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THE SOCIAL VALUE OF SPACE AROUND THE THEATRE IN THE LATEST POLISH BUILT PROJECTS

SPOŁECZNA WARTOŚĆ PUBLICZNYCH PRZESTRZENI WOKÓŁ- TEATRALNYCH W NAJNOWSZYCH REALIZACJACH POLSKICH

Abstract

Values generated by art and culture usually almost automatically generate social values that appear around the source of the said art, and thus around theatre buildings or concert halls as well. They help to shape the sense of identity of a place, which is important both to local residents and to those from further afield who are interested in cultural events. The experience of social values created around a source of culture is, however, not always as obvious. Can social values be built in public spaces surrounding theatre or concert hall buildings independently of the cultural events that take place inside them?

Three Polish built projects featuring theatre and entertainment buildings built over the past five years in Gdańsk, Warsaw and Katowice were selected in order to analyse this problem. They have won numerous distinctions and awards, including for their innovative solutions in terms of the public spaces created in their immediate vicinity.

Keywords: social values, public spaces, Shakespearean Theatre, NOSPR, Teatr Nowy

Streszczenie

Wartości generowane przez sztukę i kulturę tworzą zazwyczaj niemal automatycznie wartości społeczne, powstające wokół źródła tej sztuki, a więc i budynków teatralnych lub koncertowych. Pomagają one kształtować poczucie tożsamości miejsca, ważne zarówno dla lokalnych mieszkańców, jak i zainteresowanych osób z zewnątrz. Odczuwanie wartości społecznych, tworzonych wokół źródła kultury, nie zawsze jest jednak tak oczywiste. Czy w przestrzeniach publicznych, otaczających budynki widowiskowo-teatralne można budować wartości społeczne, niezależne od rozgrywających się w nich wydarzeń kulturalnych?

Do analizy problemu wybrano trzy polskie realizacje budynków widowiskowo-teatralnych powstałe w ciągu ostatnich pięciu lat w Gdańsku, w Warszawie i w Katowicach. Zdobyły one wiele wyróżnień i nagród, między innymi za nowatorskie rozwiązania przestrzeni publicznych, stworzonych w najbliższym otoczeniu obiektu.

Słowa kluczowe: wartości społeczne, przestrzeń publiczna, Teatr Szekspirowski, NOSPR, Teatr Nowy

1. Introduction

Public spaces associated with theatre buildings, concert and entertainment halls have a specific character due to the strong dominance of the basic function that is housed within them. According to the Spatial Planning and Development Act from the 10th of October 2018 [6] “an area of public space” is defined as: “an area of particular significance to satisfying the needs of residents, improving their quality of life and conducive to social contact because of its location as well as its functional and spatial qualities...” [6, Art. 2, pt. 6]. Its shape and organisation scheme should provide people not only with open physical access to a place, but also with the possibility of multi-level circulation and interactions that play out between those who gather there, as well as the events that are organised in entertainment buildings.

Widespread globalisation, commercialisation and occupation of public spaces by private entities that accompany the current development of cities have led to a gradual transformation of theatre buildings, concert and entertainment halls into a type of cultural hybrid that attempts to house, alongside the stage proper, widely accessible gastronomic establishments, shopping spaces, and sometimes even entertainment centres associated with recreation [8]. These additional functions, which are meant to increase the attractiveness of the public reception of a place, nonetheless introduce limitations as to its accessibility due to the proper functionality of a space that is enriched in this manner. Public space is thus becoming limited by places occupied by coffee shop tables, with numerous prohibitions being introduced, such as bans on running, roller-skating, stepping on meticulously landscaped lawns, consuming one's own food, etc. As a result, this leads to the partial social exclusion of certain groups of people from a given space and, as a consequence, a negative reception of a given place.

Insofar as the subject of public spaces organised within urban layouts (squares, parks, streets) is often analysed by specialists; public spaces associated with culture-forming buildings are presented somewhat as an afterthought to the discussion of the architecture of a theatre building itself or a report on events that take place in these spaces. Such spaces are also rarely assessed in terms of their social value, although the need to generate values of this type is inseparably associated with creating a place's genetic code [1] based on the culture being represented, in this case by a building which is an evidently functional, formal and dominant element of this space. We can distinguish three basic types of broadly accessible public space around theatre and entertainment venue architecture. The social values of a place that are generated within them often take a completely different character.

2. Values resulting from theatre space functional division plans

In theatres and historical concert halls, a building's architectural form and the character of its immediate vicinity were strictly regulated by rules of hierarchical divisions that have been developed over entire centuries, ones that were the result of not only the production direction of a given play (audience – curtain/stage frame – stage), but also from the class-based division



Fig. 1. Shakespearean Theatre in Gdańsk – interior of an Elizabethan-type layout (photo by Linkowski)

of society. Social values of public spaces associated with such buildings formed around two main notions: the “meeting” and the “event”. The “meeting” took place in the sphere directly adjacent to the building, enforcing certain types of behaviours and an appropriately designed entrance zone. Starting with the location of parking spaces, through to an official approach to the main entrance, an appropriate entrance portal with space reserved for people awaiting entrance, to a hall making it possible to observe those who enter – all of this created the social value of the place, which was a result of the visual manifestation that was commented on by its participants on the spot. It was dominated by a public space of a social character, which stretched not only to the immediate surroundings of the theatre, but also within its interior (hall, foyer, audience). A theatre, as an institution, hosted people in its spaces so that they could experience not only art, but each other’s company as well.

The “event”, or spectacle – uncovered over the course of its performance by the lifting of the curtain – featured values that could only be fully read by the most well-educated members of the audience. The remainder of the audience were satisfied by the sensory experience of the performance, consumed in accordance with each viewer’s personal sensitivity. An event’s value could also be high despite the spectacle not being understood, as many people were satisfied simply by being present in such a place and enjoying even a fleeting experience of something elite. The decoration of the place in which these “events” and “meetings” took place has been and still is carefully prepared as a “clear sign that makes it possible to directly identify a place and a space” [7, p. 173]. Theatres and concert halls currently being built which repeat the classical scheme of relationships between the stage and the audience in their layout,

attempt to democratise these divisions, offering new compositional and formal solutions which maintain the capacity for the generation of social values within such a place.

The Shakespearean Theatre in Gdańsk, designed in 2005 by Renato Rizzi, was built as late as in 2014. It was built at the site of the former Fencing School building (1600–1612), in which theatre plays were also staged in the seventeenth century [15, p. 41]. Its conceptual scheme and form almost symbolically repeats the historical divisions of space used around this type of stage. The massive brick massing of the current theatre hides a light timber structure of the reconstructed stage and balconies for the audience. The entire lot on which the theatre is placed is surrounded by a thick wall which constitutes a type of visual barrier that demarcates the sphere of the *sacrum* of theatrical space from the *profanum* of urban space. This wall isolates the space that directly surrounds the theatre from the hustle and bustle of the city, whilst simultaneously constituting an element of a cleverly composed public space in which various cultural events such as open-air exhibitions or open theatrical workshops are organised. It also constitutes a sort of tourist observation trail, as we can marvel at the panorama of the city and the massing of the theatre itself from its top. The interior of the stage and the audience section is, in terms of technical and functional solutions, a layout that is fully modern and flexibly modified, making it possible to arrange three basic types of stage: an Elizabethan, Italian or experimental one. This makes it possible to stage plays that utilise various methods of the audience's access to events, during which the stage-audience space can be shared at one of the levels, thus keeping the distance between the participants of an event to a minimum.

The limitations that have been introduced by the reconstructed stage and galleries typical of an Elizabethan-type theatre forced the management of the theatre to introduce zones in the audience that differ in terms of the comfort of observing a play. Zone C (the cheapest) covers



Fig. 2. Shakespearean Theatre in Gdańsk – view of the walking trail along the top of the wall (photo by Panek)



Fig. 3. NOSPR in Katowice, footbridge along the axis of the Centre alongside a fountain and amphitheatre (photo by J. Sroczyńska)

the galleries of the first and second floors and while it does offer members of the audience the freedom to choose the place from which they view a play, it is unfortunately associated with having to stand during performances in order to be able to see the actors on stage. The galleries of the third floor, due to the poor quality of reception and visibility, have been closed entirely. The space around the theatre, delineated by a wall with stairs, narrow passages and irregular courtyards, forms a sort of a puzzle that one needs a significant amount of time to decipher. By allowing a visitor to identify and name it, makes it possible to generate the social values of the place. The layout, inspired by the narrow streets of historical old towns, makes it possible to shorten the walking distance required to meet one another and get to know other people, as well as to develop one's individual imagination, based on a contemporary interpretation of the past. As can be seen, such strict solutions of the classical layout of the division of theatrical spaces and the limitations associated with them, make it possible to evaluate and appreciate selected social values that are generated by and even thanks to these limitations.

3. Values that are the result of the open external spaces of theatres

The evolution of theatre that over the centuries has finally led to a departure from the strict division of space and changes in fundamental relations between the audience and actors, has also resulted in a new approach to the social values of a place that are generated within

theatrical and entertainment space. Contemporary theatres have become a place of public debate, clashes and discussions about everyday life philosophy and aesthetics, a source of new cultural forms, political representations or socio-cultural manifestoes. In a period of the pauperisation of art, the form of the massing of a theatre or concert and entertainment hall is meant to symbolically manifest a place as special, unique and significant to people.

In 2015 the Polish Association of Town Planners, along with the Association of Polish Cities, acknowledged the area surrounding the new building of the Polish Radio National Symphony Orchestra (NOSPR) in Katowice as the best public space in the “newly-created public space” category. The design of the surroundings of the building, which houses a concert hall that is amongst the world’s most modern and best in terms of acoustics (in addition to that of the building itself) was prepared by architects from Konior Studio. It is one of the more important elements of the regenerated part of the city which once belonged to the “Katowice” mine and is at present called the Sphere of Culture. This sphere is currently composed of: the “Spodek” multi-arena, the Silesian Museum International Congress Centre and the previously mentioned NOSPR building.

The surroundings of the concert hall that has been awarded this prestigious distinction is located at the site of a former mine lumber yard, right near the shafts of the former mine [12]. Due to the character and function of the main building, it was decided to create an urban garden at the site, with a living and multi-threaded character, one that is, however, based on elements that reinforce and prepare visitors for musical experiences. The space was meant to play the role of a sort of foreground in which, through learning and gradually using various devices that have been placed in this garden, visitors could experience various sounds as they come closer to the core of the design – the concert hall, where they will be able to directly come into contact with the purest and fullest form of auditory sensation that is music. Elements characteristic of music, such as changing rhythm and fluidity, were used both in the facades of the building and in the functional and formal variation of its surroundings. The four-hectare gardens feature such elements as a music fountain, an amphitheatre, a labyrinth of hornbeam trees and numerous sculptures in the form of toys that produce sounds upon interaction. The labyrinth enables people to learn about the historical urban layout of Katowice’s city centre from 1926.

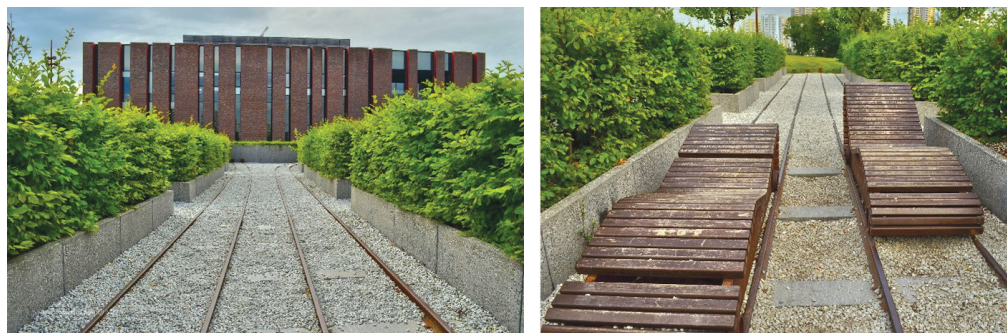


Fig. 4. NOSPR in Katowice – hornbeam labyrinth with details reclaimed from a demolished mine
(photo by J. Sroczyńska)

With the local community in mind, it was possible to fully employ this space by using materials typical of the region in its creation (brick, timber, steel, cast iron), as well as blending details obtained from the former mine into the decoration of garden furniture. Indeed, this place, despite being somewhat distant from nearby residential block complexes, is rarely empty. The space of the gardens became connected with other elements of the Sphere of Culture through a concrete footbridge that safely binds all of the basic elements of the complex together. The footbridge is currently the most frequently used place by people who want to take a commemorative photograph or wedding photo with the NOSPR building and its gardens in the background. The design, featuring a publically accessible Hall foyer by the inclusion of a music book store, has made it possible for an intermediary zone to be established, one that binds the external space of the public *profanum* (a zone that patiently educates people using elements that constitute an attraction to the average person) with the sphere of the *sacrum* embodied by the concerts' musical culture of the highest order.

The social value of this place lies precisely in this combination of an “event” that provokes a forced interest in the place of a potential “meeting”. Preparing people for interaction with high culture is based on participation in play, which slowly introduces the still-unaware audience to the temple of classical sound. Experiencing sensations registered by the senses and reflection upon them are stimulated by the emergence of images and cognitive emotions



Fig. 5. Teatr Nowy in Warsaw – view of the theatre's courtyard (photo by J. Sroczyńska)

within the human mind, which, as a result, generate the individual social values of a given place. This space was also awarded the second prize in the prestigious international European Garden Award competition, whose jury acknowledged the garden as “an important element of the city’s new identity” [10].

4. Values of a democratised new type of space around theatres

In Poland, stage spaces of this type are increasing in number every year. They are characterised by the lack of a classical stage and a place for the audience. Both the audience and the actor are meant to take their own place in order to complete their mission. Such a space makes it possible to facilitate many types of stage performances and the lack of scenic framework makes it possible to introduce a reinterpretation of semantics in plays, used by the director of a play and the audience’s reception. The audience, along with actors, jointly establish the fundamental semantics and meanings of the values that they distinguish and the spectacle itself becomes “a sort of debate, whose result is never predetermined” [13]. A democratised theatrical space can come into existence not only inside the theatre building itself, but also within its immediate vicinity. It is supported as a perception of art not only by the direction, but also by the simplicity of the stage design, shaped independently of rows of



Fig. 6. Teatr Nowy in Warsaw – interior of the foyer with a bookstore, coffee shop and reading room
(photo by J. Sroczyńska)

audience seats. This procedure also makes it possible to do away with the procedure that is typical of historical theatres that causes members of the audience who are just entering the world of art to be intimidated, as well as with all the divisions that support social stratification. The departure of the spectacle beyond the framework of the stage/frame/audience scheme is also accompanied by a different philosophy of shaping the character of the immediate surroundings of the theatre building, which is a type of extended arena for discussion initiated by the spectacle and at the same time a public space of the city in which the events that play out are commented on during the spectacle.

There is an increasing number of such spaces, with the new building of Teatr Stary in Warsaw's Mokotów district being particularly noteworthy in the context of this discussion. Its initiator and current artistic director – Krzysztof Warlikowski – had long searched for a place in which to create his own theatre as a multi-disciplinary space, open to many disciplines of art, making it possible to “engage in an in-depth dialogue with the audience” [13]. This outstanding and world-famous director wanted to establish an institution that would primarily interfere with the lives of the residents of the city in order to, over time, alter human perception of his city by revealing “the structure of its memory, repression or oblivion” [14].

Through dialogue with society, he also wanted to build a social understanding of European culture, showing the characteristics that are similar despite there being many differences arising from a distinct experience of history. In order to implement his project, he decided to procure an abandoned lot that had belonged to MPO, located in Warsaw's Stary Mokotów district, at 10/16 Madalińskiego Street. A design by Kozień Architekci, which won an international competition organised in 2008, was selected for construction. Unfortunately, the design was not executed due to a lack of much-needed funds. The programme had to be significantly reduced and cheaper solutions had to be found while still maintaining the idea behind the project. It was decided to only use the existing buildings of the complex, designed in 1927 by T. Emmel and which have been placed on the protected heritage sites list as the city's post-industrial heritage.

The design of the modernisation and adaptation of the historical complex of buildings of the former garage hall along with the MPO's storehouses and workshops for the purposes of a theatre was developed in 2014 by Piotr Fortuna Architekci from Gdynia. In 2016 Warlikowski began his work in the new building [4]. The stage space of the Grand Stage was organised in the main hall of the former MPO garage and features 4 independent mobile audience modules for 400 people. The space can be freely partitioned using folded curtains, which makes it possible to move the audience segments anywhere within the space. The sides of the Grand Stage, in the spaces of the former workshops and storage areas, were adapted to feature a foyer on one side and theatre facilities on the other. The foyer also houses a coffee shop and a bookstore, which operate all day long, independently of the events hosted at the theatre. A portion of the facilities section, near the changing rooms for artists, was appropriated for a rehearsal room, which, being adjacent to the Grand Stage, can also be used for purposes associated with spectacles or exhibitions. It can also be fully accessible to the public as a space for cameral artistic events thanks to being open from the side of the courtyard.

The interior design was the work of stage designers M. Szcześniak and Ł. Kwietniewski. Their design is dominated by a spirit of conceptualism and constructivism, which is why both the stage space and the foyer appear to be makeshift, temporary spaces; however, they are anything but random. Their design causes everybody who enters to feel free. It is an everyday space of the city, and is thus used by the local community that meets here in the coffee shop or in the reading room adjacent to the bookstore when its members take a break from their everyday tasks.

The courtyard, designed by Ł. Kowalski and K. Samborska of Pracownia La.Wa is a particularly significant element of the Teatr Nowy International Culture Centre. It is an open area, although separated from the pavements of streets with openwork segments of partitions and benches. It plays the role of a cultural agora, “a place of social interaction, a public space that aids in sharing experiences, but also a place of casual rest on one’s route through the city”[4]. It is here that invited artists are meant to test various forms of using urban public space. It constitutes a sort of ecotone, a transitory space between the world of theatre and the city, understood as a separate ecosystem of the city’s biocenosis [3]. The elderly and children were also taken into consideration here, as a large lawn and a playground for children have been placed near the courtyard.

One of the freestanding single-storey storage buildings of the former MPO was assigned to act as a so-called dayroom. It is currently a centre that features educational events for children, youth and seniors. It hosts lectures and workshops that support social initiatives associated with improving the standard of living of the district’s residents and skills concerned with engaging in social dialogue based on a diversity of human attitudes and cultures. The operational activity of the Centre’s dayroom is created and directly regulated by the residents of the neighbourhood who participate in it.

The public space designed around and partially inside the theatre complex is a place that fully generates measurable social values that appear at the point of contact between so-called “high culture” and the true, everyday life of the city, whose pulse is clearly felt in this place, built as a democratic platform for dialogue. It does not lessen the rank of the “events” that play out here, and “meetings” that constantly take place here take on a supralocal significance. They thus constitute a public domain, a common good that is created by local social activity. The authors of a theatrical performance are but an element of the meeting that takes place here, commenting on the values of a democratised space of the city by interpreting a play.

5. Conclusion

The perception of space around theatres is associated with identifying, classifying and ascribing meaning to elements that shape this space as a public place. In order to generate social values within it, each member of the community who visits this place must first identify and then assess this space themselves. Opinions about such a place are undoubtedly affected by its composition, which makes it easier to perceive its assets, as well as enabling people to actively participate in this space, while providing stimuli to human senses which, when processed by

the human mind, build positive connotations [1]. The increasing number of anonymous public spaces is growing uncontrollably, which significantly waters down the idea of the city.

The unification of solutions and the uniformity of public spaces is a result of a stance focused on directionally satisfying the needs of residents. As Michel de Certeau suggested, it is currently necessary to “invent everyday life” [5], in order for the receiver to have a chance to discover and create values that will enable them to form true roots in a given place. Places associated with art, particularly with theatre and music, can, like no other public spaces, help people to form these roots, as the character of a theatre or concert hall is their inseparable trait.

The social values of space around the theatre are suspended between three fundamental layers, namely: the semantic, formal and cultural layer. The semantic layer generates values arising from such determinants like location, the history of the place, the function and manner of the organisation of the central building. The formal layer can generate values thanks to the aesthetic of the compositional and spatial layout, the harmony of employed colours and greenery as a factor that aids relaxation.

The cultural layer (the most dominant one in this space) can provide people with satisfaction resulting from a feeling of experiencing so-called high culture and the possibility of using the prestige that surrounds a place. Values generated within these layers ensure social integration thanks to the ability to engage in dialogue with people on the subject either of assets or a lack thereof on each of the abovementioned layers. And it will always be a dialogue of a transcendental nature, as it is not really about discussing an element of reality, but thanks to people that we get to know and who come to this space and the mutual communication of said people, these values that have the character of spiritual traits – that are so important to the development of humanity – are generated [2]. This is why the postulate of M. Koziński-Woźniak [9] concerning the need to create theatres of interference, whose cultural spaces will be appropriately superimposed upon the surrounding everyday reality, appears to be applicable to all newly built buildings of culture.

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