

CITY SENSORICS. BETWEEN THE ANIMATE AND THE GENIUS LOCI

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*"...Any building for humane purposes should be an elemental, sympathetic feature of the ground, complementary to its nature-environment, belonging by kinship to the terrain..."*¹

This brief motto is a clear definition of the *organic architecture* that Frank Lloyd Wright included in his divagations on the substance of architecture; yet it may also be a poetic explanation of *genius loci*.

Wright presented his opinions for the first time in a series of lectures given in the spring of 1930 at Princeton University and subsequently published in a book entitled "Modern Architecture. Being the Khan Lectures." The last, sixth lecture was entitled "The City" and constituted an anti-manifesto for the vision of a contemporary city presented by Le Corbusier in a project entitled "Città per Tre Milioni d'Abitanti." The title of one of Wright's earlier lectures, "The Tyranny of the Skyscraper", has already shown his negative attitude to the concept of a "soulless" house designed as a machine for living, multiplied in the great urban mega-structures that looked like "blocks shining in the sun."

The text of Wright's lectures is not written in an easy language and requires careful reading and possibly even closer familiarity with the Master's character, who is perceived by his biographers as "an arrogant celebrity, a charismatic genius and an ardent critic of his colleagues." The text is characterized by deeply running emotions and at times even pathos, which calls for a thorough and careful analysis and definitely makes it a hard reading.

In the very first sentences of the lecture about the City, Wright leaves no doubts by saying: "I believe the city, as we know it today, is to die"², yet the annihilation of the city created by the Machine may be – for our modern civilization – a benefit and the greatest service rendered by the Machine to Man, because "The city is itself only Man-the-Machine – the deadly shadow of the Sentient Man."³

After all, Wright does not prophesy a complete fall of cities; what is more, he does not see such necessity; however, he sees the *necessity* of transformation of the hitherto model of the city, demanding its utility, sensibility, relation to the specific area (*genius loci*) and appropriateness to

¹ F. L. Wright, "Modern Architecture. Being the Khan Lectures", Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2016.

² F. L. Wright, op. cit. p. 243.

³ F. L. Wright, op. cit. p. 244.

the specific time in which we live (*genius saeculi*). Neither does he try to eliminate the Machine, but warning against its uncontrolled domination over Man, he sees the possibility of its rational use by Man.

Wright's opinion on this issue is clear: "Only when the city becomes purely and simply utilitarian, will it have the order that is beauty, and the simplicity which the Machine, in competent hands, may well render as human benefit"⁴; a bit further, he clarifies that this is about the City of the near future which is the place of self-fulfillment of Man and his needs and whose core consisting in "the necessity for artistry that is laid upon us by the desire to be civilized, is not matter only of appearances. Human necessity, however Machine-made or mechanically-met, carries within itself the secret of the beauty we must have to keep us fit to live or to live with. We need it to live in or to live on. That new beauty should be something **to live for**."⁵ (emphasis by the authors).

Wright notices that in the past, the structure of a city resulted from specific social demands – necessities that keep changing in the course of time. Today, Man has different needs, so a completely different and new model of the city is necessary. Rejecting the old one, no longer useful model of the city, Wright ostensibly discards the tradition and, more specifically, the type of tradition he calls *customary*, i.e. the attitude to the past that is devoid of reflection and characterized by absence of a reliable analysis of mechanisms governing the construction of the city, quoting ancient sages: "Except as you, Sons-of-Earth, honor your birthright and cherish it well by human endeavor, you shall be cut down and perish in darkness... Keep all close to Earth, your feet upon the Earth, your hands employed in the fruitfulness thereof be your vision never so far, and on high."⁶

According to Wright, the sense of an organic city consists in application of a slightly modified Vitruvian triad: *utilitas*, *venustas* and *firmitas*, where *firmitas* (durability) was replaced by simplicity. Yet even Plato clarified simplicity as a condition for durability.

In this place, it is worth reaching to the Polish classic in the discipline: the ideas of Tadeusz Tołwiński, who had no doubts that searching "for the shape of the city with respect to its structure and form requires familiarity with the old cities, on account of two reasons. First of all, a European city, and in particular a Polish city in the 20th century follows, in a greater or lesser degree, the example of an old city and constitutes a further **link in the evolution** of an urban product of bygone epochs. Secondly, only historical studies reaching to the periods of city establishment lead, in a planned and harmonious manner, to discovery of factors which, throughout the ages, created cities that were almost perfect in their urban organization and form."⁷ Tołwiński puts forward a clear hypothesis that shaping a city, i.e. constructing, transforming and reconstructing it, is a continuous process taking place as part of the evolution which the human existential space undergoes "anew and differently"⁸ on an ongoing basis.⁹

⁴ F. L. Wright, op. cit.: p. 253.

⁵ F. L. Wright, op. cit.: p. 259.

⁶ F. L. Wright, op. cit.: p. 251.....

⁷ T. Tołwiński, *Urbanistyka*, vol. I - Budowa miasta w przeszłości, published by Trzaska, Ewert, Michalski, Warsaw 1948.

⁸ M. Porębski, *Ikonosfera*, PIW, Warsaw 1972.

⁹ M. Porębski, op. cit.: considers architecture, urban and spatial planning *creative technologies* which use the "space surrounding man, its divisions and curiosities, both natural and resulting from civilization that has been developed for millennia" as its material, cf. also Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* – Polish edition: "Bycie, Przestrzeń, Architektura", Wydawnictwo Murator, Warsaw 2000, where the term "existential space" is defined, cf. also A. Kadłuczka, *Conservatio est continua creatio – czyli doktryna ochrony dziedzictwa jako komponentu przestrzeni*

What is more, Tolwiński's ideas specify features that a city should possess in order to make sense, i.e. *genius loci* and *genius saeculi*. But what does it mean that a city has its *genius loci*, its protective spirit? *Genius loci* is something that is perceptible, even though difficult to define, "something" that makes us go back to a place willingly, that makes us identify with a given location and remember images generated in such place, as well as refer them specifically and exclusively to this place and not to any other.

Christian Norberg-Schulz tries to find answers to these questions by clarifying that *genius loci* means a place where the existential space has a separate, exceptional and specific character. Norberg-Schulz claims that since the ancient times, *genius loci* has been identified with reality forming a part of the space where man can feel fully autonomous, i.e. be capable of individual pursuance of own daily needs.¹⁰

In his dissertation, "Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture", Norberg-Schulz differentiates three areas on the basis of which he assesses the originality and the uniqueness of a city and its sensory structure. These are: the *phenomenon of the place*, the *structure of the place* and the *spirit of the place*.

According to Norberg-Schulz, the phenomenon of the place is a feature that cannot be defined via intellectual analysis and determined on the basis of classically abstracted "scientific concept"¹¹, due to the fact that it requires phenomenological thinking and description of "things as they are." The phenomenon of the place cannot be described without Heidegger's ontological examination of *being* and the *existence* of such *being*.

On the other hand, the structure of the place is a feature that has a material dimension, referring to the manner of forming and constructing space. Therefore, the structure may have the form of a region, landscape, a housing estate, a city or a complex of buildings. It consists of specific "items" encountered by the observer in every-day life.¹² However, the structure is dynamic; it may change and it sometimes changes very rapidly. Nevertheless, Norberg-Schulz claims that such changes do not have to entail loss of the value which is called *genius loci*; on the contrary, many places preserve their characteristic identity in spite of changes, whereas the stability and durability of *genius loci* are conditions necessary for maintenance of *human life*.¹³

Eventually, there is *genius loci* – the spirit of the place. This is the problem to which Norberg-Schulz dedicated an extensive dissertation. In this place, it is worth stressing together with the author that the ancient Roman concept of *genius loci* assumes existence of a protective spirit

egzystencjonalnej, in: Wiadomości Konserwatorskie 14/2015; the author – by referring to Ch. Norberg-Schulz, introduces the term "existential space" to the modern doctrine of heritage protection: "...preservation... of monuments which are a part of our existential space requires a new concept of protection of cultural heritage consisting in "transformation management" of man's existential sphere and all of its ingredients and thence on identification and interpretation of such ingredients (monuments) and subsequent construction of creative development concepts, designing the manner of implementing them and conducting organisational and administrative activities to preserve them ..." p. 72-75.

¹⁰ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture* ... p. 5, "First of all I owe to Heidegger the concept of *dwelling*. "Existential foothold" and "dwelling" are synonyms, and "dwelling", in an existential sense, is the purpose of architecture ... Dwelling therefore implies something more than "shelter". It implies that the spaces where life occurs are *places*, in the true sense of the word ... Architecture means to visualize the *genius loci*, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell."

¹¹ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, op. cit.; p. 8.

¹² Ch. Norberg-Schulz, op. cit.; p. 15.

¹³ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, op. cit.; s. 18

that accompanies people and places from birth to death and determines their character and substance.¹⁴

This description of *genius loci* is fully compliant with the earlier concept of existential space proposed by Norberg-Schulz¹⁵, which is formulated in architecture which is, in turn, spatial and material “visualization” of the immaterial spirit of the place that has an attractive spatial form and is equipped with perfectly shaped utilitarian values.

These features make up the basic image of the city which Kevin Lynch calls “The Image of the City” and Porębski “Iconosphere”; this term stretches the frames of the image beyond the “point” which the city forms in this very image of existential space.

If it is to be assumed that a city is a spot or a point on the surface of a painting, like a transport and information node, an open composition, a hybrid that is ready for changes, then it forfeits its material significance. It starts to function as a living work of art, an experience and an experiment. The game in which it takes part¹⁶ resembles the act of creation, motion solidified in time and space, which is the source of all changes. The city has a procedure-like character, not only as an urban and architectural layout, but also a cultural one; it manifests the power of unlimited possibilities of expansion, ambiguity of expression and multi-layered semantics.

Modern visual activities in the space of cities are always used to express some idea, which has been shaped already at the stage of the process of creation and which utilizes matter to express this idea, being a completely new and free artistic language. The context of the place, the sensorics of space and the recipient’s interpretation become the co-authors of such activities. All of this creates a unique composition of meanings, a sphere of inter-penetrating images, man’s visual environment. The term “iconosphere” was explained in the 1970’s by Mieczysław Porębski, a historian, art theoretician and critic, an outstanding persona in the modern Polish humanities. He drew attention to its liquidity, openness and kaleidoscopic character. The changing character and the growing intensity of “iconosphere” depends on the growing needs of the modern man, displayed via modern social communication means.¹⁷ “Iconosphere consists of facts, facts of appearance of images. It includes images either created in front of our eyes or the ones that came into being earlier. There are also images – constellations shining in the sky – from which we are separated by millions of light years. There are also images that appeared on the walls of prehistoric caves several or several dozen thousands of years ago, initiating an incessant sequence of creative deeds, thoughts and human imagination. There are images brought to us by every moment: the hum, the light signals, the shadows and the colors that attack us all the time. There are also images about which we remember and which we talk about, which nevertheless have not crossed the threshold separating our inner world from the world of our dreams and hallucinations.”¹⁸ The iconosphere understood in this manner goes beyond the historical and traditional understanding of the term, due to the fact that it describes the modern, multi-layered *sensorics* of a place.

¹⁴ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, op. cit.; s. 18

¹⁵ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* ... cf. also op. cit. p. 5; “Existential space is not only a logico-mathematical term, but comprises the basic relationship between man and his environment.”

¹⁶ H. G. Gadamer, *Aktualność piękna*, Wydawnictwo Oficyna Naukowa, Warsaw 1993.

¹⁷ idem, *Sztuka site-specific i jej awangardowe rozwiązania w przestrzeni kulturowej miasta historycznego*, Czasopismo Techniczne, Kraków 2015, p. 2-3.

¹⁸ M. Porębski, *Ikonosfera*, Warsaw 1972, p. 271.

The sense of the city, i.e. its sensorics, means a set of its features received by the system of human receptors belonging to the user of the city, its resident, in the realm of five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch, containing various information about the space surrounding him and transferred to the central nervous system: the human brain, where the impulses are received, processed and generated, eventually resulting in interpretation of such features and reactions to them. Obviously, the reactions may be greatly diversified, depending on the number of factors and not only the rapidly changing phenomena, e.g. the sound of engines of a passing plane or the hum of vehicular traffic on a highway which, causing an immediate reaction, may be leveled by other impressions caused by the same phenomenon, e.g. the charm of the place where they are experienced: the beautiful landscape surrounding the observer or fascination by the dynamics of motion caused by the moving trail of vehicles.

A changing reception of the values of the area may also be conditioned by varying esthetic or organic sensitivity of the observer. For example, dilapidated walls of Venetian houses will be seen by some as an esthetic condition outclassing the observed facility, whereas by others as romantic beauty of old architecture, shaped by nature, with "Ruskin-type" patina on the structural material testifying to its age. The sight and the odor of Venetian canals will be perceived by some as an important element of what is called "genius loci" – the phenomenon resulting from combination of defense features of nature (i.e. Venetian lagoon) with the needs of safe location, difficult access facilitating maintenance of independence; for others, it will only be related to the problem of organic allergy, a dirty place failing to satisfy basic sanitary conditions. Changing perception of the values of the surrounding area may also refer to the basic concepts in shaping the development of a historical city, taking into account *continuity* postulated by Tołwiński and Wright's imperative of *heritage care*. Neither Gadamer, who was looking for the *modus vivendi* between the "old" and the "new", nor Gombrich, who noticed the paradox of avant-garde movements which, in the course of time, lose their avant-garde features, were able to settle the dispute concerning the substance of *continuity* and *heritage care*. In this context, the thesis of Norberg-Schulz about slight sensitivity of *genius loci* to changes and "the new" in the existential space seems to be justified.

Avant-garde art, present in the cultural space of cities, is characterized by media independency and it escapes traditional conventions; it is "unpredictable." Assuming an autonomous stance, it becomes a multi-media communication raised to the rank of a work of art, a piece of information emphasizing the substance of relation with space and the recipient's active stance.

*"My desire is to set up a situation to which I take you and let you see. It becomes your experience."*¹⁹

Referring to the words of James Turrell, eminent American artist who focused on the phenomenon of light and space in his works, it is possible to risk such emotional statement regarding vision and the shape of the city as follows: it is the symbol of "the folly of human dreams."²⁰ By representing the manner and the style of life of its residents, the city shows the potential attitude of man to the world; this man is a creative being and without his skills,

¹⁹ <http://rodencrater.com/about/>; 05.04.2016.

²⁰ T. Sławek, *Miasto. Próba zrozumienia* [in:] *Miasto w sztuce – sztuka miasta*, E. Rewers (ed.), Kraków 2010, p. 17-69.

potential, desires, longing and passion, there would be no such thing that is called landscape, *unus mundus*, i.e. the entire sphere of imagery in the public space.

The term *unus mundus* (Latin: one world) is used here on purpose; this term was used in the 19th century by Swiss psychiatrist, psychologist, scientist and artist, Carl Gustav Jung. This term was used interchangeably with others, such as: *unio mystica*, *coincidentia oppositorum*, *complexio oppositorum*, *coniunctio*, which denoted an *image* offered *a priori*; an image that has occupied a significant place in the history of development of the human spirit since time immemorial.²¹

The image itself, the world-image, the land-image, the city-image, the image of man in the image of the world, etc. as well as the term "image" refers to the condition of the entire complex and heterogeneous organism such as the city, which is self-fulfilled in its *multi-appearance*.²² It is not accidental that the above-mentioned term *unus mundus* is closely juxtaposed with the term *genius loci* (in Latin: protective spirit of a given place).²³

The phenomenon that is common for them is the spirit, the aura, the atmosphere or the poetics of a place. All these terms refer to the most sensitive and the most complex city spaces, i.e. the city's identity and tradition, thereby denoting material and intangible values.

The aspects above, contained in signs, symbols, forms and images infused with meanings, may become a part of *artistic revitalization*²⁴, which is aimed at eliminating the city as the ANIMATE, increasing the rank of neutral, abandoned and forgotten places and offering a possibility of restoring their lost meanings, balance and form referring to the character of the place where the society recognizes its culture, i.e. recognizes the sense of the GENIUS LOCI city.

²¹ C. G. Jung, *O istocie psychiczności*, Warsaw 2007, letter of 7 May 1956.; idem, *Problem typu w dziejach ducha starożytności i średniowiecza* [in:] *Rebis, czyli kamień filozofów*, Warsaw 1989, p. 53 - 54.

²² T. Sławek, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²³ Z. Kubiak, *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian*, Warsaw 2003, p. 544.

²⁴ K. Kołodziejczyk, *Projekt Space Fillers. Sztuka instalacji w przestrzeni publicznej jako konfrontacja współczesnych działań wizualnych z architekturą historyczną* [in:] *Historia i współczesność w architekturze i urbanistyce*, vol. 2, chapter in monographic study 466, Cracow University of Technology 2014, p. 105.