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THE HOUSE UNDER THE STARS
IN THE CHILDREN'S VILLAGE,
OR THE PRAISE OF DIVERSITY

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W WIOSCE DZIECIĘCEJ,
ALBO POCHWAŁA RÓŻNORODNOŚCI

A b s t r a c t

The need for originality in art and architecture has replaced the need for beauty. Somewhere close to these categories, there is also a category of the need for spatial order as opposed to diversity. These issues can be seen in the project of an architectural event: The Children's Village in Oświęcim; International Collaboration Project.

Keywords: The Children's Village in Oświęcim, spatial order, originality, diversity

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

Potrzeba oryginalności w sztuce, i w architekturze, zastąpiła potrzebę piękna. Gdzieś obok tych kategorii istnieje kategoria potrzeby porządku przestrzeni jako przeciwieństwa różnorodności. Zagadnienia te można dostrzec w projekcie wydarzenia architektonicznego: The Children's Village in Oświęcim; International Collaboration Project.

Słowa kluczowe: The Children's Village in Oświęcim, ład przestrzeni, oryginalność, różnorodność

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1. MODERNIST CONTINUATION OF CLASSICISM

Without looking back at the very distant past of architecture, one can say that the tendencies towards the idea of ordering the world and the desire for unconstrained formations or picturesqueness of shapes have always existed in cyclical, subsequent or simultaneous, courses. There were also places, areas or periods when one did not pay attention to it. However, the definition of architecture – *Architecture is the art of shaping space* – has become common good, and trying to create new ones, we do not argue with it. Even if we do not know what – art and what – space is. And yet, this prideful definition says nothing about one important human need, the need for – order. Is architecture the art of organising space? Or is it the art of demolishing space?

The term *art of shaping space* means something else to housing architecture than to the construction of cathedrals and palaces. Le Corbusier noticed the problem and responded to it with the project of the Paris reconstruction in 1922. The project, as much visionary as utopian, was impossible to be carried out. Yet, its value lied in something other than the architectural form. It called attention to cities overgrown with a dense structure of houses, manufacturing plants, factories, stables. To the dreadful sanitary conditions of citizens. “At that time the average room was inhabited by several families, in the poorer districts of Paris one toilet served seventy people, and a tap with cold water was a luxury. Factories and workshops located in the middle of residential neighbourhoods exuded smoke and sewage. [] Cholera and tuberculosis posed a constant threat. There was heavy traffic on the streets day and night”¹ Le Corbusier remarked: “All cities have fallen into a state of anarchy. The world is sick.” The great Frenchman’s vision of the ideal Paris was so frightening that it met total criticism. The issue of the similarly terrifying order of the city’s space was not raised. And those cities packed with building development triggered the need – speaking in very simple terms – the need for the order of architecture. It remains unclear even today who feels such a need. Master Le Corbusier would have become convinced of it if he had kept track of the fate of the quarter of residential development Modernes Fruges in Pessac (1924), the artwork of early and pure Modernism, devastated by adapting to the tastes of users.

In the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, or at the beginning of the era of contemporary architecture, a large number of housing estate projects was created, sometimes strengthened by constructed objects. Heading this time for Germany, one can notice rationalist trends combining geometric formal inquiries with “architectural pretexts” from the sphere a creator was interested in at a given time. Those could be ideas of “modernity” as well as those of the noble past. One could mention here an extremely rationalist example of the housing estate Dammerstock in Karlsruhe (1928) designed by Walter Gropius or the work of the same architect and Stefan Fischer – the Haselhorst housing estate in Berlin (1928). The differently ordered space is presented by the Hufeisensiedlung in Berlin designed by Ernst Engelmann and Emil Fangmeyer (1925) or Rundling estate in the form of three concentric circles designed by Hubert Ritter in Leipzig (1930). The last housing estate brings to mind formations and ideas known from history.

¹ Alain de Botton, *Architektura szczęścia*, transl. Krzysztof Środa, CZUŁY BARBARZYŃCA PRESS, 2010, p. 239.

Unfortunately, time (and poor designs, which were regrettably implemented) blurred the images and memory of those patterns of orderly architecture and the world. What followed after was the weariness of monotonous estates and industrially produced architecture as well as the general weariness of art.

And that was when the era of diversity began – later called Modernism. The architecture of the late Modernism was characterised by the loss of clarity of meanings. One can also add here the creation of individual rules, extreme individualism, lack of agreement between those speaking different languages.

2. CHILDREN'S VILLAGE AND THE HOUSE UNDER THE STARS

The concept of the Children's Village in Rajsk near Oświęcim (official name: The Children's Village in Oświęcim; International Collaboration Project, 1991) came into being in the atmosphere of many initiatives taken by architects at the time who created theoretical projects for mental and design exercises published to arouse interest among critics and in the world!

One of such events was the realisation of the initiative taken by Janusz Marszałek who was a local resident of the international organisation S.O.S. Kinderdorf in the country where MAJA foundation has organised "villages", housing estates for orphans in Poland. As the future will show, the event will also be an intellectual and design game with no chance of implementation. Tomasz Mańkowski, director of the Department of Housing Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture of Cracow University of Technology managed the organisation of the project. It was he who created the outline of the residential complex with accompanying facilities. The Village's location close to Oświęcim and Auschwitz concentration camp and the patron of the Children's village, Dr. Janusz Korczak, murdered in 1942 were not without influence on the atmosphere accompanying the design of the houses.

12 houses having a modest area of 150 m² were earmarked for 6–8 children each. The programme provided for: two single rooms (10 m² each), three double rooms (15 m² each), a bedroom and bathroom unit for a housemother (20 m²), living room (30 m²), kitchen (29 m²), a room for housemother's assistant called Auntie (15 m²), two bath units for children (15 m²).

An important spatial decision was the design assumption of the whole "residential complex": houses were located in the area of a square with dimensions of 104x104 m with four plots on each side. Thus, 12 plots and the inner garden with dimensions of 48x48 m were obtained. Square, truly neoclassical assumption was surrounded by row of trees, and the whole was complemented with the surrounding road and axially located supporting facilities housing administration offices and guest rooms. One gets the impression that the design assumption presented a general idea sketched schematically rather than a finished development although specific location agreed upon with the architectural authorities promised the possibility of project implementation. The idea of the Children's Village's form was to provide equal spatial conditions for all houses. In fact, the location of individual houses offered a different arrangement in relation to cardinal directions (sun exposure) and seemingly identical arrangement in relation to the inner garden. The estate's design completely omitted cars!

International and Polish architects were invited to the game. The architects did voluntary work. Specific locations of the houses were selected at random. The architectural event was attended by: Fumihiko Maki from Tokyo and Kan (Mikihiro) Mimura from the School of Art and Design of the University of Tsukuba; Mario Botta from Lugano and Aurelio Galfetti from Bellinzona; Gianni Fabbri and Gianugo Polese from the School of Art and Design of the University of Tsukuba, Ilo² from the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia; Gerhard Dürschke from Düsseldorf and Stefan Scholz from Berlin. Also, the architects from Cracow, from the Department of Housing Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture: Tomasz Mańkowski, Maria Mańkowska, Zofia Nowakowska and Dariusz Kozłowski. The results of the works were presented in numerous publications³.

It is convenient to begin the tour around the *Children's Village* from the house due to its location at the corner plot and clarity of form, which makes it an eye-catcher. The author is naturally **Mario Botta**. The year is 1993, Mario Botta is a famous architect, creator of a number of single-family houses, including perhaps the most famous one – *Casa Rotonda* (1980–1982) in Stabio, Ticino, Switzerland. The authorship of the house in Rajska is recognisable as usual. The vision of the house belongs to the collection of Botta's house designs exploring the geometry of a cylinder as an architectural "pretext". This idea will be used repeatedly and continued not only in the design of single-family houses. Here, the cylinder was named – a "tower" by the author. The house is stately, which distinguishes it first. The composition is subordinated to the axially of the diagonal assumption; the plot is a corner one and that is how the entrance was situated. "The axis model of the functional and spatial arrangement of the building's interior has been arranged around the central opening enabling visual communication between the two ground storeys". According to the author, this will facilitate integration of life inside the house. The interior, on all levels, is precisely symmetrical. Three overground floors (one underground) were complemented with a roof terrace surrounded by a wall with round "window" openings. The form of the building develops the idea of the Swiss architect concerning the very window solutions. Windows understood as a rectangular hole in the wall with gleaming glass hidden in the thickness of the wall. The holes concealing the windows are not rectangular, they hide the glazing somewhere in the depths of the body of the building. Even though one could have expected concrete blocks, the description does not mention any building material. The strong architectural form of the house typical of a monumental object appears to be completely unconcerned with its

² Apart from substantive considerations one should note: Gianugo Polesello, Honorary Professor of Cracow University of Technology, the initiator of cooperation between Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and the Faculty of Architecture of Cracow University of Technology, academic teacher to participants of Tempus PHARE doctoral studies.

³ Publications in: *Współczesna Architektura Krakowa*, SARP Kraków 1991, catalogue and the exhibition accompanying the CSCE Symposium on the Cultural Heritage in Cracow 1992; D. Kozłowski – *Projekty i budynki 1982–1992; Figuratywność i rozpad formy w architekturze doby postfunkcjonalnej*, Institute of Architectural Design – Faculty of Architecture – Cracow University of Technology, Cracow 1992; Catalogue – *Wioska Dziecięca* – Institute of Architectural Design Faculty of Architecture CUT, Cracow 1992; ; "International Journal of Theory, Design, and Practice in Architecture", St. Paul, Minnesota USA, Spring/Summer 1992; *13 Architekten, 9 Länder, 1 Lageplan*, "Bauwelt" 1993, No. 4; *The Children's Village in Oswiecim – International Collaboration Project "Space Design"* 1994, December, No. 353.



proximity to other buildings. It acts as an ordering sign in a set of various forms of sometimes undeveloped personality.

The concept of the house designed by **Gianugo Polesello and Francisco Polesello** was built on a completely different idea. It is a two-storey house, not counting one underground floor. “The architecture of the house is (maybe it is inevitable) a metaphor of the “Villa Italiana” type on the Polish ground; the use of the pergolas, the integration between inside and outside, the same concept of a house in the garden, the columns of classical evocation, etc.” – the authors explain the existence of columns and pergolas within absolutely functionalist architecture. The authors attach particular significance to the columns, massive elements, which, after all, do not bear anything, clearly performing the symbolic role associated with the meaning of “Villa Italiana”. It seems that the seven columns painted red (which can also be seen on a very aesthetic presentation of the design) dominated the form of the building, and especially the form the garden elevation (the façade?). The house designed by the Venetian architects occupies a neutral position in relation to the whole form of the estate-village. It distinguishes itself with the colonnade; “Villa Italiana” among the houses for orphans sounds quite surreal.

The house by **Stefan Scholz** takes place in another corner of the estate’s plan. As in the case of Mario Botta’s house, this situation is used to create the idea of a family house in the *Children’s Village*. The three-storey (plus the underground floor) house occupies the plan of a triangle formed after cutting off half of the cube; the other half was indicated on the plan with poles of a quasi-fence. The author presents it the following way: “The situation of the building site in the north-western corner of Children’s Village has inspired me to design a house on the plan of a triangle. All the rooms in the building go out in the south-easterly direction, facing the central point of the village.” The main rooms open out onto the garden, which is demonstrated by large openings with glazed windows. In the building with a diagonal symmetry inscribed in the corner of the plot and the whole residential complex one can see an asymmetrical placement of the entrance to the building. A tree – was designed on the plot’s area. The author of the building was not content with the design simply according to rationalist ideas; it was equally important for him to participate in a team game of architecture. The building is an integral part of the whole; its existence outside the village would be pointless.

Gerhard Dürschke presents his idea of a house in the design, which is difficult to analyse and describe: “The building is designed in the form of converging shapes whose main composition axis is directed toward the north-east and the central space between the family houses.” The principle of the house’s composition develops around the symbolism of a centrally located table, a meeting place. The two-storey building with a basement is a truly free composition. It treats the building alignment without much esteem: it steps out of line.

In another corner of the Village’s area, **Kan** (actually **Mikihiro Mimura**) presented his design of a house. The Japanese architect wishes to solve the social problem of children deprived of motherhood, living in the houses of the Children’s Village by means of an architectural solution of a house. “Tower, Gate-tunnel and Outward-room-formation embody the easy recognition of ‘My house’ and ‘My room’ as well as of ‘Other houses’ as the first

step of self-confirmation and identification among the solidarity.” A sophisticated body of the building consists of small (one can get such an impression) cubic elements. A series of six narrow, (approximately three-metre-wide) elements of uneven height was covered with gable roofs. The body of the building is complemented with a higher tower within which a staircase was located. A quite unrestrained arrangement of the whole stands out from the residential complex. It is difficult to say whether it disturbs the order of architectural things; one has to remember that the designs were born without information about the neighbourhood and evidently about the whole unit while the only organising guideline was the binding building alignment.

Aurelio Galfetti usually connected with the four: Luigi Snozzi, Livio Vacchini, Aurelio Galfetti, Mario Botta owing to the place of work and life in the Swiss region of Ticino, work as term professors at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, rationalistic approach to architecture and concrete – presented the design of a building based on the highly disciplined idea of visible minimalist tendencies. The author concisely presents the principle of functional (and formal!) solution: “The building is divided into two parts; the lower day part, which is completely open and the upper part with closed off rooms directed towards the interior.” The functions were distributed over the four floors, one underground (common workspace) and three overground ones. A detailed solution was proposed for the house’s surrounding, which was functionally combined with a heavily glazed ground floor, dividing it into four zones: the entrance, terrace with a pergola in front of the house, a flower garden and a vegetable patch; everything completed with the roof garden. It appears, however, that the author’s aim was above all formal effect: he constructed a cube on a light foundation – a clean, strong form. This impression is exacerbated by a complete lack of windows! The opposite elevations are dissected only by single large rectangular openings. They conceal glazing of the windows on the side planes. The whole design was solved with elegance known from other Aurelio Galfetti’s implemented designs; the play with symmetry was not avoided, though. The building employs a great deal of constraint within the residential complex; it does not divert attention from the neighbourhood, leaving a comment about its shape for connoisseurs of concise architecture.

Continuing the tour around the Children’s Village in Rajsk, one can reach the next corner plot. This place was provided for the house designed by **Fumihiko Maki** from Tokyo, the winner of the Pritzker Prize in 1993. “The Children’s House presents unmistakable figurative image of a house; yet its central tower expresses something extraordinary about the structure of a family within. Because the imbalance between upper and lower volumes is slight, the house both confirms our expectation of a ‘house’ and questions conventional definitions of a ‘family’” – the architect comments rather than explains. The house is “naturally original” if that can describe anything. The building consists of a three-storey tower covered with a gable roof, surrounded by a single-storey substructure with a large pitched roof. The “traditional” whole presents a slightly decomposed coherence of form not making, as it seems, references to indigenous regionalisms. The architect settled for the design of the house, not caring about its surrounding. Within the Village’s residential complex, Fumihiko Maki’s house may take the position of the building, which existed there forever or maybe just for a long time in symbiosis with the place, not necessarily with a new architectural context.

Gianni Fabbri preceded the design of a house with an analysis of the architecture of the house's past: "In my opinion, it is necessary to back to the primeval elements of home, to the almost ritual character of home space and organisation of home as a story derived from the centuries, long tradition. The story in question begins with the entrance." This seems a legitimate and interesting assumption, but the problem can be supplemented with the following question: from which part of the world is this house? Anyway, the problem seems more real than the search for references to "Villa Italiana". It seems that the architect has placed two worlds in the proposed building. A one-storey body of the building on a rectangular plan with a basement covered with a big gable roof is possible to recognise as a "traditional house"; it is situated in the depth of the plot facing the garden. It houses the occupants' rooms. From the front a three-part one-storey building linked together with a short connector contains rooms of the same size: the hall on the axis, the living room and kitchen with dining area on the sides. Here the architect's considerations on the tradition end. On the axis of the building above the hall a lighting element was designed, a kind of tower of a form resembling a spiral minaret in Sāmarrā. Next to it above the kitchen, a roof in the shape of a pyramid was designed. A terrace on the roof of the living room was decorated, on the axis of the room, with something the author of the idea calls a "palm or leaf", a concave form placed on the column. The device serves to collect rainwater intended to power the fountain. In short, a kind of regionalism enriched with ludic forms, which may appeal to children living in the house. Yet, the house was not consulted with its future inhabitants. Other houses also remain silent as regards such aesthetics.

The house in the *Children's Village* in Rajsko near Oświęcim designed by **Dariusz Kozłowski** was named by the author himself: *the House under the Stars*. This time, the name does not refer to the shape of the building, but is a direct reference to the problems of freedom and morality in line with Immanuel Kant's thought: "the starry sky above me and the moral law within me." The proposed construction material is heavily burned, clinker road brick of purple discolorations, being a reference to the idea of "sincerity" of material according to neo-brutalism's ideas. The building has three floors above the ground and, as usual, an underground one and four "towers" rising on the surrounding base. It is obvious that the towers contain children's rooms thereby establishing a certain kind of their autonomy. The proposed architectural details serve to blur the obviousness of the house's image: windows do not resemble normal rectangular window openings, the walls suffer damage here and there. The children's house should be a little fairy-like, arousing the imagination and allowing for the journeys into known and unknown areas of imagination. As it seems, *the House under the Stars* does not dazzle with excessive conspicuousness within the Village's space; dimensions of the house maintain discipline in the order of the development's blocks. The form remains original (despite the pressure of the event organiser to make the building more "normal"). What remains is the hope to recognise that *architecture consists in constructing fictitious things in such a way that they look real*.

3. DIVERSITY AND ORIGINALITY

What is certain is that architects and their works, houses in the *Children's Village* speak different languages. They were invited to the joint venture. Cemented by the idea of the need to come to orphaned children's aid. And the fact, deployed by the investor in a marketing

way, resulting from the location of *the Children's Village* in the vicinity of Oświęcim, the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

The plan of the village or, strictly speaking, the plan of the part of the village's assumption allocated for the houses' locations may resemble the projects of Modernist assumptions from the beginning of their existence. It can be also associated with the assumptions of the ideal spaces of the past. However, filled up with the plans of houses it may rather resemble the housing exhibition at the Weißenhof estate organised in 1927 in Stuttgart. Domination of individualism over the need for the order was obvious there: the most prominent architects of Europe participated in the event. They also spoke different languages of architecture, and did not try to communicate either.

The houses' designs in the Village in Rajsko manifest themselves with extremely original ideas realised through original forms. One seems to have forgotten where and for whom the houses were to be built.

The Children's Village in Rajsko near Oświęcim will not come into being.