

PRESENT-DAY ARCHITECT IS AN URBAN DESIGNER

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Abstract

The range and scope of an architect's tasks has shifted: from that of a designer burdened with responsibility for the shape and effectiveness of architecture, to that of a director (animator) of urban space, responsible for the smooth and undisturbed direction of the spectacle taking place within the urban space, of the incessant, simultaneous and unbroken continuum of the mutually interactive scenes from the life of the City. Architecture, or rather urban space, has become a scenography for the synergistic holistic/multidirectional activities sustaining the life of the residents and making the uses and functions of architecture more effective. Programmers, directors, animators of culture, city mayors, grassroots initiatives of the residents, wealthy investors – all of these organizers of urban space should have equal rights and prerogatives in the process of ARRANGING URBAN SPACE.

Does a present-day city still need architects?

... do cities still need architects?

Cities have ceased being mainstays of civilization as well as stable havens. Mobility and change concern almost equally the permanent tissue of architectural substance as well as its residents. The contemporary man who feels the need to belong to the creative urban community which flows with the current of civilizational change, rarely chooses troublesome life close to the untamed and unbridled nature, and tends to reserve this option rather for moments of relaxation or sporting achievement. The city promises comforts, a sense of fulfillment, success, following progress, a sense of enriching oneself, and finally of attaining better standards of work, and even, if one wishes to avoid any effort – a possibility of an easy existence or even living a life of a social parasite. A city is equipped with dense networks of media supplying individual and communal receivers – for the comfort of everyday life. Thanks to mobility and electronics, every modern man who owns a smartphone (and who does not?) is an invaluable source of information for hundreds of thousands of devices which process his data. Everywhere he goes, makes a telephone call or else decides to make a purchase, he leaves behind him a digital

trace, his own commentary and a documenting image. The smartphone gives him an illusory sense of confidence, domination, a sense of influence on the development of the city or his own existence. But at the same time, he realizes, or rather sometimes suspects that he is being watched; the traces of his movements constitute a complete record of his activities, which in turn may be interpreted depending on the situation and the need of the moment. This data is of use both in the management of all sectors of urban life, beginning with traffic and ending with instant medical assistance in emergencies and the optimization of all kinds of resources and energy. However, on the other hand, the same data may serve all kinds of criminal activity. It may constitute both a proof of innocence as well as an aid in crime. The above data collected over a longer span of time, illustrate a pulsating nature of city life, allowing the urban designers to alter and perfect the individual elements of this life. This process constitutes a smooth, synergic modeling of city movements in real time for the comfort of its mobile and unpredictable users.

The intelligence of the city

Cities are in perpetual movement and are fully prepared to accept unpredictable changes. All predictable changes are defined in programs which regulate city life and adjust it to specific city needs, such as e.g. self-driven cars which are introduced into the regulated city traffic, thanks to which accident free traffic becomes possible. Contemporary cities are „compassionate” in the sense that they respond to all signals sent by their residents.

Even if the recipients of the contemporary city are different than the „flaneurs” from the beginning of the last century – the addresses of the slogans of the Situationist International, it is impossible not to observe a consistent continuation of the concept of this symbolic urbanism. On the one hand, we observe a model medieval city with its transformations and directions of organic development described by Lewis Mumford, and on the other hand, the continually changing contemporary technological development enabling the realization of a romantic-surrealist geographical labyrinth of a city from Guy Debord’s vision. And everything that a city has to offer serves the purpose of “continual drifting” in the city space. The contemporary drifting has taken on the form of a chase after attractions, but the concurrently, more and more often promoted *slow-motion*, offers a slowing down of the race. In the fashionable public spaces, there arise cul de sacs. Similarly as at the beginning of the last century, art, poetry and minor social movements are to shape human needs; in turn, the authorities resort to the achievements of civilization to introduce order and to subjugate the society. The authorities are interested in controlling and regulating, whereas the artists and the social avant-garde are involved in the conflict between the visionary notions and tradition. And indeed, it is a struggle as the social awareness tends to be opposed to building new meanings; it continues to be attached to archetypes. “...abstraction has dominated all kinds of art, particularly architecture. Pure plasticism, free from anecdote, but inanimate... (...) Our goal is to look for new mobile decorations. (...) Darkness gives way to artificial lighting and seasons of the year to air-conditioning: night and summer lose their charm; dawn disappears (...) dreams begin in reality and become real in it. The development of technology has made it possible for the individual to remain continually in touch with the cosmic reality, at the same time, liquidating the discomforts

associated with it. A glass roof makes it possible to observe the stars and the rain. A mobile home turns together with the sun. Its folding walls allow the vegetation to take control of life. The home sits on rails; in the morning it can be moved to the sea shore and in the evening it can be moved back to the edge of the forest.”¹ Seemingly, even if a city home has more limitations and conditionings, it is nevertheless an easily modernizable drawer in the city organism which is subject to reform and manipulation.

Artists

The vision of one's own ideal home is a distinguishing feature of every generation. Generally speaking it is precisely architecture that constitutes the best measure of the level of civilization. The contemporary western world has put the main emphasis on comfort which precedes spiritual, social and global needs. The economics of gambling, gaming techniques and manipulating advertisements ensure development and profitability. Whereas the accumulation of buildings themselves for the organization of the residents' free time, will not suffice. Architecture as inanimate matter will not come to life without inter-human relations, without memory and arrangement, without programming situations and mutual relations. The rationalization and technicization of urban processes is possible exclusively on the basis of traditional principles and humanistic values.

This need for the humanization of buildings is best illustrated, for example by artistic or para-theatrical activities, e.g. the art of Marc Camille Chaimowicz which introduces the element of memory into the used and ruined interiors. Elements of former activities associated with these interiors, or else borrowed from elsewhere, recorded sounds, lighting effects, activities, conversations – all of this gives an instant effect of revitalization or even more, as it raises the recalled phenomenon to the rank of cult of the place – as it happens in the case of a museum. Architecture comes to life, but not thanks to the efforts of an architect – author of the ruined building, but that of an artist- animator who introduces the principles of the ritual. An interior which is subjected to the experiment may be both a newly-built *white cube*, or post-industrial hall, or else a ruined *squat*, a square or courtyard.

Urbanists

In so far as an architect working in accordance with the accepted norms is expected to create innovative spaces, enclosed and shaped with specially designed matter, the impatient and by its very nature extremely creative contemporary world, pushes his activity towards mixing reality with fiction. An architect-engineer is not able to meet this challenge; what is needed is a creator-director or an artist-visionary. Many of the engineering activities concerning aspects such as optimization of the project functional effectiveness, cooperation with the utilities media, local networks – are now taken over by computer programming. All that is needed here is a craftsmanlike ability to select proper parameters, suited to a given case. Proper designing and management of city space is an interdisciplinary activity; it belongs to multi-professionals,

¹ (cit.) Giles Ivain, *An Outline of New Urbanism* in: *Sanative City. Architecture and programming senses*, ed. Joanna Kusiak, Bogna Świątkowska, Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2015, within the project „Synchronicity. Projects for the Future.”, www.synchronicity.pl, ISBN 978-83-62418-27-5, 368 pages, p. 89.

specialists in new, non-traditional disciplines. What counts here are equally skills, knowledge and imagination within both technical as well as humanistic-artistic activities. Due to man's subjectivity, it is the humanistic ideas that take precedence over technical means of implementation of new solutions. In the ever accelerating reality, in fact all these solutions go „head to head” with each other, to attain the fastest pace of progress. If a single discipline clearly outpaces the remaining ones, particularly within the sphere of purely humanistic branches, e.g. economics, logistics or armaments, it is usually due to a concealed will to dominate the others.

Architect-philosopher and politics

New York may be accepted as a model of a Western mega-city; already towards the end of the last century, Rem Koolhaas compared it to Lagos – the capital of Nigeria. In spite of the disturbing prognoses, the latter one continues to remain among the leading “exploding” cities in respect of its development, although its model of development is totally different from that of the western urbanism. Throughout the whole time, it has preserved an extraordinary flexibility and openness to the local needs. “Today it is in all probability the most radical of cities and on top of that one that operates quite efficiently”.² A demographic explosion, religious fever, construction pressure, immense wealth and simultaneously huge areas of poverty and all kinds of shortages – all of this seems to stand in stark contradiction to the western practice in spatial planning, but at the same time, it constitutes a proof that the city's self-organization as well as the spontaneity of its residents provide a key to maintaining the spatial coherence of Lagos. One may only appreciate it from the perspective of a helicopter flight during which the city creates the impression of being a live art installation or else of being engaged in a continual dance. In reality, the *status quo* is maintained by the tensions of the various political forces and the local power constellations as well as the judiciary which controls the flow of capital. In spite of its dynamism, entrepreneurship and individualism, Lagos does not confirm the models of the „new urbanism”, whereas New York, which is being compared to it, has rather realized the modernist visions of the city. Koolhaas perceives the exceptionality of New York exclusively in its density and diversity. Thanks to an accumulation of a variety of functions in a single place, the skyscrapers declare a programmatic instability of the city. According to the words of geographer Andy Merrifield, it is a “dreadful delight” – an epitome of Dante's inferno, in which one may in spite of everything breathe in freely. Such a refreshing diversity is maintained in New York by the migrants who replicate the models of European historical merchant cities. The outcome of the comparisons points out not so much to the pressure of politics, but to individual entrepreneurship as the most significant city-building factor.

Noise

Like every type of economic stimulus, noise is an instrument of politics and political dictate. It is an instrument or weapon which is invisible, yet extremely effective. If a composed sound or a

² Rem Koolhaas i in., *Mutations*, Actar, 2000, p.718, in: Kacper Pobłocki *HITI*, Magazyn Miasta # 11, no 3(11)2015, ISSN 2299-6745, p.58

sound that accompanies concrete actions complements urban reality – is a sign of the local *status quo*, then noise is a multiplication of sounds that are commonly experienced as unpleasant and irritating. Ordinary urban buzz, generated by the transport system as well as an accumulation of machinery or people's voices is not generally regarded as stressful. It is even thought of as a sign of attractiveness of the place and is not criticized. Yet the noise which is escalated by the dimensions of the metropolis and crowds of people as well as the sheer number of machines producing irksome sounds, additionally augmented by various alarm signals, is difficult to stand by more sensitive individuals; it is a frequent cause of aggression and may even lead to sickness.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the research conducted by scientists representing various disciplines of knowledge focuses on ways of decreasing and controlling noise in cities. Side by side with the science of acoustics, science fiction is developing vigorously; as an art, the latter one is always one step ahead of scientific discoveries. It has for instance defined a paradigm of sound transformation or created a sonolux – a kind of „vacuum cleaner“ of sounds which gathers unwanted sounds from the audiosphere and others. Architecture in itself is a source of many undesired sounds which are transferred by the energy of the building materials themselves, the shape of the interiors, sound reflections (echo), saturation of memory and permanent buzz which is inaudible for man etc. Philosopher Albert Borgmann created the notion of the „paradigm of order“ which speaks of an absolute dependence of human life on technology which becomes in this way man's "natural" environment. While researching the phenomenon of speech synthesis and artificial intelligence together with its peculiarities, Raymond „Rey“ Kurzweil – IT scientist, author and futurologist formulated a thesis concerning its transhumanism. In turn, James Graham Ballard's dystopic literature creates a world which is subordinated to acoustic ecology, where architecture is a type of organic computer which stores acoustic information, and therefore requires periodic cleaning and removing of unnecessary noises to ensure a harmonious reception of sounds.

An ecological city is a harmonious, aesthetical, beautiful city. Musical harmony permits dissonances, sound clusters, counterpoints, complete silence – as elements making up a composition. Yet it does not allow monotonous noise, permanent jarring or whistling sounds, or else protracted vibrations, particularly in registers which are difficult to bear. Hence Ballard's figure of Mangon (J.G. Ballard *Sound Sweep*) – a dustman and sound engineer who sweeps stray sounds from the city.

The sphere of audibility and acoustic spaces has not yet been fully cognized. Also architects treat it rather intuitively as an effect of information experience. In the year 2006, at a World Forum of Acoustic Ecology, a Tokyo professor of environment information Emi Nishina, came up with the concept of an urban system of sound design. Acoustic city landscape is yet another untapped area of urban activity. For a given community creates a specific acoustic identity, incorporating into it also the sound memory as well as auditory recollections. With a view of improving local soundscape, Nishina comes up with the notion of sensory hi-fi „acoustic pockets“, based on samples of soundscapes, treating the sounds of rain forest as a basic measure of natural human experience.

More and more audio-refuse is gathering in city space; the latter, similarly as other types of waste requires recycling. Hence, there is a need for a cybernetic model of transforming ways of listening, of behavior and of acting in a given area of city audio-sphere.

Health

Yet another field of urbanists' activity is the phenomenon of *healthism*³ which is an expression of an obsessively treated threat to health which is apparently posed by dangers associated with ecological problems occurring in big cities. Similarly as in the case of struggle with the nagging problem of soundsphere in metropolises, we succumb to the processes of medicalization; in other words, we approach all biological phenomena in the categories of health and sickness, rather than treat them as ordinary biological, adjustment or cause-and-effect processes. The condition of model health has become not only desirable but also mandatory as being ideologically correct. The city organism is also treated in similar categories. Urban designers have also taken over certain medical terms, recommending e.g. a regeneration of urban tissue, revitalization or sterilization; architecture is protected by skin, reacts intelligently and even feels. For health reasons, city dwellers are advised to exercise in the fresh air, walk, cycle and use public transport; fresh food is produced on the spot, vertical farms are created and aging in place is facilitated in one's own apartment; finally the city infrastructure is perfected in such a way as to enable it to shape a perfect man. An expression of such an approach is e.g. the New York program *Active Design Guidelines. Promoting Physical Activity and Health in Design* which is being promoted by the long-standing city mayor Michael Bloomberg. Modern architecture is subordinated to health issues associated with the notions of light, air, water and nature. Corridors and stairs are specially designed and lengthened in the name of health, avoidance of stress and struggle with obesity; lifts are moved to concealed niches, therapeutic and training programs are introduced. Finally "healthy" building materials and special ventilation systems are used; simple shapes and colors are to deepen the sense of cleanliness and facilitate the cleaning process itself, while panoramic glass walls are to create a sense of unity with the open space outside. The entirety of architecture is to remind one of an athletically built young human body triggering off healthy reactions among the residents. The design concept is subordinated to the philosophy of health.

Whereas as a biological creature, man himself does not keep up with the progress of civilization and his organism becomes less and less adjusted to adaptation mechanisms, thereby weakening his biological processes and minimalizing his ability to overcome difficulties. What is needed is a rejection of radical technical solutions and a turn towards the micro-scale and individual reform activities, suited to local needs as well as a tactic of nurture, rather than programmatic treatment.

³ Giovanna Borasi, Mirko Zardini *Let's demedicalize Architecture* in: *Sanative City*. p.325

Water

One of the elements of city life which is indispensably present, purifying and absolutely essential for the existence of the city – is water. “That is why, water has become an important element of the latest conceptions of materiality of urban space and is regarded as an evolutionary link between the human organism and the urban utility networks.”⁴ Up until recently, utilities networks were considered to be chiefly the domain of engineers and were rather shamefully concealed, creating entire systems of invisible, underground cities. Architects created a visible urban physicality; urbanists and planners dealt with operations in the city space. Thanks to the contemporary virtual reality and digitalization, the city has become a place of broadly understood communication which is chiefly physical in its character and belongs to the sphere of users. It is precisely water as an element combining technology, community and urban space that has taken over the role of a link and mediator between life-giving nature and rational technology. As a strategic element it is likely to become the trump card in the hands of the authorities. Undoubtedly, it exerts a major influence on management, issues relating to territorial limitations, as well as on ensuring hygiene and planning in all matters relating to urban design, including the production and distribution of energy or else fiscal and property policy. The modern *smart* solutions help develop social self-control and individual innovativeness for the optimization of new concepts. The leading metropolises, such as New York or Stockholm retain full social control over the ownership structure of companies and water systems of their cities. Water constitutes an important element of not only spatial, but also cultural policy giving the designers, as well as the local authorities and planners a chance to influence and shape life in the city. It constitutes an element of tension and dependence which serves as an intermediary between the community of users, the commercialized city space and the utilities networks that cater to their needs.

Air

„City air makes people free” (*Stadtluft macht frei*) – this saying which is often quoted in the context of arguments in favor of city life, which include elements such as: the ease of life, sterility of the urban environment, and the availability of the media, information, commodities, resources and transportation - is often illusory and ambiguous. Originally the above adage goes back to the mediaeval law which freed peasants from serfdom after they had completed a year's work within the castle grounds; once they were set free, they acquired the rights of free citizens. Taking into consideration today's social mobility as well as globalization, the shape of the city depends not only on *citadines* – city dwellers, in the sense which had been given to this term by Henri Lefebvre. In spite of territorial control, the air around the planet allows all kinds of external interferences which change the shape of cities. „A revolution which is to lead to the creation of a happy city may begin right beyond the threshold of our home and (...) each of us, without exception, is capable of changing the city”⁵. In many places where pavements have not

⁴ Matthew Gandy *Rethinking Urban Metabolism: Water, Space and the Modern City* (2004) in: *Sanative City*. s.343

⁵ Charles Montgomery *Miasto szczęśliwe. Jak zmienić nasze życie, zmieniając nasze miasta* (*Happy city. Transforming our lives through urban design*) transl. Tomasz Tesznar, Wyd. Wysoki Zamek, Kraków, 2015, ISBN 978-83-941434-2-8, p. 411

yet been built next to the roads, cycle paths have already been created – following the world health trends, the need for exercise and movement in the fresh air, ecological transportation, accessibility of the vehicle and the desire for adventure. Even the bicycle paths in New York, attributed to Bloomberg, arose in the effect of a grassroots initiative of Aaron Naparstek and his *StreetsBlog*.

The plan of the road system bears testimony to the state credibility the quality of its urban policy. The more regular it is, the stronger the state's legal system and the faster the pace of its development; the more irregular its shape, the slower the pace of life and the lesser the dependence on the pressures of civilization. That is why, the imploding New York Manhattan so easily adapted the street grid and the numbered street system; that is also why the well-developing cities of mediaeval Europe so willingly adapted the regular grid system as an ordering model. A city builds streets which divide its territory into separate lots, whereas quite independently of this order, the residents mark out places which obliterate the boundaries of ownership. In many cases, today's public spaces have arisen as a consequence of their earlier functions as trading places gathering areas and meeting points.

Junkspace⁶

That is how Koolhaas refers to the remains of man's presence; he calls them byproducts of civilization. Every construction, modernization and every example of spatial changes in cities are accompanied by a refuse dump of remains which in many cases becomes a permanent feature of landscape, side by side with the new construction. This "refuse-dump" is nothing else but blocks of flats, favelas, squats, shacks and extensions which arise from refuse in response to individual needs and initiatives. Architecture whose goal is luxury, user's comfort or even the notion of community and egalitarianism – always divides people into those who are privileged and those who are rejected. It is only once buildings become worn that the boundaries of privilege are shifted. Contrary to the principles of the mass reception of architecture, it is the junkspace that constitutes the core of the city – it is a place where life reverberates with the intensity of use, a place where city masses which contribute most to the city revenue and its budget, really reside. The new, large-scale architectural spaces, joined by a system of air-conditioned interiors, are spacious and empty. This state of things continues until as ruined they become ultimately taken over by junkspace. The contemporary architecture tries to obliterate the above divisions and applies "megastructures" and hybrid solutions, in this way creating an opportunity for mutual inter-penetration of different kinds of spaces. In place of classical harmony and permanence of architecture, the present-day architects offer an escalation of function and entropy of the uniqueness of each and every place. Junkspace denotes arbitrariness and anarchy of the multi-directional trajectories of movement. The designed directions of flow do not work out in practice. It is only the ad hoc interventions that solve the accumulation of problems. The emergence of a problem forces the designer to introduce modifications there and then. That is why, classical designing has been substituted by the use

⁶ Rem Koolhaas *Junkspace* (in: „October” no 100/2002, The MIT Press Journals, p. 175-190) in: *Materialność Alternativa*. Antologia 3 pl, ed. Krzysztof Gutfrąński i kuratorzy wystawy: Arne Hendriks, Inês Moreira, Aneta Szyrak, Leire Vergara, pub. Instytut Sztuki Wyspa, Gdańsk 2012, ISBN 978-83-935174-0-4, p.341

of diagrams; continual changes have become not only a need, but an everyday reality. At the same time, public spaces which adhere to the notion of absolute universalism and which lure users with utilitarian comfort, become bland and anonymous; they contradict the notions of communal freedoms creating only a statistical impulse for the realization of vested interests. The society seems to be affected by the syndrome of urban loneliness. It is the loneliness of individuals within a crowd who similarly to us have been huddled together by the imposed architectural tissue.

City-state

„If Barber ruled the world...he would do everything to create a world democratic power. He would summon city mayors and hand over the business of governing to them.”⁷ Every city mayor in a western metropolis must be a democrat and a pragmatist and must act in an effective way. In his everyday activity, he must find solutions to local problems which in many cases are identical as the ones that occur on the global scale; he must also cope with all city crises, regardless of the priorities associated with the global policy. An alliance of cities would no doubt be a more numerous and powerful organization than the military alliances based on national states. More importantly, such city alliances already exist and often prove to be more effective and efficient than international agreements, particularly in the cultural and economic sphere. Even the contemporary global problem of terrorism is in fact being solved on the level of cities. Terrorism is targeted on big city communities, and consequently the cities themselves deal with the issue of self-defense, while state governments embroiled in political dependencies, often are not able to liquidate the threat. It is a similar story with the immigrants whom city environments generally accept and assimilate, in spite of the political conflicts. Cities are living organisms – collections of human individualities and totally humanistic melting-pots. The activity of urban communities is not always fully rational. It is often the outcome of motives that are not fully rational (*vide* Warsaw Uprising), but it is precisely this intuitive creativity and flexibility of local authorities that give one hope for faster and more rational changes.

The future and well-being of cities is directly dependent on the creativity of urban activists – people of various professions and occupations as well as amateurs and visionaries. All of them are in fact “urbanists”, that is co-authors of contemporary cities. It is them who are truly familiar with city needs and are able to come up with the best possible solutions and remedies.

And where in this situation is the place for architects?

In my view, the architects are to act as advisors to city activists. For the architects are equipped with the necessary technical knowledge and abilities that enable them to introduce the utopia into reality. And by being at the same time humanists and artists, they help transform all the illusive and intangible ideas into a material shape. Already now, they have become mediators in the entire design and realization process. This may lead to yet another sinusoidal wave which weakens the position of an architect – as his prerogatives widen and become blurred – maybe

⁷ Jacek Żakowski *Zapędziliśmy się w ślepej uliczce* (interview with Benjamin R. Barber, an American political scientist) in: *Niezbędnik Inteligenta*, special edition 10/2014 „Polityka” ISSN 1730-0525 index 381-055 entitled *Miasta i ludzie*, p. 108

the power of the demiurge is slipping from his hands? But does not cooperation with others in the common task help consolidate the community? Isn't his contribution to the common good a sufficiently ennobling activity?

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