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HOMO LUDENS AND THE NODES OF URBANITY. PLACES, MAPS, METAPHORS

HOMO LUDENS I WĘZŁY MIEJSKOŚCI. MIEJSCA, MAPY, METAFORY

Abstract

The author discusses the interrelationships between play and the art of urbanism focusing on the cluster of nodal places called here “nodes of urbanity”. At the background of Huizinga’s theory of *Homo ludens* as cultural component, the analysis of these foci of urban life seem to have explanatory value for architectural and anthropological theories of the “Ludic City”. The main points of this conceptual framework are illustrated with two cases from the city of Krakow.

Keywords: urbanism, architecture of the city, place, nodal places, nodes of urbanity, urban anthropology

Streszczenie

Autor prowadzi rozważania na temat wzajemnych związków między grą a sztuką urbanistyczną koncentrując uwagę na skupiskach miejsc węzłowych nazwanych tu „węzłami miejskości”. W świetle teorii Huizinga na temat *Homo ludens*, i gry jako kluczowego komponentu kultury, analiza tego rodzaju skupisk życia miejskiego wydaje się mieć niemały walor interpretacyjny dla architektonicznych i antropologicznych teorii „*Miasta Ludycznego*”. Główne tezy metodologicznych koncepcji tego rodzaju analiz zilustrowano dwoma przykładami z Krakowa.

Słowa kluczowe: urbanistyka, architektura miasta, miejsce, węzły miejskości, antropologia miasta

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1. Introduction

The title of this paper announces two of the author's points in the discussion on the connotations of the play-element in the contemporary theory of urbanism – with particular reference to the theories somehow related to Rossi's theory known as “the architecture of the city” [8]. The first refers to the urbanistic implications of Huizinga's famous theory on the role of play in the development of culture [6]. The second point refers to role of metaphor in the art of urbanistic and anthropological interpretations of the clusters of nodal places where we can observe the condensation of “ludic energy”. In urban literature, it is assumed that this energy exemplifies the essence of urban culture as well as cultural changes resulting from recent technological developments and urban marketing. These changes, in turn, strongly impinge upon the image of the architecture of the contemporary city – particularly those which are metropolitan.

The text is made up of sketchy notes laid out in two narrative layers. The first contains references to the theoretical components of urbanism significant to the understanding of the architectural and anthropological aspects of the process known as the “ludification of urban culture”. Here, the author outlines his concept of the “nodes of urbanity” focusing on its specific typological categories that can be regarded as “the domains of contemporary homo ludens”. In the second layer, this analytical concept is exemplified by two cases from Krakow.

2. Urbanity and *urbanistic construction* – frameworks and places of play

Motto: “A spectre is haunting the world – the spectre of playfulness. We are witnessing a global “ludification of culture”. Since the 1960s, in which the word “ludic” became popular in Europe and the United States to designate playful behaviour and artefacts, playfulness has increasingly become a mainstream characteristic of our culture. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind in this context is the immense popularity of computer games, which, as far as global sales are concerned, have already outstripped Hollywood.”

(Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens, *Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity*).

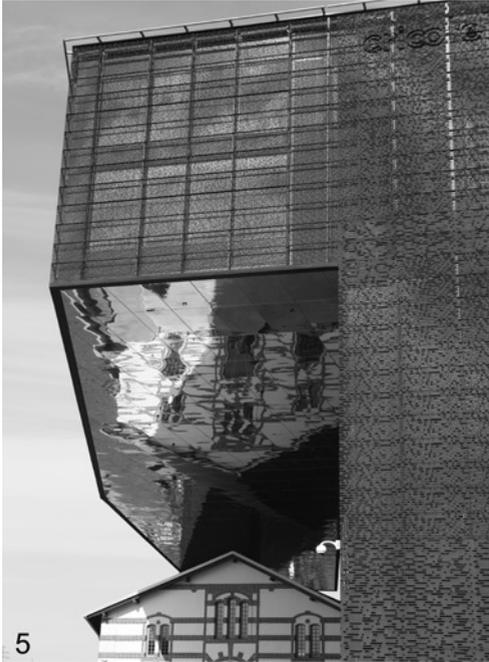
Urbanity and play belong among the fundamental concepts of culture. As emphasized by Huizinga, play is an essential function of culture. His *homo ludens* [5, 9] symbolizes the universal codes of urban rituals and behavioural patterns which have to be analysed in order to explain the cultural logic of urban form. Therefore, this theory, although first published over 70 years ago, still inspires urbanists looking for a bridge between the two currents of research on the cultural nature of the city: anthropological studies on the complexity and subtlety of urban lifestyles and the architectural analysis of their spatial settings.

Contemporary anthropological research on play – and its role in the development of cultural forms of life – provides yet another field where we can discuss the relationships between urbanism, art and culture. In the light of countless statements that urbanism is in a deep crisis, and evidence of chaotic urban and suburban development which, unfortunately, confirm this diagnosis, discussing urbanism as an art is more than abstract. It can easily be regarded as irritating. On the grounds of urbanistic theory, however, we can still find convincing arguments rationalising the use of term: “art of urbanism” [8, 7]. In this argumentation a significant role is played by the postulate which refers to quite a definition of urbanism based on the analogy

to one of the most common definitions of architecture. Namely – similarly to architecture – we can define urbanism as the art of “shaping / forming” the space” – specifically: urban space. Between these two branches of common disciplines, however, there are significant differences. As a result, the ties of this “urbanistic branch” with art are weaker and its artistic identity less clear. We are talking here about differences in: a) the scale of designed territory on which design solutions are expected, b) the level of complexity of a designed system, c) the degree of dependence on politics, d) the scale of potential conflicts generated by the design situation, and e) the complexity of a decision-making system resulting from the large number of “actors” involved in the decision-making process and complicated – and often non transparent – relationships between them. It is just because of this last – let’s call it the “urbanistic decision-making game” – that we reflect on the anthropological aspects of the relationships between urbanism, culture and the game.

The Ludic City is becoming a fashionable theme for international conferences on urbanism architecture and urban anthropology. This urbanistic idea, however, does not seem to be clear enough for us to operationalize it on a larger scale at the moment. In the fast growing literature on this subject we can find attempts to combine anthropological streams of urban research with environmental psychology studies and their architectural and urbanistic connotations initiated by the famous Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City*. There are also explicit references to Huizinga. In a sense, the role of play in urban anthropology pointed out by Huizinga’s theory of *Homo ludens* is taken up by Quentin Stevens. In the second chapter of his book – “The Ludic City. Exploring the potential of public spaces” – he discusses “the analytical concept of play” [9, p. 27] referring to the theoretical writings of such distinguished thinkers reflecting on diverse facets of the phenomenon of play in the urban realm as Benjamin, Lefebvre, Sennett, Bourdieu, and Goffman. Stevens also provides an extensive case study on the elements of the “ludic spaces” in the CBD of Melbourne, Australia. In his analysis of “the social dimensions of urban space” he uses analytical units as: “paths”, “intersections”, “boundaries”, “thresholds”, “backdrops”, and “props”. References to the relationships between morphological thinking and the mental mapping discovered by Kevin Lynch are quite obvious.

Let us consider now the other “common denominators” of play, urbanism, and art. These are “urbanistic construction”, place, maps, and metaphors. Our first step should be a reflection on the architectural perspective of urbanism and the anthropological view of urbanity. Paradoxically enough, the semantic relationships between *urbanity* and *urbanism*, and their consequences for the area of their respective professional and academic activities, are not obvious. For many urbanists, the notion of urbanity is still associated with behavioural patterns, lifestyles, contacts and other forms of activities as well as their environmental settings affecting the quality of life in the populated territory which conforms the criteria established in such “canonical” definitions of the city as the one given by Weber [12] or Wirth [13]. These sociological and anthropological definitions corresponded with the architectural view of the city. According to the classical European tradition, dominated by the architectural perspective, urbanism as an academic discipline is viewed mainly as the art of building and rebuilding cities (*Städtebau*) supported by relevant theories borrowed from science and the humanities. In urbanism, this concept of city building is associated with the creation of a cultural meaningful and functional environment hospitable to inhabitants and other users of the territory organised and managed with respect to the Ancient Greek idea of the *polis* and the later political concepts of urban democracy as well as the notion of the public good. In



a more contemporary version, however, we could modify the above definition by accentuating the wide-ranging competences of the main actors – designers, planners and other decision makers – participating in the complex game called the development and redevelopment of physical urban structures.

As with architecture, the conceptual apparatus of urbanism is structured around such basic terms as form, function, construction. These fundamental concepts can be also regarded as design criteria formulated in professional standards *vis a vis* the widely recognized values and qualities of the urban environment. From this perspective, in a metaphorical sense, the urbanistic idea of the spatial order can be explained as the postulate to regard the city as a large scale architectural structure – the “*architecture of the city*” [8] – made of inherited and new architectural objects and landscapes, with a distinct morphology as well as functional attributes and meanings satisfying standards of a given urban culture. In other words, urbanism is the art and science of creating spatial frameworks for diverse forms of urban life according to the principles reflecting values highly respected by the population of a given territory. In the contemporary theory of urbanism, however, the above definitions and approaches – as well as classical ideas on the spatial order – are strongly challenged by the “actor related approach” to urban space, the idea of fluid space in a networked society [3] as well as new architectural concepts of urban spatial structures.

3. The *nodes of urbanity* and the metaphor of mapping

In the urbanistic literature, anthropological, sociological and geographical explanations of urban phenomena are strongly related to the research on the cultural nature of the city and cultural attributes of urbanity. For these reasons, interactions between the forms of urban play and the spatial forms of urbanity deserve more attention. In particular, this postulate refers to the play-element in the nodes of urbanity: places clustered in the nodal points of urban networks. Supported by the analytical tools of urban geography and other relevant disciplines, urbanism helps us to understand why urban life is more vibrant in certain places than in others. For this purpose, we have to carry out a number of cartographic operations: 1) to compare the configuration of these places with the layers of urban reality that can be read from the respective map / maps, 2) to work out the method of mapping relevant layouts of activities and behavioural patterns of playing actors, and 3) to compare the results of the above analysis.

The idea of urbanity nodes changes the analytical perspective and the focus of the research on urban centres borrowing certain elements from the approaches adopted in the network theory of the city and paying more attention to the anthropological elements of the analysis. The *node of urbanity* can be defined as the place or a cluster of places which, because of its / their accessibility and other highly appreciated values, have key significance for urban life. This definition implies that the meaning of this term covers a much broader area than such basic urbanistic concepts as: city centres, district centres and the like. For the urban planning methodology the questions arise at this point: What is the role of urban nodes in the construction / reconstruction of urban form? What is the role of the play-component in the architecture and anthropology of urban places? To answer these let us give a kick-start to our imagination and look at the play-place relations from a perspective similar to those we can find in famous literary fiction on the magic of mapping the city and multi-layered realities coded in maps.

The Borges metaphor of a map or, if you like, Calvino's dream of the perfect map, as well as the cartographic dramaturgy plotted by Houellbecq in his "*La carte et le territoire*" could be inspiring for tracing geometrical regularities between *the anthropology of place* and *the architecture of play*. Two places from Krakow have been chosen here to illustrate the main points of this paper. These are: the Small Market Square and a newly created public place linked with an architectural landmark called Kantor's Cricoteka. In a sense, these two examples are the opposites of the typological spectrum of urban heritage nodes. But they also have some common denominators. Both could be used as the themes for the interdisciplinary research projects carried out from architectural and anthropological perspective and devoted to changes in public places – with a particular reference to heritage and tourism aspects of these forms of cultural urban environment.

4. Poetics of place: two cases

Although overshadowed by the life on the neighbouring Main Market Square, The Small Market is so saturated with diverse activities that it could become fascinating a subject of a joint case study for architects and anthropologists. From urbanistic perspective, the analytical framework of such a research project should be focused on the relations between cultural and spatial policies and the management of the public space in the cultural environment having high values of urbanistic heritage and a strong tourism component.

Together with other squares of The Old Town, The Small Market belongs to the cluster of places which function as the core of the historic city centre and – at least symbolically – the very centre of the City of Krakow. Until 2007, the grounds of this public space had been used as a car park. That year, however, coincided with the 750th anniversary of the act granting the city's rights to the major settlement of Krakow. To celebrate this event, the local government decided to "modernize" this place. The conservation project, worked out by the architectural office guided by Professor Andrzej Kadłuczka¹, was implemented as an element of the larger programme, approved by the City Council, and geared to revitalizing the historic core and other areas designated as deserving public intervention. As a result, the square changed its image so significantly that today it can be regarded as second stage of the "city's open air theatre".

In the morning sun the tectonic of the Small Market Square may recall the Canaletto's paintings illustrating the baroque public spaces of Dresden. In the play between lights and shadows, as well as the masses and linear forms designating the rhythms of architectural modules, we can read out the elements of artistic expression so significant to the compositional thinking of the Italian master. Also here, the architectural language of the place creates a hospitable environment for urban play. The space of the market is an opening for actors and the whole space seems to be expecting a stage director who will creatively orchestrate their actions. The question is, however, will these forthcoming events, and their means of expression, correspond harmoniously with the scenic background?

The programme of these special events is quite intensive and diversified. Sometimes, one could have the impression that the place is overloaded with performances and commercial

¹ The project received a General Public Award in the competition organized by The City and daily newspaper "*Gazeta Krakowska*" ("*Krakow Newspaper*").

activities initiated as a combination of urban marketing tools, instruments of cultural and educational policy as well as activities, like e.g.: beer festivals, are probably thought of simply to repair the city's budget. Throughout the season, the Small Market changes its face almost every day. Apparently, trade fairs, particularly food markets (Ill. 1), are to be regarded as events corresponding with the historical tradition of the place. The point is, however, that some of these events are arranged in a style which doesn't seem appropriate for such a prestigious place in "The Kings City of Krakow". Fortunately, the majority of the happenings played on The Small Market can be regarded as the examples of the effective and accurate image building techniques. Among the most successful cultural events are: jazz concerts (Ill. 2), street theatre spectacles (Ill. 3), street ballets, and lessons of common singing and the like. We also have innovative experiments performed here. One of these interesting events was the Micro park exhibited at the Small Market Square last May (Ill. 4). The prototype of this modular arrangement was commissioned by the Krakow Technology Park and made under the framework of the project named "Smart KOM".

As in other historic places, the cultural identity of The Small Market Square is rich, diversified and multilayered. Apart from the special events programmed here by the local government, the time of this place² has to be read out by still other, and probably even more significant, "anthropological layers". One of these is composed of smaller scale activities which could also be studied as interesting patterns of play and joy induced by the architectural environment and stimulated by its commercial side. For obvious reasons, this environment of play is dominated by the behaviour of individual visitors and tourist groups: flocked along the two lines of outdoor bistros and pubs and spread out on the floor of the square. Observed from the anthropological point of view, their interactions reveal the "other side of the form-function relations". Looking more deeply into the communiqué of these patterns we can realize that their ambivalence escapes from the rigid evaluative criteria and terminological apparatus used in the routine practice of urban design and planning.

The node of urbanity chosen as a second example is also located in a historic part of the inner city of Krakow. It is the area where we can observe, experience and enjoy, a cluster of places giving a new life to the part of the Vistula Riverfront situated between Pilsudski Bridge and Silesian Insurgents' Bridge. This new constellation of spots for leisure and culture activities belongs to the collection of the most fashionable sites in the city. Here you can find those who, tired of the historic core overcrowded by noisy tourists and almost Disney-like atmosphere of the area around Broad Street, flock to the spots where they can enjoy the pleasure of social contacts coupled with the magic of the former industrial sites and picturesque panoramas of two historic districts: Kazimierz and Old Podgórze. Among these magic spots, the area around the Cricoteka occupies a special position. This distinctive architectural form could be regarded as an iconic building creating a new and attractive image for the public spaces which are newly emerging as a result of the urban policy to revitalize the Vistula Riverfront. Undoubtedly, this is an outcome of a successful architecture design strategy to adapt the old industrial building into a museum and performing art centre devoted to the creative legacy of Tadeusz Kantor.

The Cricoteka Centre is a plugged-in place in two senses: 1) aesthetic, as an artistic message and a sign of the semiotic metaphor of the map, and 2) functional, as a place having its

² This is the reference to the book of Kevin Lynch titled: "*What time is this place*".

use value, mostly due to its accessibility and cultural programme. Apart from the Cricoteka, this node includes a new cluster of lively places of Old Podgórze and – on the other side of the Vistula River – places along Mostowa Street, up to Wolnica Square, and Museum of Urban Engineering in Kazimierz. The liveliness of this area results also from a uniquely attractive location and the spill over effect of a relatively new construction of the footbridge called “Bernatka”. The positive impact of this pedestrian bridge on the surrounding area is so significant that we can even recognize the places grouped around this construction as new node of urbanity in the historic centre of the City of Krakow. Looking on the Kazimierz side from the terrace smartly arranged below the “Cricoteka Bridge” we can face the ambiguity of unspoken questions. Like in the “*The Death Class*”, we can sense the play between the past, identified with the historic components of Kazimierz panorama, and the unknown future exemplified by the former industrial sites still queuing for redevelopment.

5. Summary

Play and place – key concepts of culture and the art of urbanism – are designated the main compositional axis of this paper. It was also assumed that these two terms can be regarded as an interesting thematic axis of the reflection on the “common denominator” of the two main currents of contemporary urbanistic thoughts: anthropological and architectural.

The methodological concept outlined here, called “*nodes of urbanity*” by the author, has both structural and anthropological connotations. It refers to the network theory of the city because these cluster-places are regarded as the nodes of urban networks. Emphasizing architectural and urbanistic perspective we can regard the “*nodes of urbanity*” as significant places in the “*urbanistic construction*” of the area designated for a given development project or a planning document. Semantically, the term “*urbanistic construction*” seems even more appropriate because it also bears the suggestion that in the time of the polarized and “*deconstructed city*” the urbanistic profession should play a more profound role in the integration of fragmented spaces. This, in turn, may also imply that urbanists and architects should focus on these places which – in terms of the lifestyle and behavioural settings – are more attractive than others, and therefore, have stronger integrative potentials. To fulfil this mission, however, architects and urbanists should open their professional sensitivity to the new social phenomena characteristic of the “physiology”, “anatomy” and “physiognomy” of urban places.

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