Zbigniew K. Zuziak*

FROM ARCHITECTURE TO URBANISM AND FROM URBANISM TO ARCHITECTURE

The author of this paper asks questions about the sources, modes and chances of artistic expression while building urban form in the context of research on present good practice in the revitalization of the European metropolis and city marketing. He confronts these observations with questions about the applicability of simulation games to explain decision-making process leading to the creation of urban form.

Keywords: architectonic and urban form, large scale urban development project, simulation games in urbanism, urban revitalization

The problem of expressing form in urbanism

Treatises on the art of building cities emphasize the impact of a strong architectonic form on an urban structure. We may look at this dependence as a “decision-making path” which I conventionally call “from architecture to urbanism” herein which means that we are interested in how “strong architectonic decisions” build an urban form.

However, following the same path in the opposite direction: “from urbanism to architecture” is also significant in the relations between architecture and urbanism. It means that building an architectonic form allows for – or actually: should allow for – a rich collection of factors concerning changes in the structure of a city in accordance with the principles of urbanism. The real problem is that these principles have been blurred and impoverished in today’s urbanism. In practice, more and more often, they are excessively reduced to procedural aspects and economic factors usually adjusted to the slogans of the liberal ideology.

Only repeated and creative struggling to and fro along “the road between architecture and urbanism”, which is full of traps, brings us nearer a situation where urbanism assumes the features of “the art of building cities”, while urban designing and planning mean planning and designing the architecture of a city. This opinion could be transferred on the ground of the theory of building an urban form in the shape of two statements which express a certain type of feedback. The former refers to the impact of architecture on urbanism: The quality of an architectural form ranks among those factors which have the strongest impact on the aesthetic values of an urban space. The latter, concerning the significance of urbanism in interpreting an architectural form, is perhaps less obvious although by no means insightful: Only in the context of urban issues does interpreting the expression of an architectural form “discover” values added which give a deeper meaning to architecture.

These mutual relations open a space for dialogue between the autonomous forms of architectural objects and the formal determinants and structural references which are waiting for interpretation in a conventionally defined context. This feedback can be analyzed

* Zbigniew K. Zuziak, Prof. D.Sc. Ph.D. Arch., Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology, Institute of City and Regional Design.
from the perspective of various aspects of building an architectonic and urban form. We are mainly interested in the problem of expression formulated as the conditions and interrelations which make a collection of architectonic media used in a given urban design capable of gaining an aesthetic effect readable in an urban layout, in a scale going far beyond the range of a given design. In other words, we are interested in those title categories and interrelations which create “artistic externality in urbanistic scale”. This term may be treated as an expression of an analogy to the economic as well as urban problem of external effects. Such an attitude is supported by the fact that the notion of externality [1] transplanted onto the ground of urbanism, related to the term external benefits, ranks among the fundamental concepts explaining the mechanisms of changes in the quality of an urban environment and the regulation of these changes in the context of the idea of justice – also with respect to the theory of sustainable development.

Expression is a notion which may be helpful in ruminations on construction and the comprehension of compositional interrelations between an architectural form and an urban form. It happened so when the relations between architecture and urbanism were governed by the classical rules of composition. To a certain extent, this state could be observed in modernist times. These rules require a subject – a subjective pattern, actually – with strong potential of power, material means, knowledge, culture and talent. The history of architecture and urbanism indicates that such a pattern was formed on the line: an open-minded patron – a talented designer. In European cities under modernism, a similar pattern was formed owing to a strong and socializing state policy which created suitable circumstances of action for the then “titans of architecture and urbanism”.

What is it like today when the conditions of designing are dominated by a tough market game, excessive individualism, hunger for originality at any cost and aggressive emphasis on an individual’s position? To make matters worse, the position of the public authorities with respect to a private investor is becoming weaker and weaker, while architectonic culture is being degraded under a flood of mediocrity or extravagance which violates good taste more and more often. This degradation especially concerns a kind of commercial architecture described by Dariusz Kozłowsk: The main feature of such architectonic things is pandering to unprepared recipients; perhaps the expression of an architect’s preferences, too. Referring to the myth of Orpheus, he adds sarcastically and regretfully, Dogs from hell do not want to take care of architects who willingly deal with commercial architecture [2]. Can we still speak of urbanism as the art of shaping spaces in the scale of an urban layout under such circumstances? Can single successful or even outstanding architectural implementations be treated as solutions which stand a chance of having a positive impact on the quality of urban spaces in a larger scale? Can we treat compositional principles expressed in some classicizing postulates of the ideological assumptions of New Urbanism and perceivable in relatively scarce designs in accordance with this ideology as the determinants of a long-term tendency?

It is difficult to answer these questions in such a short paper. However, we may at least show some promising directions of search and a meeting area for the efforts: the theory of building an urban form, research on an architectonic and urban form in significant urban designs and experiments in the field of innovative techniques of steering changes in an urban space with special emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of the changes. Following this train of thinking, the author chooses three thematic threads hoping that the reader finds some inspirations for his own quest.
1–6 – Fragments of Rheinauhafen (photo by Author). Pic. 1 and 4 – View of the complex of high-risers Kranhaus ("Kranhaus PLUS", "Kranhaus1" and "Pandion Vista"); Pic. 2, 3, 5, 6 – snapshots illustrating the climates of the place.
The first thread of theoretic nature concerns an interpretation of “the sources of expression” and modes of its appearance in the architecture of a city as physical reality, virtual reality and in the sphere of urban policies. As the applied term “the architecture of a city” indicates, the thread called the sources and manifestations of expression in the architecture of a city herein is an attempt to refer to Aldo Rossi, while the signalled questions concerning the expression of an urban form seek their inspiration in his theory of an urban form treated as a structure with the key role of “the individuality of urban artifacts” [3].

The second thread concerns large-scale urban designs, characterized by a relatively powerful impact in an overall scale from the compositional point of view, too, acknowledged as outstanding examples of good practice by architectural and urban critics [4]. The example of the design of Rheinauhafen in Cologne was chosen here – it can be treated as an expression of a consistent and cultural policy, that is why this large design became a chance of artistic expression for its architects and urban planners as well as another landmark and an effective tool of urban marketing for the city. The third thread refers the reader to urban simulation games and their relationship with an urban policy.

Towards theory
I suggest commencing our theoretical reflection with a few simple questions: What does an architectonic and urban form express? What may be the sources/intentions of this category of expression? What are the chances of the development of urban instruments so that the title interrelations are conducive to the artistic expression of a spatial form in both scales? Of course, we could go on like this but Antonio Monestiroli’s question is of greatest importance for the problem. He formulated it at the beginning of his lecture on the art of building a city: “Is it possible to comprehend a city as a work of art today?” [5].

This small portion of questions shows that the problem requires a more specific depiction. Looking for it in the area of theoretical reflection, we can choose from at least two approaches. One refers to theories which emphasize the meaning of the concentration of potential in the process of building an urban form. Here, the power of the expression of a spatial form in an urban scale also proves an ability to reach a certain level of “critical mass”, so it needs to concentrate potential which conditions a proper scale of the impact of an enterprise on the surroundings. Hence contemporary urbanism’s relatively high interest in the circumstances of large-scale enterprises in an urban policy. The other – seemingly contrary – approach focuses our attention on those aspects of a decision-making process which make an urban form diverse and preserving a certain level of “uniformity in diversity”. We may call the corresponding morphology of the urban tissue “fine-grained”.

On the ground of aesthetic theories and the history of urbanism, an urban form is also treated as the expression of various individual needs and the dynamics of a social process. In an urban scale, a readable and consciously constructed architectonic form is a manifestation of a narration which expresses: a need for emphasis on one’s prestige or even domination (“strong forms” and a determined, usually axial composition of a spatial layout with relatively simple geometry of the entire layout), will to imitate forms recognized as a symbol of a high position, pursuit of people’s attention, an explicit need for “being together” which characterizes the urban forms of a group with a strong community instinct (it especially concerns communities where the traditions of the Protestant culture are still pronounced).

An architectonic and urban form may also be treated as a metaphor expressing a metaphysical message which still applies to urban layouts where sacral architecture plays an important role in the re-
ception of the city silhouette. However, such cases are rare today because the space of The Sacred is a weakening component of the spatial policy of a city in more and more secularized Europe. It does not mean, though, that the problem of the expression of an urban form is disappearing from the area of a municipal policy. We can even venture a thesis that we are slowly becoming witnesses of an opposite tendency, while sharp discussions on the location of mosques and the meaning of their forms in the landscape of a European city indicate that such a hypothesis is quite sensible.

In European cities characterized by high urban culture, the symbolism of a body and a search for more and more original forms of architectonic and urban expression is becoming a more and more appreciated aspect of an urban policy. This remark especially refers to cities whose authorities are aware of interrelations between the consistent introduction of an ambitious architectural policy and the effectiveness of the strategies of the development of a city, especially in areas where territorial marketing and revitalizing designs meet in common programmes and corresponding large-space investment projects.

A practical example

The freshly finished design of rebuilding and "reviving" former port areas in Cologne, known in subject literature as Rheinauhafen (Rhine harbour) where a multipurpose urban structure was implemented about 2 km along the Rhine on the area of around 15 hectares, makes a good example of such a situation [6]. Its dominant feature is a complex of three almost identical high-risers [7] "with a marketing etiquette": Kranhaus ("Kranhaus PLUS", "Kranhaus1" and "Pandion Vista") which is somehow explained by an allegoric reference to the form of the harbour cranes [8]. Their dynamic and expressive form is sometimes compared to the famous "Sky smoothers", designed by El Lissitzki, ranking among the icons of Soviet constructivism. In this case, however, interpretations concerning the intentions which guided the designers in their pursuit of some original media for an urban form and its relationships with the expression of an architectonic form take on a special meaning in the context of an urban policy. First and foremost, we are interested in the question of the significance of a style of building a form for the effectiveness of this policy. Artistic decisions are well "configured" with the economic rationality of the entire enterprise.

One of the most important problems in a discussion conducted by experts on European urban policies is the effectiveness of tools for revitalizing a city. The German design arouses a vested interest and receives relatively high assessments. Nearly unanimously, specialists in the real property market, architects, urban planners and experts on the management of large projects in constructional investments emphasize its advantages, especially a relationship between the values of its architectural composition, the attractiveness of the entire urban layout and right decisions in the programmatic and spatial sphere. Emphasis is also put on the role of positive interlocks and a peculiar synergic interrelation between the urban design of Rheinauhafen and Cologne’s urban landscape and business community. In this case, we may speak of a creative interpretation of the context and climate of the place. The whole urban layout is culturally adjusted to the urban landscape of Cologne. The towers of the “Crane Houses" introduce some new values. They do not harm the historic silhouette still dominated by a cathedral, while the new accents can even be interpreted as a dialogue of forms. In projection, the composition of this large-space structure is formed by a linear layout of two belts of buildings extending parallel with the Rhine promenade for about 1.5 km. From the north, the rows of buildings are closed by the Chocolate
Museum; from the south, the complex of offices COO (Cologne Oval Offices am Gustav Heinemann Ufer) makes an attractive neighbourhood.

*Rheinauhafen* is worthy of notice as a case where an architectonic and urban idea, selected in a competition [10], was almost ideally adjusted to the creative climate of Cologne’s business community. Let me remind you that it is strongly related to “the creative sectors of economy” (the media, “artistic industries”, the strong and diverse sector of culture). Perhaps this very feature of the urban environment of Cologne determined the success of the design. The intellectual climate of Cologne’s cultural community, relatively good cooperative bonds between companies representing “creative industry” and their relationships with the authorities turned out to be conducive to the development of this urban concept [11]. In such an environment, the expression of an architectonic form could be associated with the programmatic and spatial layer in an innovative manner. Now we can say that this design belongs to a group of metropolitan undertakings which determine the effectiveness of the city’s strategies of revitalization where creative treatment of broadly understood culture plays the decisive role.

**Urban form and simulated decisions**

Another way of approaching this problem is a search for urban tools which will allow for the significance of a mutual impact between diverse strategies of subjects which build an architectonic and urban form. This leads us to the question of the applicability of urban simulation games for the explanation of this decision-making process, especially its intricacies resulting from aesthetic aspects whose parameters are vague. It can be presented as a problem of confrontation: an architectonic and urban form versus simulation games and urban policies.

Let us imagine that we are told to design a game. The players will be trying to imitate the construction of cities taking the compositional aspects of this process into consideration. Putting “blocks” imitating the forms of buildings onto special boards, they will be guided by their own strategies of building architectonic expression as well as by the rules suitably designed for a given game but with reference to a certain reality created by generally applied urban instruments. However, this situation, comparable to “Monopoly”-type strategic games and many computer games, is different from them as we will be mostly interested in the aspects concerning an architectonic form; to be more precise – the urban consequences of individual strategies of building an architectonic form (A→U) and the architectonic implications of urban strategies and policies (U→A). We assume that both kinds of dependences can be also attributed to more important types of the instruments of contemporary urbanism. The game should take place on many boards which means that – similarly to contemporary global economy – the players take decisions observing the situation on all the boards that symbolize various types of cities.

In the era of computer simulations, such a formulation of an ambitious enterprise may seem rather archaic. The developed market of popular Internet games has got a rich offer, therefore the solution of this assignment may take on a more attractive form. Urban-planning computer games prove helpful for the comprehension of complicated strategies from investors and municipal institutions involved in conquering markets, territories, capital, competitive advantage and similar manifestations of investment processes related to the construction of a city.

A set of mathematical models, which urbanism has been using to explain the laws governing the development of a city for years, is equally rich. These tools – necessary in solving complicated engineering problems, especially related to the design of urban transport systems as well as strategic locative deci-
sions – are limited to some measurable aspects of changes in the spatial development of a city. They require very extended data bases and usually omit aesthetic issues.

However, it may turn out that we will find certain advantages in such a slightly anachronistic formulation of our assignment, especially if we want to define the field of possible strategies of building an urban form with this method and attempt to explain some mechanisms producing similar results in a clash of different strategies applied by the participants in this game for an urban space in various situations.

ENDNOTES

[6] The whole covers c. 250,000 m² of usable area. A relatively detailed description of this revitalizing design from the perspective of a utilitarian programme can be found in Piotr Celewicz’s article entitled Nowe przestrzenie dla środowiska mieszkaniowego w Kolonii, Czasopismo Techniczne, Cracow University of Technology Press, Kraków, 1, 3-A/2007, p. 23–30. Cf. also the list of Internet and other sources at the end of this article.
[7] Each of them is 60 m tall; in projection: 70 m x 34 m.
[10] Its laureate was architect Hadi Teherani who worked in Hamburg at that time.
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