

DIRK HANSEN*

EMOTIONAL ARCHITECTURE
OR NOT. THE USE
AND MISUSE OF SPACE

ARCHITEKTURA EMOCJONALNA
LUB NIE. UŻYWANIE
I NADUŻYWANIE PRZESTRZENI

Abstract

The creation of architectural space is more and more subject to commercial, capitalist activities by that losing its emotional content. It is not anymore an architecture hands-on – rather an undertaking divorced of basic concerns with body, mind and soul.

Keywords: empathy, ambiguity and pluralism as the basis of true emotional architecture, against profit, pomposity and populism

Streszczenie

Tworzenie przestrzeni architektonicznej podlega coraz bardziej komercyjnym, kapitalistycznym działaniom, przez co ztraca emocjonalną treść. Nie jest to już architektura praktyczna – raczej przedsięwzięcie oderwane od podstawowych problemów dotyczących ciała, umysłu i duszy.

Słowa kluczowe: empatia, niejednoznaczność i pluralizm jako podstawa prawdziwej architektury emocjonalnej, wbrew zyskowi, pompatyczności i populizmowi

* Arch. Dirk Hansen, Berlin.

In times like these, when democracy elsewhere is in turmoil, when democracy is riven by emotionalism, when small and supposedly great states are likewise pushed by emotional populism to the brink of their basic humanitarian, democratic values, one might ask if architecture, too, is being gripped by an identity crisis.

Just speaking of Europe, where architecture is still somewhat circumscribed by democratic policies, architectural competitions, planning systems, distribution of space, I believe there are some breaking points.

Up foremost is the distribution of space, which I believe is important for the development of our well-being without or within.

It starts with the eternal housing question. Since Engels there seem to have been no advances. The desire to own one's house, flat, villa, workshop, an abode to be identified with is one of immense emotional undertaking. "My home is my castle". There we find our identity, there we find the emotional space to be cosy. But when in the past the forming of this space happened hands on, with a conversation amongst not only ourselves, but with a set of communities, family, within a group of villagers, burghers, craftsmen or merchants though sometimes interfered with, dominated by feudal powers the present globalization does not allow such tight knit solutions for creating our emotional spaces any more.

Space is identified by others, alien to one's emotional needs. This started with the rise of industrialism, capitalism and commercialism. Space has increasingly become a commodity to speculate on. It is in the hands of "Trumpism". Of course, space has been always subject to one manipulation or another. Nations have been built on it. But now the spaces of our planet are ravaged by an aggressive mindless deconstruction. It is telling that one of the foremost countries in the world is run by a proper czar. But we are all part of this, not just this feckless man.

We are driven to own our house, our space or spaces just on the basis of how much we can sell it for. We hardly look for creating a space to be comfortable in. Mostly we fill it with a commercialized identity, from Ikea or such. The paradox is that, for example, we are so individualized (we live more and more as singles) that the creation of space is not subject to personal desires (we leave it to architects, people like Gaudi, Zaha Hadid or utopian hermits) but to normative solutions which are driven by rampant property capitalism. We still use space as if it exists in abundance. Everywhere developers offer houses to satisfy the desire to settle between two or more columns. The shape and sizes are those of tea-caddies, square and righteous. Hardly ever are "architects" involved. Their work is hidden in the architectural magazines, at architectural biennials or at architectural conferences. In the end we have a property crisis, globally and by that destroying more of the planet's precious spaces which then lie fallow and ruined.

Furthermore, this capitalized and commercialized identity with one's house which has been created with such emotional financial effort seems to be so normative, so coldly functional that in the end one is looking for an identity, kicks of emotions of and by the other. We travel around the world by car, plane or cruise ship to find emotional pleasure in historic architectural spaces, in the narrative of a world gone by.

By that destroying the make-up – the emotional spaces of the people visited. In Venice, in Barcelona, nearly everywhere, we are now searching for what is lacking in our normative conformative estates. So much so that people in Venice or Barcelona have to fight back to keep control of their emotional spaces constructed over centuries.

There is a kind of hedonism to use the spaces of someone other instead of looking deep into ourselves to find what is really needed to fulfill our emotional well-being. Is it just historic brick or mortar?

Where does architecture stand in all this? Recently Rem Koolhaas¹ involved himself in what one would say *Back to the Country*. An architect who, since his *Delirious New York* 1978, has been always a champion of the metropolis, which meant to be heavily involved in the deconstruction of the communality of spaces, of spaces full of emotional possibilities. He is not a crude *narodnik*. But he obviously feels that the countryside has to offer more emotional content than sky scraping (Beijing). An architecture still being manifest around the world. He is not the only one. A book on architectural hypocrisy has not been written yet. Architecture fails monumentally and permanently (with exceptions) in supplying a “good feel” about it. Emotional content has been driven out. What was once an attempt at a Gesamtkunstwerk of “emotional” architecture – as for instance being inherent in Baroque architecture – has been on one side deformed by the so-called “Bilbao effect” architecture (Gehry, Hadid etc.), and on the other by banal hedge funded forms and facades.

We cannot go back now to the countryside to live out our deep-rooted emotions of belonging. Too much has been invested in our urbanity. There we have to look for new solutions, garnering spaces on the basis of a commonality which we had in the past in our villages (commons) and towns (market places). We have to bring back the control of our environment, away from the property funds.

The villages, the small towns are empty now. No emotional content can be found there but the “Angst” of being left behind.

Wherever we look we see an architecture of either pompous dimensions or aesthetic extravagances which leaves out the emotional connotation we all can make contact with. Of course in between all of this there are architects like Zumthor or Schattner and many others who try to embody their architecture with some emotional value. And it is true that our environment increasingly loses the ingredients, the little morsels, which make it: the telephone box, the kiosk, the toilets, the benches, the letter boxes or building types which in the past have carried much of emotional value with them: churches, post offices, banks, stations, petrol stations, airports and many more which have been subject to digital Lidlisation. What was once fixed in emotional rituals, e.g. arrival & departure in railway stations or airports is now stifled by shops loaded with transient goods, perfume or alcohol. The commonality of all this architecture, the commonality of its humanitarian, emotional value is being lost. The distribution centres of Amazon are the new architecture, without soul and “body”. We participate in all of this through our hedonism to shop or putting our life into pension funds besides our obsession with cars.

So amongst this onslaught we want to find spaces to be comfortable with. We visit historic villages, towns and cities which still have “character”, Norberg-Schulz’ “Genius Loci”. But these are calmed down artificially by taking e.g. cars out, by filling them like in Krakow with places where the tourists can rest after strolling around.

The big spaces become cluttered, the small ones are erased.

More so, cities like Frankfurt am Main² in Germany are trying to bring back the old emotional environment amongst a debate what is “deutsch” or “undeutsch” architecture. For years the Bauhaus stood for the architecture of the “aliens”. It was defamed by images connecting it to North African, also Syrian architecture. Instead it was an architecture which

¹ NZZ 2/12/2017 “Architekten, raus aus den Städten“, Antje Stahl Exhibition Countryside: Future of the World, Guggenheim, New York.

² Süddeutsche Zeitung 11/5/2018.

tried to get rid of all that architecture built by pumped up chauvinistic, nationalistic, racist emotions. Emotions which are again everywhere in ascendance. The Bauhaus, contrary to these falsifications, tried to use foremost space, as I believe, as the basis to exert our bodies, souls and minds. But not only the Bauhaus avantgarde exercised or tried to follow emotional creativity, the Amsterdam School, the Expressionists, or just persons like Rudolf Steiner or Paul Scheerbart or the Czech universalist Wenzel Hablik (1881–1934) who invented Gesamtkunstwerke which attacked all the senses we have. These are the ones we have to garnish, to create a true “emotional” architectural world. Not the constant attempt to construct architectural pomposity with skyscrapers, not with sets of Gehry’s, not with nostalgic structures like in Frankfurt, but with structures, with spaces which are ergonomically, ecologically based. Structures and spaces which are formed around our parameters of our bodies and senses. To use e.g. materials or colours which create an immediate emotional response. (There is a lot of wood in architectural use now to fight the cold and wasteful steel and concrete constructions.)

Above all we have to bring architecture back to a kind of pluralism which enables the empathy we need to find our personal or collective space as successfully emotional.

It is interesting that the refugee crisis has created a somewhat more sensitive approach to how to form space. First by minimalism, well, a kind of crude functionalism but then of forming spaces which are economically, ecologically and last but not least full of emotional considerations. These latter are first determined by the status, position or standing of the dweller, being a student, a pensioner, a couple or family, or a disabled person. That is, the spaces are created according to the primary “emotional” situation. But secondly, ever more so to consider spaces which are changeable, in height and in light, in up and down, inside and outside, compact or open. Considerations which are helping to find one’s own or collective emotional space. It seems obvious that the present mode for tree-houses, huts or cabins, for more ephemeral architecture, has become a set feature of architectural magazines. And with that the possibility to find one’s emotional space, not so much by the clutter of personal, increasingly commercialized belongings (the cuckoo clock) but by architectural solutions which are based on our emotional state, mind, body and soul.

What to do? A question asked in the socio-political realm for decades now. But what “can” architecture do? First, architecture has to become more socio-political. Too isolated are the attempts where architects make a creative decision morally or democratically underpinned.

Secondly, architecture has to be more ecologically charged. Thirdly, architecture has to become more transparent to the citizen so that he or she has the opportunity to be involved and being given the chance to help the architect in his or her eternal viscous discussion with the clients.

Fourthly, architecture has to open itself more to empathy. Only then will we again find the spaces for emotional well-being. That means away from ideological, pro and contra, habits. Allowing more pluralism and more ambiguity³.

³ T. Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt. Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt*, Ditzingen 2018, 4. Auflage.