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BEING LIKE EMMA THOMPSON

BYĆ JAK EMMA THOMPSON

Abstract

The film “Sense and Sensibility” was shown in Poland under the title that could be literally translated as “Reasonable and romantic”. The plot takes us to England at the end of the 18th century and portrays the situation in which the Dashwood ladies, a mother and her three daughters, found themselves in. The older daughter, played by Emma Thompson, is immediately perceived as only the reasonable and pragmatic one. It quickly turns out that this perception of the characters’ roles can be misleading. Such opinion about the duality of the human nature, which leads to intuitive actions immediately followed by the sensible thought, seems quite logical. It can also be transferred to the realm of art, including architecture.

Keywords: intuition, pragmatism, architecture

Streszczenie

Film „Sense and Sensibility” był wyświetlany w Polsce pod tytułem „Rozważna i romantyczna”. Rzecz dzieje się w Anglii pod koniec XVIII wieku i pokazuje sytuację, w jakiej znalazły się panie Dashwood – matka i jej trzy córki. Najstarsza, grana przez Emmę Thompson, wydaje się zrazu tylko rozważna i pragmatyczna. Szybko okazuje się, że takie odczytanie roli postaci może być błędne. Taka opinia o dwoistości natury człowieka, skłaniającej się do działań intuicyjnych, żeby zaraz przykładać do nich miarę racjonalną, wydaje się dość logiczna. Można ją przenosić także na sposób tworzenia dzieł sztuki, w tym architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: intuicja, pragmatyzm, architektura

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1. In 1995, the film *Sense and Sensibility* was released, but it was not until the next year that it was shown in Poland under the title that could be literally translated as “Reasonable and Romantic”. The plot takes us to England at the end of the 18th century and portrays the unpleasant situation in which the Dashwood ladies, a mother and her three daughters, found themselves in. Two of them dominated throughout the film. The younger one, played by Kate Winslet, is perceived as a romantic girl as she is prone to such emotions. The other, older, played by Emma Thompson, with the burden of a family to feed, is immediately perceived as the reasonable and pragmatic one. It quickly turns out that this perception of the characters’ roles can be misleading because the title of the film might actually refer only to the woman portrayed by Emma Thompson, who was actually awarded an Oscar for writing the script for the film. This opinion about the duality of the human nature, which leads to intuitive actions immediately followed by sensible thought, seems quite logical. It can also be transferred to the realm of art, including architecture. At this point, it is necessary for us to move on to the examples of our trade.

2. The 70s–80s in Poland were a time of architectural and urban studio contests. It was so far the only possibility for a professional show-off, so we participated in those events eagerly. In various personal arrangements (most often in a team with Grzegorz Chodkowski and/or Andrzej Gawlikowski) we created nearly 40 projects and fortunately half of those received an award or were honoured in some way. We usually started our work at the last moment, never earlier than a week before the deadline. Therefore, there was not a lot of time, but we compensated for the lack of it by hard work, sleepless multiple-day sessions spent over scattered papers and an increasingly effective approach to the task, which featured drawing, unending drawing, enthusiastic drawing of plans, sections, views and whatever else was needed. We carved the formed images of the future with zealous enthusiasm, leaving previous ideas under piles of carbon paper without remorse. The drawing/design decisions were made spontaneously and the only guide was the initial sketch which showed the state of our activity in a synthetic form.

We approached it with incredible care, searching for lines, groups of lines, even clusters of parallel lines or those simply running next to each other, diverging here and there in the form of fans, all in the search of a line ornament. Its improved image became geometrical with every successive step, a planned location template of a new concept. The template grew as an extension of what was already made, sometimes it assumed the shape of lines that were extended just for the fun of extending lines, or for the creation of something charming, unknown to us at the time.

We got carried away by drawing, especially when we created the 3rd dimension for line elements. This is how the designed space was created together with the existing factual state. All of this was fascinating, the layers of drawings that improved upon previous ideas grew in piles, urban details were added, lines were transformed into drawings of streets, frontages, axes, directions of viewing and the edges of building fragments. The points in the drawings became dominants and special signs – all that is necessary for an urban composition.

Today I think that in this free drawing, hand sketching (and designing at the same time) there was a note of something romantic. Surely, there was more drunken bravery, quixotism and audacity than demiurgic pride in all of this, but at the same time, and I am sure of this, we were careful to make the struggle possible to overcome. After all, we were the students of Kazimierz Wejchert, who not only knew how to draw a city, but he actually built it. Yes, we were the students of Wejchert school, which would not exist if not for the school of Tadeusz

Tołwiński. Both men were characterised by romantic zeal and the pragmatic creativity to form the boundaries of this zeal.

3. I am looking at the architectural plan of Warsaw (Tołwiński and the so-called community of young architects) of 1916, emerging largely from the city's tradition that was just taking roots – a garden city with traces of academic classics. Doubtlessly, this extravagant-looking plan, which was drawn by a truly young designer (Tołwiński was 29 at that time) featured an incredible creative force. It leads to the creation of an official document, the architectural plan of Warsaw that was acknowledged in 1931, and the later plan of 1938, which was not acknowledged because the war began. Tołwiński's plan was beautiful in the urban meaning of the word: it was great at constructing space and solving technical problems.

4. I am looking at the competition architectural plan of Tychy (1951, then it was known as Nowe Tychy) and its later versions, with its origin rooted in the traditions of small Polish towns and modern European experiences. Those that read *Miasteczka polskie jako zagadnienie urbanistyczne* (Eng. Small Polish towns as an urban subject), Wejcherts PhD thesis written during the war, will understand his fascination with their irritating vernacular architecture. At the time the book was published, right after the war, he experienced a wonderful urban adventure with a group of his co-workers: the designing of the so-called simplified plans for over 70 small towns in the Reclaimed Lands (Ziemie Odzyskane). At that time, the competition for the plan of Nowe Tychy appeared and it was won by a team led by Wejchert.

5. When analysing the plan of Tychy today, we write about both traditions, the small town – the romantic one, and the modernist town – the pragmatic, visible in his plans. However, to what extent were both approaches present in the plans of the designers?

First, let us discuss the modernist pragmatism. The Wejcherts claimed that the influence of the Athens Charter on designing at the threshold of the 40s and 50s was not great. The Charter was nearly unknown in their community and it was “Urbanistyka” by Tadeusz Tołwiński that was considered the model to follow. The school featured experience gained from practice and the discussions with Bolesław Malisz, Jan Olaf Chmielewski and Kazimierz Dziewoński. The authors of the competition entries from 1951 did not have direct contact with the new cities of Western Europe, and the information about those places was gathered from the few available publications. After all, the tone of the Polish publications was clearly highlighted: the British cities could not compete with the socialist cities – this is how we can briefly explain the issues surrounding publications and the architectural and urban forms valid at the time. And so, the authors of all of the competition entries (H. Adamczewska and K. Wejchert, T. Zieliński, T. Ptaszycki, T. Teodorowicz – Todorowski) relied mainly on intuition, fantasies and the rejection of the bad qualities of capitalist pre-war cities. The situation was supposed to be similar to the competition's jury (K. Dziewoński, A. Ciborowski, A. Krzyszkowski, W. Ostrowski, R. Pieńkowski, Z. Skibiniewski). So if Nowe Tychy was built in significant isolation from the post-war European modernist movement, the question arises where so many formal similarities to the more prominent realizations of that era came from? There are two hypotheses:

- Assuming that Nowe Tychy is a product of the Warsaw architectural-urban school, it is worth recalling that this school had a tendency to absorb the theoretical ideas by realizing objects. This “learning by doing” approach also functioned in the case of

the Wejcherts and Tychy. In their community, they were learning the modernist ideas by realizing Tychy. And so at the beginning, where the Wejcherts started Tychy, we see small-town forms (old Tychy and B district) from which they moved on after 1956, when the contacts with the west of Europe increased, to a housing type of layout, forced on the other hand by the realization capabilities (or rather incapacabilities) of house factories. Following this idea, the districts E2, E3, E4 were formed in 1957, D1 in 1959, and other districts later on.

- “The modernist education” did not entail learning about the Athens Charter with no previous knowledge of it, contrary to the statement by the Wejcherts. The Warsaw community was associated with its creation like no other. The jury of the 1951 competition were the authors of a six-year plan for the reconstruction of Warsaw, which was much more modernist than socialist. Their co-workers from the Office of Capital Reconstruction came straight from CIAM. However, the specific knowledge of the Charter is not so important. It is important to think in its categories. The Wejcherts, when dividing Tychy into functional areas, paying particular attention to communication solutions and eventually placing great blocks in space showed that this was the case with Tychy.
- “The modernist education” in the case of the Wejcherts also meant the processing of modernism. It has to be remembered that the Wejcherts came from Tołwiński’s school. This is visible in their early post-war urban realizations, especially the aforementioned results of the simplified plans of western and northern towns. Therefore, they were of different intellectual provenance and nearly a generation younger than Syrkusowie, Brukalsy and Chmielewski. Hence, the different optics of perceiving the world, so little and so much at the same time and hence the astonishment at how well they assimilated the modernist way of designing a town. Maybe they just had to. Maybe it would have been better if the rest of Tychy had been made in the small-town romantic convention of district B. It seems that the Wejcherts longed for this the entire time they were working in Tychy. When they wanted to show the town during the Biennale of Architecture in Kraków in 1985, they did it by presenting the small-town elements of Nowe Tychy. They designed a lot of them in every part of the town, trying to translate the dry forms of groups of prefabricated buildings into local Arcadian landscapes. They wanted to create the images known from older markets – in a new architectural reality that became very nostalgic as a result.

6. “Nostalgia in space” can be produced as if using a production line, which is not a negative comment, but simply a fact. In the search for a cure for the characterless dispersal of cities, especially the big ones, the spatial forms typical for smaller towns have been used for many years. Their existence, as well as their patterns, can be – as it is adequately stated – an example of the lasting identity of a place, passed on to later generations, all of which is sought by town planners the whole world over. At the time of globalisation, which makes every city similar, this quality is particularly valuable, especially when we want to build on new fragments of space. The search for such qualities is quite common and their direction is known – there is a reason why American pragmatic New Urbanists search for patterns in good old Europe.

It is worth reminding why small towns were and still can be a model for urban and architectural creativity. We all know the critical state they are in. It resulted in the 50s from

the lack of the traditional city forming factors, which was associated with the depopulation of small towns. On the other hand, we had development plans made without any criticism, the gaps in legal regulations regarding the maintenance of private estates, the weakness of the planning apparatus and construction supervision, all of which lead to the exchange of the regional character of districts and the individualisation of space for pseudo-modern architectural trends. Lastly, the complex of a small town is also of importance, as well as the “small-town taste” which is constantly brought to light, showing the attitude of the “great world” to faraway towns, even when this “world” is merely a thoughtless Warsaw.

Despite all the negative phenomena, one can determine a set of characteristic qualities in small towns that still exist and that are worth maintaining. They result largely from the definition of a small town: a clearly planned and concise group of a small number of buildings over a small territory with a small number of people that use these structures, as well as the relations between these elements and inside them. The recurring word “small” each time refers to a group of people not bigger than 30 000 individuals. A small town defined in such a way has the following characteristics:

- a) Small physical size: a small human scale, different from monumental, superhuman or non-human scales,
- b) The specificity of space, a clear plan and clear borders,
- c) Connection with the landscape, a picturesque silhouette, colours associated with the construction material characteristic for the surrounding environment,
- d) The rules of composition governing the area which are far from the pedantic ordering of elements – the composition is a result of various forces, not exactly a confrontation with the order of space. It is more a result of a pragmatic distortion of spatial assumptions, it is an axis without symmetry, the acceptance of partial solutions and spatial diversity. We also observe streets shaped as urban interiors with annexes resulting from the irregularities of planning. This entails a view of short distances, increasing the role of dominants, detail, decorations and finishing,
- e) The antiquity and monumentality of many spatial arrangements as well as the evolutionary character of their changes, which ensures the continuity of life of the city and within the city based on the existence of an authentic social bond. This means the personalisation of spatial problems and a clear reflection of the activity of an individual in the scope of the whole city while establishing clear boundaries of spatial privacy,
- f) The historical shaping of the role of a capital of a given region.

The qualities mentioned above can be violated, but they are not gone completely thanks to the relative independence of both sides – the independence defined in the rooted look of a town shaped during its management with few possibilities of transformation. To conclude, the qualities that shape the image of a small town do not undergo huge changes. More so, they acquire the status of functional ones regardless of the state of the environment of their origin. It can be said that their group forms the descriptive adjective “small-town” regardless of the town itself.

Therefore, where the aforementioned qualities appear, all of them together or within groups, the small-town factor is born. It does not have to be associated with the size of the agglomeration, the small-town image does not have to be formed as a result of the functioning of the traditional city-building factor, it is not necessary for such image to be shaped in an evolutionary manner and it does not have to be an urban monument. It can appear anywhere and can be sought in any place. This is the strength of the small-town building tradition.

7. The qualities of a small town, forming the small-town feel of other sets of objects, can be divided into three groups: those related to the town as a whole, those that refer to particular spatial problems and those associated with the residents. This division reveals the existence of three templates that a small town may provide: a Defined Whole, an Orderly Space and a Cooperating Community.

The first one is a result of the relative simplicity of the structure of a small town, the clarity of the perceived whole and the establishment of borders by contrasting buildings with open landscape.

The second one results from the notion of order based on the understanding of the role of communication between an object and its user. Following this idea, a Place is formed from notions, signs, symbols and streams of movement, from as much life as it is possible. Such a place can even be governed by a certain kind of chaos, but as it is elevated to the status of a rule, it is the antithesis of classical order in which the relations between mass and space are set forever. One can say that in a small town irregularity means the highlighting of special places, arrhythmia the hierarchy of order, and diversity the autonomy of constituents. This is how the small-town harmony of spatial elements has always been formed, which is so friendly in our era, non-heroic and not placing architecture over other arts, merely using it for the purpose of actions that aim at ordering space.

Finally, the third template – the Cooperating Community. Nowadays, when individual and mass movement of people is becoming more frequent, new communities are being formed in towns and cities. To overcome challenges, urbanists have to have sociological imagination, so they should be able to state hypotheses of community development. There is a need for templates characterized by the harmonisation of interactions, the feeling of identification with a given group and the joint pursuit of common goals. To put it briefly, there is a need for what sociologists named “social bonds”. These templates also have to be modern, but at the same time, they have to be shaped by historical traditions. Not to get too idealistic, it is believed that a small town can serve as such a template due to the following qualities: the spatial and psychological connection of residents, the mutual interactions that lead to social control, the social diversity and self-sufficiency of the group, the set social order and the evolution of processes, and the identification with the place of residence.

Of course, every quality can be viewed in such a way to see its downsides: here we have an annoying interference into privacy, acts of intolerance towards personal freedom, a class order, claustrophobic enclosures, the rejection of “foreigners”, etc. It is also clear that a town cannot live basing only on a single social model and that the human being needs different structures – big and small, closed and open – to fulfil various needs. However, on the lowest level of the urban organism, where there is a need for a social bond between specific individuals, yielding order and unity, the small-town template can be applied.

There are many examples to support the abovementioned opinions. The whole town movement – gardens with dozens of 20th-century realizations, Warsaw’s Mariensztat and Warsaw’s Kubusia Puchatka street (Eng. “Winnie the Pooh” street), the results of numerous urban contests (see Federacja Małych Miast – Eng. the Federation of Small Towns – near Poznań from 1980), the rebuilding of “prefabricated districts” so that they turn into cities within cities (here I recommend, e.g. the study of the Berlin examples), the new structuring of large cities (the plan of New York by C.A. Perry, or the London “city villages”), and finally the previously mentioned New Urbanist movement. It is also worth mentioning that the great city/region of today (or a city within a region) will base its polycentrism on the existing small

towns or the newly founded relatively small groups that will reflect small towns. Various international planning documents mention this phenomenon.

8. The application of the small-town templates means, of course, the positive “small-town” feeling. The Polish language still lacks a term that could be in opposition to the common negative use of the “small-town” adjective. The positive small-town factor is a phenomenon that is rooted in that which is beautiful because it is preserved at a small scale. Doubtlessly, it is present in newly constructed small towns, its main carrier. This is a result of the motivations for the construction of these towns from:

- The offer of organic life, close to nature (even constructed nature – like the town itself) and at the same time thanks to adequate transport that makes it possible to participate in a bigger number of attractions than those offered by the small town itself,
- The offer of work performed by means of electronic media, so one that is performed far away and regardless of traditional centres,
- The occurrence of new city-building factors, leading to the specialisation of small centres and requiring the preservation of a small-town spatial scale.

Such small towns, new or revitalised, are nowadays becoming the place of permanent or temporary residence. However, their form remains unchanged – the preservation of historical and regional urban and small-town achievements is the dominating factor. One might not omit a certain kind of eclecticism, even extravagance in the use of forms, but it is necessary to avoid the straightforward copying of forms and to be simply inspired by history. This might be the biggest contribution of urbanists and architects to the dialogue with the rules of the past art of city construction. The realism of such small-town Urbanism makes it possible to encode a resistance to external changes, providing a chance for full realisation and the evolutionary, resident-friendly development.

9. It is hard to say what would convince the reader that “the road to architecture” is one, but features two lanes even when we are not aware of it, similarly to the poor protagonist of Moliere who did not know he was speaking prose. It is good then that the subject of reaching architectural solutions (urban included) recurs from time to time in discussions. We wrote about this in 1990 in the book *Ścieżka urbanistyczna*. A few years later, on the cover of the Wejchert’s book “Jak powstało Miasto”, there was a city that was born like a tree that had a double set of roots – theoretical and practical. The book was published at the time as Ang Lee was directing the film *Sense and Sensibility*. This is coincidental, but the example of the character played by Emma Thompson has educational value. We are similar to that character, even more than that, it is important to be like Emma Thompson.