

LONGING FOR THE MAIN STREET

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Abstract

It may sound like a cliché that urban design theory changes with man's development. The article refers to the changes in the way a city functions and the resulting new perception of the lack of existence of something as significant as the "main street". Consequently, there has appeared a different way to identify with its parts anew. The transformations which have recently changed the assumptions of polycentrism are associated with the need to create multiple autonomous centres related to diverse functions of a city. The emergence of newly designed arteries, which are just transport links and not the symbol of the place's splendour, breaks its tissue, creating a new, sometimes unpredictable scale. One can make assumptions about the "total" decomposition, which has become one of the modern methods of composition of urban spaces (somewhat, or entirely, by chance). Without going into evaluations, one can attempt at memories and express melancholy which is carried by the "main street" and a human scale which cities used to have.

Street

Polish bard of the eighties, Andrzej Garczarek, once sang: "... a thirty-year-old taxi driver from Pittsburgh, was shooting at people on the main street". The world has changed in recent years (this is quite obvious). Streets once as important as Floriańska or Grodzka Street in Cracow are paling into insignificance. A city is no longer a set of coexisting quarters separated by streets. Cities are a collection of distant shopping centres, connected with four-lane roads (not streets anymore). The main street or streets, the most important and the most representative in the city, have got lost somewhere. The city has become a puzzle difficult to remember in its shape, consisting of ornaments of the buildings scattered irregularly against each other. Market squares, which modern *malls* originated from, were situated differently within the urban space. Easily accessible from the nearby neighbourhood, not causing nuisance or the need to construct giant parking lots.

Not without toil, Adolf Loos began to strip buildings of decorations. By decomposing historical urban quarter development, Ludwig Hilberseimer created a vision that caused unpredictably

dramatic consequences in the construction of urban spaces. Monumental in its expression, but fortunately utopian design of *Hochhausstadt* from 1924 presents a vision of a rigorous composition of smooth, evenly arranged buildings, devoid of decorations as if it had been done for Loos. Such architecture would see its many imitators decades later, affecting the image of the city until the seventies. Le Corbusier headed even further in his designs, proposing a city for three million inhabitants. It is no longer the total architecture, it is totalitarianism. The drawings presenting the design are beautiful, they show expressive buildings which fill the horizon. Yet, even in the era of the "struggle" for every apartment, they must dispirit. And the road, no longer the street ruthlessly cutting the whole intent, is completely contemporary here, like the ones in American cities. Even though it was only 1925, the architect anticipated what would happen in a several dozen years. The modern world has already forgotten about the revolutionary demands from the Athens Charter from 1933. Individual freedom has become one's personal matter and can no longer be considered by the bodies of creators. Freedom has led to the impossibility of planning the city as a whole (for the sake of an individual, obviously). What once had to be in the neighbourhood, can be far away owing to cars. The ideas of modernism died at 15:32 on 15 July, 1972 in St. Louis, perishing under the ruins of the buildings from Pruitt-Igoe complex designed by Minoru Yamasaki. It was then that the concepts of the modern city associated with the modernist revolution died. Not only the ideas of urban planning, but also the architectural ones of Modernism were buried then. This had been predicted by Władysław Strzemiński in 1931, who wrote: "using a straight line, flat roof and unbroken belts of standardized windows still do not constitute a solution of modern architecture"¹. However, humanity is bound to long for this image of the city and architecture, forgetting about the modernity which is brought about by the ubiquitous architecture of decomposition.

The contemporary city is a particular broken form of its predecessors. If we approach urban planning (if one can still notice such an issue) like a certain art, one can be tempted to draw comparisons with Adolf Goldschmidt's thought. The phenomenon called by him as the "breakdown" of form – disintegration – appears in art. A similar phenomenon in architecture was noticed by Dariusz Kozłowski "This phenomenon consists in the fact that a form which occurs in nature or a work of art is captured by the observer not in its organic compound and context, but only as the sum of details"². The researcher draws attention to a specific aspect in the composition of a work of art, which, he claims, can be observed in different periods, and definitely in the era at the turn of the late antiquity and the Middle Ages. He notices the thing which strikes him, but which was not perceived by the contemporaries. He defines this defect as the breakdown of form – *Formenspaltung (disintegration)*. Jan Białostocki gives examples of such actions in the depictions of the motif of robes. He writes: "the folds of the Greek robes' style are submitted to schematisation in Byzantine art"³ and in this form they are intercepted by western art. Their further simplification follows with time. This happens with other existing elements. Goldschmidt is not trying to draw ultimate conclusions as to the artistic need for such

¹ W. Strzemiński, *Zasady nowej architektury* [in:] *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Kraków 2006, p. 48.

² A. Goldschmidt, „Rozbicie” formy w rozwoju sztuki, [in:] *Pojęcia, problemy, metody współczesnej nauki o sztuce* selected by: J. Białostocki, Warszawa 1976. p. 142.

³ J. Białostocki, *Pojęcia, problemy, metody współczesnej nauki o sztuce*, Warszawa 1976. p. 145.

actions, but concludes “thus the history of artistic misunderstanding, which the breakdown of form was, can be the truth from the point of view of art history”⁴. Disintegration of the art form should be considered as a superior order in the creation of art, it is not a complete lack of rules, but it becomes an attempt to break away from them. It may be a new look at the subject and form of a work. Kazimierz Dąbrowski, a psychologist and philosopher, formulated the theory of mental health called positive disintegration. He argued that: “The positive disintegration expresses beneficial relaxation, and even the breakdown of the original psychic structure”⁵. Such a definition can be applied to a description of the fine arts as the destruction of the existing rules in order to create a new work. “I studied two hundred scientifically researched biographies of outstanding people. They were chosen »out of a hat«, with no key. During the analysis of the biographies, I found the features of the increased mental excitability of mostly emotional, imaginative and intellectual type in 97% of the outstanding people...”⁶. Such amplified emotionality and the disintegration of form can be a description of the sophisticated contemporary architecture, one can transfer such destruction of prototypes and disintegrations directly as the image of shaping modern cities.

Breakdown

There appears (perhaps slightly unintended) disintegration of the urban arrangement. This prompts the association with the dreams of the early twentieth century precursors of avant-garde. Antonio Sant'Elia, the creator of one of the most famous artistic manifestos, is known primarily as a theorist and author of many drawings of unconstructed buildings. His assumptions and innovative ideas that could not be realized at the beginning of the twentieth century have survived as the perspective of imaginary cities resembling scenes from the novels by Italo Calvino, but in a form more “suitable” for the common audience. As it would turn out later, they would qualify to be followed by successive generations of architects seeking to be called the avant-garde. And here appears the dilemma of whether it is an invisible architecture, as it is “built” only on paper, or a contribution to what surrounds us. Italo Calvino “designs” his cities with no claim to their construction as, for the sake of (apparent) simplification, they are invisible cities, but, after all, still created ones. Marco Polo tells the story of one of them to Kubla Khan. One can cite any of the numerous descriptions to have modern metropolis (again everyone a different one) before one’s eyes. “Hidden cities. 3. One of the Sibyls, when asked about the fate of Marozia, said: »I see two cities: the city of rat and the city of swallow«. The oracle was interpreted in the following way: Marozia today is a city where everyone runs in the underground lead tunnels like a herd of rats which wrest out of one another’s teeth the remains dropped from the teeth by the most dangerous rats; but a new age will soon begin, when everyone in Marozia will soar like swallows in the summer sky, recalling one another for fun, showing off with acrobatics performed with motionless wings, clearing the air of flies and mosquitoes”⁷. And without presenting the full definition of such architecture yet (if there exists an unambiguous

⁴ A. Goldschmidt, „Rozbicie” formy w rozwoju sztuki, [in:] *Pojęcia, problemy, metody współczesnej nauki o sztuce* wybór: J. Białostocki, Warszawa 1976.

⁵ K. Dąbrowski, *Trud istnienia*, Warszawa 1986, p. 6.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ I. Calvino, *Niewidzialne miasta*, Warszawa 2002, p. 121.

one), one can say that an invisible architecture appears here. It disintegrates like the surrounding urban space. After all, “we must invent and rebuild the Futurist city like an immense and tumultuous shipyard, agile, mobile and dynamic in every detail; and the Futurist house must be like a gigantic machine”⁸. These words would work well as a manifesto of modern art, today they terrify with their literalness in the modern world, and, looking around, one feels a bit like in the city of rats. However, one should look for the positives in the contemporary thinking about the city. For Philippe Starck, creation is related to the discovery of the ideas of rescaled “architectural objects” within the architecture created by him. Starck dreams of a city in which its architectural *objet trouvé* are to be a conglomeration of objects beyond the urban scale – most often pieces of furniture: “...the city that I construct, is, for me, the game of chess, objects beyond the urban scale, full of vital energy, giving it a surrealist Dadaist sense, [...] I use the principle of the monumental piece of furniture inserted in the urban space – an object out of place”⁹. Forms beyond the scale can also turn into forms beyond content, detached from our associations with their function. After all, “there are genres completely independent from the notion of content, namely music, ornamental art, and architecture in a sense. While we are talking about the musical illustration, it is easy to realize that the relationship between the juxtaposition of tones and conceptual content can be achieved only by artificially added explanation, and in a number of ways. Also, a knight’s helmet, a swan, a female figure can be discerned in the ornaments filling e.g. Persian rugs, but one will soon see that not only does this way of looking not help us to empathize with the beauty of these items, but it will also soon cause fatigue and distaste. A similar phenomenon occurs in architecture, which has long been rightly juxtaposed with music”¹⁰. And precisely such structures are landmarks today, used to describe the city. Malls are generally amorphous solids which do not aspire to become architecture. Perhaps such creators as Starck would be able to help restore an artistic sense of these places.

Instability and lack of literal reception (except for the size perhaps) in the shape of *decon* architecture is suitable for creating such features in the city. The time has come when recipients have become accustomed to such building. What was once the subject of conjectures, now is becoming commonplace. In 1966 Juliusz Goryński foresaw a new approach to aesthetic reception of today’s architecture’s instability. He was looking for an objective approach to aesthetic criteria and getting rid of (which is difficult) subjective judgements. He stressed that: “The awareness of the material nature and purpose of a utility building evokes the feeling of anxiousness in a person unless the architectural composition confirms the physical stability of the building and the safety of its use. Experience seems to confirm that it also affects the aesthetic evaluation. This means that the building whose composition causes anxiety for one’s safety, is not considered to be beautiful or aesthetically satisfactory. Yet, construction technology is changeable. More durable and better constructed building materials applied in construction allow one to erect buildings which, measured with the scale of earlier strength requirements, seem to threaten with collapse. Such structures are considered ugly until the new

⁸ A. Sant’Elia, *Architektura futurystyczna*, 1913 [in:] Ch. Baumgarth, *Futuryzm*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 309-310.

⁹ O. Bioissière, *Starck, Condensateur du temps*, [in:] *Starck*, Köln 1991, p. 27.

¹⁰ L. Chwistek, *Formizm* [in:] Leon Chwistek *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Kraków 2004, p. 97.

technique comes into widespread use, affecting the new development of a sense of structure security"¹¹. The city also changes together with the lack frontage, creating new forms and shapes of buildings. Perhaps these are the memories of Le Corbusier's thoughts. Modernism rejected decoration (regardless of the building's structure); the need for the ornament's beauty was replaced with aesthetic "game of forms assembled in the light", derived from a variety of ideologies. "The decorative must be abolished. The problem of Futurist architecture must be resolved, not by continuing to pilfer from Chinese, Persian or Japanese photographs or fooling around with the rules of Vitruvius, but through flashes of genius and through scientific and technical expertise. Everything must be revolutionized. Roofs and underground spaces must be used; the importance of the façade must be diminished; issues of taste must be transplanted from the field of fussy mouldings, finicky capitals and flimsy doorways to the broader concerns of bold groupings and masses, and large-scale disposition of planes. Let us make an end of monumental, funereal and commemorative architecture. Let us overturn monuments, pavements, arcades and flights of steps; let us sink the streets and squares; let us raise the level of the city"¹². These fulfilled fantasies encapsulate the realisation of the dream of living in palaces, playing building fortresses with blocks, and probably many other architect's games with matter which residents and casual travellers were drawn into, which one can only taste by personally touching things.

Adolf Loos called for stripping architecture (read the city) of ornaments. For this outstanding designer, ornament was not indispensable for the existence of the construction or the structure of things, including works (of art). Contemporary times seem to agree with him, but only partly. The creative work of Zaha Hadid and other creators of contemporariness, which cities are full of, are not structures ornamented as defined by Loos. They constitute ornament in themselves. The breakdown of the form of the city and the architecture that creates it get mixed. One does not know whether this was postulated by the great creator when he thought about the forthcoming new era of building construction. "By style was meant ornament. I said: Weep not. Behold! What makes our period so important is that it is incapable of producing new ornament. We have out-grown ornament, we have struggled through to a state without ornament. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the cities will glow like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, the capital of heaven. It is then that fulfilment will have come"¹³. Some fulfilment has certainly come, but is it the one it was supposed to be.

Change of function

The contemporary world mercilessly proves to us that the functioning of the city is changing. The places in front of churches and marketplaces are no longer important features. At the other end of design is housing architecture. Contemporariness associated with property right (less respected in the past epochs) leads to the inability to introduce certain regulations, so necessary for the harmonious development. Infill, cadastre or cardinal directions in design are already passé. "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from

¹¹ J. Goryński, *Urbanizacja, urbanistyka i architektura*, Warszawa 1966, pp. 133-135.

¹² A. Sant'Elia, *Architektura futurystyczna*, 1913 [w:] Ch. Baumgarth, *Futuryzm*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 309-310.

¹³ A. Loos, *Ornament i zbrodnia*, [in:] A. Loos, *Eseje wybrane*, Warszawa 2013, p. 136.

utilitarian objects”¹⁴, and yet what we see all around us is ornaments. What used to be called the polycentrism of the city, takes on a new meaning today. It is no longer associated with the centres and the attendant functions important for the functioning of the city. The structures of human interests turn themselves and their surroundings into new centres. Recognizing the need for multiple city centres and explaining the work of another architect, Zaha Hadid points out that it is possible to imagine a vibrant urban tapestry – a city – with many (odd) buildings by Zvi Hecker. Decomposition in architecture has become a fact (observed in the city) and art cannot (temporarily) do without it, likewise in the totally disintegrated landscape of the modern city. This leads to the disintegration of the form of the surrounding landscape. And again, the writer-literary theorist’s words may be the most appropriate to explain or understand architecture: “What we sing or deliver in the most solemn and most critical moments of life, what sounds in the liturgies, what we whisper or shout in passionate rapture, what we comfort the baby or the unhappy one with, what proves the veracity of an oath – all of these are words whose content cannot be embraced in clear concepts or separated from a certain manner and tone of speaking without depriving them of meaning and effectiveness at the same time. In all these cases, the accent and tone of voice are more important than what causes understanding: they speak more to what is alive in us than to our mind. I wish to say that these words are a much stronger incentive for us to happen than to understand”¹⁵. The shapes of buildings may be perceived as a “tone of voice” and their function as “understanding”. Such duality occurred as early as in the times of Aristotle who argued that the substance is composed of matter and form: „...»substance« is perceived in two senses: as the final substrate, which is not predicated of anything else, as well as something, which is concrete, is also separable: and such is the form and shape of each thing”¹⁶. Such duality exists in the whole landscape that surrounds us.

Another aspect of the present architecture is its detachment from the trivial utility and opposition to the past, the novelty becomes the expression of the absence of imitation of anything. Architecture is the last art that becomes abstract; ultimately breaking with figuration. “The artist neither imitates nor creates anything: he is looking for something in the past. We are satiated with that world of form, colours, human beings, it overwhelms us, deprives us of illusions: art is not similar to anything in our world...”¹⁷. We can call abstract art any art which neither resembles nor suggests the reality, regardless of whether this reality was or was not the starting point for the artist¹⁸. This description also fits the architecture of modern expressionism. If a certain phenomenon lasts in art, sooner or later a question will be posed – which came first – which creator started it? And a question like this seems to gain the significance of a fundamental issue. Abstraction in architecture is an expression of the changing trends in all arts. The change in approach sometimes takes place by chance. In his work, Kandinsky “... did not recognize one of his vibrant landscapes, which had been turned upside down. Kandinsky realized then that a

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.136.

¹⁵ P. Valéry, *Estetyka słowa*, Warszawa 1971, p. 191.

¹⁶ Arystoteles, *Metafizyka*, Warszawa 1983, pp.119-120.

¹⁷ G. Colli, *Po Nietzschem*, Kraków 1994, p. 88.

¹⁸ J. Le. [ymarie] *Abstrait Art*, w: *Nouveau dictionnaire de la peinture moderne*, Paryż 1963, p. 1, quoted after: A. Kotula, P. Krakowski, *Malarstwo rzeźba architektura*, Warszawa 1981, p. 144.

painting may be deprived of descriptiveness¹⁹. This epoch-making discoveries do not shock anyone today, they become commonplace, they are something that just happens. Marcin Czerwiński explains this in the following way: "Throughout the course of my previous considerations I perceived the decline of the mimetic art simply as a phenomenon given to us by history"²⁰. Obviously, approaching works of art as certain abstractions or art difficult to describe also appears in literature: "in the works of figurative art, figurative elements overwhelm ordinary sensory elements delighting by themselves. In a given poetic piece, especially written in prose, words affect us mostly with their meaning: we do not always realize that they also affect us with their sound. Similarly, even though not to the same degree probably, lines and colour spots in a given painting are for us primarily signs showing some items. Only expert relishes in the assembly of lines and colours as such"²¹. The last sentence is a literal description of the abstract avant-garde architecture. Here, once again, the philosopher Giorgio Colli can help us by revealing to us *Two sides of abstract representation*. "Abstract representation analysed in its elemental content can develop as confidence and immobilization or as tension and twine. In case of the former one, the representation is isolated in its nature of expressive reflection of immediacy, in the latter – it indicates the union and constitutes an expressive leap towards externality. In both cases the performance possesses an object, but not to the same extent. The object is defined precisely when it appears as part of the evocation of something direct, which was later established as something widespread or as an abstract object in the proper sense. In contrast, when the evocation is the thread leading back, the fabric captured while unfurling, then both the object and the subject turn out to be a mutual tangle. In short, the representation appears as either an object or a union"²².

Rules

Detachment from the previous design rules leads to the emergence, perhaps slightly accidental one, of a new look at the construction of urban spaces. The only recognizable remnant of certain assumptions are the remains of a cadastre. Leon Chwistek explains detachment from the rules in his theoretical considerations: "These rules become second nature to architects with time, leading to the erroneous belief that they possess an absolute character. At this point, there is a striking analogy between architecture and music. If we want to reject these rules, we are immediately faced with the theoretical void which can be filled only with the direct imposition of a particular shape. Hence, an apparent paradox comes out which consists in the fact that the works constructed for practical purposes cause fewer restrictions in terms of form than paintings or sculpture whose aim is exclusively artistic"²³. Such words can be a description of contemporary times. Cities tend to break their form as if taken from Wölfflin's considerations. Writing his book in 1915, Heinrich Wölfflin could not have foreseen the emergence of the architecture of Deconstructivism. "Painting can be tectonic, architecture must be. Painting only

¹⁹ J. Bell, *Lustro świata. Nowa historia sztuki*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 377-378.

²⁰ M. Czerwiński, *Samotność sztuki*, Warszawa 1978, p. 144.

²¹ M. Willis, *Przeżycie i wartość*, Kraków 1968, p. 92.

²² G. Colli, *Filozofia ekspresji*, Kraków 2005, pp. 113-114.

²³ L. Chwistek, *Zagadnienia współczesnej architektury* [in:] Leon Chwistek Wybór pism estetycznych, Kraków 2004, p.105.

fully develops its own peculiar values when it takes leave of tectonics. For architecture, abolishing the tectonic framework would be tantamount to self-destruction”²⁴. Painting and breakdown of architectural forms spread to the whole art and the art of shaping cities. The broken city does not yield to self-destruction and leads us further into the future. We are not able to give name to that which is arising around. Something new is born, not similar either to the original shapes of cities or to the Modernist city (although we are in Modernism all the time). Perhaps this is the postmodern city, although it is fading too. Like architecture, the city becomes a dynamic combination of separate centres. Maybe it becomes the fulfilment of the dream of polycentrism. This dynamic abstraction is reminiscent of Rudolf Arnheim’s explanation from the chapter on Dynamics: “Moreover, by using formal criteria rather than referring to subject matter, the theory avoids limiting the effect to images of mobile objects. It can explain why pictures of trees or mountains may look strongly dynamic and why this may also be true for wholly “abstract” shapes in art or architecture”²⁵. Perhaps today we are dealing with deconstructivist city which, like in the case of deconstructivist architecture, we struggle to define or to identify some clear-cut trends in it.

It may sound like a cliché that urban design theory changes with man’s development. There appear new challenges for designers related to the changes in the way the city functions. Something has got lost in the pursuit of areas and space for shopping malls and new districts. There appears a longing (perhaps only the author of this text feels it) for something ordinary and of a human scale. The need to create something that was once called the “main street” arises. Consequently, there appears an old way of the recipient’s identification with parts of the city. The transformations which have recently changed the assumptions of polycentrism are associated with the need to create multiple autonomous centres related to diverse functions of a city. The emergence of newly designed arteries, which are just transport links and not the symbol of the place’s splendour, breaks its tissue, creating a new, sometimes unpredictable scale. One can make assumptions about the “total” decomposition or striving for deconstruction, which has become one of the modern methods of composition of urban spaces (somewhat, or entirely, by chance). Without going into evaluations, one can attempt at memories and express melancholy which is carried by the “main street” and a human scale which cities used to have. Present cities arise as the disintegration of their earlier form, disintegrating original assumptions, unable to wait for the logical justification of their form. As a naive man, the author tries to discern some logic in this and explain this fact with some explorations of the past better shape. Evolution does not make sense, after all. Everything changes, striving for perfection. However, in our planet’s history there have been mistakes and some big birds – Phorusrhacos; having appeared most likely as a result of a mistake or evolutionary joke they had to become extinct, and their place was taken by much smaller, weaker but smarter mammals. Present state of the surrounding cities do not bode their further development. Perhaps something (unpredictable) will happen so that we can again enjoy walking along the streets and looking at frontages of quarters – the simple ones which architects used to design.

²⁴ H. Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki, Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Warszawa 1962, pp. 166-199., III. Forma zamknięta i forma otwarta., p. 194.

²⁵ R. Arnheim, *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa*, Łódź 2014, p. 439.

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