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Name                         Krzysztof Chwalibóg

### REFLECTIONS ON ARCHITECTURE IDENTITY OF SPACE AS A RESOURCE

Identity of the built environment is becoming nowadays a resource as precious and scarce as clean air and water. Resources of identity represented by the buildings and urban landscape, characteristic for a given area are shrinking.

In the past as well architecture as landscape has been mostly defined by local factors such as: topography, climate, building techniques and cultural traditions.

At present the importance of them all is progressively receding under the pressure of technological uniformity on the global scale.

The local and regional specificity is constantly decreasing.

Easy to distinguish identity of space is an important feature for the general quality of life of its inhabitants and visitors as well from the psychological, social as cultural point of view. Therefore it should be considered as vital for human beings as ecological factors.

However this fact doesn't seem to be reflected not only in so called "commercial buildings" but also in

some "fashionable" tendencies observed in contemporary architecture and based on the extensive use of the futuristic technology and overemphasized scale.

In consequence as well the natural as local cultural factors are giving place to the prevailing technological impact. By this way the environment is becoming more technological and less human.

Taking into consideration mentioned above reasons, legible identity has to be recognised as an important resource and a basic factor of the quality of architecture and of the urban landscape.

In order to see how the mentioned above problem is reflected in urban design and architectural policy short observations from few European cities are going to be presented. Chosen cases are concerning at first cities destroyed by the war and then reconstructed (Warsaw, Rotterdam and Berlin), and also Amsterdam and Marseille.

As far as it concerns an attempt to comprehend how the identity is treated in the works of some of the

most renowned architects more significant examples are going to be shown.

### CITIES

WARSAW

Warsaw has been destroyed in more than 70% during the second world war 1939-45 and its urban identity has almost totally disappeared.

When reconstruction works started in 1945 a violent quarrel burst out on the subject of the character which should be given to the recreated capital. The modernists opposed the idea of rebuilding the Old Town with medieval structure arguing that it would be absolutely more rational and less costly to build instead the modern city. Fortunately (as we can say now) the historical part of Warsaw has been carefully recreated with the help of prewar surveys and the eighteenth century paintings by Canaletto. Thanks to this process during fifties and sixties traditional scale and variety of design of old churches, palaces and houses has been alive again.

And then started modern construction. As an outcome of urban design competition for a part of central area of the City, a cliché of Cite Radieuse appeared. In the place of the dense, continuous pattern of street development 17teen identical, 15 floors high slabs has grown.

The other parts of Warsaw became a mixture of remaining prewar buildings and new office towers looking as in any city of the world. And peripheral housing areas has been endlessly repeating the archetype created by Le Corbusier (like in all communist countries).

Till now the market square and the surrounding narrow streets of the Old Town are the most popular place to go as well for the inhabitants of Warsaw as for visitors, when a business area in very center is unable to provide more attractive public space among its outgrown glass towers.

## ROTTERDAM

Rotterdam has also been bombed and problem of recovering identity appeared very heavily.

Reconstructing the Old Town was nowhere an issue. Instead modern commercial center called Lijnbaan has been constructed by Van der Broek @ Bakema connected to blocks of flats.

Let me quote now what Lucien Kroll said about this project in an interview: "And Lijnbaan in Rotterdam isn't it dutch? O yes, there are some traces, however rather shy, but most of all it is pretending to the International Style."

Also the whole Veena area, as well modern and nice looking, but a newcomer hardly could say in which part of the world is it situated.

The same but on even larger scale can be seen in the development area of the future new center called by the way "Manhattan on the Maas". This complex seems from its very beginning doomed to be a poor cousin of the real Manhattan and no office tower as huge as can it be is going to change this obvious fact.

You can put as many skyscrapers designed by famous international and local architects as you wish but this will not give any quality to the urban landscape except the skyline.

What counts is an alive public space defined by well scaled, interesting architecture and above all having its own character instead of borrowed "nowhere look".

## BERLIN

Reconstruction of Berlin is a process of reweaving of the city divided by the iron curtain and split into separated entities of which one has been heavily marked by destruction of all remaining traces of the urban tradition. The challenge of reborn the spirit of this city has been so enormous task and the scale of the whole process so important that possibility to eliminate mistakes could hardly be imagined.

And the debates among the professionals and the general public are reflecting this. However from the point of view of a visitor being able to compare what have been achieved here to some other cities there is no doubt about an urban quality which has been provided.

At first what should be pointed, the strong feeling of necessity to rediscover the identity of place by recreating the continuity of development and traditional city scale is a basic value of the idea of "critical reconstruction" formulated by Professor Josef Paul Kleihues and implemented by the senate of Berlin.

It is normal that there is a difference between a point of view of an artist and an urban planner. But a city has to be an alive environment for the people and not a frozen monument of the past catastrophe. This is why Daniel Libeskind is not right when opposing the continuity of street facades in favor of loose, open spaces.

It is another mistake is to fight against stone and regulated building height in the name of imagination and freedom of expression. It would be completely stupid to create a world full of chaotically monotonous, glass covered, unrelated one to the other structures. This would not be an expression of democracy but rather of a frightening anarchy.

When one looks on thousands of chaotic megapolis growing all around the world one has to consider any regulated city a miracle and extremely valuable resource.

A city worth of this name cannot be a bunch of individual buildings even of very high artistic quality but a harmoniously organized entity. And Berlin is trying to make it.

## AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam - one of the most beautiful cities of Europe, similarly to Rotterdam is undergoing spectacular transformations of its docks. After the evacuation of port facilities city has taken over the old docks areas called: Java, KNSM, Sporenburg and Borneo.

However the way of development adopted here is showing totally different approach from what is happening in Rotterdam. One can only guess that thanks to the long tradition of planned, harmonious urban growth, which started already in early middle ages, Amsterdam instead of trying to import its new face from outside is simply carrying on its own principles. Let me refer again to the words of Lucien Kroll:

"It is again an issue of culture proper to the Dutch, and International Style could not invade this culture, however Calvinist, deeply anchored to the polders."

And probably because of it Amsterdam refused letting grow the high rise buildings close to the central part of the city. Some of them are only visible on the outskirts. The recently built housing areas are keeping as much

as possible certain features of the historical development. Small canals are cutting across long the shape of Java island and traditional form of single family four floors house is appearing. The new urban tissue is providing a variety of shapes, colors and materials. Amsterdam is not trying to imitate Manhattan but keeping its own way.

MARSEILLE - between identity and global design

## 1. Transatlantic and the old town

When in 1952 Le Corbusier has built his famous "Unité d'habitation" looking like a huge oceanic steamer, he believed to create a new valuable model of urban life. And he was partly right because during next forty years more or less similar copies appeared in most of European cities and above all in any urban area of the communist empire.

Now those buildings have been destroyed or totally reshaped in the countries able to afford it. In the others (like in central and eastern Europe) they will remain for long as the ghettos of the poorer social groups unable to leave for a better environment.

Today Unité d'habitation stands alone among low developments of the southern district of Marseille

being called by the local people "la maison du fada" which means "the madman's house". Several architects living in it are satisfied and this seems to confirm the theory about "architecture for the architects" being different from the "architecture for the normal people".

Conforming to the ideas of Corbu, the old, unrational and unfunctional cities has been doomed to be destroyed. However the old town of Marseille with its narrow streets and squares and houses with shops, bars, and small gardens in the backyards is fortunately still there.

## 2. "Cinq Avenue" against the "Grand Bleu" spaceship

This what seems to be like a title of another science-fiction thriller is however only a striking comparison of the two urban design projects distant by more than a century in time and two kilometers in space.

When the works connecting the new channel bringing the fresh water to the city has been accomplished, an important complex of monumental buildings and landscape composition with the artificial waterfall and park have been realized. The composition creates a focal point in the middle of a housing area when 5 avenues are converging. The relationship between the pattern of the whole housing area and the public buildings is perfect and the beaux arts architecture wonderfully connected to the hill and interplay of the water and greenery. Important views from this "belvedere" are going along the avenues.

The whole composition is not something very local but represents a mediterranean identity as the archetypal form of an "mosaics" (being built on any aqueduct's end).

Now when we move about 2 kilometers from this point succeeding to find our way from the subway's corridors we will emerge in totally different surroundings. Somewhere in between an important road rather than an avenue, multifamily housing blocks and scattered little houses remaining from an old village Saint Just you will finally see "Grand Bleu" (on this way local people call the blue-"cosmic vehicle" which by some

accident landed in this casual place to become the headquarter of the regional government.

It has been designed by one of the top British architects as a result of a won competition and is without

any doubt extremely well studied, climatically sensible and interesting from the point of view of interior space relations. Unfortunately it is completely unrelated to the surrounding space.

This situation seems to be typical for the way many urban areas are now growing. More and more futuristic shapes are "landing" in many cities all the emphasis being made on the "fashionable form".

The notion of classical "Genius Loci" has been so far eradicated by modernistic idea of a machine as a model for buildings. Be it a steamer or a spaceship. And these do not care for the context.

## IDENTITY AND STAR ARCHITECTS

After trying to see the identity problem in the existing urban environment of the few European cities

It would be interesting to change the observation field and to learn something about the feeling of it among the

world's top architects. Any architect of this group could be easily recognised because of its specific way of design. The manner of organizing spaces, composing forms, materials and colours, playing with scale and meaning.....all the architectural expression.

All this is so personal and it would be impossible to confuse the architecture of Norman Foster with that of Frank O. Gehry or Jean Nouvel. Intensity of this individual style not tuned to any local context is somewhat producing an effect of the stamp being applied to a given location in a given country. It is easier to recognise

"this is Gehry" than in which part of the world is it built.

And this is occurring always when the author is so fascinated by his own idea to the point not being able

to care about the context. Keeping in mind a very different scale of the phenomenon it is however possible to see a parallel of it to the violence of invasion of commercial investments (like a supermarket or Mac Donald restaurant) dropped somewhere without any regard to the environment in any point of the globe.

Fortunately this approach is characteristic only to some of star architects. Several of them are having quite different understanding of the genius loci and identity issues. Their buildings designed for the specific area are reflecting not only their personality but the context of the place and culture.

Division line is lying between those who still believes in the dogmas of modern movement defining

how the building should look like and relating it not to the place but to the archetype of machine or a vehicle.

In order to have a closer look at the reality of this problem let us see the case of the international invited competition for the directional centre of the region of Galizia in Santiago de Compostella.

## SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELLA COMPETITION

The result of this competition is giving a spectacular comparison of two opposite design philosophies.

One - modernistic and universal and the second - local identity oriented. In this confrontation of ideas among

other conventional proposals, two radical schemes have been competing.

One - the idea of horizontal megastucture invented by Le Corbusier to be put in any hilly city (Algiers,

Rio de Janeiro etc.) and "recycled" for Santiago de Compostella by Jean Nouvel.

Second - (by Peter Eisenman) a form based on the archetype of the shell - a symbol of Santiago from the early middle ages, but also a straight reference to the form of medieval town and to the organic shapes of the hill on which slopes it has been situated.

When the scheme of Nouvel is clearly expressing the modernistic idea of domination over the nature by levelling the hilly country and introducing outscaled technological structure, Eisenman is showing an extreme sensibility as well to the culture of the place and next to its topography. His proposal is clearly showing the right way of treating with respect the landscape of the earth and building the future on the roots of the past.

Looking at the verdict of the competition's jury one cannot disapprove. Eisenman's scheme won the competition.

This is very instructive example of ideological confrontation which we are witnessing around us. Unfortunately not always the respect of nature and culture is prevailing over technological brutality.

For this reason those values should be mostly appreciated in the creative process of some of the renowned architects. This kind of approach can be seen in the works of Charles Correa reflecting deeply the Indian culture, this you can remark when Alvaro Siza is constructing in Berlin and expressing the local character, or when Rafael Moneo is designing a "scandinavian" building of Museum in Stockholm.

## CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions of this short trip across few cities and some phenomena of the present architectural scene are leading to the statement about the utmost importance of the identity of the place and culture - resources which are very often in danger of disappearance and could be preserved only thanks to the high quality of architecture and very careful and consistent architectural and urban policies.

Local/regional identity is a basic resource which architecture should provide.

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Krzysztof Chwalibóg