

TECHNICAL TRANSACTIONS | **CZASOPISMO TECHNICZNE**
ARCHITECTURE | ARCHITEKTURA

9-A/2015

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PLAYING ARCHITECTURE

GRA W ARCHITEKTURĘ

Abstract

The very word “game” has a very wide meaning. As a game can be considered a prototype of culture as well as a metaphor, a simulacrum, and a simulation of the real world, the article is a reflection on architecture seen through the prism of three very old games: hide-and-peek, musical chairs and the goose game.

Keywords: musical chairs, hide-and-peek, goose game, experiencing architecture, comfort, gentrification, contemporaneity, architectural practice

Streszczenie

Gra jest pojęciem niezwykle pojemnym. Przyjmując, że gra jest nie tylko prototypem kultury, lecz może być również metaforą, symulacją i symulacją rzeczywistości, artykuł proponuje spojrzeć na architekturę przez pryzmat trzech starych gier: gry w chowanego, gry w gorące krzesła i gry w gęs.

Słowa kluczowe: gra w chowanego, gra w gorące krzesła, gra w gęs, odczuwanie architektury, przeludnienie, gentryfikacja, projekt architektoniczny

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1. Architecture as game

Architecture – the game between convergent lines, rhythm, mimicry and optical illusions, colours, textures, smells and sounds, planes and volumes, light and shadow – plays incessantly on our emotions. It is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be – admits Alain de Botton gloomily in his essay *Architecture of Happiness*. – Taking architecture seriously therefore makes some singular and strenuous demands upon us... It means conceding that we are inconveniently vulnerable to the colour of our wallpaper and that an unfortunate bedspread may derail our sense of purpose [3]. This vulnerability, described by the silver tongued author of bestsellers on all topics, is a state quite new and typical of the citizen of our modern world, so used to the comfort zone. Throughout the ages, life within architecture was usually quite short and miserable, with days passing by in modestly decorated, poorly lit, and unheated interiors. Humanity ground on forward, sleeping together in crowded chambers, on tables, benches and piles of hay on the floor. Only the more affluent could afford beds – often intentionally made too narrow and short, so that the body would find it harder to achieve a supine position, which, according to folklore, aided Death in its dirty work. At times, the contrary was the rule, with beds large enough for entire families to sleep together.

The ill comforts of church stalls and refectory benches had their practical implications: it was not appropriate for someone to fall asleep in church, while the dining hall was not a place for wasting precious daytime more than necessary. At the same time, these areas had carefully calculated proportions and opulent decorations, so that the eyes could be soothed while the bottom ached.

The tradition of uncomfortable seats that are meant to keep us awake has survived in the form of seats at schools or on train stations. However, the quality of the surroundings has shed gradually over time. It is no wonder, then, that having sat in non-places for years (a classroom fulfils all the criteria to be labelled as such), we have become immune to the beauty of architecture. We are now trying to reverse this process by means of architectural education for children, public participation programs, etc.. While these ventures are valuable in and of themselves, the true solution to the problem is, so to speak, bottom-up oriented. A good example of this is the case of the Roma-Fiumicino Airport.

FCO, with its nearly 39 million passengers in the year 2014, is the largest Italian airport, and the sixth largest in Europe. It is also crowded, oppressive and just generally seems like the result of first class ineptitude, a polycentric one at that. The bars and restaurants equipped with normal chairs are grouped on the top floor, which is connected with the main terminal by a stairwell acting like a bottleneck, while the bars and restaurants located on the lower floor mostly do not offer seats. The reason for this is perhaps the extremely quick pace at which the numbers of the entry gates are called, probably the quickest in all of Europe. The end result is that a couple of hours at the FCO can easily derail – at least temporarily – our sense of purpose and successfully strip anyone of any sympathy towards modern architecture.

The same interior and the same asphalt and concrete landscape of the airstrip become almost unrecognizable near gate B4 where old, decrepit couches akin to those of the classic LC4 type designed by Le Corbusier are set. As soon as one manages to secure a place, the thankful body sends a signal to the brain – it's fine, rest now, look around, breath in, listen. The grey of the ceramic tiles, pillars and ceilings suddenly start to take on distinct shades, the traces of children's noses and fingers on the glazing become visible, the conversations

of people nearby emerge from the white noise, as do shapes, colours, smells and sounds of architecture, that a moment ago, had, and made, no sense. Again we find ourselves embodied in time and place instead of giving in to the oblivion of waiting.

2. Musical chairs

When we look back as close as the beginning of the 19th century, we can see that entire generations were still literally replacing their ancestors. Yet a group of factors – the technological development of farming, changes in nutrition, expulsion of cemeteries and workshops outside city centres, and finally, the wide availability of soap and cotton underwear made it possible for the demographic curve of Europe to make a steep climb, despite years of war and waves of migration. People started moving from the rural areas to the cities, only to dwell in spaces as cramped beyond belief as the one presented yet in 1948 in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*: 8 persons per 6 square metres [2, p. 37–38]. It is hard to believe that in the contrasting landscape of 19th-century London for instance, so full of inequality, with the beautiful interiors of Bedford Square and Russell Square on one hand and the poverty ridden southern and eastern districts on the other – the musical chairs of existence were not as hot as they are today.

It would be naive to think that the assigning of social housing was free of speculation and allowed all those in need to find a roof over their heads. The sources, however, remain silent regarding events so scandalous that they could be comparable to the current gentrification processes of the central areas of London.

Heygate Estate, lying between Walworth Road and New Kent Road in the Elephant & Castle district, on the right bank of the Thames, a residential development designed by Tim Tinker and finished in 1974, quickly became an infamous place. Its architecture and spatial layout – the varied height of the structures, the system of walkways and corridors that organized pedestrian and vehicular traffic in a manner that allowed the space between the buildings to be entirely taken up by greenery, was not acknowledged until 2004 when a revitalization plan providing demolition of the estate was approved. In the air of accusations of corruption, law breaking in broad daylight and of acting against the interest of the public, in 2014 the plan entered its final phase.

Despite numerous analyses, the results of which cast doubt over the need to demolish the existing buildings and suggesting instead their revitalization, the estate was demolished. One of the premises of the plan was that 1,000 of the 2,535 new apartments would have cheap rents, so that the old inhabitants would have a chance to continue living in their old neighbourhood. In the end, only 79 will be provided. These and other breaches of the specified requirements – from the one stating that at least 20% of the area of the existing buildings and infrastructure to be reused to the facilities for renewable energy sources – cost the real estate developer but tickets to the Summer Olympic Games and a trip to Cannes. Such was the gift received by the head of the district council.

Gentrification is one of the facets of the deepening, global phenomenon of the polarization that takes place between the strata of society, as well as the rising antagonism between them. Wherever there is a demand for a certain area, it is gradually being taken away from its current users and handed over to those better off. Obviously, gentrification is not limited to the face of the callous, greedy real estate developer, as demagogues would have us believe.

44		20	19	18	17		
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	46	59	64	63			12
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01		03	04	05			

Its mechanisms are much harder to personify. One only needs to take look at High Line Park in New York, an initiative praised by the entire world of architecture along with the various urban movements. Today, most of the founders of the initiative can no longer afford their own apartments, as the cost of rent per square metre in the vicinity of the Line has skyrocketed beyond their control [4, p. 16].

3. Hide-and-seek

According to a UN report on the year 2014, over a billion people worldwide live in a state of absolute poverty, with two billion inhabiting slums or in conditions that offer no access to basic amenities. Around half of all mankind is affected by so-called multidimensional poverty, while a section of the other half of the lucky ones who can spend more than five

dollars a day are plagued by wars and natural disasters. They do not care about the colour of their wallpaper or that of the bedspread. Furthermore, more than half of the population of the Earth really does not care about architecture. The only thing they wish from it is a roof that doesn't fall.

If the game is a prototype of culture [5, p. 3], a shelter is an archetype of architecture, an essence to which any architectural form can be reduced. When looking at the changes that have happened to the Polish landscape, especially that of the large cities of recent decades, it is hard to escape the feeling that they are not fit for that final game of hide-and-seek. The wide, ever wider streets, designed in accordance with the ravening appetite for more space for cars, enclosed residential estates, no public access point to potable water, etc. – this is all that the architecture of the period of our small stability has to offer. It is hard to forget especially when the intellectual game with the very concept of inside and outside, interior and exterior that Gordon Matta Clark played for the 1975 Paris Biennale of Art becomes real in the picture taken by Mstislav Tchermov (AP) in Donetsk on June 1, 2015.

4. The goose game

Gänsepiel is an old board game that originated in Mediaeval Germany. Until the end of the 19th century it was one of the most popular games in the world. Sometimes the boards usually divided into 64 spaces, which allowed 2–4 players at least a quarter of an hour of leisure – were little works of art, rich in symbols and meanings. The kind used by the Templars for instance was a simulacrum of the pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostella.

But what is the link between the goose game and architecture? The answer is: board and chance. Just as in architecture, the board represents the world on a microscopic scale: regardless of the way it is presented, it has its own internal logic. It can have miserable, barely practical value and it can also be a work of art. Just as in the goose game, it all comes down to a roll of the dice and the layout of spaces. And just as in the real world, the latter is the only things that really depend on a designer. In the architectural game players can specify their own goal: whether it is the proper and original solution to a design problem, the creation of a work that will grace the pages of history books or exhibition panels, or perhaps only the interior of a filing cabinet, meeting both deadline and budget, or a paid invoice. Regardless, each and every one of us always returns to the starting point – the game of architecture never ends. It would not hurt, however, to remember the words of Jan H. G. Klabbers regarding the basic concepts of (game) design: you must always know who makes the rules, who is the player and who pays the bill [6].

Figure: Architecture game.

Rules: Each player in turn throws the dice. To start the game one must throw 6. Players move their token the number of spaces indicated by the dice. Two tokens may not occupy the same field at the same time – whenever one lands on an occupied field, that player's token goes back to the field the other came from.

Basically, the object of the game is to successfully land exactly on field 64. Along the way, many fields have special hazards or benefits for players who land on them:

inspiration [A] – a piece of good architecture is always inspiring: roll the dice again;

mobile [mobile phone] – roll the dice again: even – move to the next space marked with mobile; odd – you lose one turn;

labyrinth [toilet] – creative block, you're eating your own tail losing two turns;

death – that's not gonna work, lad... you have to start again; in the next round you subtract one of every number thrown;

concept design [09] [10] – roll the dice again: 1 or 2 – your client so full of enthusiasm accepts your first concept and signs the contract; you move to space marked as executive design (and lose two turns); 3 or 4 – your client rejects your ideas one after the other; you lose one turn; 5 – something's wrong; you lose two turns unless someone lands on this field saving your ***; 6 – it's brilliant but useless; you lock it in the sock drawer and start again;

self-promotion [17] [18] [19] – right place, right time – you're moving forward; roll the dice again;

university's call for entry [25] – roll the dice again: even – you blossom in academia, get new contacts and move to next space marked "inspiration"; odd – you lose yourself in bureaucracy buried under piles of grant applications; you're stuck until someone lands on the same field at take (push?) you out of here;

executive design [26] [27] – you lose two turns;

building permission [34] [35] – roll the dice again: 1 or 2 – only some minor corrections, you lose one turn; 3 or 4 – some significant changes required; you lose two turns; 5 or 6 – forget the building permission, go back to start; in the next round you subtract one of every number thrown;

ranking [54] – roll the dice again: 1 – no one ever notices you, you lose two turns hit by the *Weltschmerz*; 2 – you get Razzie in Architecture and start again; 3 or 4 – you're indifferent to rankings, you simply do your job; 5 – this is your time! next time you land on some messy space you're safe; 6 – this is how victory tastes like! you start again;

acceptance of work [59] – roll the dice again: 1 – you will never get through the fire audit; go back to start; in the next round you subtract one of every number thrown; 2 to 4 – you lose one turn and roll the dice again; 5 – congratulation, you can move to [64], 6 – that was simply too much! You pass [64] and go backwards to [63].

approval for use and completion [64] – you win and... start again; in the next round you add 1 to every number thrown;

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