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HOUSE OF *THE OTHER*

DOM *INNEGO*

Abstract

The thesis concerns the houses of “the Other”, the architecture that refers to the problem of dwelling outlined by the philosophy; Phenomenology and Existentialism. It presents examples of works of architecture and art created in the urban space, whose aim is to raise a question about the house itself, its properties and qualities, the idea of dwelling – living on the Earth. The essence of a “home” can be found in boundary situations – when one loses their house or they are excluded from it. The works presented are examples of the house in the metaphorical sense: the homeless house, the house of memory, the house of a suicide, the house of music. These works are from the borderland of philosophy, art and architecture. Perhaps they have a double identity – of the work of architecture and art or they just simply show that the place of architecture is in the world of art.

Keywords: house, the Other, architecture, art, philosophy, ethics, existentialism

Streszczenie

Praca dotyczy domów “Innego”, architektury odnoszącej się do problemów “zamieszkiwania” jakie nakreśla filozofia; fenomenologia i egzystencjalizm. Opisuje przykłady dzieł architektury i sztuki powstałych w przestrzeni miast, których celem jest stawianie pytań o dom jako taki, właściwości, cechy, istotę zamieszkiwania – bycia na Ziemi. Istota domu odsłania się w sytuacjach granicznych – gdy dom się traci, gdy jest się z niego wykluczonym. Przytoczone przykłady to domy w sensie metaforycznym; dom bezdomnego, dom pamięci, dom samobójcy, dom muzyki. Dzieła te są z pogranicza światów filozofii, sztuki i architektury. Może mają podwójną tożsamość – dzieła architektury i sztuki, a może stanowią dowód tego że miejsce architektury jest w świecie sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, Inny, architektura, sztuka, filozofia, etyka, egzystencjalizm

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A house is not just a residential building. This word has a wide range of meanings. Philosopher Martin Heidegger in his essay *Dwelling Building Thinking* writes: “The truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there. These buildings house man. (...) The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. it means to dwell.”¹ Architecture is a material effect of dwelling. Not every “home” is a work of architecture but every work of architecture is a part of earthly “Home”. The existential properties of a house belong to an architectural thing, though they are not architectural properties. The concepts related to dwelling are: identity, safety, freedom, property. These traits have been studied in many fields such as psychology or sociology, whereas critical analyses can be found in philosophy and art. All these outlooks meet together in some part in architecture – which creates material houses. That is why works of architecture are often the subject of analyses in these fields. Yet, it happens that architecture goes beyond its basic aim and it raises critical issues about dwelling. It becomes a committed participant in a debate, it asks questions (not only answers them). It makes one think, it approaches art and philosophy. The examples presented below are from the borderland of art and architecture. They stand in the urban space and refer to the problems of the house outlined by philosophy; Phenomenology and Existentialism. These are “houses” in a metaphorical sense. On a metaphysical level they have a common goal, which is raising a question about the house itself – about dwelling, its properties, qualities and the essence – the way man lives on the Earth.

The problem of dwelling manifests itself clearly in a boundary situation; when one loses his home, or is excluded from it or simply when a house doesn’t provide comfortable living. If being means to build and dwell, can one live without his or her home? It turns out that you can’t just be, not owning a home. You can’t be without a place which is “yours”. A homeless person is a person who doesn’t own a house. Although a city is his or her home, they are still treated like strangers there. They don’t have their own shelter where they can feel safe and sound. Even special architectural barriers have been created to keep the homeless away – spikes on the pavements or special benches making it impossible to lie down. The problem of exclusion became a concern for the artist Kszysztof Wodiczko. In 1988, in response to the growing problem of homeless people in New York, he designed a *Homeless Vehicle*. At that time in the city there were about 100 thousand people who had been left homeless. This vehicle was some sort of an attempt to give people who were living on the streets a little space and privacy and to help them to live in the city as normally as possible. The artist, in consultation with homeless people, built a “house” that met their fundamental needs. A house with a substitute for basic components of the contemporary flat like a space for sleeping, eating, washing or storing, placed in a mobile vehicle. The concept was based on the supermarket trolley, often used by homeless people. The vehicle was made of aluminium, metal sheet, steel mesh, plexi and a tarpaulin sheet. “The vehicle designed by the artist doesn’t claim to be a perfect shelter – there was awareness of the specific limitations imposed by the nomadic existence of

¹ M. Heidegger, *Dwelling Building Thinking*, in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, First Perennial Classics 2001, p 143, 144, 145.

the city. Though it can't be called a house, this vehicle certainly improves everyday existence on the street. It started off with survival strategies used by urban nomads. Through discussions with pickers, a vehicle was designed which could be used both for personal shelter and can/bottle storage. Its symbolic meaning is just as important as its utilitarian function. The *Homeless Vehicle* project was inspired by the idea of a picker who is perceived as an autonomous and active individual. It is meant to be a visual substitute for everyday goods used for consumption and trade (for example cars or food suppliers) as well as build a bridge of empathy between homeless people and observers.² The vehicle was shaped into the expressive, noticeable form of a metal racket. The intense yellow used in the central part of the roofing and a red flag made it possible to be seen from a distance. The red flag expresses pride, saying "it's mine". The vehicle was meant to give partial autonomy, some privacy, and at the same time indicate the presence of the homeless in urban society. It gave freedom and identity. The French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas wrote: "In a world which is from the first other, the I is nonetheless autochthonous. It is the very reversion of this alteration. It finds in the world a site (lieu) and a home (maison). Dwelling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself* (*Se tenir*), not as the famous serpent grasping itself by biting onto its tail, but as a body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds *itself* up (*se tient*) and *can*. The "at home" (Le "chez soi") is not a container but a site where *I can*, where, dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free. It is enough to walk, to *do* (*faire*), in order to grasp anything, to Take. In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means. The site, a medium (Le lieu, milieu), affords means. Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is comprehended. The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same. I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession. (What is absolutely other does not only resist possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it.) This reversion of the alterity of the world to self-identification must be taken seriously"³ The vehicle accomplished its basic goal but was only designed in several copies. Its main aim was to shock people; to raise the problem of the homeless. It was supposed to show the presence of homeless people; "useless", excluded from the capitalist system, and consequently, give them a voice in the public space. Asserting, bringing visibility back to "the strangers" can be seen in other works of the artist such as: *Alien Stuff*, *Porte Parole* or in his famous section called *Projections*.

Things like Invisibility, difference or isolation lead to exclusion. When "the Other" remains unnoticed, it is no longer a subject for ethics. The Holocaust is a good example. It became a foundation for the ontological and ethical reflections of Emmanuel Levinas. His family was murdered by Nazis and he was sent to a German concentration camp. The philosopher concluded that metaphysics emerges from the relationship with "the Other" (namely someone else, not the "Other in me"), when one is face to face with the other; when one notices the other's face without taking it over. "A calling into question of the same – which

² Form brochure by Krzysztof Wodiczko and David Lurie, publicized during the exhibition of *Homeless Vehicle* in Clock Tower Gallery in NY, 1988.

<https://www.mocak.pl/artist/23/pojazd-dla-bezdomnych>

³ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Pub. Hague 1979 p. 37.



- III. 1. *House of Suicide* and *House of the Mother of Suicide*, source: wikipedia.org, phot. gumpe
III. 2. *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, source: panoramio.com, phot. Rolf E. Staerk
III. 3. *B018*, source: bernardkhoury.com, phot. Jon Shard

cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into questions of my spontaneity by presence of the Other ethics.”⁴ “The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the Other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* is not figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum – the appropriate idea. (...) It *expresses itself*. The face brings a notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but *expression* (...) To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I (...)”⁵. The presence of the Other can be revealed in oneself by feeling shame. When the Other stops being noticed there is no reason to feel shame. The Nazi ideology made the face of excluded not be seen; it was no longer a subject of ethics. Architecture was used for that exclusion. What was once a home now became a prison, a ghetto or concentration camp. To commemorate the murdered Jews of Europe, they decided to put up a memorial in Berlin. After many years of discussions, the project was finally designed by Peter Eisenman. He suggested filling a space of 19 thousand square metres with 2711 concrete blocks of varying heights. Between them there are narrow alleys of 95 cm. The surfaces of the paved pathways are uneven. While walking, one can get the impression of uncertainty. Entering into the “maze”, the slabs become much higher and their size far more massive. “(...) the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is a sculpture you can walk through which – and this is very much my personal sense – unfolds a great emotional power. It is a symbol in concrete for the utter incomprehensibility of the crime. It is, in the true sense of the word, an open work of art. Open toward the city, the spatial surroundings into which it extends. Open for diverse individual use: you cannot walk through this Memorial, collectively’, it is an experience which is isolating. For the visitor, it makes possible an emotional and sensual conception of isolation, torment, threat. It forces nothing upon us. That is the intent. Not a kind of negative nostalgia but a commemorating of the victims that obligates us for the present and future: to a culture of humanity, of recognition, of tolerance in a society and country in which we can dare to be different as human beings and not be afraid.”⁶ The scale of the concrete blocks is a sort of testimony of an absolute tragedy and number of victims. It is a big monument of a lost home – a Jewish culture which almost totally disappeared from Europe. However, it can also be interpreted as a big monument of shame for the fact that so many German people followed the Nazi ideology. “This Memorial in the centre of its capital recalls the greatest crime in its history. In the centre of that city, which was not a place of mass murder, but from which the systematic killing of millions was conceived, planned, organized and administered. No other nation had ever undertaken the experiment, wrote the American Judaic Studies specialist James E. Young, to ,reunite on the stony subsoil of the memory of its crimes, or to place the remembrance of these crimes in

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 43

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁶ Speech by the President of the German Bundestag Wolfgang Thierse at the inauguration of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe <http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/speeches-at-the-inauguration-of-the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe.html>

the geographic centre of its capital”⁷. The size and form – the “totality” of the blocks – may evoke association with the total influence of Nazi ideology on German society. Nazism overpowered the German people’s minds, deprived them of freedom or the ability to think clearly. Moreover, it deprived them of ethics, control over their lives, and finally it deprived them of the chance to build their own “Being in the world”. They all agreed to live in” a “home” ruled by Hitler. The mechanism of giving in completely to community, incapacitating individuality and following blindly others was described by Martin Heidegger before the war: “This ,absorption in...’ (*Aufgehen bei...*) has mostly the character of Being – lost in the publicness of the “they”. Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away (*abgefallen*) from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into the “world“. “Falleness” into the “world” means an absorption in Being-with-one-another (...)”⁸ Hanna Arendt, Heidegger’s student, watching the trial of Adolf Eichmann, concluded that the origin of evil may be simple stupidity. She claimed that Eichmann was just a reckless cog in the totalitarian machinery. It is unclear whether the Nazi activity of Heidegger, Mies van de Rohe, Philip Johnson and others, was a manifestation of downfall into the world, simple stupidity, or conscious, calculated amorality.

Emanuel Levinas said that human freedom is visible only by means of a conscious, metaphysical relationship with the other, based on the pursuit of the common good. “Demented pretension to the invisible, when the acute experience of the human in the twentieth century teaches that the thoughts of men are borne by needs which explain society and history, that hunger and fear can prevail over every human resistance and every freedom! There is no question of doubting this human misery, this dominion the things and the wicked exercise over man, this animality. But to be a man is to know that this is so. Freedom is knowing that freedom is in peril. But to know or to be conscious is to have time to avoid and forestall the instant of inhumanity. It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of treason – the infinitesimal difference between man and not-man – that implies the disinterestedness of goodness, the desire of the absolutely other or nobility, the dimension of metaphysics.”⁹ An example of a heroic act of conscious choice of freedom is Jan Palach’s self-immolation. He set himself on fire on January 16, 1969 in Prague’s Wenceslas Square to express his objection against the invasion of his country by the Red Army. It was an act of resistance against losing political freedom, against being “thrown” into a new order; a new “world”. Home is a place which gives human a shelter, in which man feels safe and secure. “To feel at home” means to be free, ease, calm. A foreign invasion is a violation of freedom and identity. Jan Palach’s death was an ultimate act, he sacrificed his life and freedom to defend the freedom of the others. This is a special case of suicide, which can be defended from the ethical perspective, even in relation to the philosophy of dialogue. Emmanuel Levinas describes the relation between will and suicide as a paradox. In the conception of Levinas, our life is part of totality. In historical time it is finished, initiated by birth and finished by death. It is also determined, because we do not have the choice of place or the time to enter this totality. Being begins to be when it questions itself and by that it becomes self-conscious. It forms the relationship between I and I-minded – interiority. But according to Levinas,

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, Oxford 2001, p. 220.

⁹ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Pub. Hague 1979, p. 35.

such knowledge is arbitrary and is not metaphysics. Interiority is doomed to loneliness, because man strives to externality – to the meeting with the Other. And metaphysics is based on that relationship. Thanks to it a parallel time is formed. The difference between the finite physical life and metaphysical infinity lies in isolation from the totality of history. It is possible by creating our own parallel story based on the dialogue I – Other. Time which prevails in the metaphysical existence has no relation to the time of physical life, because it is abstract and independent, without reference to “Earth time”. It is also infinite, because in contrast to the physical life, the time of metaphysical being has no beginning and no end. Intuitively we accept infinity but we do not have an idea of it – we cannot imagine it. Death is a deprivation of I, I-thinking, the end of opportunities for dialogue and, consequently, the end of the parallel time. I (without Cogito) is cast as being, the heritage of his life down to the totality of history. Death is the end of freedom. According to Levinas, it is a paradox of the impossibility of suicide. I can decide as long as it is and its being is infinite. I can decide about being, but it cannot decide about not-being.¹⁰ In Levinas’s ethics of responsibility, suicide is a manifestation of selfishness. But politically motivated suicide has not much in common with ordinary suicide. An act of political suicide belongs to life and includes the intentional awareness of the consequences. It is an act that is focused on the result, in contrast to the usual suicide, which is aimed at nothingness. Free being and its meaning lies in the ethical contact with the Other, abandoning myself and taking responsibility for others. Jan Palach’s suicide was some sort of appeal to the other, the last, total expression of a dialogue. While we are able to justify this act ethically, and even consider it heroism, it does not change the fact that it claims its victims. It is the close family of a suicide that experiences emptiness after those who go away. In the case of Jan Palach’s self-immolation, the silent character of the drama was his mother Libuse Palachova. She was a double victim, lost her house twice, a house-the country and a house-the family. After the death of her son she had to fight with the ruling regime which aimed to discredit her son and erase the memory of his sacrifice. To commemorate the drama of a mother and son, John Hejduk designed *House of the Suicide* and the *House of the Mother of the Suicide*. Sketches, inspired by the poem *The Funeral of Jan Palach* by David Shapiro, were originally conceived as a part of Hejduk’s *Masque* series. They are the only surviving examples of a series of twenty-six large-scale, ephemeral structures realized worldwide mainly by architecture students. The structures are considered to be something between art and architecture. These two were first created at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. After attracting the attention of the government and Czechoslovakia and Vaclav Havel, in 1991, the project was reconstructed and installed in the royal gardens at Prague Castle. In 2016, renovated, covered with metal sheets, the “houses” were moved to Jan Palach’s Square (formerly Red Army Square). Houses stand a few metres away from each other, look like an architectural *pietà*. The House of the Suicide is sealed so that the viewer can only imagine the experience of its entombed inhabitant. Entry to the mother’s house is possible via small opening at its base. Inside there is a small aperture that permits a visitor to look at her “son” from her perspective. Each structure has dimensions of 2.7 x 2.7 x 3.3m and comprises forty-nine steel “spikes”, which are more than four metres long. Here’s what the

¹⁰ E. Lévinas, *Czas i to co inne*, tłum. J. Migasiński, Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 1999.

daughter of John Hajduk, Renata Hajduk says about his work: “My father thought of the spikes as a sunburst, as sonic—the mother is quiet and turning in on herself. Implosion of sound and explosion. The sonic act when Jan dies is his sound going out into the universe as an act against the apathy of the students in 1968. He set himself on fire to set them on fire.”¹¹ During the inauguration of the monuments in Prague in 1991, in his dedication speech, Hajduk said; “I mourn those who have given their lives for the freedom of expression. I listen to the poems about them. And I am saddened by the fact of those missing, disappeared, and dead. Lost are lost. Art, literature, architecture and poetry, in the end, are thoughts of people about people and they are life giving, in life and in death”¹²

A different strategy of surviving the hardships of the war was chosen during the 15-year war in Lebanon. Parties became a form of resistance to the war struggles. Naji Gebran believed that music and dance is a sort of therapy to ease the stress of the war. In 1980, he began to organize the parties, under the name of *Musical Therapy*, at his chalet in the suburbs of Beirut. They became so popular that he had to move them to a bigger space – a warehouse in the industrial part of the city. The club was officially named B018. In 1998, the architect Bernard Khoury was hired to design a new home for the club, at the Quarantine district, near Beirut harbour. In the past it was a place of quarantine for arriving crews. During the war, it became a camp of Palestinian, Lebanese and Kurdish refugees. In January 1997, a local militia man launched a brutal attack, and the camp slums and its surroundings were razed to the ground. B018 is labelled an example of “war architecture”. In the design, the architect wanted to express the spirit of the wartime past of the place. He designed the building, hidden in the ground, so that in daytime it resembles a bunker. “The B018 project is, first of all, a reaction to difficult and explosive conditions that are inherent in the history of its location and the contradictions that are implied by the implementation of an entertainment program on such a site. B018 refuses to participate in the naïve amnesia that governs the post-war reconstruction efforts. The project is built below ground. Its façade is pressed into the ground to avoid the over exposure of a mass that could act as a rhetorical monument. The building is embedded in a circular concrete disc slightly above tarmac level. At rest, it is almost invisible. It comes to life in the late hours of the night when its articulated heavy metal roof structure retracts hydraulically. The opening of the roof exposes the club to the world above and reveals the cityscape as an urban backdrop to the patrons below.”¹³ During opening hours covering plates are lifted up, transforming the club into open-air discotheque, where guests dance under the sky, watching themselves reflected by the mirrored surfaces of the lifted roof. The club became one of the most fashionable places of Beirut. Due to its form and function, B018 is an extremely expressive piece of architecture. The design harmoniously combines contradictory emotions; the memory of the war – hatred of the Other, with its opposite – peaceful partying, music, dance, joyful meeting Face to Face.

¹¹ <http://archpaper.com/2016/01/hejduks-house-suicide-structures-get-new-life-prague/>

¹² Dedication Speech, John Hajduk September 4, 1991, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/5804/poetry-and-architecture-architecture-and-poetry>

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