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HEY BOYS, IT'S NO FUN! [3]  
OR  
POLISH ARCHITECTURE'S GAMES AND PLAY

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EJ, CHŁOPCY, ŹLE SIĘ BAWICIE [3]  
CZYLI  
GRY I ZABAWY POLSKIEJ ARCHITEKTURY

**A b s t r a c t**

What, if any, are the relationships between architecture and games and fun? Are games and fun identical values? Are these phenomena, when they come together, different depending on the specific cultural centres and the passage of time? In this essay the author tries to answer this question.

*Keywords: architecture, cultural space, building, game, play, fun, post-modernity*

**S t r e s z c z e n i e**

Jakie są, jeśli istnieją, związki między architekturą a grą i zabawą? Czy gra i zabawa są to wartości tożsame? Czy zjawiska te, gdy występują wspólnie, różnią się w zależności od specyfik ośrodków kulturowych i od wpływu czasu? W eseju tym autor stara się na tak ustawione pytanie odpowiedzieć.

*Słowa kluczowe: architektura, przestrzeń kulturowa, budynek, gra, zabawa, postmodernizm*

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“The Town Game” [1]

“The Town Is Not Architectural Play” [6]

Both the title of the essay and the two above titles of books written by Polish architects testify to the two terms of our interest here. Both terms may mean the same but also – more often – different things. Such a phenomenon exists in our language. We will be more interested in the differences than the similarities. In the titles quoted above a difference in context is seen – the word ‘game’ is positive or neutral while the word ‘play’ is negative.

The game is associated with something serious, both when it is a synonym for fun and when it means a system, thinking and scheduled acting – obliging, responsible, based on a strategy, principles or standards. And it lasts. As for play or fun it is different, totally opposite. The assumption is short, ad hoc improvisation treated as relaxing, with different overtones.

In my thinking and writing on the theory of architecture I have become used to treating it from the point of view of Polish conditions. In the small number of books published in Poland as well as in numerous enforced texts: scientific research (or rather so-called “scientific” – the scientific complex in architecture!), conference papers, or articles in periodicals, dominate fragmentary, ad hoc, but also abstract ways of dealing with spatial problems. Attempts meant to organize the problem in a broad context of events, treating the matter in a supposedly objective and global way are skipped, though specifically related to a culture, including custom and stemming from my own thoughts and experience, but overall critical and wishful. And the differences resulting from national or regional identity are significant indeed, for good and for bad.

The other, cardinal, aspect in my perception of the problem is what we mean by architecture. We are primarily absorbed by selected buildings, the so-called hits, preferably our own ones :- ) – incongruity – not by the entire cultural space surrounding us regardless of the quality presented. In this context of considerations the architecture in our country differs considerably, in a negative sense, from the western countries which we usually refer to and whose patterns we follow. And it is precisely its universality which should testify to the culture of a country – that is what happens. In the aspect of the relationships between architecture and games and play/fun, all the above should be taken into consideration.

The game and play/fun. The fact that the two terms were used in the considerations shows that there is no equals sign between them. Although they are sometimes used interchangeably, the principle seems to be their difference. The concept of the town game, I will repeat extending the thread, may be neutral, may be various. However, town play is perceived as a warning against something improper, wrong. Here, it is necessary to differentiate between the house and the town, which is the scale of architecture – small and large – understanding that the house is and has always been a fundamental and simple value of architecture; it is its quintessence, whereas the town is optimal and complex. Therefore, there is a basis to put the sense of the phenomenon in the form of the game and play/fun into architecture.

The town was always the consequence of a game. Echoing Ortega y Gasset’s words it came into being to create the conditions for discussion, exchange of ideas. It also had to protect itself against aggression, creating the proper conditions to carry on the fight. Thus, the rules of the game had to function in times of peace and in times of war. Hence the Greek town and its plan: a regular, geometric grid of crisscrossing lines of the streets to move, the point of the square for citizens’ meetings and the residential quarters. That is one thing. The other is the fortification of the town, its closure: the walls and the water. The Roman town benefited from the experience

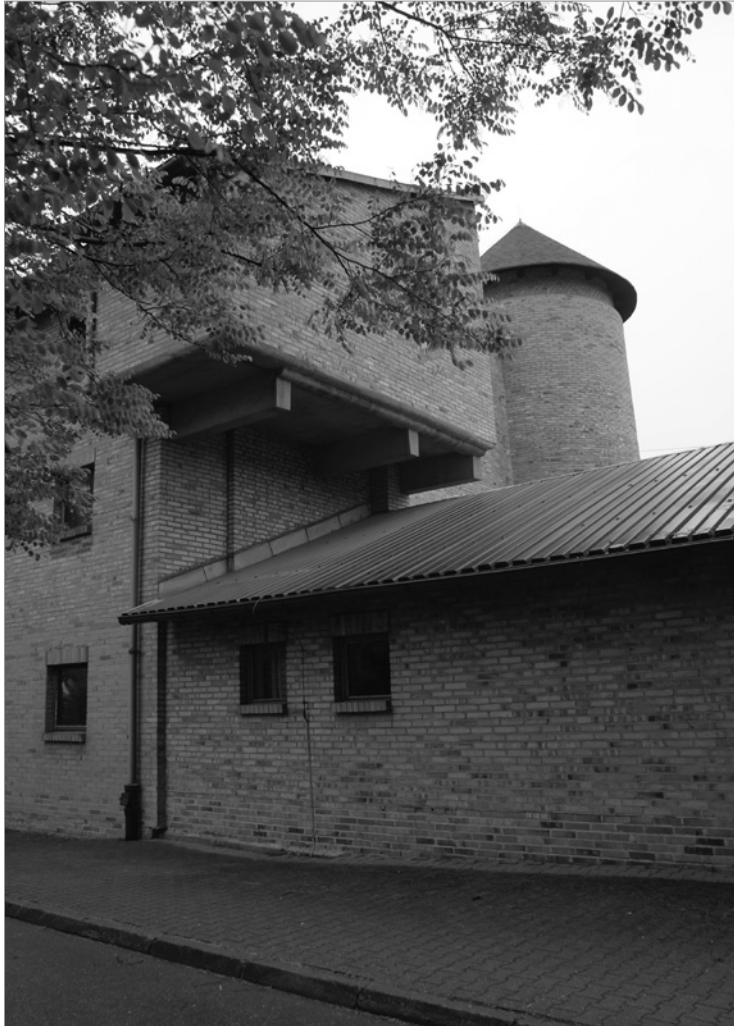
of the military camp, with the plan not changed in principle. It was not changed even a thousand years later locating towns in Central and Eastern Europe. Its fortification changed with the changes in military technology until it became redundant when the manner of fighting could manage any system of urban protection. The principle of the grid plan lasted circa two centuries longer – the Americans made use of it – as Manhattan is evidence. As a kind of *appendix* in the context of the town and war is Baron Hausmann's Paris – the star pattern of the streets with roundabouts was supposed to function effectively during the revolutionary movements, unlike the geometric grid. That meant new rules of the game.

Thus, a game in architecture, especially in its large scale, urban planning, is indeed a serious matter. Also apart from this, even in card games it is not fun. And if it is – it is in simple ones, not demanding excessive thinking – certainly not in bridge.

Well, let us go back to the architecture at the smaller scale, that is the house/building – how does fun measure here? I think that in traditional architecture deriving from the Antiquity, also the Middle Ages, it is difficult to find a place for the fun aspect. Maybe our persistent researchers, our scientific busy bees will find something :-). That is definitely a separate subject. Let us get closer to our times – modernism and postmodernism. The first one, yes this pioneering interwar and postwar, classical architecture, fundamentally serious. The principle, rigor, “from here to there” as necessary. The Charter of Athens and the new concept of the town, like previously, based on the game. No fun! Until postmodernism started – a laid-back atmosphere, freedom and fun, both phenomena are here. The 70s and 80s play with postmodern buildings – Hundertwasser's, Bofill's Marne-la-Vallee, or a larger scale like Las Vegas. The primacy goes to the Americans, whom modernism did not suit. It is worth recalling Le Corbusier's symptomatic talks with Americans during his stay in the USA. [5, p. 65–112]

What has already been said refers to the experts' thinking and acting, mainly of architects, but not only. They stop with the moment the functioning of the town, settlement, building starts. Later architecture, thus a town starts living its own life. The game is over, the fun can start. Further, the matters depend on the quality of the law, which is different depending on the tradition, the mentality of the people, the customs, distortions and myths, when the proportion of the brain and emotions varies.

What about Poland in this light; more precisely, our distinctive way of treating space. “Neither is it West nor East here” quoting a poet. It started with the Romans – they did not deign to pay us a visit. This determined the rusticity of the country, but it is its urban character which creates its culture. The town, not the village. “Villagers cannot build towns. They leave their totems of strange deities. The centre is somehow copied but the outskirts always look like a misguided hamlet.” [7, p. 250–251] The town came here one thousand years after the fall of Rome due to German colonization. Thus, it was the Germans and later also the Jews who created them. The gentry were not interested in them – it was “ugh” for them and it was they who decided about the fate of the state. The burghers did not matter as townsmen and as strangers, unwanted – xenophobia. The growing anarchy of the Polish space has its origin in its rusticity, the absence of the rigors characteristic of towns. The excess of unorganized space. The Eastern policy of the Jagiellonian dynasty even increased the problem, here we could speak about endless space, not to be controlled. They wanted to have it but did not know how to be in it. It might be thought that because our country was not engaged earlier in the crusades or religious wars there was a lack of interest in the matters that bothered Europe. It is legitimate to assess it as the consequence of the rural individualism of the gentry which,



Ill. 1. Primary school, Pszczyna, Stara Wieś, arch. B. and J. Włodarczyk,  
The inspiration by the middle age castle dansker

in spite of their ambivalent attitude to the abovementioned, also turned us away from common European interests, to our disadvantage. The absent are not right.

Wars and migrations made prescription and thus order difficult. The three Partitions of Poland with the rapid development of the West caused regress in the functioning of the country which in turn caused the decline of the cultural space. Another essential factor that intensified the mediocrity of the space was the increasing Romantic ethos of the fight against the work ethic. It is difficult to take care of our own or common space if we are not at home.



III. 2. Primary school, Pianówki, arch. B. and J. Włodarczyk, The elevation with the face

In the interwar period, the approach to architecture in Poland appeared to be a novelty. After almost three centuries of total mess in this game there were the first attempts to put order in the space – it was building Gdynia as well as the concept of Functional Warsaw, the architecture of health resorts and sport objects, yet, with total neglect of some parts, particularly those in the east. Well, there was relatively little time.

Then there was another war and another regression – *inter arma silent musae*, and also *silent leges*. Well, and then came the PRL times – the Polish People's Republic. Regardless of the overall, often tendentious, view that that time brought into our space some positive



aspects – significant and planned elements of the game: providing the needy with accommodation based on the idea of social housing estates, the moderately ordered spatial law and its derivative rights, with the enclaves of anarchy in individual building left to those interested without any participation from the state.

Finally, the last quarter of the century. A still immature democracy, and the primitive and rough form of capitalism plus postmodernism (it is worth giving a thought to whether it was not the Poles who invented it a long time ago :-)) with the lack of the elements of the game led to and fixed the spatial mess and total waste of the cultural space. Its excessive privacy and the lack of the game factor mean that we deal with something like bad play. Private interests which, without adequate perception of the space in society and total freedom and absence of applicable law, created the view of the countryside as can be seen today.

The problems of the surrounding space should not, must not, be separated from the socio-political sphere of the country – architecture is not an autonomous value, of itself. This space of ours is a reflection of this very sphere. There is no sensible game, we play with current problems which we quickly get bored with – leaving them unsolved – and then we switch to others and on it goes. Such fun! Therefore, I will conclude with the ending of a poem

... “for you it is fun, for us it is life”. [3]

And at the end – a bit of optimism. The architect’s job can be also seen as pleasure and fun. At least that is how I understand it. It is fun, permanent :-)

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