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‘PLAYING DICE’
– A VOID AND FILL-IN.
A STUDY OF THE URBAN DESIGN
OF A TOWN HOUSE

„KOSTKI DO GRY”
– PUSTKA I WYPEŁNIENIE.
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A b s t r a c t

A quotation from Herbert’s poem became a starting point to reflections on the significance of a townhouse as the substance of the urban design of a city. The importance of the replacement of the buildings, their homogeneity or heterogeneity urges an analysis of the different ways of using house design, and its influence on the development and the reading of the urbanity of space. Especially tenement houses, such as in Łódź, come to be the rightful element of the urban game – in the role of an object filling the space or extremely present through nonexistence. The author tries to establish the influence of such an intimate and private space as home on the public space of the city.

Keywords: tenement house, the architecture of the city, privacy, public space

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

Cytat z wiersza Herberta staje się punktem wyjścia do rozważań o znaczeniu domu miejskiego jako tworzywa urbanistyki miasta. Wymiana zabudowy, jej jednolitość i różnorodność skłaniają do analizy sposobów projektowania miejskich domów i ich wpływu na budowanie i odczytywanie miejskości przestrzeni. Szczególnie kamienice miast, takich jak Łódź, stają się pełnoprawnym elementem wypełniającym przestrzeń, a często zaskakująco obecnym przez nieistnienie. W podjętych rozważaniach autorka stara się określić istotę wpływu tak intymnej i prywatnej przestrzeni jaką jest dom na przestrzeń publiczną miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: kamienica, architektura miasta, prywatność, przestrzeń publiczna

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(...)
'clear your throat –
here is a city
with one tower
a leaning wall
yellow houses
like playing dice'
(...)¹

1. A HOUSE IN THE CITY

Sometimes we move around places which allow us to catch deeper insight into the rules of the machinery of a space. A walk along 5 kilometre long Piotrkowska Street in Łódź, especially as a repeatable experience, shows that not the design of a single house but the endless repetition of houses placed along the street is important for the image and character of this particular city. Singled out, the tenement houses are interesting in detail, differ in height and ornamentation, have symmetrical or asymmetrical entrances, various shops, open or closed courtyards but all these features are not important when observed in the long, horizon stretching, perspective of the straight street.

But this singular experience is not that specific at all. The idea of walking is used in many concepts of architecture², also as 'a form of appropriation, the 'spatial realization of a place'³. A route and a sequence appear as the two most important ways of the experience of space, architectural and urban. As Janson and Tigges remark even as in legalese a building is considered to be an 'immovable property', architecture can be experienced only through movement⁴. So the succeeding, often contrasting, spatial situations of a sequence or the traversal of a route differentiate the image of a city, of the houses which line the space because 'the same travel route is not identical coming and going, because the return has an altered goal and a reversed perspective'.⁵ Also the rhythm and ritual of the space is essential in experience of the space in the same way in the architectural solutions or spatial urban forms. Rites of passage and transition influence the shapes and ornamentation, and are woven into the urban tissue.

And the tissue of every city is made of buildings. It is their architecture that makes the urbanity. When houses are missing, the feeling of the city disappears into nothingness.

¹ Z. Herbert, *Pudelko zwane wyobraźnią*, [in:] Herbert Z., *Stadium przedmiotu*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 1996, p. 5–6; English translation: Herbert Z. *The Collected Poems 1956–1998*, Ecco, New York 2007 trans. Czesław Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott, Alissa Valles, <http://booksgoogle.pl/books?id=nqeWAwAAQBAJ&pq=PT164&lpg=PT164&dq=zbigniew+herbert+a+box+called+imagination&source=bl&ots=L>: [Accessed: 25.05.2016].

² A. Janson, F. Tigges, *Fundamental Concepts of Architecture. The Vocabulary of Spatial Situations*, Birkhäuser Verlag GmbH, Basel 2014, p. 202–205, 264–266, 278–280.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

Aldo Rossi in 1966 claimed that ‘urban studies never attribute sufficient importance dealing with singular urban artefacts. By ignoring them – precisely those aspects of reality that are most individual, particular, irregular, and also most interesting – we end up constructing theories as artificial as they are useless.’⁶ So he proposed to understand the city as architecture, because ‘architecture came into being along with first traces of the city’⁷. Another Italian architect Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani suggests that the urban dimension of architecture arises from its social demand. And that a city creates the most complicated level of human culture of togetherness, where individuals acquiesce to rules which coordinate and simplify their common life. And then because of this kind of social subordination the language of architecture should be understandable for as many people as possible. And this is the reason why townhouses have to give up individuality and represent a kind of cultivated neutrality⁸. And to talk about townhouses means to describe urban blocks, the essence of such cities as industrial Łódź, where the grid pattern of streets filled with tenement houses, factories and just huge gaps without any buildings show the real face of a city frozen in space and time in its development process. The French researchers Panerai, Castex, Depaule and Samuels defined urban block as ‘a part of an urban area ‘isolated’ from the neighbouring parts of the territory by streets. Thus, the block is not an architectural form, but a group of interdependent building plots’⁹. Their analysis of urban blocks of different backgrounds including the Modern Movement brought them to an conclusion that the urban block should be understood as ‘not an *a priori* form, but as a resulting system, capable of organizing parts of the urban territory’ staying in strict relationship with the road system, and based on a ‘fixed legal and real estate framework, which conditions the evolution of buildings and the types of use by the inhabitants’¹⁰. So the form of the townhouse became the result of the used plots, their width and depth, and the resulting homo – and heterogeneity of the perimeter buildings originate in the urban layout of the city. Also extremely important in a townhouse placed in a city block is the specific courtyard of nineteenth-century tenement houses – a narrow space filled with life so vividly described by Bolesław Prus in ‘Lalka’ or pictured in the black-and-white photographs of Łódź from the beginning of the previous century. ‘In the form of a kind of spatial inversion, the courtyard can be conceived as an exterior space that is everted so that it occupies a building’s interior’¹¹. The courtyard describes the character of the cityscape. Its well-shaped walls reduce the light and the life perspective of the inhabitants. The functions filling the space enlarge the public space of the street. The private space is not so private, allows penetration and intimate glimpses in the life of the inhabitants. The sequence of courtyards on the same plots make the space mysterious and unexpected, slightly dangerous or welcoming, an adventure when you look for

⁶ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 1984, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁸ V. M. Lampugnani, *Radikal Normal. Positionen zur Architektur der Stadt*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2015, p. 100–101.

⁹ P. Panerai, J. Castex, J. Ch. Depaule, Samuels I., *Urban Forms. The Death and Life of the Urban Block*, Architectural Press, Oxford 2005, p. 162.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 162–167.

¹¹ A. Janson, F. Tigges, *Fundamental Concepts...*, *op.cit.*, p. 75.



- III. The void. Empty space which come into existence after an idea of refurbishing of a tenement house into an office headquarters of a state company. After the change of management the building site got abandoned. The gap remains. Photo: R. Mikielewicz, 2016

a specific workshop or eatery. This makes the charm of the contemporary space of ‘the alternate meeting place’ of OFF Piotrkowska in Łódź, where an old factory complex in the middle of townhouses offers unexpected multifaceted spaces filled nowadays with restaurants, cafes, shops and start-up offices. The previous, often criticized mixed use of the plots in the urban block, resulted in a break of the monotony of repeatable house-frontages along the street. So the now revealed plans of the developer to build the missing front building and fill the gap caused a real outrage.

Front buildings make the character of the street, but the annexes at both sides of the courtyards build the specific character of the nineteenth-century tenement house. The urban tissue which developed as the effect of speculative real estate processes created a specific well-feel to urban space. Something which the Modern Movement tried to conquer, but failed to replace in the hearts of the people, who evidently identify better with this under-lighted space than with the sun filled spaces of mass housing estates.

2. ‘THE PLAYING DICE’ – A FILL-IN AND A VOID

*‘mark the place
where stood the object
which does not exist
with a black square
it will be
a simple dirge
for the beautiful absence*

*manly regret
imprisoned
in a quadrangle¹²*

The typology of tenement houses in Łódź¹³ shows the characteristic traits of this kind of urban tissue. The placement of entrances, symmetry of elevation design, height depending on the stage of the city development process – all these elements through their recurrence allow the emergence of strange unity and rigour, which also orders the urban image. The necessity to leave the side walls windowless for the neighbouring houses leaves the gaps between buildings the more prominent and strangely emotionally loaded. So much that when in 1981 a group of artists and architects, named ‘Urząd Miasta’, decided to prepare a performance to mark the importance of the repeatability of tenement houses for the street image of the city of Łódź they chose a house barren of the neighbourhood buildings, a tenement house with two

¹² Z. Herbert, *Studium przedmiotu*, [in:] Herbert Z., *Studium przedmiotu*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 1996, p. 54–58; English translation: Herbert Z., *The Study of the Object* in: Herbert Z. *The Collected Poems 1956–1998*, Ecco, New York 2007 trans. Czesław Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott, Alissa Valles, <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/study-of-the-object-by-zbigniew-herbert> [Accessed: 5.06.2016].

¹³ H. Jaworowski, *Ewolucja typologiczna domu mieszkalnego w śródmieściu Łodzi w drugiej połowie XIX i na początku XX wieku*, „Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki”, t. XXIX, z.1–2, PWN, Warszawa 1984, p. 163–176.

free side walls, left standing alone after demolition undertaken for a new street. Surprisingly the situation repeated itself as a reversal in 2011, thirty years later, when a sudden void appeared in the dense structure of the Piotrkowska street row, after a firm demolished a house and ceased to rebuild it due to a management change.

So a house taken out of the row and a void in the row marked the same experience of space – of continuity and of a little boring but still trusted reliability of patterns and expectations. A reversal of space. A sign of the significance of urban elements which usually seem insignificant.

The statement, that ‘(...) context itself can be seen either as the persistence of a function over time or as something isolated from the urban structure, that is, as something which stands outside of technological and social evolution’¹⁴ proved right once again.

But the continuous urban space of the city centre, filled with buildings, shows only a partial picture of the urban tissue of a city. As in Łódź, the prevailing area of the city is its suburbs. And even quite many contemporary space analysts tend to believe that the spirit of our times is better shown in the suburbs than in the architectural icons placed in the city centres. What previously differed in physiognomy and social live forms now started to be the most standardized “mass culture” product. The outskirts of big cities develop in a fully uncontrolled way or in a seemingly controlled, but in reality, chaotic way. The intensive urbanization of such areas brings the most dramatic changes in the cultural and natural landscape without difference regarding the legal character of the process. The most important feature here is the only partially existing compactness of the urban tissue. This way the suburbs and their houses build an entirely different world to the city centre. Also the existence of prefabricated housing estates with disintegrated links between houses and streets do not help to build the sense of urbanity. The private space, the most important characteristic of suburban space, visually attractive, hardly tolerates a stranger. House fronts show the material status of the families. But the space of the streets is unwelcoming in the social sense. The public space between private houses and gardens, between mass housing estates and gated communities, builds only communication corridors, but not of social interchange but only for transportation.

During a walk in Shanghai, China it is possible to discover whole not existing urban blocks. Vanishing houses, vanishing inhabitants who have to make way for modernization measures. And then in one of the streets in the outskirts of Shanghai a monument, named ‘The Fading-away Scenes Monument’ (2009, Wenije Wang) is placed in the middle of the pavement. It shows scenes from the everyday life of longtang alley houses (called also shikumen houses). Houses which filled rather big areas of the city and are now vanishing urban elements. Looking at the stone pictures we see children playing after school, daily chores, the time when Spring Festival is coming near, etc. Located near a public school facility, in the middle of a modern housing area, in a street bordered with big old trees the monument is surprising and attracts immediately the attention of a passer-by. It is very low and enables the children to play between the figures of stone. But what is most important is that it gives a possibility for the older people to explain the next generations the specific culture of living in the traditional courtyard houses, and of an urban pattern which filled large parts of Shanghai and has now been demolished or redeveloped as in Xintiandi – an area of shops, restaurants, museums and delis, an upscale entertainment complex. Still here the architectural and urban form have been preserved, even though the use has changed.

¹⁴ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

Such longtang houses were built in Shanghai between the 1870s and the 1930s and architecturally combined a mixture of Chinese and Western influences. In 1842 the Treaty of Nanking opened five of China's major ports to foreign trade. In Shanghai outside the Chinese Old Town on land bordering Huangpu River French, British and American concessions were founded and with the growth of the population increased the need for housing. And the first longtang houses were designed and built. Housing styles differed in scale and maze-like structures on very tight grid patterns were built. The interior of a longtang had and still have a communal character, the outside world is and was accessible through the entrance gate, which led to an orthogonal system of narrow lanes, sometimes connected with neighbouring longtangs by small openings. Longtangs could fill an entire street block or be just part of an existing structure, with other buildings, different in scale on both sides. The entrance gate marked a separation between the public space (predominantly foreign because of the historic urban development of the city) and the residential area (Chinese)¹⁵. To this day there is a guard and information board near the entrance gate.

The problem solved in these designs arose from the question of how to build cheap, affordable housing and how to construct Chinese-style buildings on land that was subdivided by Westerners according to their traditions. The richness of variety of longtang houses which differ with time and the solutions chosen for the targeted tenant group shows that even (or just that) a simple scheme can provide a successful urban solution in a very human, and surprisingly modern way. The houses show also a practical pattern for a cultural exchange from such different traditions as nineteenth-century China and Britain, especially as they were a very efficient solution to the urgent housing needs and not a long-used architectural historic house type. But the future of the longtang houses is far from assured because of their bad physical condition, overcrowding, and location in the key areas of Shanghai – the obvious targets for large-scale developments. Hence the fading-scenes of vanishing culture pictured in the stone monument placed in a neighbourhood more attractive for the inhabitants. A monument dedicated to a life-style in such a direct way. The depicted scenes of work, play, everyday repetitive activities which are going to exist only in memory because the ways of life and the behaviour changed. And even when the buildings remained as in Xintiandi they became stylish icons filled with very different genius loci.

As every city needs its replacement of houses and its voids and fill-ins to remain alive. But as after the analysis of different world examples of urban blocks the French authors observe 'when transferring experience from one culture to another, even cultures that may seem superficially very similar, account has to be taken of the local habits, customs, regulatory regimes and development processes. As designers we have to be prepared to modify our values and even be prepared to abandon some of those we cherish most'¹⁶.

3. THE CITY AND THE HOUSE

The house means also a home – to families, memories, things happening, our private worlds. And privacy is opposite to public, also public space – the streets and squares of a city toward the home opens. This contradiction builds one of the most interesting features

¹⁵ E. Firley, C. Stahl, *The Urban Housing Handbook*, The John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, Publication, Chichester 2009, p. 134–141.

¹⁶ P. Panerai, J. Castex, J. Ch. Depaule, I. Samuels, *Urban Forms...*, *op.cit.*, p. 201.

of urbanity. The meeting between the unfamiliar and the intimately known builds a tension, which enables the creation of existing spaces and spatial situations.

Different forms of townhouses¹⁷, different forms of courtyards, from the longtang alley houses of Shanghai to the tenement houses in Łódź, show the importance of the space of social interchange. Even in the more private areas of the house meetings with the neighbours are important, an exchange of values necessary to lead a fulfilled life. But this aspect also draws attention to the problems of inequality of and in the urban space. Michael Sorkin describes the glass houses of contemporary cities and their transparency which puts privacy on display and thus needs new safety measures. And the new regulations for houses 'safe' in every aspect of possible danger could only lead to upscaling¹⁸. The problem of how building codes, regulations and standards (necessary as they are) can influence the urban tissue of a city is also indicated by the authors of a report on architecture, housing and socioeconomic inequality in the United States of America¹⁹. '(...) standards and regulations have become the instrument of choice to maintain segregation by income or race. By stipulating minimum lot sizes (1 acre, for example) and the maximum number of units per lot (one, perhaps) a town can easily write out entire populations through zoning ordinances without explicitly saying so. By virtue of the size of the parcel of land, the type of building that is allowable on it, and how it may be used, a zoning code can effectively lead to the construction of generous single-family homes unaffordable to anyone below a certain income range'²⁰. Such intersection of policy, finance and housing design is somehow rarely present in the minds of architects. But such awareness starts to be stronger together with the increasing role of socially engaged architecture. The incremental houses of Alejandro Aravena show the necessity for the participation of the future inhabitants of the designed houses and the role of the courtyards as the common space. The courtyard is essential to build a sense of community and to make the space safer. To allow identification and build a sense of belonging.

The architect describes in his book about Elemental housing estates how the social housing projects led his team to become involved with entire cities, so the projects now 'are all of urban scale and integrate all dimensions of the city: from its geography and environment to economic production, from energy to transportation, from public buildings to housing, from public space to infrastructure'²¹. And only such an approach seem to bring the necessary solutions.

And then as Aldo Rossi wrote 'one can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the *locus* of the collective memory. This relationship between the *locus* and the citizenry then becomes the city's predominant image, both of architecture and of landscape, and as certain artefacts

¹⁷ E. Firley, C. Stahl, *The Urban Housing Handbook*, The John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, Publication, Chichester 2009.

¹⁸ M. Sorkin, *People who live in Urban Glass Houses* in: Sorkin M., *All Over the Map. Writing on Buildings and Cities*, Verso, London, New York 2011, p. 192–194, p. 194.

¹⁹ *The Art of Inequality: Architecture, Housing, And Real Estate. A Provisional Report*, ed. Martin R., Moore J., Schindler S., The Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, New York 2015.

²⁰ *The Art of Inequality: Architecture, Housing, And Real Estate.*, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

²¹ A. Aravena, A. Iacobelli, *Elemental. Incremental Housing and Participatory Design Manual*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfilden 2016, p. 503.

become part of its memory, new ones emerge. In this entirely positive sense great ideas flow through the history of the city and give shape to it.²² And this way a house and the city unite themselves in a never-ending intercourse between the language of architecture and urbanity.

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²² A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, *op.cit.*, p. 130.