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## MY HOME IN A HOUSE

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### MÓJ DOM W DOMU

#### Abstract

The story about my own Home in a downtown multifamily residential (building) in Warsaw began at Hoża street in 1973. At first there were unrealistic and therefore media-based study visions, titled “Open-air museum – Centre”, subsequently in 1985 a (solidarity) housing cooperative was established by the employees of Warsaw University of Technology, a project which was completed within the studio of the Faculty of Architecture, and finally it all ended up in a housing estate in a compact downtown (housing) development with 180 individually designed apartments, 4 green, pedestrian courtyards and an underground parking for 150 cars. From 1990 we have lived in a real, friendly community, whereas the neighbourhood revived thanks to tens of restaurants and cafes. The situation now seems similar to that of my vision from 1973. Botton’s motto turned to be real.

*Keywords: downtown – modernization – housing estate – community – “architecture of happiness”*

#### Streszczenie

Opowieść o własnym Domu w śródmiejskim warszawskim domu wielorodzinnym na Hożej zaczęła się w 1973 roku. Od nierealnych i dlatego medialnych wizji studialnych zatytułowanych „Skansen – Centrum”, przez założenie solidarnościowej spółdzielni mieszkaniowej pracowników Politechniki Warszawskiej w 1985 roku. Projekt wykonany został w pracowni na Wydziale Architektury i doprowadził do budowy kolonii mieszkaniowej w zwartej zabudowie śródmiejskiej ze 180 indywidualnie projektowanymi mieszkaniami, 4 zielonymi, pieszymi dziedzińcami i podziemnym parkingiem dla 150 samochodów. Od 1990 roku mieszkamy w prawdziwej, koleżeńskiej wspólnocie, a okolica wokół odżyła dziesiątkami restauracji i kawiarni. Jest tak, jak było w mojej wizji z 1973 roku. Motto z Bottona okazało się realne.

*Słowa kluczowe: śródmieście – modernizacja – kolonia mieszkaniowa – wspólnota – „architektura szczęścia”*

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*There need be nothing preternaturally sweet or homespun about the moods embodied in domestic spaces ( ) what we call a home is merely any place that succeeds in making more consistently available to us the important truths which the wider world ignores*  
Alain de Botton "The Architecture of Happiness"

Botton's motto and the view from my window in Hoża Street, overlooking the grim, excessively tall development in Warsaw, could form a counterpoint story of one's own House and of one's own apartment in this House. However, disclosing such personal knowledge can display these Bottonian "truths" regarding the prevalent hustle and bustle of the capital's downtown. Let us make it a raw, scientific reflection, although some urban sociologists could find its facts appealing.

The Story of the House started in 1973: that is 43 years ago. In a workshop of the Warsaw Faculty of Architecture, we created strikingly unrealistic visions of downtown: "Extension of the Warsaw University of Technology – the "Skansen – centrum" area"<sup>1</sup>. This vision encompassed the complex of two quarters enclosed by Wilcza – Poznańska – Wspólna – Em. Plater Streets, with Hoża Street in the middle, both of them related to the tradition of the University of Technology development. The functional idea was to include new programs required for the development of the University interspersed with the surrounding downtown development. "Skansen" (i.e. heritage park) was a catchy name, but, substantively, did not create an accurate association. What the project was about was the actual revitalization of this area. The spatial concept assumed a return to tight quarter-based development in opposition to the slowly fading estate development or single high-risers. Surprisingly, our line of thinking was accepted, and thus our concept was incorporated into the then elaborated principles of development of Warsaw's southern downtown<sup>2</sup>. The "Skansen" concept was picked up by the media. In the Christmas issue of "Życie Warszawy" of 1973, in an article titled "Młodzi na gwiazdkę starej Warszawy" ("The youth gives old Warsaw a Christmas gift"), I describe a "Universal module", a vision which refers to the old "36 x 36 m" development, to the old urban tissue in the region, and to the old width of plot frontages. A 1974 issue of "Kultura" included my article titled "Dać życie miastu" ("To give the city life")<sup>3</sup>. Thinking about Poznańska and Hoża streets, I wish for *small restaurants and cafés with the proverbial five tables, open until the late-night hours*. In an authorial booklet-book from 1982 titled "Czwarty wymiar architektury miasta" ("Fourth dimension of city architecture"), when presenting the "Skansen-centrum" area, I quote the ever-accurate Aleksander Wallis: *downtown buildings and spaces should overgrow with various expressions of social life which, in time, will prove the histories of particular complexes and fragments. These are the deeds that become the symbols of existence and prestige of various communities*<sup>4</sup>. I found such a smart approach appealing.

As of this point in the story, the House is a mere fantasy on paper.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Szukanie w przeszłości*, [in:] *Architektura*, issue 3/75, p. 87–91.

<sup>2</sup> The elaboration was drawn up in the Construction Research & Design Institute of the Warsaw University of Technology by an authorial team of: architect Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, Anna Miklaszewska, Danuta Rybak.

<sup>3</sup> K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Dać życie miastu*, [in:] *Kultura* 7.07.1974, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> . Wallis, *Kultura i więź przestrzenna*, [own translation] [in:] K. Kucza-Kuczyński *Czwarty wymiar architektury miasta*, Warszawa 1982, p. 85–87.

Within the next three years, breathing the atmosphere of political enlivenment rooted in the soil of 1980, in the environment of young teachers and the University's "Solidarity" movement – as referred to by Wallis on numerous occasions, we gave birth to a concept establishing a true residential cooperative: to build us a Home. I am one of the founding members. We narrowed our circle of interest to the 1973 plans for Hoża Street. Our co-op was established and took on a Bottonian name: the "Ideal Apartment". The design was created in an academic workshop from 1985: a concept covering 0.9 ha in total area, including 180 apartments, 150 underground parking spots and offices and stores from the street front<sup>5</sup>. The idea for the function was the structure of four green yards, without pedestrian traffic. The only traffic admitted was occasional technical movement, whereas all vehicles were moved underground. Today, this is a standard solution, but back then, in 1985, we faced bureaucratic problems with approvals, particularly for the scale of the underground parking lot.

One of the features of a true cooperative is freedom of choice. In this case, it was about authentic design of apartments according to one's individual needs – the outcome was 180 different flats, including two-storey apartments in the attic. The contractor nearly went bankrupt because of these. But this is how we wanted them and this is what we created. Furthermore, a true cooperative accounts for the economics of solutions resulting from low university payroll, as well as our own contributions at the construction site, including over-night watches due to the "demanding" nature of the neighbourhood. This was the official opinion of the militia office in Wilcza Street. The cost of constructing 1 m<sup>2</sup> of residential space was 2,700 zlotys.

The architecture of the Colony, our and my Home, is neutral, mediocre, quiet, dominated by the individualization of particular apartments. Further on, we would make different architecture, a more fashionable one

At the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Krakow Architecture Biennale in 1987, my work titled "Historia jednego kwartału Hoża" ("The history of one quarter in Hoża") received an honourable mention and an award from the Polish Academy of Sciences for *presenting an authorial definition of beauty deriving from architecture and science in a spatial transformation design*<sup>6</sup>. This was the cherry on the cake.

In December 1990, after 4 years of construction, the house welcomed its first resident – Jan Szmids – currently the President of the Warsaw University of Technology; I and my four-member family were the second ones. Back then, we reached the house treading winter mud, walking on makeshift wooden platforms. This was, however, unimportant: this was our own House and we were happy: it was in the city centre, several minutes away from where we all worked. 85% of the "43/49 Hoża Colony" residents were University of Technology employees, with the majority of electronic and mechanical engineers, but there were also 6 architects. The remaining apartments were given to contractors. It is to them that we owe today's excellent technical service of the Colony.

The value of each House is measured in the designer's relations with its residents: even today, we welcome one another with due respect, we visit one another, depending on the level of intimacy. This is solid evidence. Perhaps now, it is harder to recognize the children that have all grown up, now strolling with their own children. Our neighbourly friendships

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<sup>5</sup> Design authors: architect Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński /chief architect/, architect Roman Gonciarz; structure: engineer Andrzej Krawczyk.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Międzynarodowe Biennale Architektury Kraków 1987, [in:] *Architektura*, issue 1–2/88, p. 41/43.

were tied in the course of community works: we maintained the greens, we erected the Mary, Mother of God shrine – analogously to all downtown yards. Once a year, on the June, or “papal” as they call it, anniversary of its consecration, we would hold an estate mass on behalf of the residents. Walking past the shrine, you will always see fresh flowers the residents leave after their birthdays and celebrations. But the yard has witnessed more than that: there were New Year’s Eve celebrations, wedding photos and memorials.

Built in these hard times, before the rise of new post-1989 construction technologies, but solidly erected, resting on sturdy “Energomontaż-Północ” concrete walls supplied by the Żarnowiec power plant construction staff, the Colony has aged in the finishing layer only. The time has come to renovate the roofs, façades and details, and to add elevators to the 4-story development inside the quarter. As we know, in the era of pseudo-cooperative management by the Central Association of Residential Development, these were not allowed. But times have changed. Using this opportunity, we were able to reconstruct our apartments, particularly the attic ones, according to our individual needs. This was the true spirit of cooperative.

In the opposite corner, based on the same visions from the past, we built<sup>7</sup> the “second Hoża colony” in 2002. This time, the development featured an excellent standard of the Warsaw golden stone, a two-level underground parking lot, as imposed by the small size of the plot, and a form that consistently matched the scale and size of the identifying downtown development. In the corner, we placed a pharmacy – just like in the old days – flanked by symbolic clocks facing two directions, with custom-designed dial plates<sup>8</sup>.

From my loggia terrace, facing the South, I am looking on the old tree growth casting a shadow on the architecturally-blunt – just like our “43/49 Hoża Street” – but somehow similarly homespun, old houses in neighbouring Wilcza Street. Then, facing the North, without envy, experiencing what can be only described as pity, I glance at Libeskind’s strange house. Of course, all of this is a matter of free choice. There – the freedom to choose the scale of financing. Here, in my House, it was about the freedom to choose to live in a true city, with its own atmosphere of the past and the future. Today, in Poznańska and Hoża, in my “Skansen” quarter, there are 12 restaurants and cafés, including 2 Italian ones, one French, one Israeli, one Mexican, one Mediterranean, one Lebanese and several Polish. The dream we described in “Kultura” in 1974, has come to life. Just like our House.

PS. Whenever this dream of living in a downtown Community house becomes too tiresome, I switch to another happiness: of living in a small house made of Kazimierz limestone. But this is an entirely different subject, as it is the city that is the highlight here

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<sup>7</sup> Designed by the “ATELIER 2 Kucza-Kuczyński, Miklaszewski” authorial office by a team of: Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, Andrzej Miklaszewski, in cooperation with Anna Miklaszewska.

<sup>8</sup> K.Kucza-Kuczyński, *Kamienica 2000*, Magazyn Budowlany, issue 1/2001 p. 10–17.