

HUMAN DIMENSION OF URBAN SPACES: INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE OF ARCHITECTURE KRAKÓW 2015 AND THE POLISH AWARDED COMPETITION ENTRIES

Marta A. Urbańska

PhD. Eng. Arch., Assistant Professor

Institute of History of Architecture and Monument Preservation, Faculty of Architecture

Cracow University of Technology

ul. Kanonicza 1, Kraków 30-106, Poland

martaannaurbanska@go2.pl

+48 608 219 209, +48 12 628 24 22

+48 12 421 87 22 (F)

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Abstract

“Jan Gehl, an expert in humanisation of cities, is convinced that the enhancing of quality of our life in the cities is a derivative of the image of public spaces [...] where people meet “in order to exchange ideas, to trade or simply to rest” (Jan Gehl, *Life between buildings*). These words hail from the *Regulations of the International Biennale of Architecture 2015* whose motto was “Human dimension of urban spaces”. Its idea was to inspire the debate, both at the civic and self-governmental level, on Polish public spaces and their accessibility, through the presentation of architectural and urban designs. It was considered vital because of the colossal means from the EU cohesion funds which are being spent in Poland on urban revitalisations. Due to her involvement in the Biennale’s organisation (commissioner, juror, moderator), the authoress raises the issue of the mentioned and awarded Polish designs. All the entries (over 200) were competing in one of the three categories: of the realised designs, hypothetical ones and interventions-manifestos. They provide the perfect comparative material. As it was stated in the Protocol of the Jury, ‘In the competitions A i B , the Jury has mentioned and awarded completed projects in various scales, from small architectural scale through an urbanistic one to landscape, both mobile, temporary and permanent, yet always fulfilling the criterion of shaping urban spaces in human dimension’.

The article, analysing the recent solutions and observations proposed by Polish architects, mostly for Polish public spaces, shall discuss whether one may observe positive tendencies towards the return to urbanity and to human, communal character of city’s public spaces.

Introduction: International Biennale of Architecture in Krakow

The issues and results of the last year’s International Biennale of Architecture in Krakow, whose motto was *the Human Dimension of Urban Spaces*, seem to be in perfect concord with the

overall topic of the present CTV Congress, discussing the most welcome return to urbanity, as the title “Back to Sense of the City” is showing. However, for the better understanding of the statement, it is rather necessary to outline the history and aims of the Biennale.

The aims and history of the Biennale

“The MBA Kraków [International Biennale of Architecture] has been held in Krakow for the past 30 years as a regular event. Each subsequent edition offers an unique forum for exchanging ideas and individual experience among the architects from around the world. A diversity of accompanying events like thematic competitions, exhibitions, presentations and lectures makes it a totally unique event for everyone involved in any way with the domain of architecture in this part of Europe [...] The uniqueness of this cultural event consists also in its very location. Krakow is a city well recognized throughout Europe. This is owed primarily to its rich historical heritage; its landmark architecture playing a pivotal role. It is in this city that a continuous rivalry between the old and the new, the historic and the modern, the conservative and the avant-garde has gained much prominence. The ever on-going architectural debate seems to be embedded in the very soul of this vibrant city.”¹

The above quote describes the very essence of the Biennale, an open architectural competition not only held in Krakow, but also devoted to the city itself. The Biennale is organised by the SARP, Association of Polish Architects (the oldest Polish artistic association, founded in the year 1877 in Krakow), in cooperation with the Municipality of Krakow. Its idea was coined by Romuald Loegler, one of the most recognised Polish architects, already in the year 1985, in the totally different times – i.e. in the Communist era. Krakow, the former capital of Poland, and the seat of one of the oldest universities in this part of the world (1364) was already then inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (1976). Yet the city was totally neglected, its architectural treasures in desolate condition, suppressed by the perilous vicinity of the then largest steel works in Poland, the Lenin Steel Works of Nowa Huta. Implanted directly to the East of Krakow, these huge factory combine created horrible air pollution including acidic rains, caused by its steel production, at peak times reaching 8 million tons of steel per annum.² (Interestingly, the Nowa Huta district, built by the regime as an ideal industrial town, yet very well laid out by Polish architects, itself became the subject-matter of the Biennale in the year 2002, under the motto “less ideology – more geometry”³). Krakow, then largely underinvested, needed a new impulse, like all Poland. With the political upheaval of the year 1989 and the advent of freedom, for which the Poles fought for so long after 1945, came the great success of Krakow, which has reinvented itself as one of the foremost tourist destinations of Europe. All of those tremendous changes were reflected in the issues raised by the Biennale, whereby each of its 12 editions was devoted to a then current aspect of Cracovian architecture and urbanism, hoping to spark –

¹ The quote from the Biennale public announcement, written by the Biennale Curator, Romuald Loegler and the Organisational Committee, as [in:] : <http://www.mba2015.sarp.krakow.pl/>

² Cf. Miezian Maciej, *Nowa Huta, socjalistyczna w formie, fascynująca w treści*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Bezdroża, 2004,

³ Cf. Lisowski, Bohdan; Urbańska, Marta A., Jazwiecka Dominika (eds.) *International Biennale of Architecture, Catalogue*, Kraków: SARP, 2015, p. 19

and doing so – a vivid architectural public debate regarding the city, by means of widely publicised competition entries and popular accompanying events.

MBA 2015 and its specific character in respect of urbanity

Novel approach

As it was mentioned earlier, the Biennale had 12 editions in 30 years, as due to financial constraints it could not always be held biannually. The year 2015, actually the year of the Biennale's 30th anniversary, marked quite a difference in its overall concept. According to the Curator's idea, it ceased to be a competition announced with a special actual design assignment in Krakow, as it was before - be it for instance the aforementioned Nowa Huta, the Cracovian Commons (2000), The Main Market Square (1996), or the environs of the convent of the Norbertine Nuns (1987)⁴. Instead Mr Loegler envisioned a more general approach. The Biennale was to be held in three categories – competitions: exhibition of realised designs, exhibition of theoretical and academic designs or of uncompleted competition entries, and the competition of architectural speeches-manifestos. All of them had, however, to pertain to a general motto: Human Dimension of Urban Spaces. It allowed for presenting the designs and thoughts devoted to such aspects of the main topic as:

“A new dimension of design of a city

A city full of life and bustle

A safe city

A sustainable city

A healthy city

A pedestrian-friendly city

A city of better-designed urban spaces

A city of better architecture.”⁵

Procedure

The first two competitions, A and B, required preparing the maximum of two boards presenting the designs, while the third one, C, required public delivering of a manifesto of maximum 10 minutes. All the competitions were adjudicated according to the SARP rules of architectural competitions, by the international Jury consisting of architects: Jan Butenschøen (Norway), Giovanni Multari (Italy), Claudio Nardi (Italy), Piotr Lewicki (Poland) and Marta A. Urbańska (Poland, who also was the organisational commissioner of the competition C). All of the entries – in case of the interventions, their abstracts – were published in the Biennale Catalogue. Following the preliminary selection of entries by the Referring Judges, the ones conforming to

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Op.cit., p. 21

the Biennale Regulations⁶ were exhibited and chosen for the public presentation of the interventions respectively.

As the events have shown, both the exhibited entries (over 60 out of over 200) and the delivered manifestos (27 out of over 50) – the great majority of them hailing from Poland – have provided the perfect review of the recent development in Polish architecture regarding the return to the sense of the city.

Polish architecture after 1989: finally time for urban spaces indeed

From rudiments to spectacular public buildings

As it was stated, one may deem the entries from Poland, designed mainly by the local architects, representative for the current state of architecture and public spaces here. It is perhaps useful to remind that after 1989 one firstly had to satisfy the rather rudimentary, even pedestrian needs in terms of infrastructure, to start building more sophisticated architectural structures only circa a decade later. It was already observed and described by many architectural writers⁷. Indeed after the year 2004 and the accession to the EU, resulting in huge cohesion funds, several impressive buildings started to emerge, including public ones. Especially the means allocated to cultural functions, which were long and purposefully neglected in the years 1945 – 1989, resulted in many spectacular buildings. There emerged for instance numerous philharmonic and concert halls, all completed in 2014 and 2015 (National Forum of Music in Wrocław, by APA Kuryłowicz & Associates; seat of the NOSPR in Katowice – National Symphonic Orchestra of Polish Radio and Television in Katowice, by Tomasz Konior, CKK Jordanki in Toruń by Fernando Menis and last but not least, the Philharmonic Hall in Szczecin, by Barozzi Veiga under cooperation of Jacek Lenart, in Szczecin – which received the much-coveted Mies van der Rohe Award in the year 2015).⁸ Among many other buildings one should name several multipurpose halls and edifices, such as the imposing ICE International Congress Centre in Krakow by Ingarden & Ewy Architects (2014), featuring the grand auditorium of nearly 2000 seats or a smaller (yet beloved by the Cracovians) multipurpose cultural centre MOS – The Małopolska Garden of the Arts (recipient of 19 national and international architectural awards!) by the same architects (2012).

From buildings to “life between buildings” – the nascent contemporary urban spaces

However, amidst the truly impressive wave of construction of cultural public edifices, not to mention dynamic housing developments, largely financed and built by private, commercial developers, the public spaces seem to have been utterly lost in Poland after 1989. The reasons

⁶ Cf. Op.cit., pp. 22-26 for the abridged version and <http://www.mba2015.sarp.krakow.pl/dist/2dwnl/The%20Biennale%20Regulations.pdf>

⁷ Cf. Ingarden, Krzysztof, Urbańska, Marta A., *Polish architecture today: what languages do we speak?*, lecture delivered at the UIA Congress in Tokyo, 2011; publication in preparation

⁸ Cf. Janusz Sepioł (ed.) et al., *Form Follows Freedom. Architektura dla kultury w Polsce 2000+*, Krakow: MCK 2015

of this deplorable development, or rather lack of development, are multiple indeed – among others are the downfall of spatial planning caused by the decidedly complicated law (Act on Spatial Planning, 2003) and the forced loss of validity of all the former spatial development plans. Thus the publication of Jan Gehl's classic *Life between buildings* in Polish by RAM, the publishing house founded and owned by Romuald Loegler, the Biennale Curator (and translated by the authoress of this article), in the year 2010, became a true eye-opener to many. In keeping with the message of the book, the Biennale Curator aimed at pinpointing the good examples of public urban spaces, also for their didactic value to the self-governmental authorities as the key stakeholders in creation of such places. Indeed the Municipality of Krakow, following a painstaking process of public protests against a planned housing development, has recently finally announced the long-awaited study competition for the spatial and programmatic development of the scenic former quarry "Zakrzówek" area – aiming at creating the first public park laid out since the 1950s.⁹

Awarded and mentioned Polish entries

*Excerpt from the protocol of the Jury of the Biennale regarding Polish entries*¹⁰

The aforementioned Jury, convening on the 15-16th October 2015 in the ICE Cracow Congress Centre, acting on the basis of the MBA Regulations and evaluating all the entries in the competitions A,B,C in respect of their complying with the motto of the Biennale – 'Human Dimension of urban Spaces', decided to award the following mentions and prizes:

Competition A – An Exhibition of Realised Designs - Honourable Mentions (ex aequo) and Prizes:

BudCud – Mateusz Adamczyk, Agata Woźniczka – "Kwartal FKŻ", information / multipurpose pavillion of the Festival of Jewish Culture in Krakow's Kazimierz District, for a temporary yet inspiring insertion in a strictly historic, medieval context

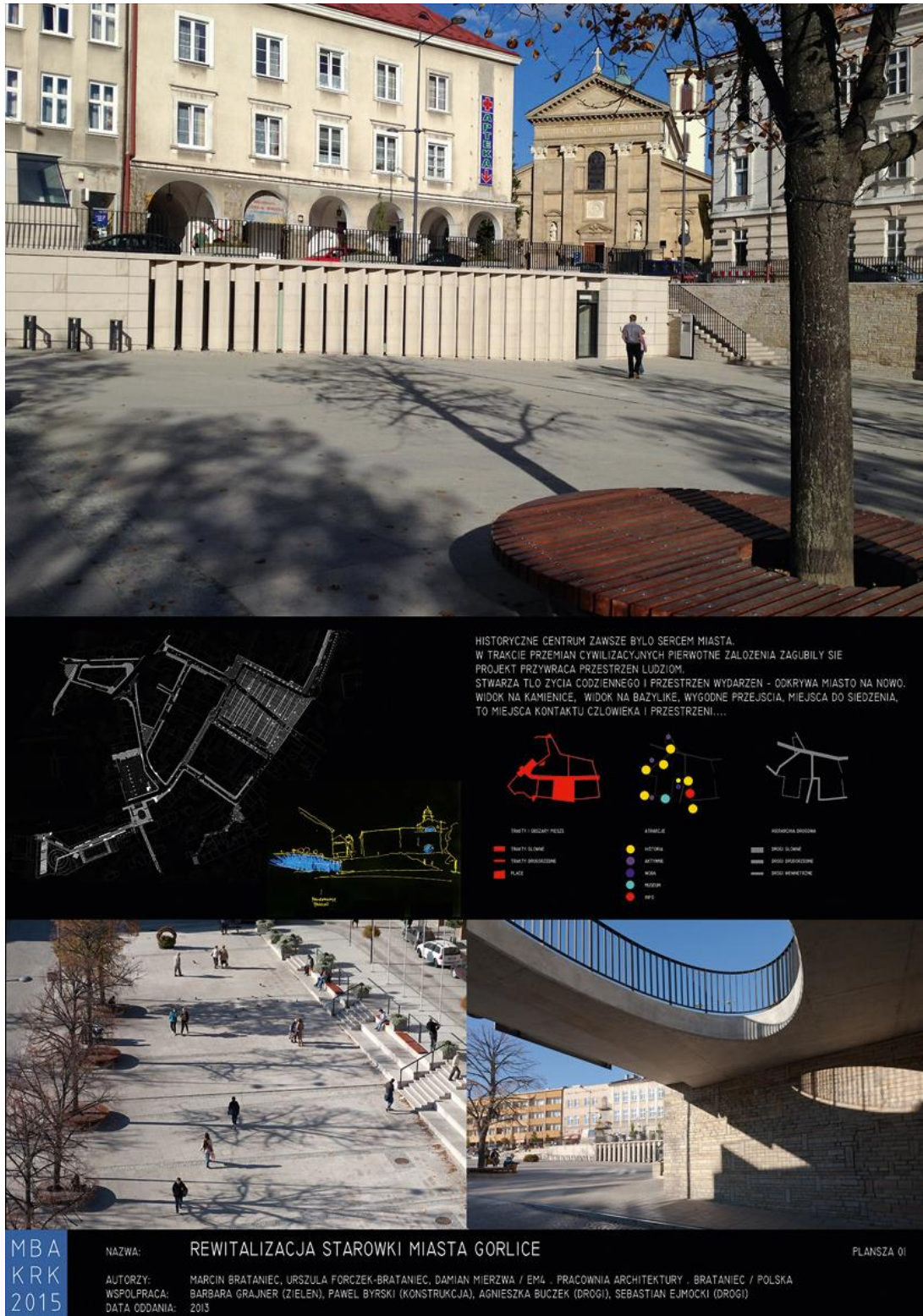
eM4. Pracownia Architektury Brataniec – Marcin Brataniec, Urszula Forczek-Brataniec, Damian Mierzwa – "Revitalisation of the Old Town in Gorlice",

⁹ Cf. the competition announcement

http://www.sarp.krakow.pl/konkursy,736,Competition_for_the_elaboration_of_the_spatial_and_programmatic_concept_of_the_Z.html

¹⁰ Written by the authoress of the essay as the Jury member, in the SARP archives; the excerpt covers the entries regarding Polish sites and examples

Figure 1. "Revitalisation of the Old Town in Gorlice", entry by the eM4 Studio



Source: Competition Catalogue MBA 2015, courtesy of the SARP and the architects

Renato Rizzi + Grupa Projektowa A.T.I. + Q-ARCH Sp. z o.o. – "Building of the Shakespeare Theatre in Gdańsk",

Sofft – Mikołaj Smoleński – "The Loungeabout" in Wrocław

Figure 2 Sofft Mikołaj Smoleński, The Loungeabout



autor / author:
Mikołaj Smoleński SOFFT, Wrocław PL
kurator cyklu ARCHI-BOX / ARCHI-BOX curator:
Michał Duda, Muzeum Architektury, Wrocław PL

Trudno przecenić znaczenie czynności jaką jest leżenie. Leżymy przez jedną trzecią życia śpiąc lub odpoczywając, choć niekiedy czynnie wyrażając sprzeciw i poglądy polityczne. Leżenie to pozycja najbardziej sprzyjająca rozmyślanom i pomimo intymnego charakteru, może też sprzyjać integracji. Nie mniej jednak leżenie w mieście należy do czynności najbardziej kłopotliwych i niepokojących. Powstrzymujmy nas przed sam sklagowaniem z beznadziejnością i alkoholizmem oraz kąpieliną klimat znaczącego do zalegania na miedzych parkowych murawach. W miastach brakuje też infrastruktury nadającej się do leżenia – ławki jako meble przeznaczone do siedzenia zupełnie nie są dostosowane do pozycji horyzontalnej. Coraz częściej stanowi to nieprzypadkowy element szerszej polityki urbanistycznej materializującej się pod postacią tzw. „architektury defensywnej”. Im bogatsze i bardziej znaczące stają się miasta, oraz im większe w nich kontrasty społeczne, tym większe pokusa aby rugować z widoku wyjątkia co nie pasuje do ich sterylnego i dynamicznego „autogeneratu”.

„Polegiwacz” to instalacja, której założeniem było odsygnalizowanie czynności leżenia w kontekście miejskim. Forma obiektu pozwala realizować to na kilka sposobów. Najdawniej, często dzieci, mogą się bawić na siatce-hamaku w górnym rogu konstrukcji (wersja z 2014r.), młodzież i ludzie w średnim wieku mogą się swobodnie rozkładać lub pokładać na sprężonych półgosedach. Serwisom defekacyjnym są tradycyjne toalety. Układ podestów i ogardz pozwala też „poczuć” się z nogami do góry co przynosi ulgę się w okresie letnim. Głęboko tego Polegiwacz służy spontanicznie jako wódekna, parkiet taneczny, plac zabaw, otul czy nawet scenariusz do fotosesji ślubnych. Swoją popularność zyskiwała w dużej mierze połączeniu z funkcją mini-kawiarni oraz cyklom imprez. Po inauguracyjnym sezonie 2014, kiedy funkcjonował w ramach cyklu wystawowego Archi-Box organizowanego przez Muzeum Architektury, znalazł chętnych na sezon letni 2015. Polegiwacz został odbudowany z niewielkimi przebudowaniami i sprzedał się w komercyjnych warunkach jako element Cafe Piława przy klubie Żwirnywiejskiej kolo 200.

POLEGIWACZ / THE LOUNGEABOUT lato /summer 2014 Wrocław /Park Stowackiego /Muzeum Architektury /Cafe Sztuczki



Source: Competition Catalogue MBA 2015, courtesy of the SARP and the architect

WIZJA Biuro Architektoniczne – Stanisław Deńko, (nsMoonStudio Piotr Nawara, Agnieszka Szultk, Sławomir Zieliński) – „Seat of Cricoteka - Tadeusz Kantor Art Documentation Centre”, for creation of a new quality of a fragment of an urban space at the Vistula River in Krakow and its presentation in the striking context of bold architecture

3rd Prize:

Michał Dąbek, Jan Kuka – "Monument to Henryk Sławik and Jozsef Antall Senior in Katowice", for creation of a place of reflection and memory in urban space, shaped by means of architectural elements in human, adequate dimension

2nd Prize:

RS+ Robert Skitek – Robert Skitek – "Development of the eastern shore of Lake Paprocańskie in Tychy" , for comfortable and aesthetic shaping of the place of rest in contact with nature in the generally highly urbanised context of a Silesian town

It is worth mentioning that in this section all the mentions and awards went to the designs built in Poland, save for the first one. The 1st Prize was given to the truly epic project by Közti Zrt – Tima Studio – "Kossuth tér reconstruction Budapest", for an intervention of great scale and significance - multi-storey rebuilding of the square surrounding the Hungarian Parliament building, place of celebration of civic values.

Competition B – An Exhibition of Conceptual Designs - Honourable Mentions (ex aequo) and Prizes:

Autorska Pracownia Projektowa Jerzy Wowczak – Jerzy Wowczak, Agnieszka Sanecka – „Way to freedom” in Gdańsk, for a poetic proposal of the representational promenade – public space connecting places of memory of the “Solidarity” movement in Gdańsk

3rd Prize:

Zvi Hecker – "Memorial Park of the former German Nazi Concentration Camp Płaszów", Kraków

2nd Prize:

Kacper Ludwiczak – "Concept of development of Warsaw Architecture Pavilion Zodiak",

Competition C – A Seminar of Manifestos-Honourable Mentions (ex aequo) and Prizes:

Zuzanna Bogucka, Katarzyna Sentycz – "Designing the invisible dimension of urban spaces" / for an interestingly illustrated intervention regarding aspects of human impressions and reactions in designing of urban spaces

Andrzej Kaczmarczyk – "Miasto Europa / Europe City",

for an interesting comparison of values of places and spaces in human scale in culturally diverse, variously shaped cities of Europe

Elżbieta Szymańska – "Sojalizator Miejskowy / Local Socialiser", for an original proposal of space integrating atomised communities in Warsaw

3rd Prize:

Małgorzata Burkot – „Noble reviving – revitalisation vs gentrification", for a methodical and convincing analysis of significant problems of transformation of contemporary cities

2nd Prize:

Arkadiusz Pacholski – "Senses as the best designers of a modern pavement", for a captivating analysis of contemporary practices of 'revitalisation' of Polish urban spaces in respect of realisation of surfaces of pavements on the example of author's own research in Kalisz

1st Prize:

Przemysław Chimczak, Tomasz Bojęć (BLOKBLOG) – "Ageing-friendly cities. Connections of spatial analyses and participatory methods while creating Masterplans 60+"

Discussion of the select entries

The following passages are discussing a few chosen Polish entries which appear to be the most interesting for the value of their urbanity and generating city-like character of life, and doing so in spite of the position in the Jury's evaluation, very different scales and varying locations of their design interventions.

Realised designs

In the Competition A, all the mentioned and awarded entries would merit closer attention, as their brief descriptions by the Jury are showing; however, due to the limited space of this article, only two are illustrated and discussed here. Firstly, the completed design by the team of eM4. Pracownia Architektury Brataniec, was mentioned for the successful revitalisation of the historic centre of Gorlice and retrieving its space for the inhabitants. The design itself won numerous prizes before, and was widely publicised. The historic Market Square of Gorlice is quite large in scale, as Gorlice, founded as a late medieval private town in south-eastern Poland, was laid out generously. Moreover, as the town of Gorlice is situated at the foot of the Beskidy mountains, it has quite a steep slope. The Market Square, once pestered by the traffic, having lost its traditional market / trade function, was until recently quite a morose space. Following the aforementioned influx of the cohesion funds in the years 2004 – 2013, the self-governmental authorities decided about the renewal of the physical qualities of space in order to render it more urban in terms of its more civic character. Thus the geometry (slope) was slightly changed, including the positioning of a service pavilion in the upper part of the Market and the steps conducive to sitting and resting along the longer side of the Square; the extant trees were left and surrounded by large benches; a fountain was installed, as were other urban furniture. The urban floor was paved with large slabs of stone, conducive to comfortable walking. The space, completed in 2013, may be – and is often – used as a place of various events, such as stage and cinema shows, fairs, demonstrations, masses etc., due to the reorganisation of traffic.

Another mentioned proposal in this section was "The Loungeabout", designed by Sofft – Mikołaj Smoleński. It was cited and is discussed here for its wit, simplicity and low budget. That purposefully shaped structure was serving rest and relaxation, and was temporarily located in various urban corners of the city of Wrocław in summer of the year 2014. Thus its demountable character is decidedly different to that of the solid space of the medieval Market Square in Gorlice. Nevertheless, its urban quality is no lesser, allowing for leisure and enjoying the

company in a pleasant, green environs, close to the water (as the diagram on the board is showing). Wrocław is blessed with the presence of the River Oder, which is spanned by many bridges there. The pictures are showing "the Loungeabout" located in the park adjacent to the now Museum of Architecture in the former Bernardine Monks' convent and later at the banks of Oder. Its geometrical, angular, sloping shape is comfortable for sitting, reminiscent of an amphitheatre (but with a safe, higher rear wall) and amusing. Built of coarse plywood, the urban furniture is easy to transfer and mount.

Theoretical and unbuilt designs

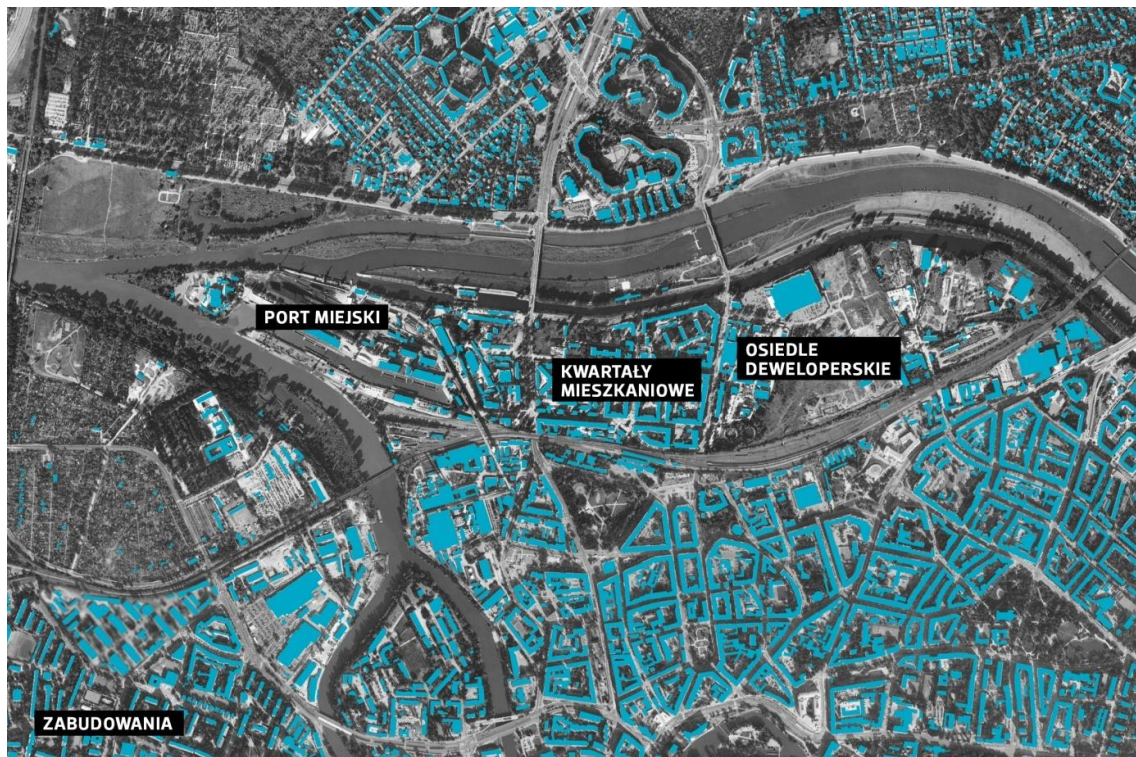
This section of the Biennale competitions was replete with interesting proposals, also foreign ones. However, one Polish entry was chosen here for discussion, because of its location and strictly geometrical language. It is the proposal by Kacper Ludwiczak – "Concept of development of Warsaw Architecture Pavilion Zodiak", awarded for its lapidary, archetypal and yet versatile form of public space in the strict centre of the capital of Poland. The proposal consists in adding a square form of an atrial, low building in front of the Modernist pavilion, itself recessed from the narrow public passage. The currently rather unused, non-entity little piazza preceding the pavilion is complemented with a minimal, Miesian structure. Its modular sections may be opened or closed at will, extending the exhibition space. The design, drawn in black and white, is both simple and timeless thus evoking the city patterns of the Classical Antiquity.

Figure 4. Kasper Ludwiczak, Warsaw Architecture Pavilion Zodiak

Architectural manifestos

This competition proved to be very successful and interesting indeed. The Jury, confronted with vivid, richly illustrated interventions, awarded the team of BLOKBLOG, young architects and participatory activists. Their intervention, held *a deux*, received the prize for the original work analysing both urban space and social needs of the mainly elderly (60+) inhabitants of a residential district. They are suddenly confronted with the vicinity of a commercial, developers' housing estate in Wrocław. The work showed both exemplary urban analyses of the now rather neglected Kleczkow and Ołbin districts and told of participatory activities as the model of a pragmatic planning practice. Moreover, the work was clearly and well illustrated, convincing in the narration of methods of social activation and participation of the inhabitants, and it also resulted in a proper publication.

Figure 5 Przemysław Chimczak, Tomasz Bojć (BLOKBLOG), Masterplan 60+



Source: Competition Catalogue MBA 2015, courtesy of the SARP and the architects

Short summary

Circa half of the sent entries did not comply with the MBA 2015 brief and keynote, presenting new buildings rather than any urban public spaces. This also evidences the current state of affairs, whereby the public sector in Poland simply hardly invests in such new projects, leaving its duties unfulfilled. The only exceptions are probably the so called revitalisations of the extant spaces hailing from another time (as in the case of the historic centre of Gorlice). Such actions,

commendable from the aesthetic point of view as largely consisting indeed in the aesthetic amendment of public spaces, were once (in the 19th century) aptly named 'beautification'. Moreover, in many cases 'revitalisation' means felling more or less accidental verdure and excessively elaborately paving squares and streets. Such a common practice was brilliantly described by Mr Arkadiusz Pacholski in his witty (and vitriolic) analysis of the modern 'revitalisation' of his hometown of Kalisz. Whether that may be indeed deemed bringing urban spaces back to life, remains to be seen.

However, there were also entries which show increasingly good public, urban solutions of spaces – often generated by large public buildings as their surroundings (NOSPR in Katowice) or civilising the extant, intensely used space (Paprocańskie Lake in Nowe Tychy, Monument to Jozsef Antall in Katowice), or inserting a vitalising addition in the historic city space (multipurpose pavillion of the Festival of Jewish Culture in Krakow's Kazimierz District). The above of course refers to all the designs described in the section 4.

Thus, looking at the development of Polish architecture of 1989, from the rudiments and infrastructure to sophistication of splendid new public buildings, one may hope that the time of contemporary public, urban spaces – back to the sense of the city – is finally coming. Lost in the rapid political and economic transformation, they would be most welcome again, at long last. Our country has a tradition of excellent public spaces in human dimension – not only of the unsurpassed medieval, Renaissance and Baroque market squares of classic towns and cities... but also of the elegant boulevard layouts of the 19th century and of the prewar Modern cities designed and built in the free Republic of Poland.

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