THE LOST SPACE - ON THE BLURRY BOUNDARIES OF URBANITY

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Abstract

The boundaries of the modern city are defined by administrative divisions – boards informing about the lines created artificially on a map and not by physical "barriers" – walls, gates, frontages. At the same time, dynamic urbanization of suburbs takes a spontaneous and often chaotic nature which satisfies the immediate needs of today's generation. This is often done without any reflection on the future order and shape of urban spaces. These are the lost spaces where the essence of urbanity has been eliminated – i.e. a clear hierarchy of public interiors which the local community is organized around and which the accepted forms of private buildings have been subordinated to. Numerous, often radical voices and opinions meaning to improve the *status quo* appear among contemporary and renowned artists. The article attempts to provide a synthesis of a certain range of issues related to the blurring of urban boundaries' readability and the need to return to the distinctive definition of today's urban structures and spaces.

Horizontal and vertical forms of overexpansion of the development in modern urban structures

The development of today's cities is accompanied by urban processes which, not fully regulated, conduce to the sprawl of spatially disordered suburbs. The progressive urban sprawl and constant, economically driven, migratory propensity of people from agricultural areas as well as the influx of people from smaller towns to large and rapidly growing urban centres has eventually led to the emergence of clearly visible forms of urban overexpansion. This is noted by Léon Krier – known for his criticism of modernist ideology, an advocate of *New Urbanism*. In *The Architecture of Community* he indicates the two basic forms of hypertrophy of urban structures: *"1) Urban centres tend to overexpand vertically. This phenomenon leads to an excessive density of buildings, activities and users, which in turn results in an explosion of land values and rents. 2) Suburban peripheries are overexpanding horizontally, driven outward by the low cost of land, resulting in very densities of buildings, uses and activities. These two forms*

of hypertrophy condition each other. The resulting functional problems are interdependent and cannot be solved in isolation[1]. This linkage between the tendency of city centres towards vertical forms of development and horizontally expanding suburbs results from economic diktat, reflecting the prevailing socio-economic and globalization relations, which ultimately leads to spatial pathology and obliteration of the essence of classically defined urbanity. While the phenomenon is more readily adjusted in terms of planning in inner-city areas, or in the case of the revitalisation of post-industrial areas, suburbs seem to develop more on the basis of spontaneous investment activities, usually based on a small, individual capital. This leads to the blurring of spatial readability of city boundaries, creating areas of urban-rural fringe development. These areas have been deprived of the development typical of the traditionally defined typology of the urban tissue, creating a kind of caricature – of "neither a city nor a village". The modern state of suburban development is frequently considered to be incapable of creating the values typical of urban space. It can be perceived as the lost space for the formation of the continuity of existing city structures. The urban boundary is of administrative dimension here (i.e. signs and information boards) and does not have a real spatial context resulting from the clear continuity of the urban tissue expansion. Striving for a balance between the periphery and the centre should be based on the principle of polycentric spatial policy which normally requires regulations in the field of property rights. According to Krier: "*The urban economy will no longer grow by expansion into the surrounding countryside or the overdevelopment of historic centres, but by the redevelopment, maturating, opening up, completion, and internal growth of the suburbs*"[2]. The architect perceives a contemporary form of the suburban overexpansion as a kind of parasite on a healthy urban body. A number of the views presented by Krier, calling for a return to the traditional understanding of architecture and urban planning, faces criticism, mainly among the contemporary artistic circles who declare themselves successors of the twentieth century modernist thought. Nevertheless, his thinking is gradually winning more and more supporters and physical reflections in implementations (e.g. Poundbury in England, Cayala in Guatemala).

The significance of the housing expansion in the process of blurring urban boundaries

Contrary to the demands calling for the crucial adherence to the traditional urban and architectural patterns proclaimed by Krier, a significant part of modern suburbs develops around larger cities or metropolis in the manner which is a consequence of the lack of clear plans for further development. This state defies urban regulations empowered in local law that would allow for the creation of the development which could create a semblance of urban space – a square, a street with frontages or a courtyard. Such suburbs are usually characterized by loose and chaotic housing development – mainly single-family, less often terraced or multi-family one with low intensity factor, based on property right strongly exhibited in the architectural expression. Blurring of urban boundary occurs in the ultimate spatial effect due to the lack of

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[1] Krier, Leon. *Architektura wspólnoty*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011, p. 99.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

clear, specific guidelines having citygenic consequences for the organization of private investment development. Suburban development has become an unnatural urban form of private housing development, giving urbanites the opportunity to escape more and more burdensome contemporary urbanity. In *A Pattern Language* even states that: *"The suburb is an obsolete and contradictory form of human settlement"*[3]. He justifies this with the fact that: *"Many people want to live in the country; and they also want to be close to a large city. But it is geometrically impossibly to have thousands of small farms, within a few minutes of a major city centre"*[4]. The essence of understanding the problem of excessive growth suburban development lies in the need to shape properly understood housing environment and human life. As early as in the mid-twentieth century Walter Gropius – the founder of Bauhaus – made certain observations in this field in his *Scope of Total Architecture*. Trying to figure out the essence of the ideal housing, he point out to a particular internal conflict existing in human nature. It consists in meeting basic needs both in urban and rural environment. He writes: "*Violently conflicting opinions concerning the ideal type of housing persist: the root of the controversy is the old antithesis of city versus country. Man requires contrasts for stimulation and relaxation, and the urbanite's longing for the country as well as the country dweller's longing for the city are elementary drives constantly in need of satisfaction"*[5]. Gropius stressed that with the advent of progressing development, both of these needs are met by alleviating mutual differences (*"by bringing the comforts of the city to the country and returning the charms of nature to the city"*[6]). Gropius's observations, referring to the psychological background of the dispute about the nature of the ideal form of housing, allow one to understand that the growth of the suburbs and the character of their development stems not only from the purely economic reason in choosing the place of residence, but above all because of the compromise allowing one to live in close proximity to nature, but also to remain close to urban structures and make use of their facilities. The state of modern suburban development is the result of human expectations and aspirations embedded in the   framework of economic possibilities. This promotes the development of architecture which is often referred to as suburban. The authors of the publication *Learning from Las Vegas* – R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour – describing among others the phenomenon of the so called peri-urbanisation (also referred to as *urban sprawl* – i.e. dispersive urban development spread), emphasise that: *"Many people like suburbia. (…) Most suburbanites reject the limited formal vocabularies architects' values promote, or accept them 20 years later modified by the tract builder: The Usonian house becomes the ranch house. Only the very poor, via public housing, are dominated by architects' values. Developers build for markets rather than for Man and probably do less harm than authoritarian architects would do if they had the developers' power"*[7].

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[3] Alexander, Christopher. *Język wzorców*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2008, p. 30.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] Gropius, Walter. *Pełnia architektury*. Kraków: Karakter, 2014, p. 159.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.
[7] Venturi, Robert; Scott Brown, Denise; Izenour, Steven. *Uczyć się od Las Vegas.* Kraków: Karakter, 2013, p. 206.

Sources of suburban decline – lost urban spaces

The sources of pathology in the current state of urban development can be traced down to planning trends that were established in the second half of the twentieth century. Their development was closely rooted in the progressive currents of Modernism aimed at rejection of compact development, and thus abandoning classically defined city and urban space in favour of the worship of a single-unit buildings or buildings-monuments located in open space. At the time this process served for a good cause – it was to be a response to the overly dense development known from the period of industrial development of the nineteenth and early twentieth century which had created unfavourable conditions for the housing environment for decades. The aim of the spatial revolution was to – as emphasized by Gropius: "*deconcentrate, not to dissolve the city*"[8]. The consequence of the quest for new solutions for urban space was the implementation of development models non-existent before in history. The traditionally conceived space of compact urban districts became displaced by the models of the so-called "housing estate development". The continuity of the development structures making up urban space was replaced with the compositional juxtaposition of buildings in open space. This gave rise to a process of blurring the boundaries of traditionally regarded districts, and thus the essence of urbanity. New orders abandoning the past and historically established continuity of the development of urban structures, progressive ideas of CIAM, and Le Corbusier's "three essential joys of urbanism": sun, space, and greenery, relatively quickly turned out not to be an entirely successful experiment that was never fully accepted in the general public perception. Nostalgia for the traditionally conceived city, elements of identification and transfer of social relations to the new forms of development and housing failed. Charles Jencks points to the demolition of part of the housing development Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis from 1972 (designed by Minoru Yamasaki, 1952-55) as a meaningful symbol of this failure. Here he sees the moment of the fall of sterilely rational, modernist concept of architecture and the new ways of shaping the development of the modern city[9]. In turn, the author of *Cities for People,* Jan Gehl sees the reluctance to modernist principles of shaping urban space common among people in that they have reduced the possibility of creating a kind of friendly environment to establish relationships and to build the correct principles of social coexistence. Gehl indicates the reason for this state of affairs, writing: "*Modernists rejected the city and city space, shifting their focus to individual buildings. This ideology became dominant by 1960, and its principles continue to affect the planning of many new urban areas. If a team of planners was asked to radically reduce the life between buildings, they could not find a more effective method than using modernist planning principles*"[10]. These principles were guidelines for the creation of regulations that often became the deciding factor determining the nature of urban but also architectural solutions. Urban space and the architecture that created it began to be governed with parameters, coefficients, meters and not proportions, line segments, composition or appropriate scale. Not only does the effect of blurring the urban space occur on the expansively growing suburbs, but it is also visible within the newly implemented residential areas where new building complexes that are not

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[8] Gropius, Walter. *Op. cit.,* p. 174.
[9] Jencks, Charles. *Architektura postmodernistyczna*. Warszawa: Arkady, 1987, p. 9.
[10] Gehl, Jan. *Miasta dla ludzi*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo RAM, 2010, p. 4.

related to each other in a consistent and logical whole arise according to investors' economic diktats. This space can also be considered to be lost due to the fact that it sets and reinforces the apparent way of development which one calls the "city" for the next few decades. Such a substitute of the "city" has lost its raison d'être as the plan presenting the continuity of the development structures has been rejected – the fundamental element of urban design. This is pointed out by Rem Koolhaas who claims that: "*What has finally killed urbanism is not the fact that so many people made so many desperate mistakes, but fact that very few of the processes and operations that take place today can take place in the form of a plan, the classic product of urbanism*"[11].

Suburban landscape – the crisis of defining the rural-urban fringe

On Polish soil there is a particularly visible phenomenon of "suburbanisation" of rural and agricultural areas around the growing urban agglomerations. This process has been commonly called the "residentialisation" of the countryside. This phenomenon encompasses the transfer of urban forms of development but also urban amenities and standards as well as the urban model of life to rural areas[12]. Expansive suburban sprawl encourages, in turn, "indigenous" urbanites to move to the peripheries, away from the urban hustle and bustle and the hypertrophy of downtown development. This would confirm the above-quoted Gropius's prophetic observation of *"bringing the comforts of the city to the country and returning the charms of nature to the city"* as well as the issue of constant need to satisfy two starkly contrasting "instincts" deeply rooted in the human psyche, related to human habitat: *"the urbanite's longing for the country as well as the country dweller's longing for the city"*[13]. Thus, being a result of aggressive expansion and hypertrophy of the surrounding urban structures, the process of "residentialisation" of the countryside leads to the blurring of the so called "townscape" which since the 50s and 60s of the twentieth century has become as important as the natural or cultural landscape of the country for a small number of conservative architectural and urban planning circles. For such figures as Gordon Cullen, explanation of the idea behind the "townscape" in publications from 1961 entitled *"Townscape"* and *"The Concise Townscape"* or in the articles published in "*Architectural Review*" was a kind of reflection and dissenting voice of some of these circles against new doctrines derived from modernist trends related to the ways of shaping cities. According to Philip Wilkinson: "*The rich variety of cities that had grown organically, with their seemingly random mix of large and small, old and new buildings, entranced Cullen. And he was convinced that when others understood it, they would be entranced, too—the traditional organic city was for him an immense source of sheer visual pleasure. The opposite of this was what Cullen called "Prairie planning": the same house design repeated endlessly against a background of uniformly wide streets, dull street furniture and featureless, unfenced gardens*"[14].

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[11] [Quoted after:] Miessen, Markus. *Koszmar partycypacji*, Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2013, p. 87.
[12] These issues were addressed in the assumptions of III Region-City-Country Conference whose theme was the question: "In the countryside, which is where?" The conference organised by the Department of Urban and Spatial Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Silesian University of Technology in 2016. [retrieved at: http://konferencje.polsl.pl/rmw/default.aspx].
[13] Gropius, Walter. *Op. cit.,* p. 159.
[14] Wilkinson, Philip. *50 teorii architektury, które powinieneś znać*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2011, p. 179.

The current absorption of a growing number of new rural areas around the developing agglomerations and the consequence of their development in a way that has neither the connotation of the cultural code of urban space nor the rural character of the forms of rural housing does not allow for identification and classification of this kind of action as building the continuity of the idea behind "townscape" as defined by Cullen. Blurred, incapable of creating the visual message of space, the rural-urban fringe can be thus considered to be the lost space in the context of the lack of opportunity to form a clear image of a townscape.

The aspect of scale in shaping urban space

Rem Koolhaas claims that: "*Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture*"[15]. His term *"Junkspace",* reflecting the character of modern urban space, has gone down in history as criticism of today's architectural and urban planning actions. He writes: "*Junkspace is the sum total of our current architecture: we have built more than all previous history together, but we hardly register on the same scale. We do not leave pyramids. According to the new gospel of ugliness, there is already more Junkspace under construction in the twenty-first century than has survived from the twentieth... It was a mistake to invent modern architecture for the twentieth century*"[16]. Expansively sprawling cities almost always "live and breathe" their historic centres, which have a clearly defined spatial plan – urban planning. Here blurring of the urban boundaries takes place through thinking about architecture as an autonomous structure, as if effectively connected to the city's infrastructure. The context is omitted; it does not create a consistent continuity of the space between the complexes of interconnected buildings. More and more often the city is defined by a group of detached buildings competing for the first place in the creation of an architectural event. Thus the space created between the buildings-icons may be considered the lost space which defines the visual context of individual buildings and not the context of the place created with their participation. *Genius loci* – the mythical spirit of the place did not extend its care to such heritage of contemporary times. Questions about the future of cities remain. Isn't the re-evaluation of the principles of shaping space, based on human friendly scale known from traditional European cities, the beginning of the collapse of urban culture? In his theoretical considerations, Koolhaas refers to the problem of Bigness perceived as the problem of size or rather (according to Charles Jencks) the absence of a theory of Bigness which he considers architecture's most debilitating weakness[17]. In *"S, M, L, XL"* Koolhaas states that: "*Bigness no longer needs the city; it competes with the city; it represents the city; it pre-empts the city; or better still, it is the city. If urbanism generated potential and architecture exploits it, Bigness enlists the generosity of urbanism against the meanness of architecture. Bigness = urbanism vs. architecture*"[18]. The issue of Bigness typically refers to overexpansion of city centres developed within the twentieth century city structures as well as at the turn of the century and which continue to this day. They are based on economic locational diktat of a profit-driven investment to which technical and

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[15] Jencks, Charles; Kropf, Karl. *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*. Warszawa: Grupa Sztuka Architektury, 2013, p. 342.
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 407-408.
[17] Ibid., p. 344.
[18] Ibid., p. 347.

aesthetic properties of architecture are conformed. The essence of defining urban boundaries is also becoming a matter of scale. Its skilful use is the art conditioning urban planning actions based on a sense of appropriateness, proportion, directions as well as on building a friendly atmosphere for man's living and functioning in the public space. Extreme overexpansion, both vertical in the case of urban centres and horizontal in the case of suburbs, can ultimately lead to the effect of obliteration of the sense of urbanity. Not defining the space of the city, undertaking actions which blur its boundaries, one is abandoning the essence and identity of the city – killing its *Genius loci*.

The essence of the city – determinants of urban space

In "*Life Between Buildings",* Jan Gehl addresses the issues of large, medium and small scale in spatial planning and cross-correlation between the distinguished scales. Departure from the loosely built-up suburbs and return to the principle of building urban space with a traditionally conceived layout and hierarchy of streets and squares is a way to stop the effect of blurring the boundaries of urbanity. As pointed out by Gehl: *"In the entire history of human settlement, streets and squares have been the basic elements around which cities were organized. History has proved the virtue of these elements to such a degree that, for most people, streets and squares constitute the very essence of the phenomenon "city." This simple relationship and the logical use of street and squares – streets based on the linear pattern of human movement and squares – based on the eye's ability to survey an area – have in recent years again been taken up"*[19]*.* Gehl also refers to the principle of the development of cities based on a system of streets and squares. Their differentiated structure can be occasionally found in the newly designed suburban areas or functionalist building projects, with the difference that it is in a *"diluted and spread-out"* fashion. The so-called "streets" have become roads, and the so-called "squares" have become nondescript areas of open spatial character, devoid of human dimension and people's desire to stay there. An urban layout, insufficiently defined by the density of development, can also become a kind of lost space, although it was shaped on the traditional grid of hierarchised streets and squares. The process of blurring the boundaries of urbanity is closely linked with the way space is assembled by introducing the principle of continuous building line – the framework for urbanity. One of the main tasks for today's urban districts is to return to walking and cycling. The introduction of pedestrian routes and reducing car traffic fosters building cities according to the old rules of planning, which restores the subjectivity of urban interpersonal relationships. In Europe, such activities started in Copenhagen already in the 60s of the twentieth century. It was soon realized that the reduction of traffic is in many cases a factor which stimulates the attractiveness of urban spaces. One of the primary factors contributing to blurring of the urban boundaries is the introduction of excessive availability of traffic to urban structures. Finding the compromise between non-intrusive vehicle traffic and pedestrian areas (promenades, plazas, squares) seems to be a key way for the formation of modern, human-friendly urban spaces today. In *"Cities for People"*, Jan Gehl indicates the uniqueness of Venice which was designed as a city for pedestrians throughout the whole period

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[19] Gehl, Jan. *Życie między budynkami*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo RAM, 2009, p. 89.

of its existence. According to him: *"Venice [is] of particular interest today as the model for working with the human dimension. Venice has everything: dense city structure, short walking distances, beautiful courses of space high degree of mixed use, active ground floors, distinguished architecture and carefully designed details – and all on a human scale. For centuries Venice has offered a sophisticated framework for city life and continues to do so, issuing a whole-hearted invitation to walk"*[20]*.* For many architects and urban planners Venetian model of the city has become field of research in pursuit of the essence of urbanity. It is especially visible in Leon Krier's theoretical considerations on traditional architecture and urban planning and among Rob Krier's development of some of the districts in Berlin. Stopping the process of blurring urban boundaries can effectively occur when one manages to create a city defined as a set of mature autonomous districts remaining in mutual spatial relationships – i.e. striving to create the so-called polycentric city. An advocate of such a method of developing urban structures – Leon Krier – claims that: *"The basic module of a polycentric city is an autonomous district conceived as a city within a city"*[21]*.*

Conclusions

Transformations that have taken place under the influence of twentieth-century doctrines derived from modernist trends, focused on the search for new models of development and ways of spatial organization of cities, eventually led to the departure from the traditionally understood and historically established urban planning of the city. These processes imposed on the progressive phenomenon of globalization and the migration of population from rural to urban areas have become the cause of an unprecedented form of overexpansion of urban structures. In addition to stacking the development of city centres upward, there has appeared not fully controlled planning phenomenon of the outgrowth of suburbs – known as urban sprawl. This leads to specific spatial consequences in the city, or rather to the lack of them. An expansion takes place in suburban areas and in rural-urban fringe of mainly individual residential development, appropriating a growing number of new areas and leading to the effect of blurring the physical boundaries of urbanity. These areas should be considered lost spaces for urban structures due to the fact that in the majority they are unable to produce a place aspiring to become the urban centre with compact, defined boundaries resulting directly from the accepted forms of development. Apart from economic diktat, this phenomenon is also psychologically inherent in human nature. The desire to search for the perfect form of a house or flat which would combine the closeness of nature and urban conveniences of life in a community and comfort associated with the widespread availability of services is for most people a decisive factor in choosing a place to live. An example which illustrates this phenomenon in Poland is the process of the so called "residentialisation" of the countryside in the vicinity of major urban centres, which leads to a situation when in the records of local plans there are more rural areas earmarked for detached houses than the ones being purely agricultural land – for crops. Consequently, the phenomenon of scattered development does not allow for the formation of a clear, permanent image of a townscape – the phenomenon whose reconstruction conservative

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[20] Gehl, Jan. *Miasta… Op. cit.,* pp. 12-13.
[21] Krier, Leon. *Architektura wybór czy przeznaczenie.* Warszawa: Arkady., 2001, p. 124.

circles of architects and urban planners sought to be guided by. The example here could be the theoretical and practical accomplishments of Leon and Rob Krier. Undoubtedly, the problem of the scale of development is becoming to be the issue responsible for the essence of contemporary urbanity as it directly affects the effect of blurring the boundaries of urbanity and the way of defining urban spaces. The sense of the existence of a friendly, intimate or monumental space in which man can find a place to live depends on it to the greatest extent. The traditional system of streets and squares, their hierarchy is for most people still, as stressed by Gehl, the essence of the phenomenon which one calls the city. In the era of modernity streets have been replaced by notions of roads and squares have become open and undefined spaces. In order to avoid the phenomenon of blurring of the boundaries of modern urbanity and restore traditional space in cities, one must return to compact development of a suitable, friendly scale as a guarantor of a framework for life in urban communities. One can find open spaces around them which are able to satisfy the human need to stay close to natural environment. Perhaps this state of affairs is no longer to be achieved in the present since too many bad solutions found their precedent in the legal and economic basis of existing implementations, which have their authorisation in democratic social systems. Krier and many other conservative architects and urban planners believe that a reasonable solution in this situation appears to be urban growth based on an organic expansion of the development structures achieved through the multiplication of autonomous districts with their own centres and visual aesthetic identity based on pedestrian traffic – i.e. building a modern city on the basis of polycentrism. Otherwise, not only will we still call contemporary urban space *"Junkspace"*, following Rem Koolhaas's words, but we will "admire" and affirm it too.

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