Architecture and the development of downgraded urban areas

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ABSTRACT
Architecture surrounds us daily. We notice low-rise buildings and high-rise buildings, big and small edifices but we hardly ever notice their design or beauty, not to mention their surroundings, the urban interior where they are situated. This also applies to contemporary architecture. The paper suggests focusing on objects that function as museums, especially modern art museums which become characteristic features in urban space and to which urban systems are subordinated, e.g. Frank Ghery’s Bilbao centre. This function has become important and distinct over the last two centuries. That is why it is placed in objects whose architecture is special: sometimes extravagant and often monumental in scale but always significant on an urban scale. It is because architecture is not only a costume or a shell enclosing any odd interior. It forms an integral part of the urban context which is an important pretext for making it happen. It is also a composition of volumes, their forms, functions, light, the idea contained within the entire object, and first of all, its subjective perception analysed in terms of directing public attention to particular objects with a view to making them distinct. The paper presents an analysis of some examples of European museums of modern art – including some Polish ones – as significant architecture which is a key component on the scale of a city or its fragment. The aim is to stress the importance of the activities of local authorities and architects and the decisions they make for the development of downgraded urban areas.

Keywords: architecture, function, museum, distinguishing, surroundings.

1 INTRODUCTION

Architecture has been with us forever and has always occupied a prominent position among other art disciplines. It has often been a topic of literature. In many texts it is easy to come across descriptions of various buildings, which is a unique opportunity to perceive architecture as an area of art far away from the issues of construction or function. Literary descriptions are rarely produced by architects and are mostly addressed to non-specialists. They describe the viewer’s impressions, feelings and emotions that a direct contact with a remarkable, iconic building evokes. There are also commonplace objects whose ‘hidden beauty’ is revealed through the eye of the beholder.
On the one hand, poetic descriptions inspire deeper interest in architecture, but, on the other, make one reflect on its role in the shaping of human environment. After all, architecture is not only a composition of volumes with their form, function, light, ideas they comprise or a costume, a shell enclosing an interior. It is also an integral whole of the urban context which is a major pretext for making architecture happen. It is also an object emanating its own architectural shape, form and attracting wide circles of viewers by its function – in cases when objects have an impact through art. In the modern world there are voices saying that globalization transforms cities from places which give people protection into areas whose unified asceticism that leads to aesthetic perfection eliminates tamed attributes of space perceived in traditional terms. Such places provoke criticism as they seem to have been created merely in order to be quickly walked through and left behind. The most popular example in this respect is La Defence. Therefore appreciation of space with distinctive features has directed the attention of society as well as many architects and town planners to the areas that were once intensely exploited but are now abandoned as a result of economic and technological transformations. Such spaces include postindustrial districts of cities which on the one hand are ugly due to being useless but on the other hand are quite specific because of their industrial aesthetics. Their redevelopment has become a significant task across Europe.

2 POSTINDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

Since 1970s, attention has been directed to protection, recovery and rehabilitation of cultural and material heritage, including its postindustrial representations. Countries such as Belgium, Great Britain, Germany and France were the first to notice the need for protecting postindustrial structures. In Poland, similar attitudes developed in the early 1990s both as regards the theory and practice of urbanism and architecture. The main task was to improve the protection of postindustrial objects as well as to establish their authentic historic value so as to promote a discussion on modern strategies of urban redevelopment and technical aspects of erecting buildings in a unique cultural context.

One of the most remarkable examples of the new strategy of urban development seems to be Bilbao with its Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Owen Gehry. The Museum has become a symbol of modernity and reurbanisation of a socially degraded neighborhood. It has thoroughly transformed the image of the city, its social and political life. Owing to the Museum, the city has turned from the epicenter of Basque separatism into a symbol of successful revitalization which attracts crowds of visitors.

1 Bauman Z., Płynna nowoczesność (Liquid Modernity) Krakow 2006, pp.149-150: The place called La Defence, a huge square on the right bank of the Seine, conceived, designed and built as a lasting monument of François Mitterand’s presidency – during which the glory and grandeur of the office was carefully separated from the personal weaknesses and vices of its holder – comprises all the features […] of public but inhospitable urban space. […] what strikes the visitor is first and foremost the inhospitality of the place: everything within sight inspires awe yet discourages staying. Fantastically shaped buildings which encircle the huge and empty square are meant to be looked at not in.
building was completed in 1997. Erected in the city center, the object resembles a cathedral around which there centered the life of a medieval town like Bilbao. The new center developed along the river and its culmination is the dynamic, glittering structure. Its uniqueness results from the experience of an excellent architect and cutting edge technology of aviation engineering firms and is a benchmark of innovativeness and originality of the XXth-century architecture.

A comparable example of architecture with a message and charged with an urban task is Centre Georges Pompidou, a building situated in the Paris district of Beaubourg, which houses a museum of modern art (Musée National d’Art Moderne) on its top three floors. It was also opened in 1977 although the decision to establish a cultural center in the area that needed redevelopment was made in 1969 when an international architectural competition was held and the winner was the project of Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. Their revolutionary formal solution that consisted in placing all the piping and wiring in multi-coloured tubes on the outside of the building offered excellent opportunities for spatial arrangements inside, on the one hand, and created entirely new aesthetics, on the other.

3 BERLIN

In the northern part of the city, formerly GDR, between Schönhauser Allee and Christinenstraße in Prenzlauer Berg where the XIXth-century urban fabric has been preserved there stood a brewery founded by Joseph Pfeffer, a master brewer, in 1841. The former brewery complex, after thorough renovation and adaptation, has been turned into a historic postindustrial space which houses a number of cultural and educational institutions as well as some organizations dealing with problems of contemporary architecture in the broad sense of the word. Since 1980, Aedes Architecture Forum has been operating in Berlin as an exhibition center and a cultural venture which aimed at promoting contemporary architecture and urbanism as well as issues concerning urban space. Aedes, for the first time, introduced for social consideration architecture as the product of a significant creative process to do with the problems of the functioning of the city. Basing on the gallery’s history and experience, ANCB the Aedes Metropolitan Laboratory was established and joined in a broad discourse on urban space as the interaction between the urban form, its planning and sociological phenomena taking place there. Aedes Network Campus Berlin (ANCB) was founded in 2009 by Kristin Feireiss and Hans-Jürgen Commerell who created a significant cultural brand for this fragment of the city excellently contributing to a wide-ranging discussion on architecture, town planning and culture. In recent years, ANCB has attracted a large international group of students, researchers and practitioners from the fields of architecture, spatial planning and related disciplines. It collaborates closely with the Museum for Architectural Drawing (Museum für Architekturzeichnung) which was built on the site of the former brewery at Christinenstraße 18a in 2013 on the initiative of Tchoban Foundation. Sergey Tchoban, himself an excellent draftsman, offered the
Foundation a part of his collection of architectural drawings. The collection comprises works of acclaimed architects from the 16th to the 21st centuries. The museum is also an exhibition center presenting drawings of the outstanding artists for whom drawing and painting were inherent parts of professional activity, e.g. the late Lebbeus Woods. The museum building is interesting although small-scale. It was designed by Tchoban’s Moscow office. Its form comprises solids placed one on top of another and representing particular levels. The walls are decorated with etchings of details of architectural drawings in concrete. The nearly windowless, sandstone coloured solids house exhibition halls, the foyer, the conference hall and archives.

Figure 1: Berlin, Museum for Architectural Drawing.

Both institutions work in tandem on the creation of a global forum for the exchange of experiences and knowledge about hand drawing and graphical representation of architecture. Successive exhibitions and scientific symposia bring together outstanding artists who show their works, representatives of leading schools of architecture and an international group of admirers and listeners.

East Berlin, after years of degradation due to the postwar division of the city, has recovered its due attractiveness which is now appreciated by the residents and a large group of tourists alike. History has become a pretext for creating new values in the space of this district.

4 POLAND

Meanwhile, in Poland, large postindustrial complexes began to disappear rapidly following the transformations of the political system in the early 1990s. Their spatial values or adaptive reuse potential did not seem to matter. Weak arguments of their supporters were drowned in the turmoil of debates
overwhelmed by economic considerations in particular. In Krakow of the early 1990s there was little interest in the project of redevelopment of the area and production halls of Solvay factory although attempts were made at drawing people’s attention to the value of the degraded halls and other quite charming buildings. The 1991 International Biennale also focused on redevelopment of the area but voices of the supporters of adaptive reuse of the industrial relics were not heard amid various divagations. Of the entire complex only the layout of the streets and the staff canteen built in the 1930s to a design of Waclaw Nowakowski have been preserved. It is situated rather unfortunately next to a busy street and houses an art centre. So the site of the former Solvay Soda Works is now occupied by the vast Zakopianka Shopping Centre and the Solvay Center for Modern Art.

The Solvay Center for Modern Art, despite its location in the historic building mentioned above and convenient access, does not attract potential art lovers as it is squeezed between a very busy street at the front and a car park at the entrance. The Center functions within the organizational structure of the Podgórze House of Culture. Its task is promotion of modern art. Main fields of activity include fine arts, theatre, multimedia, music and artistic education in the broad sense of the word (workshops, conferences). It is also a place for interdisciplinary artistic projects. The Center opened in January 2000.

In this case, the opportunity to create a unique character of the place was lost as the main considerations taken into account in the discussions about the redevelopment of the area were the degree of environmental degradation and pollution.

4.1 KRAKOW, ZABLOCIE

A similar philosophy was behind the construction of the Museum of Contemporary Art MOCAK in Krakow which was opened in 2011. The main designer was Claudio Nardi, an Italian architect who won the international competition held in 2007. The museum is situated in the old industrial district of Zabłocie, on the premises of the historic factory of Schindler. The project encompasses several old factory buildings covered with shed roofs and a fragment of a tall wall which is the only historic relic incorporated into the structure of the new museum with exhibition spaces inside. The spatial layout of the factory has been preserved and the old buildings have been adapted to new usage. The characteristic shed roofs have been turned into recognizable detail of the new architecture and their outlines have become the museum’s logo.

The object carries very special connotations because of the history of the site and the role Schindler’s factory played in saving the lives of the Jewish population during World War II. Contemporary art inscribed into the postindustrial space seems to fit perfectly with its difficult past and its original aesthetics.
4.2 LODZ

It still is a major industrial city in Poland. However, the economic and political transformations have changed the city’s industrial profile which resulted in the closing down of many factories and industrial enterprises leaving behind vast, abandoned areas that degrade the urban space of the agglomeration. The authorities have been taking action to renovate and modernize the postindustrial city quarters and objects with a view to repurposing them. The flagship investment was the Manufaktura\(^2\) shopping mall that opened in 2006 and was awarded many prizes for successful revitalization of historic postindustrial objects. The redevelopment was carried out so as to preserve the atmosphere of 19\(^{th}\) century Łódź and Izrael Poznanski’s factory. The complex is dominated by old factory buildings made of unplastered red brick whose interiors were completely rebuilt. It can be considered an architectural creation whose contemporary features are not diminished by a strong mark of history. It comprises museums, cinemas, discos, shops, restaurants. Its centre is a 3-hectare market which is an open public space where cultural and entertainment events are held that attract residents and tourists. The opening of the Manufaktura was considered the most important event in the city in the past quarter –century. The place soon became the city’s icon.

Another major investment in downtown Łódź is the renovation of the Łódź Fabryczna railway station which was built in 1866. The redevelopment took place between 2011 and 2016\(^3\). At present, the

\(^2\) Izrael Poznański’s textile factory has been turned into a mixed-use development including a shopping mall and accompanying facilities. The project was done by the office of Virgile&Stone and Sud Architectes in 1999-2003.

modern and functional complex is a communication hub combining railway, bus, tramway, bicycle and car transportation routes. It has a great architectural and historic value. It also contributed to the redevelopment of the adjacent area including the revitalization of the EC-1 power station and its repurposing into culture and art facilities.

Generally, the railway station complex is thoroughly modern although the contemporary object is based on the old structures. This was possible owing to the initiative of the designers who considered the preserved substance worth protecting because of its significant value contributing to the atmosphere of the place. The historic structures remained as distinguishing, decorative marks. Without them, the tectonics of the object would have merely met the international standards for structures of this type. It ought to be stressed that the main aim of the project was to restore architectural and spatial order to downtown Łódź and create opportunities for the residents of the city and the region to use these central areas as public space by making them perform new functions.

Yet another investment is the revitalization of the former power station EC-1 next to the Fabryczna railway station. The preserved objects house National Centre for Film Culture and Centre for Science and Technology. It is worth mentioning that Łódź is an important place of Polish film production. The city’s Feature Film Studio and National Film School are major cultural and educational institutions in the country setting the direction of the development of the art of film making across Poland.

For this reason, the creating of the new infrastructural basis for the institutions presenting and promoting the achievements of film art have made the city more attractive for the residents and the region as well as tourists visiting Łódź.

The renovation resulted in a new object whose front elevation faces on to the modern version of the Fabryczna railway station. The expressive architecture of the building has been integrated with the renovated elevations of former industrial buildings. The whole complex has a unique character and perfectly promotes film art, science and contemporary architectural and conservation ideas.

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4 The EC1 Łódź power station (Łódź, ul. Targowa 1/3) was built in 1907 - 1930. It comprised a cold room, a boiler-room, an engine-room, a switch-room, a pump-room and a water treatment plant.

New functions: Center for Science and Technology (EC1 West), Center for Art and Culture (EC1 East)

Project authors: EC1 East: ,,Home of Houses” Sp. z o.o., arch. Rafał Mysiak; EC1 West, EC1 South-East: Biuro Realizacji Inwestycji FRONTON Sp. z o.o. and Mirosław Wiśniewski Architektura i Urbanistyka Sp. z o.o. More information: http://www.ec1lodz.pl/; http://www.architektura.info/index.php/architektura/polska_i_swiat/ec_1_w_lodzi_rewitalizacja_pr_zestrzeni_poprzemyslowych;
The realization seems to express a specific and desirable duality: on the one hand, creative openness and skillful use of the language of contemporary architecture and, on the other, reflection of the local tradition, authenticity of the city or even district that is so much expected by the viewer.

5 CONCLUSIONS

We are daily surrounded by architecture. We see low houses and high-rises but we rarely notice their decoration or beauty, not to mention their neighborhood or urban interior where they are situated. This also refers to contemporary architecture. Nevertheless, through its form, often avant-garde, and its function, often a museum or modern art exhibition, it becomes a distinguishing mark in urban space which promotes also run-down urban complexes that need revaluation, activation and reintegration into contemporary urban fabric.

For this reason, it is worth noting the functions which have become important and distinguished especially during the last two centuries. They are placed in the objects whose architecture is special: sometimes extravagant and often monumental in scale but always significant in urban space. This is because architecture is not only a costume or a shell enclosing an interior. It is an integral part of the urban context that is a major pretext for its emergence. It also is a composition of volumes, their form, function, light, the idea contained within but mostly, a subjective message enclosed in the created object and analyzed in terms of directing social attention to particular structures and their surroundings with a view to distinguishing them. This distinguishing quality is important particularly when it comes to redevelopment of degraded urban areas and emphasizing the role of architects and local authorities in making decisions concerning the process. The above presented and analyzed examples of European – and Polish -museums of modern art which are representatives of significant architecture and key components of urban space prove the thesis to be true.
REFERENCES


