind the wall** usually have two faces. From the street side they are simple, dark, raw, inaccessible, but on the other side, they are firmly open to the garden, which becomes another green room and adds space and light into the interior of the dwelling. The front wall sometimes takes the form of a mirror, reflects the surroundings, and pretends that nothing is behind. But, there is an **invisible house**. And what if on the other side of the mirror there is no place for a garden? Then the front wall can be covered with plants. The result is a **house behind a vertical garden** – a bit retracted, hiding the life of the household members behind a green wall.

## 5. BUILT-AROUND SPACE – SURROUNDED HOUSE

There are such places in the city where the buildings are turned back to back, and the space behind the rear walls does not belong to anyone. It is dark and seemingly too small to successfully place there any building, unless it is small with no windows. Could this be a home? If someone does not need beautiful views, there is still plenty of light to use, from the top. So, there may be built a **surrounded house** with no windows like *The Daylight House* in Yokohama, designed by Takeshi Hosaka, in which the roof is covered with square skylights, from which the sun's rays illuminate the tight, undivided interior of the house (il.6.).

An extreme case is a **house built in** a small yard, a **house with no facade**, or rather only with the facade of a roof, like *The Anderson House* in central London, designed by Jamie Fobert. This house cannot be seen from the street, you can see it only from the rooftops of neighbouring buildings (il.7.).

If such an enclosed place is more spacious, the problem is not so difficult to solve, because a **house with an atrium** is already a very well-known and tested model of residential architecture. Although if the interior space takes a more extravagant shape, just like a wavy wall at *The NE Apartments* (il.8.), designed by Yuji Naka, the associations with the historical Roman House seems to be very distant.

## 6. LACK OF AREA – TOWARDS THE VERTICAL CITY?

And what if you find your dream location, but it has completely no space? Maybe it is possible to *hang* it **in the air** somewhere over this place, appended to the wall, or hiding

somewhere **on the roof** of the existing buildings? And if not on land, not in the air, then maybe start to live **on the water** as on a houseboat on Amsterdam's canals? Creativity has no limits, only legal limitations sometimes block the imagination. Then, we need a little cleverness, to actually go beyond the rules, use loopholes in the law, or we need a lot of courage to oppose and take the prohibited space. It doesn't matter if it is lawfully or wantonly, people produce these kinds of residential structures, which are **stuck on, suspended, or built on** existing buildings. An example is the 9-square-metre *Backpack House* of Stefan Eberstadt (il.9.). This lightweight construction is coupled up to the wall of a residential building and starts to be an additional room suspended by steel cables and attached to the facade. Such solutions are balancing a bit on the border of art and architecture; they are some kind of happening. That is why they are rather rare and usually just temporary. They grow like **hubs**, attach themselves like **parasites**, do not touch the ground and are suspended in the air like a **bird's nest**.

These structures often occupy the most attractive locations in the whole neighbourhood, because the space on top of the roof is the best lit place in town, and the light and space is a luxury in the intensively urbanized city tissue. **Penthouses** in the city centre are usually the best and most expensive apartments in the entire building. Here is an interesting view, you can have a large terrace or a roof garden ... and perhaps even a whole farm? Yes, a farm, a different world, an idyllic atmosphere just a few levels above the streets of the bustling city. It sounds unrealistic, but a little bit of that dream about the future can already be observed on the roofs of skyscrapers of Manhattan, a city where land prices are maximally high, and lots of people who have come here in search of work and happiness, are living in apartments of a small drawer size, exactly like in the movie *King-size* directed by J. Machulski. It is here where **mini eco-farms** arise, located almost in the clouds because on the roofs of tall buildings (il.10.). From here, it is only one step to the spontaneous development of the **vertical city** as in science-fiction movies, or the realization of a utopian vision of *The Pig City*, presented by architects from the MVRDV group (il.11.). In their theory, life is going on high pyramids composed of rural farms, where animals graze on large terraces. Is this the direction we are going in?

The great metropolitan areas attract like a magnet, so their population is constantly increasing. To live with dignity in an overcrowded city you have to think outside the box, fancifully and prospectively. Just go to the big Asian cities to see first-hand already, today, seemingly unrealistic ideas. Perhaps in search of space and light, it will be a vertical city offering a good standard of housing in a good location, as designed by the OMA studio, located in Singapore, a complex of thirty-one 6-storey buildings raised one above the other (il.12.). Or, maybe it will be just a shelter, but in a good location, just like slums on the rooftops in Hong Kong?

## 7. CONCLUSION

The beginning of the construction of a dream home in the city is always searching for the perfect location. But nowadays it is a challenge, because the very centre is increasingly built-up and land prices are constantly rising. In such a situation, you can try to open your mind and look more broadly on the surrounding urban space, look for unwanted, neglected, difficult and unfavourable places. Every inch of space is important. Just a bit of imagination and courage or cleverness, and it may be that we will build a dream house in the city



centre, on a plot bought for pennies, just as happens in bustling Tokyo. Such a recycling of undervalued space stimulates creative thinking. Therefore, each project on a small, difficult location is different, far from the traditional patterns and proven technical solutions or space composition. Then, is it not so, as the proverb says, that *necessity is the mother of invention*? Well, the solution to the problem is usually an innovative idea, in this case a **non-traditional townhouse**.

Of course, the emergence of so many innovative residential constructions in Japan would not be possible if they did not have the support of the local authorities for these exceptional architectural initiatives. Also, the introduction of appropriate legislation favours brave investors and architects. In many other countries the construction of such facilities would not have been possible because of the legal requirements. They could only be carried out as a happening, a kind of artistic interventions in urban space, and then only for a moment – as a temporary architectural and sociological manifesto, because for the average European, living in such a house is absurd. We are far from the Japanese mentality, which grows out of a tradition and history very different from ours. Even if we have similar priorities, our habits are already very distant from the culture of the Far East. Therefore, the prevalence of small houses is the phenomenon of overcrowded, Japanese metropolis.

Here the question arises of whether such a non-traditional townhouse is also a good and desirable house in other major cities in the world? Is it enough that such a house surprises, impresses and is interesting for us? Do we want to live in it for more than a day, two or three? Or maybe the non-traditional house is good for the non-traditional residents, regardless of location, size, durability of construction, privacy, or the amount of light? We live in a time of individualism, tolerance, exhibitionism, extravagance, mobility, temporality, the cult of otherness and novelty. Thinking optimistically, maybe it is not an escape from the tradition but a search for new values, also in thinking about the form and function of the urban home? So, such a **house other than the traditional**, for example: un-private or without windows, folding, hanging, temporary, crooked or micro-house, isn't this a house? Maybe this is exactly the new townhouse of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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