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BEYOND A NARRATIVE. FUNCTIONLESS MODERNIST HERITAGE BUILDINGS AND THE AESTHETIC AUTONOMY OF THE CITIZENS

Abstract: The article presents the current situation of some selected modernist heritage architectural objects in the city of Katowice, or rather their ruins. The author discusses their phantom-like status, describes some local artistic interventions to highlight their plight and points out their potential to create a sphere of aesthetic autonomy in the citizens' daily life.

Keywords: modernism, urban planning, architecture, heritage, ruins.

The ruin liberates function from its subservience to purpose. (...) The ruin is the temple of the non-useful.

Robert Ginsberg¹

Nocturnal Activities

On a hot summer night in 2014, the Silesian artist Szymon Szewczyk opened his installation, located at the 5th floor of the declassified and abandoned hotel Silesia in Katowice. The visitors had only three hours to find and reach the suite no. 520, where the "Plants and Animals" project was taking place. It was not an easy task, as none of the elevators were working – there is no electricity in the building. However, after a short ascent by a staircase, the effort was rewarded by the fabulous experience of a tropical garden, created inside the old-fashioned suite 520. The garden's creator is known as a lover of potted plants, which are used by him to initiate the process of, as he puts it, „taming of the austere urban space”.²

¹ R. Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2004, pp. 33, 45.

² S. Szewczyk, *Rośliny i Zwierzęta / Plants and Animals*, in: M. Lisok, *Nocturnal Activities*, BWA, Katowice 2014, p. 136.

The strategy employed by Szewczyk seems to be very similar to the one adopted by the founders of the famous Echigo Matsumoyama Museum in Niigata.³ Designed by Takaharu and Yui Tezuka, in cooperation with Masahiro Ikeda, for the 2003 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, the building is widely recognized as a „rusted submarine covered in snow”. It is believed that its creator, Tezuka, wanted it to look like a ruin from the beginning. It is worth noting that Tezuka’s design is complemented with a floral arrangement designed by the world-famous architect Kawamata Tadashi, who covered the exterior of the building with local plants able to survive high temperatures and extremely heavy snowfalls. Those plants are intended to destroy the building in approximately 30 years’ time.

It is striking that both of the projects mentioned above involve a “natural factor” in the process of creation and utilization of a ruined space. Both of them also seem to be intended as a kind of a battlefield or war between organic, living nature and artificial, dead structures. What is more, they provide the same type of narration for visitors, which requires their bodily engagement and confronts them with sensory discomfort.⁴

Although we could list a lot more of such projects, it has to be recognized that their contexts are radically different. The Echigo Matsumoyama Museum is a singular projection of the architect’s idea; a sensory experiment carried out in the middle of nowhere, a fascinating and unique object, a curiosity. In contrast, suite 520 at the hotel Silesia is a representative of thousands of nameless places hidden in today’s city of Katowice. While the “snow museum” seems to arise from a lack of such spaces in the area, Szewczyk’s project speaks rather of the overabundance of ruins. One of the critics has called it a “wildcat installation”, which „seems to be a unique cure-all that releases this urban creature from its death throes, changing its internal codes, affecting its organs, and resuscitating its long-forgotten life functions. After years of stagnation and life in exile, the forgotten building comes back to the architectural map of the city.”⁵ In fact, the event was only a part of a big art project called Nocturnal Activities, carried out in Katowice by the Bureau for Art Exhibitions in 2014. It was intended to induce a kind of deregulation of the panoptic system of control making invisible the places which have lost their readable function. The methods proposed by the project’s curator, Marta Lisok, were radical, as she spoke of “persuading the visitors to take a series of risky walks in the city’s back streets.”⁶ Those spontaneous, uncontrolled initiatives

³ All details from. J. Petri, *Aesthetics of Snow in Heavy Snowfall Zones*, in: J. Petri, *Performing Cultures*, Libron, Kraków 2015.

⁴ The staircase leading to the viewing point situated in the characteristic tower of Echigo Matsumoyama is left in the dark and filled with occasional lights and noises produced by some audio-visual equipment hidden in the structure of the building.

⁵ A. Hoenszer. *The Anatomy of the City*, in: M. Lisok, *Nocturnal Activities*, BWA, Katowice 2014, p. 144.

⁶ M. Lisok, *Loitering*, in: *Nocturnal Activities*, BWA, Katowice 2014, p. 14.

are understood as a form of an “antithesis of contemporary strategies regarding the public space, according to which preventing danger in crowded areas can be achieved by keeping strangers at a distance and surrendering to the obsession of visibility, which originates from the belief that being able to see everything around you is a guarantee of being able to quickly identify a stranger or intruder.”⁷ The problem identified by this young curator seems to be very important in the context of the ruins, semi-ruins, and other devastated or declassified modernist buildings in Katowice. The first important question here is: why are public buildings allowed to be used only half of the time – in daytime? The problem itself is not new. It was already noted in the 1950s by the members of the Situationist movement. This question however, entails another, more important one: why have so many well-planned and popular modernist buildings become invisible on the map of the modern city?

The diagnosis

The situation of the modernist heritage buildings in Katowice is paradoxical. If we begin to count the modernist era’s leftovers spread around the city, we would create a list full of well-known landmarks: the famous UFO-shaped sports and entertainment center “Spodek” [Saucer], the Silesia Hotel, the Bureau of Art Exhibitions, or the Super Unit block of flats, to name just a few. At a first glance, none of them seems to be about to disappear from the city map in the nearest future; all of them would be rather considered as emblematic, not only of Katowice, but of the whole Silesia region. We could even say that there is probably no reason for the local city movements to raise alarm, as most of the mentioned objects are protected by the municipal regulations. However, this is only half of the truth. The other half is that although the modernist era was the time of intense and rapid development of the whole Silesia region, today we have lost the key to understanding its ideas. One of the respected Polish architects, Tomasz Konior, calls this situation dramatic, as in his view, modernism itself had already destroyed some of the traditional, accumulated codes of living in a city. In his opinion, modern people have not only lost what he calls their “city genes”, but worse, the changes taking place now are far more dangerous than those in the 1960s or 1970s.⁸ The problem of modern Polish cities, which is recognized not only by Konior, is the total absence of any real urban planning.

It is perhaps worth refreshing our memory to understand what “real urban planning” meant in Silesia. Not everyone remembers the middle period of the Polish People’s Republic,

⁷ M. Lisok, op. cit., p. 14.

⁸ For the discussion of Konior’s diagnosis see J. Petri, *The Garden Cities of Katowice. A study of Cityholia*, in: “Art Inquiry, Recherches sur les Arts” 2016, vol. XVIII (XXVII), pp. 127-145.

but the local authorities of the time took proper care of promoting the “image of the city” among the citizens and visitors. Their main propaganda product, a beautiful album of photographs, entitled *The Colors and Rhythms of Silesia* can be still found in many Polish homes.⁹ The book presents the Silesian metropolis as similar to Ebenezer Howard’s garden city, a hybrid of industry and nature, which allows its citizens to work in the city center and return to a home located in a forest. Strikingly, there is a special chapter dedicated to the capitol of the region, entitled “The New Katowice”. Not surprisingly, it describes the post-war reconstruction of the city as “healing the wounds inflicted by the Second World War”.¹⁰ In fact, many of the historical tenements and monuments in Katowice were demolished after the war, in consequence of the need to free the space for new, modernist architecture, such as the Brutalist building of the new railway station. The New Katowice was meant to be a model socialist city, which would simply pop up from the pages of the book:

Gradually, new houses are being built – the same type for all residents, about equally bright, with colorful elevations. [...] Today Katowice is beautiful and new, because it is being built not only for its current citizens, but also for the future ones.¹¹

Although we can speak about modernism as the artistic framework of the described transformation, the whole concept of the new city of Katowice had a very strong socialist component. It was designed and built by the citizens of a socialist country for the citizens of this socialist country. This fact creates a far stronger context than in the case of the modernist buildings springing up in capitalistic cities. For example, the famous designs of Le Corbusier for Modulor and Modulor 2 concern the housing projects that are supposed to improve people’s quality of life in the way which is criticized today as “designing the citizens”. However, they are still miles away from the idea of a uniformly socialist community, which was an objective for the architects of the People’s Republic. The „normative” citizen was understood there as a working class hero, devoted to his labour and ascetic in his private life. It is striking that even the private villas of the key public figures in socialist Poland were nothing more than square-shaped, two storey, single houses, very typical for the time. Apart from the better standard of interior design, they did not differ from other houses. That is the opposite spectrum of the standards known from other socialist countries, such as Romania, where dictator Ceausescu had his private palace with dozens of luxurious rooms. One case is extremely instructive here. Although many consider the Super Unit,

⁹ A. Bogusz, A. Chojnacka, C. Leżyński, *Barwy i rytmy Śląska*, Arkady, Warszawa 1969.

¹⁰ A. Bogusz, A. Chojnacka, C. Leżyński, op. cit., p. 96.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 97.

built in Katowice by Mieczysław Król as a copy of Le Corbusier's building from Marseilles, there are many significant differences here. Filip Springer points out that in spite of the initial plans, no leisure facilities for the residents (such as the sun terrace and the swimming pool known from the Marseilles project) were provided in the building, as they were understood as not necessary for working class citizens.¹² The problem was that general Ziętek, who was in charge in the region of Silesia in those times, just wanted to impress his principals in Warsaw, even at the price of the quality of the building, which, with its centrally heated walls, was still considered a luxury by the Communist officials. The hiatus between the impressive form and the poor building quality, seems to be one of the main causes of problems with the condition of the architecture from those times today.

It is important to mention that such projects as the Super Unit or the Silesian Park (a park planned for the scale of the whole Voivodship) were making a powerful impression in the 1960s and 1970s, and it cannot be denied that even today, their fame is still viable. Filip Springer entitled his series of articles on PRL architecture "Badly born", which points to the special status of those buildings. They were meant to be an interpretation of the newest architectural trends, but they were built in a chaotic way, as cheaply as possible, just to be figures in the plan of rapid development. This results in their present situation: while still visually attractive, they just simply do not fit today's standards of performing, and are too expensive to be rebuilt for modern functions. The public aqua park called "Fala" [Wave], highly popular during the time of PRL, becomes an example of those problems. "Fala", part of the Silesian Park, was operated until 2015, but in its last years it was becoming more and more neglected. Although it was built "for the future", according to the best standards at the time of its creation, it simply does not fit the modern standards for such objects. Another problem is the scale, as those facilities, apart of poor quality workmanship, were overscaled, built for the masses, thousands of people coming from many Sielsian cities. It is thus important to note that in spite of the still cultivated myth of Fala, it began to be avoided by the Silesians as soon as other, newer aqua parks were developed in the area. The number of the visitors decreased rapidly in the beginning of the 21st century. The problem with those „badly born” modernist icons seems to be directly represented by the case of Fala. While still keeping their status of local legends, they are not able to function according to the modern expectations of performance. Paraphrasing the motto representing the modernistic movement in architecture, "Form & Function", they last as forms without functions.

¹² F. Springer, *Żle urodzone. Reportaże o architekturze PRL*, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artyku-1/3289-zle-urodzone-reportaze-o-architekturze-prl-u-fragment.html> (20.07.2017)

Performing City

Among the most dramatic changes in urban planning in Poland is what we could call the perspective of the architectural objects' performance. During the second half of the 20th century, the socialist vision of a city as a working mechanism interfered with the modernist paradigm of the readable form of the buildings, which resulted in the conviction that good architecture has to produce grand forms that will last for generations. The imposing, overscaled buildings, such as the Spodek sports arena or the Super Unit were intentionally designed as megastructures to satisfy the demand not only of the current citizens of Katowice, but also of the future generations. It is hard to believe today, but in fact nobody could imagine the collapse of the socialist urban management system in those times. However, the impossible happened, and urban management has been transformed in accordance with the new economic paradigm. The transfer from the realm of direct socialist planning to the reality of a capitalist city was a starting point of what is known as a performing city.

John MacKenzie was one of those thinkers who understood performance not only as a specific artistic activity, but as a phenomenon characterizing daily life in general. In his view, performance appears to be the main force shaping today's reality, also the reality of the urban life.¹³ The power of performance is the power of transformation, although it has to be clearly stated that the promises of a creative transformation of the urban environment with the intention to improve the quality of urban living, made in the name of urban performativity, are usually empty. It may be observed that new urban lifestyles and concepts redefining the use of old urban structures are extremely easy to fit into the functional logic of the traditional city projects. In today's reality, however, functionality is understood as an ability to earn money, so in fact all the "revolutionary" projects for the city have to be ultimately cost-effective, predictable, and easy to operate. The revolutionary "Performing City" is only a figure, an attractive slogan, nothing more than an interactive spectacle, which does not seem to have enough energy to transform the reality of modern urban life.

However, the concept of the "Performing City" appears as a whole: we can speak of its two functional ranges: the range of the economic performance and the range of the aesthetic performance. In fact, both of them are subordinated to the logic of economic efficiency.¹⁴ It is striking that over centuries, the urban aesthetic performance, embodied by innovative urban design, was based on economic

¹³ J. McKenzie, *Perform or ... Else*, polish edition, *Performuj albo.... Od dyscypliny do performansu*, Kraków 2011.

¹⁴ L. Kern, *Sex and the Revitalized City: Gender, Condominium, Development and Urban Citizenship*, Toronto, 2010, p. 151 „These reinvented, re-aestheticized city spaces facilitate the intensification of a consumerist model of citizenship, wherein the right to make claims on the city is performed through acts of consumption”.

growth. In today's reality, the dependency has been reversed: innovative urban planning has become a source of economic growth for modern cities.¹⁵ In this case, the corporation named Performing City tends to produce an illusion that free actions of an aesthetic nature, taken by its citizens, are an important contribution to the process of reshaping the city. Sharon Zukin unveils the nature of this process and points out that many agents taking part in the process of urban aesthetic performance present themselves as independent, civic movements, whereas they are significantly entangled in the mechanisms of urban power and control. In this frame, urban culture is presented as a strategy used to power the economic growth of the city, which does not however improve the quality of its citizens' life.¹⁶ The problem is widely recognized, and researchers like Paul Makeham state that some kind of an ethic criterion should be applied to the process of adaptation of an aesthetic performance to the mechanisms of economic efficiency. For Makeham, this should be accomplished only by the realization of the principle of full participation, where citizens are not only actors in a kind of urban theatre, but genuine performers with a real power to enable the change.¹⁷ However, even Makeham admits that this expectation cannot be easily fulfilled, because urban authorities would have to agree on the consequences of the performance also in a long-time perspective and accept all of the costs and risks that it takes, which is not possible in a short-span logic of modern urban economic performance.¹⁸

Applying the logic of the performing city to Silesian relic modernist structures meant for most of them the necessity of rapid transformation into commercial objects. This was easy in the case of the buildings in the vicinity of the Katowice market square, such as the Skarbek department store, but is still a great problem for the Silesian Park, BWA pavilion, or the Super Unit. The current situation of the emblematic Spodek arena provides a sad example of those difficulties. Its well-recognized familiar shape, and its large capacity combined with its long history of hosting sports and cultural events should ensure success even today. However, the already refurbished, beautiful arena, which hosted the legendary final of the Volleyball World Championships only three years before, has lost the competition with the brand new Tauron Arena in Kraków, and is resigned to organizing rather minor events. All this shows that most of the modernist buildings in Katowice

¹⁵ A. Gospodini, *European Cities in Competition and the New „Uses” of Urban Design*, "Journal of Urban Design" 2002 vol. 7, no 1, 59-73.

¹⁶ S. Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, Blackwell, Massachusetts 1995.

¹⁷ P. Makeham, *Performing the City*, *Theatre Research International* 2005, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 152 „Good city planning, then, promotes the full participation of citizens, both as performers in the urban drama and as spectators of it, and the most innovative planners embrace this principle willingly”.

¹⁸ P. Makeham, *ibid.*, p. 158: "For this theatre to function in practice rather than as a fanciful metaphor, the city administration must accommodate not only set and props but the performance in its entirety, including the dramas of transgression and disharmony which impel social narratives, and lend substance to shared existence”.

appear to be still determined by their original context and thus unable to fit the reality of economic performance, which sets the standards of the modern city. Despite their great history and attractive form, they are easily put into the “not profitable” category, not only by the authorities, but also by the citizens adopting the short-time perspective logic of urban growth.

The question of autonomy

In 2016, another interesting event was held at the BWA gallery in Katowice. The exhibition called *Widmo / The Phantom* was meant to document the phantom pains after the transformation of the center of the city. Once again, curator Marta Lisok proposed an exploration of a kind of performative urban geography, this time, however, concentrated on the sense of loss. It was based on the idea of performative recreation of the previous status of the phantoms – mainly modernist buildings in Katowice, such as the BWA pavilion and the Varietes Centrum (a restaurant). The Silesian art historian Irma Kozina points out that in the economic reality of the modern cities, “it seems that the only space which allows altruistic reflection on the city – free from the interference of the big capital and based on the actions that affirm social values – is offered by art”.¹⁹ In fact, the field of autonomous action seems to be wider, and not necessarily connected with artistic practice, though art is undeniably one of the possible instruments of achieving aesthetic autonomy in the world of the modern cities. This aesthetic autonomy is extremely important, as it enables the re-creation and re-shaping of the experience of the urban space. Following this principle, the artists collaborating on the Phantom project try to restore the lost experience of the emblematic objects of modernist Katowice, “evoking associations related to the former appearance of the city”, which allows “each individual to trigger their memory, to dive deep into the recesses of oblivion and search this so far untouched depository of important images from the past, images recorded during one individual existence”.²⁰ During one of these re-creations, the artist Mikołaj Szpaczyński asked the son of Stefan Michalik, the famous chef in charge of the Varietes Centrum, to draw some sketches of the interiors of the demolished building from memory. Then, “based on these reconstructions, Szpaczyński played a recording of some events that took place at the venue in the 1980s”.²¹ Such actions can be defined in terms of the performative “restored restored behaviour”. Performance researcher Richard Schechner points out that the repetition of an act which is culturally and socially restored can result in the creation of completely new meanings.²² It is important to note that this

¹⁹ I. Kozina, *Art in the Face of Accepting Changes in Urban Space - The Case of Architecture in Downtown Katowice*, ed. Marta Lisok, *The Phantom / Widmo*, BWA, Katowice 2016, p. 54.

²⁰ I. Kozina, op. cit., p. 54.

²¹ M. Lisok, *Phantom Geography*, ed. M. Lisok, *The Phantom / Widmo*, BWA, Katowice 2016, p. 12.

²² R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 28: „the training and practice, of learning appropriate culturally specific bits of behaviour, of adjusting and performing one’s life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances”.

delineates the field of aesthetic autonomy, which is not accessible via the activities performed in accordance with the logic of the Performative City. This is so, because the logic is based on the idea of the subordination of the aesthetic performance of citizens and social groups to the objective of economic performance. However, the methodology of the “phantom pains treatment” proposed by the Phantom project seems to be free of any kind of links to the Performing City. It appears to be a private, intimate practice rather than a vote “for” or “against” the changes of the urban space of modern Katowice. It is rather an invitation to a kind of an individual journey, which can enhance one’s experience of the city. It is important to remember that the notion of “enhanced experience” appears in the context of Richards Shusterman’s project of Somaesthetics.²³ Krystyna Wilkoszewska points out that it has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions as it draws attention to the multisensory aspect of the aesthetic experience, but also to its meliorative effect.²⁴ In this sense, the proposed method of restoring restored behavior can be understood directly as the practice of enhanced experience, as it multiplies its sensory aspects and restructures one’s relations with others and with the external world. How does all this relate to the status of the phantom-like modernist buildings in Katowice? Their fate probably cannot be reversed. However, this does not mean that they are simply unimportant. To highlight the possibilities that they offer in their current status, I would like to quote a small anecdote concerning murals, which comes from the city of Łódź. The world-class street artist Arys came to Łódź to paint a very well-received, large-scale mural depicting a young woman reading a love letter. However, the mural, one of the first works in the Urban Forms Gallery collection may soon disappear, as it was executed on an old layer of paint that is now decomposing. Although in 10 years’ time there will be no Arys mural in Łódź, I am pretty sure that it will become one of the icons of the city and will be preserved in millions of photos and in millions of good memories of the citizens of Łódź.

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²³ R. Shusterman, *Transactional Experimental Inquiry: From Pragmatism to Somaesthetics*, “Contemporary Pragmatism” 2015, no 12, p. 194.

²⁴ K. Wilkoszewska, *Estetyka pragmatyczna w perspektywie bio - „Przegląd Filozoficzny”* 2016, no 1, p. 220.

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POZA NARRACJĄ. POZBAWIONE FUNKCJI OBIEKTY ARCHITEKTONICZNE MODERNISTYCZNEGO DZIEDZICTWA JAKO POLE ESTETYCZNEJ AUTONOMII MIESZKAŃCÓW (streszczenie)

Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie specyficznego statusu obiektów modernistycznego dziedzictwa architektonicznego w rejonie współczesnych Katowic. Autor prezentuje, skoncentrowane na tych budynkach i zespołach architektonicznych, zabiegi podejmowane przez lokalnych artystów oraz podejmuje próbę analizy ich potencjału w zakresie wytworzenia strefy estetycznej autonomii w obszarze życia codziennego mieszkańców miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, urbanistyka, dziedzictwo architektoniczne, ruiny.