

## SURREAL HOUSES

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### DOMY SURREALISTYCZNE

#### Abstract

The article analyses chosen examples of contemporary city houses related to the movement of Surrealism in the arts. In the scope of the research have been introduced: built objects, designs of architects claiming to draw inspirations from Surrealism, designers applying methods of Surrealist artists in the process of creating “architectural objects”, and architects commonly described as Surrealists. A background to these visions was the fact that Surrealists recognized the home as a metaphor for the human psyche, and the city – a space of endless possibilities.

*Keywords: Borel, Hejduk, OMA, Spiller, Surrealism, Tschumi, Woods*

#### Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje wybrane przykłady współczesnych domów w mieście związanych z nurtem surrealizmu w sztuce. W pole poszukiwań wchodzi: przykłady realizacji i projektów budynków mieszkalnych architektów powołujących się na inspiracje surrealistyczne, projektantów aplikujących metody artystów surrealistycznych w procesie tworzenia rzeczy architektonicznej oraz architektów określanych wprost mianem surrealistów. Tłem dla powyższych wizji było uznawanie domu przez surrealistów za metaforę psyche oraz ludzkiej podświadomości, a miasta – przestrzeń niezliczonych możliwości.

*Słowa kluczowe: Borel, Hejduk, OMA, Spiller, surrealizm, Tschumi, Woods*

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Although architecture in Surrealism was the only branch of art with an undecided status – an “unfulfilled promise of surrealist thought”<sup>1</sup> – and few objects described by their authors as Surrealist have been built in the time of the greatest expansion of Surrealist tendencies, the house, as well as the city, has been characterized as the main topic of this movement in the arts (Giorgio De Chirico’s paintings or the series of *Femme-Maison* works by Louise Bourgeois ought to be mentioned here). At the verge of these two areas – the domain of creating space and the Surreal tendencies in the arts – a dialogue of forms and spaces has been established, in which irrational meanings and experiences have been created. Not many architectural objects are regarded directly as Surreal (the heyday of this current in architecture was the period of the avant-garde battle of the International Style), but tendencies generated in Surrealism are also visible in buildings completed afterwards and architectural visions remaining on paper. In addition to homes generally considered as Surreal (or their projects) like Angelo Intermezzi’s Villa Girasole or Frederic Kiesler’s Endless House may be listed here; contemporary examples of residential buildings by architects referring to Surreal inspirations (e.g. Frederic Borel), architects implicating methods of Surreal artists in the process of creating architectural objects (like Rem Koolhaas in Villa Dal’Ava), and architects directly referred to as Surrealists (like Bernard Tschumi, showing his surreal face e.g. in *Gardens of Pleasure* and John Hejduk, commonly described as a *Mediaeval Surrealist*).

Surrealism and architectural theory have had a range of mutual topics since their coming into being. The Surreal movement in the arts has been conceived as the conceptual theory of architectural ideas, whereas for Surrealists architecture has fulfilled a primary task – using dreams to shape forms. In the Surrealist tendencies one can also search for the house in deeper meanings than the physical face of a building.

Along with criticizing the automation of human life for narrowing horizons, restraining the vision of the world, and losing imaginativeness in the sphere of actions and desires, Surrealism contested rationalism and attacked Le Corbusier’s aesthetics, opting for a deliberate reversal of the mechanisms of control, taste, calculation and judgment. Anthony Vidler assigns overtaking the five points of Le Corbusier by Surreal architecture, but always accompanied with a certain ironic self-awareness. André Breton recognized the modernist Functionalism as “the most miserable dream of the collective subconscious”, in which technological realism killed the sensuality of life, and Tristan Tzara – as the negation of an image of inhabiting. The hygienic form devoid of any ornament was perceived by the Surrealists as the negation of the archetypic image of inhabiting. They replaced the Modern machine for living with their “oneiric machine for dreaming”<sup>2</sup>.

Koolhaas’s Villa Dall’Ava in Saint Cloud by Paris was inspired by modernist forms (Koolhaas mentions Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson as his inspirers), but retransformed and formed of different materials. Koolhaas dialogues with Le Corbusier’s five points of Modern architecture, retransforming them, creating a place full of contradictions – a big house in a small area, interacting with its surroundings and nature. The building is lifted above the terrain level. Its living space is enclosed in a glass box (as with Philip Johnson’s Glass House), based on a rectangular block, but covered with stones in contrast to the white

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<sup>1</sup> T. Mical, *Architecture and Surrealism*, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> A. Vidler, *Fantasy, the Uncanny and Surrealist Theories of Architecture*, Papers of Surrealism, issue 1, 2003. [http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat\\_files/Vidler.pdf](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat_files/Vidler.pdf), access 01.05.2016.

volumes of the International Style. Another of Le Corbusier's points – supporting structures on pilotis – in Villa Dall'Ava becomes an authorial game instead of a real structural system (pilotis here are distributed disproportionately on one side of the object and do not run vertically but obliquely – at various angles). Furthermore, ribbon windows in the villa are not placed in façades free from structural constraints, but limited with the planes of the walls finished with corrugated metal and concrete (on the north side of the house). Koolhaas recognized the Functional, open interiors of Farnsworth House or Villa Savoye as boring (according to the architect, the common type of program similar, similar to these objects, resulted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in banal, repetitive architecture). Therefore he introduced new elements in his building like a polyester wall enclosing the kitchen, bamboo brise-soleils, plywood and corrugated metal ceilings or numerous stairs, and a ramp enabling an autonomous entrance to two apartments of the villa (for the parents and their daughter). Thus was created a building with “nomadic space”.

The Corbu's principle of a flat roof with a roof garden has been fulfilled by putting on the villa's roofing a pool with the axis of its composition pointed in the direction of the Eiffel Tower. The axis connects the suburban house with the context of the big city. Simultaneously it is also the space around the pool that becomes the scenery of surrealist photos of the building, binding it with Surreal tendencies. OMA's employees perform a synchronous dance here, dressed in old-fashioned swimsuits, characters looking like inhabitants use the pool at dusk, with a view of the illuminated Eiffel Tower in the background. Elements that complete the image are photographs of the villa with a giraffe – the favourite animal of Surrealists. According to Roberto Gargiani, who interpreted the building, the animal matches the gravity inversion used in the house – the weight of the pool seems to be “lifted” by the glass block and the slender pilotis<sup>3</sup>.

If houses are the basic material forming each city, the Surreal city is a city of glass houses. Transparency was one of the main topics of Surrealism. In André Breton's *Nadja*, a glass house, where inhabitants are constantly visible from the surroundings, was aimed to reach self-awareness: “I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call, where everything hanging from the ceiling and on the walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where who I am will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond”<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, Louis Soutor noted that each primary residential unit should be made of glass; windows were “useless eyes” for this Surrealist<sup>5</sup>. This assumption refutes the idea of a home as a refuge of intimacy, space filled with privacy, secrets guarded by its facades (the axiom included in the theses of this conference).

It's uneasy though to separate the Surreal glass house as a model form from contemporary exhibitionism. Walter Benjamin recognized discretion (in the past acting as an advantage of aristocracy and other higher social classes) as a characteristic feature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, belonging to petty bourgeois parvenus. Glass houses are one of the favourite subjects of the Modern Movement, but Surrealists differentiated their projects from Functionalist houses – as houses of the soul as opposed to houses of the body. Dust becomes an important new

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<sup>3</sup> F. Fromont, *The House of Doctor Koolhaas*, in *AA files 68*, London 2014, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> A. Breton, *Nadja*, Grove Press, New York 1960, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> A. Vidler, *op.cit.*

element, creating opacity in glass Surreal houses – opaque glass as an aspect of terrifying reality – of the world of darkness and monsters.

Bernard Tschumi's *Urban Glass House* (1999) is a theoretical model of contemporary residential space in a glass volume, located in urban space on a roof of an existing high building. The house oscillates between transparency and opacity of its volume, presenting the open residential space – permeating rooms – of its whole interior, besides private, communication and auxiliary spaces, which are concealed in the folds of a corrugated, resin wall. Bathrooms are hidden behind a partition of a composite of glass and resin, oscillating between transparency and opacity, and simultaneously functioning as a screen. The building's curtain wall, with steel construction contrasts with circular forms inside, the apartment clad with sensual materials – marble, fabrics and wood. The hidden elements in Tschumi's house act as the “subconscious mind” of the building, adapting to the desires of its users. Breton's method to reach the subconscious through moral exhibitionism was accompanied with a linkage between nature and technology, characteristic of Surrealism. Publicizing privacy at the roof of the modern megastructure ought to balance privatization of public, urban space, which for Tschumi occurs in a virtual reality.

In opposition to the abstract architecture of the Modern Movement, the Surreal “new mythology” has been created (Tristan Tzara's “Intra-uterine space”). The Surreal domesticity symbolizes the comfort of foetal life. Rounded, spherical or semi-spherical houses have appeared, focused on delicacy and tactility of forms. Primary models of living – caves, grottos, tents – form the basis for Surreal buildings. Frederic Borel uses rounded, organic structures in his projects of multifamily houses, in the forms of whole buildings or their components (the architect points out that architecture has always meant looking for opportunities to cross borders of building structures and to fold shapes)<sup>6</sup>. In Borel's project on the rue Saint-Exupéry in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges (2013–15), a reconstruction of an existing residential building into a residential and commercial one, four cup-shaped elements (named “Tulipes” by the architect) constructed on the roof of a rectangular solid act as living spaces, connected with a glass cube (two flats are put inside).

Borel admits to Surreal inspirations also in his buildings with deconstructive forms. He recalls Seb Janiak's visions and Breton's urban walks, while recognizing transition and flux as inherent characteristics of contemporaneity, and complexity and ambiguity as consequences of pure, ascetic, functional forms. His architectonic play with spaces is supposed to create a world of feelings and emotions – a juxtaposition of closed space (density of a city or a forest) with openings – i.e. a feeling of freedom but also isolation. Opacity and contradictions according to Borel have always been more interesting in architecture than transparency. The concept of his building at the corner of rue Oberkampf and boulevard de Belleville in Paris (1989) was based on connecting two spaces – a narrow street and a boulevard – the realistic world of the street and the surreal of the courtyard. Commercial functions in that place were planned in order to stop inhabitants, acting as an accent, creating a place generating movement. A sunken garden though (which was created by means of using differences between levels of the streets) was formed in order to bond architectural structure with nature – the ground – instead of an artificially created street network. Borel's two worlds represent two different faces of the building – one at night, after the dawn, contrasted with another, forms

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<sup>6</sup> F. Borel, *Cross[breed]ing, Passages & Sequences*, <http://www.fredericborel.fr>, access 01.01.2016.

visible during the day. The second face responds to Le Corbusier's play of volumes in sunlight. Together, they present Surreal architecture as a mixture of attractive and appalling elements – providing the element of surprise in the city walk.

The comeback to the archetypical forms of inhabiting is an expression of nostalgia, a critique of technology and a reference to the origins of civilization (even if it is the Freudian womb). The subject of technology and nature appears in both Modernism and Surrealism, but Surrealists<sup>7</sup> recognized the organicity found in Le Corbusier's writings as a pure metaphor, considering the clear division between nature and machine, organic and inorganic environments, the worlds of dead and alive.

In Surrealism, this boundary has been blurred. The body retransformed by technology, retransforms external space by itself. Neil Spiller, who in his works combines technology (virtual space and nanotechnology) with “Pataphysics, alchemy, Surrealism, cybernetics”<sup>8</sup>, in a series of theoretical projects created since 1998 and titled *Communicating Vessels* (the architect drew the title from André Breton's collection of essays) forms *sublime* space – variable and alive in continuous process of growth and decline; the space in which diverse activities of various impact result in continuous architecture development. Graphics – illustrations of fragments of the design – present incessant merging of building elements, organic forms, fragments of living tissue and geometric structures. Contemporary technologies allow architects to “augment” the physical space, and Spiller goes further in his artistic actions, drawing from the human subconscious and psyche by means of machinery created out of living and technical components. The primary material of the space is here e.g. artistic narcissism, received in the “input point” (a project of *Velazquez Machine*, 1998) by fish on a frying pan and “jumping hydrochloric-acid inoculators”, received by “a highly sensitive tongue” lying on a couch, transferred, and creating *Ever-changing-view*.

A fragment of the still created Spiller's design is *Longhouse – House of Professor of Surrealism* (2015), located by Spiller (purely theoretically) on Fordham Island near Canterbury – the “mythical psycho-geography” from the architect's own childhood. The “spatial and intellectual centre of the *Communicating Vessels* Island”, is a prytaneion, in which surreal banquets of mythical creatures are supposed to happen, ghosts are dreams. “A Palace of shifting relationships, of momentary flutterings, cartographies and trajectories; where objects have the same accountability as people. It is a place of flame, of heat, of a rotten sun, of dusk and dawn, where the vertical is assimilated into the horizontal and where Modernism breaks down. The vitality of objects has increased a thousand-fold, to the agile architect these disruptive architectural technologies breathe new life into the lexicon of architecture, we can parse architecture differently nowadays, the verbs of architecture are being re-written”<sup>9</sup>.

Although the issues of beauty and ugliness seem to be uncomplicated for a common user of urban residential buildings (even though in fact it is not, which is confirmed by the theses of the conference: “there is no understanding between the novelty of originality and conservatism of tradition, they exist beside each other”), the issue of beauty in Surrealism

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<sup>7</sup> A. Vidler, *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> N. Spiller, *Visionary Architecture, Blueprints of the Modern imagination*, Thames & Huson, London 2007, p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.greenwichunigalleries.co.uk/negative-equity-house-projects-by-neil-spiller-nic-clear/>, dostęp 2016.06.20.

is a paradoxical matter. The traditional concept of beauty was substituted here with convulsive beauty, miracles, dread and black humour. According to André Breton, beauty is not the main aim of Surrealists, and furthermore – a need to distinguish living beauty from dead also occurs.

John Hejduk's architecture, the architectural personality who is referred to as a "mediaeval surrealist", cannot be classified as an example of classical beauty or traditional building typology. Sketches and drawings, graphics full of forms positioned somewhere between geometry, urban tissue, and the world of animate and inanimate objects, amaze with strangeness, melancholy and humour. Ambiguity, mystery, mythicity and symbolism are present even in Hejduk's already realized buildings – at the Berlin residential complex of Kreuzberg Tower (1998).

Hejduk's breaking of rules of logic and aesthetic stereotypes is an ideal illustration of surreal, non-obvious beauty in architecture. This has been accompanied by the architect's texts – at the verge of poetry, architectural descriptions and the Surrealist method of creating texts from scattered sentences. *The House of the Suicide* and *the House of the Mother of the Suicide* (1986–2014), presently located in Prague, use the metaphor of the house to commemorate the tragic fate of Jan Palach. Steel cubes with an edge length of 9 feet are "crowned" with metal spikes – conceived as metaphorical implusions of light and sound. In the "house" of Palach's mother the spikes are vertical, reflecting suffering in silence, introversion; in the "house" of Palach himself, they face outward – the heroic suicidal act of the rebel must be noticed by the surroundings. The metaphorical "houses" are devoid of function and feeling of domesticity; this is the greatest power of expression of Hejduk's monument. Simultaneously, by operating with ecstatic forms and focusing on the sense of hearing, the architect refers to the foundations of Surrealism.

The Surreal house was the home of terror and fear, a place of horror and phobias, a space of projection, introjection and free flow without limits – the machine of surreal work. A dialogue with the order of the space is held in the building of Villa Dall'Ava and the project of the Bernard Tschumi's Glass House, the border which in architecture is a wall (in the case of OMA, this dialogue took form of a trial in the French court). Neil Spiller's drawings, on the other hand, illustrate expressly the issue of projection and introjection; they are also distinctive images of Surrealist machines. The house as the place of terror and fear is a complicated issue. The initial psychological utility of home is being destroyed here, i.e. providing the sense of security; balance between usability and aesthetics of the space, which is the basic assumption of residential buildings in a city as architectural things.

Lebbeus Woods's interest in the reality of war and destruction, demonstrated in drawing concepts of houses in cities, which reflected architecture in the face of armed conflicts and earthquakes. However, not buildings that secure their users from the effects of devastation, but those abandoning the existing typology of buildings and aesthetics of design; they were supposed to semantically reflect the horror and trauma after catastrophes. A series of drawings created after the war in Yugoslavia (e.g. *Injections, Planes; Injections, Scab*, 1992–93) introduces the term "volatile" into the reconstruction of space destroyed in the armed conflicts. Existing forms of architecture should be/are replaced with "injections, scabs, scars, new tissue" – buildings as existential remnants of war, evidences of past events. "Seismicity" consists of many proposals (e.g. *Shard Houses, Slip Houses*, 1995), located in the waters of the previous trade harbour of San Francisco (Bay Mud), and constructed on existing, wooden piers. Woods's houses "are built of scavenged shards of the industrial wasteland, but are also

shards themselves, of a now scattered cultural whole”<sup>10</sup>. The drawings, which show structures devoid of the feeling of permanence, deprive viewers of a sense of security. The buildings of Quake City are supposed to wobble from seismic vibrations; the structures in Sarajevo also lack visual stability. Woods’s objects are more reminiscent of mechanical-organic creatures than architectural reality. They may also be associated with the subject current in Surrealism, which – next to psychosis – was trauma.

In the polis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is a clear place for surreal tendencies. Distinctive components of contemporary urban space have already been characterized as the intellectual base and elements of the surreal worldview. This concerns: extension of physical space (its continuance in the world of dreams and deliriums in Surrealism, and in the virtual world in contemporaneity), blurring physical boundaries (including those between objectivity and subjectivity, observation and imagination – and thus physical space and cyberspace, reality and fantasy, which bonds the Surreal worldview with the contemporary polis) and those between day and night (in the contemporary city done by electric lights and blackout). Imagination, which in Surrealism raises man above his own limitations, is also the basis of the ontology of events in the contemporary polis<sup>11</sup>. Like a Surrealist artist, a contemporary architect, in discarding mindless, repetitive rationalism, searches for syntheses of the world of imagination and reality, nature and technique led by contemporary scientific discoveries, reflected in the newest technologies.

In this context the house in the city appears as a favourite space of the Surrealists (this applies both to the residential home and the city itself). The early Mies and the early Barragan are now assigned to the trend of creating surreal residential houses – the shapeless space “in-between” – where paradoxes, conflicts of internal and external appear as indefinite. Rem Koolhaas suggests Dalí’s paranoid-critical method as a contemporary methodology to create architecture. The surreal accident is exploited in contemporary buildings, using the fact that supernatural objects are not subjects to full explanation – comprehensive interpretation.

Neil Spiller hopes that architecture in the future (buildings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Spiller’s idea was introduced in his article printed in 2003<sup>12</sup>) will be fluid, open, responsive. For this architect, it’s necessary therefore to get rid of the terms of sincerity, clearness, authenticity, architecture, and to use state-of-the-art technologies. Spiller himself links different sciences, introducing nanotechnology and parascience into the scope of aesthetics (not only architecture – Spiller’s designs are also collages and graphics; like Lebbeus Woods, he “thinks” by drawing). The compound of domains – and therefore the worlds of nature and technology – physical reality and subconscious becomes the incarnation of reality from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Residential spaces are supposed to undergo the unstoppable process of rise and fall, constantly changing in a series of linear, nonlinear and quantum events. As in the visions of

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<sup>10</sup> L. Woods, in: N. Spiller, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> E. Rewers in *Post-polis* describes (after Arjun Appadurai) now happening „the second revolution of imagination”. This revolution becomes now the basis of the consumption approach to the world and replaces freedom with non-places. In this context are carried out architectural practices of e.g., Bernard Tschumi.

<sup>12</sup> N. Spiller, *Deformography: the poetics of cybridised architecture*, Papers of Surrealism, issue 4, 2005, <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal4/acrobat%20files/Spillerpdf.pdf>, access 01.05.2016.

Giorgio de Chirico's cities – the architectural reflection of the crisis of modernism – architecture becomes a place of supernatural effects, created by combining decontexted fragments (human or spatial). “Sewing” the fragments means overlapping objects without content. The surreal uncanny deprives the home space of security and feeling of settling in, simultaneously allowing new, hidden contents to be discovered.

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