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PLAYFUL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SPACE AND THE AUDIENCE

GRA PRZESTRZENI Z CZŁOWIEKIEM

Abstract

Architecture very often interacts with people by showing them different types of behaviour and provoking specific actions. This article discusses public spaces of various specificity whose shapes, textures, and hidden values and symbols exert an impact on people's mood, their ways of spending free time, and even on the formation of social relations.

Keywords: a game of architecture, human activities, square, park, Warsaw escarpment

Streszczenie

Architektura nierzadko wchodzi w interakcję z człowiekiem, sugerując mu różne formy zachowania, wywołując określone aktywności. W tekście przeanalizowano przestrzenie publiczne o odmiennej specyfice, w których różnorodna atmosfera, kształt, faktura i ukryte wartości i symbole, wpływają na nastrój jednostki, sposób spędzania czasu a nawet na budowanie relacji międzyludzkich.

Słowa kluczowe: gra architektury, aktywności ludzkie, plac, park, skarpa warszawska

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1. Introduction

Architecture very often interacts with people by showing them different types of behaviour, thus inducing specific activities. People design, create and manage space; however, they are also an inseparable component of it. A given space exerts a certain influence on its audience. This process takes place on the basis of feedback.

Therefore, spatial reality as well as architecture should always be considered from the human perspective. The space sends out a signal to its users which, upon its receipt, evokes a specific behaviour. A dynamic process consisting in an incentive and response to it can be observed here [7, p. 41]. The examples subject to the foregoing analysis deal with the living (plants, one person or a group of people) as well as non-living matter (squares, buildings, sculptures). A certain game may be spotted among these elements...

2. Piazza del Campo in Siena

The motto engraved on the Porta Camollia welcomes visitors to the city with the following words: “Cor magis tibi Seni pandit” (“Siena has its heart wide open for you”). Siena is a Gothic city situated on the hills of Tuscany with numerous yellow and orange buildings with green shutters. The city itself is dominated by a high tower called the Palazzo Pubblico (the town hall). It is also home to one of the most famous and most beautiful squares in the world, namely the Piazza del Campo [6].

The shape of the square is based on the motive of a shell or fan with white and pink stripes. The characteristic feature of the Piazza del Campo is an outstanding harmony of colours applied in the square itself as well as in its surroundings (the orange shades of the awnings and umbrellas, the warm colours of the facades and the red roof tiles and stone floors). The square is located at the intersection of all the most important streets. It is also where important historic events occurred and now where city life bustles. On a daily basis the Piazza del Campo is visited by flocks of pigeons as well as by crowds of city dwellers and visitors to the city who spend their time lying, sitting or walking on the square. The city centre is closed to traffic. Even cyclists are banned from entering the city centre therefore pedestrians are those with the strongest rights and feel totally free when in the square. The social life bustles in the cafe-gardens and restaurants located around the shell. There are benches protruding from the mediaeval facades where people of all ages, from children to the elderly, rest during the day and at night.

In the past squares like the Piazza del Campo used to play the role of a social salon where all the most important social events took place including both unplanned everyday events such as trade fairs or frequent fights and organised celebrations such as ruler’s welcome parties, sermons by St. Bernard from the nearby pulpit or public executions of heretics. At present, apart from the solemn horse races taking place twice a year (on Palio di Siena), the square plays the role of a social area where people can take a walk, have a rest, show off or watch the others.

According to one of the most prominent theorists of modern architecture, Christopher Alexander, attractive walls of public spaces are the warranty of bustling life. The first stage consists in taking the passer-by through a gate from which an attractive view of a square is

to be seen. The passer-by is then encouraged to stop for a moment, e.g. by means of appealing shopping windows, newsstands, information boards or kiosks, which are the so called “pockets of activity”. The final stage embraces gradual engagement of the person so that he stays on the square for a longer time which in turn results in other people starting to gather at the borders of the urban interior thus drawing attention of other passers-by. Thanks to that, activities of the users may become more and more unrestrained and therefore start to influence the inside of the square as well [1, p. 609].

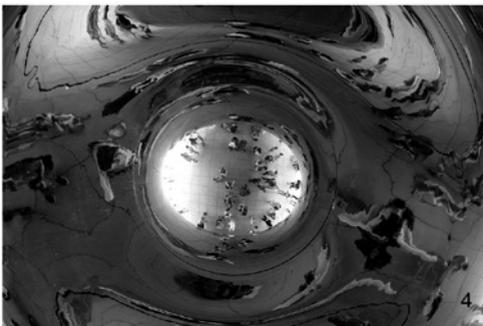
In what way does the harmonious space of Piazza del Campo stimulate human behaviour and, what is most important, attracts people? How does the individual start playing the subtle game of architecture, complying with its rules?

Most of this is determined by the unique terrain relief and exceptional floor of the square which, in the 19th century, was paved with red brick replacing the original fieldstone foundation. “Eight white lines protrude from the city centre dividing the Campo into nine parts which symbolise the reign of the “Nine” – the nine officials elected from among craftspeople, traders and bankers who were responsible for the period of the city’s greatest development (1287–1355) [6]. At the same time the geometric segments of the square are a symbol of the folds of the protective coat outstretched by the Mother of God [3, p. 339].

The surface of the Piazza del Campo, which forms a market square, radiates inside thus creating a foreground and background. The uneven floor, pastel colours as well as attractive slopes amaze all the visitors to the city. The amphitheatrical nature of the square and water splashing from the located nearby Fonte Gaia encourage visitors to take a rest and relax even for a single moment. People sitting on the floor that is not a lawn in the park are nowhere to be seen. Here in Siena, in the home of architecture and art, one may forget about all social conventions and customs. The users of the square cannot resist the temptation of having a moment of relaxation on the bricked surface. Despite a variety of restaurants and cafes, it is the floor itself that attracts the greatest number of guests who sit there, eat their take-away meals and, most of all, observe the others.

A major role in this small “game” of architecture is played by the light. The warm climate of Tuscan towns attracts crowds of tourists; however during siesta the strong light becomes extremely disturbing. The shade cast by the tower of Palazzo Pubblico, which is the seat of the municipal authorities, moves as if in the sundial thereby imposing its own rhythm and direction of movement on the square users since most of them sit exactly in its shade. A careful observer may admire this intriguing game of buildings which dictates its own terms. The best view can be seen from the Torre del Mangia tower, which is approximately 90 metres high, crowned with a white stony bell tower.

The Piazza del Campo constitutes an example of a carefully planned urban form. It is hard to believe that the mediaeval constructors had such great intuition since the towns that they built were not based on any spatial development plan. Frequently, the process of building settlements was slow thereby enabling constant evolution and adjustment of the space to serve urban functions. Jan Gehl emphasised the fact that Piazza del Campo earned the name of a proper meeting space that meets the needs and expectations of its present and past users. This is mainly thanks to its compact spatial structure, orientation towards the sun and the climate as well as owing to an astonishing fountain with suitable location and cross-section of the square in the form of a basin [4, p. 41].



- III. 1. People sitting on the brick floor of the Piazza del Campo in Siena
- III. 2. Warsaw escarpment as an amphitheatre
- III. 3, 4. Games and playful interactions at the Crown Fountain in the Millennium Park
- III. 4. Interactive sculpture – Cloud Gate in Chicago

3. Warsaw escarpment

Another example of terrain relief that exerts a direct impact on the types of human actions as well as on the creation of interpersonal relations is the space of Warsaw Escarpment. This green thread meandering through the entire capital city of Warsaw, from Buraków to Konstancin, connects the Vistula Valley with the postglacial upland and builds the identity of the city.

Warsaw Escarpment used to be overgrown with a forest, and therefore its individual parts exhibit different characters. In some places, it is represented by greenery in the form of contemporary squares and monumental parks and gardens originating from the turn of the 19th century. In other places, the escarpment is intersected with streets accompanied by frontages of buildings, stairs, footbridges and areas of unarranged greenery that cannot be found in other cities – these include, for instance, the Skarpa Ursynowska nature reserve together with its surrounding meadows and peat bogs. Apart from its aesthetic and defensive functions, which were of utmost significance in the period when Warsaw was established, Warsaw escarpment performs the role of an ecological corridor thus initiating the city aeration system.

Warsaw escarpment writes various scenarios for the inhabitants. Some of its areas which offer a peaceful linear communication tract hidden from the noise of the city encourage visitors to have a stroll or go jogging there. Why do people desire to walk there? Despite the lack of continuity of the path, which is interrupted by fenced institutions or streets, Warsaw escarpment seems to be uniquely interesting. This undoubtedly results from the romantic genius loci which shows its guests around winding, mysterious slopes and passages that are covered from the wind.

According to Gordon Cullen, an urban landscape features a specific art of relations – a dramatic phenomenon composed of both buildings and trees, traffic, nature or water. People get an impression of the inside of streets, squares or parks by means of a series of images that consist of the existing and the appearing view. Warsaw escarpment together with its variegated relief exerts its influence on the people “changing blind facts into a tension-filled situation” [2, p. 8–12]. Pedestrians climb up a sandy path to finally see the outstanding view of the Vistula Valley and then climb down and turn to unexpectedly spot the tower of a nearby church. The mysteriousness of this place is the result of the game between the foreground and the background, between different heights and contrasts, a game in which various buildings are hidden from the audience to be then revealed, a game of opening and closing the space. The potential of Warsaw escarpment as a place where people desire to take a walk, not just to move mindlessly to a certain point, lies in the viewing sequences which are to be observed on its paths.

Similarly to the square in Siena, Warsaw escarpment also provokes its visitors to stay there for a longer time. Spontaneous winter games including, for example, snowman building or sledging, as well as summer time bike rides, picnics, rolling down the hill, and standing or sitting on a green slope can be seen there.

The “Hidden Dimension” by Edward T. Hall [5] gives an explanation why most people prefer to stop at remote areas such as mountain edges or woodland boundaries. Contrary to the centre of space, when being in a remote place an individual can keep his distance from other people as well as avoid standing out in a crowd.

The escarpment offers exceptionally beautiful views that outstretch from its crown. The area located at the height of the Old Town and the Royal Route, especially along Krakowskie Przedmieście and Nowy Świat, constitutes the most important viewing point as regards the historical development of Warsaw. Other viewing points are situated, most of all, in the area of the old aristocratic residences constituting monumental palace-garden complexes [9, p. 120].

The comfort of getting a distant view as well as cultural events that are held in the space under Warsaw escarpment (e.g. at the New Town Market Square) attract crowds of visitors. On warm days the green hill, like a natural amphitheatre, is full of individuals or

groups of people sitting there to watch. It may seem that these people look at the Vistula Valley that emerges from behind Wisłostrada and the right side of Warsaw... but first and foremost they observe others. As Tyrmand wrote: “There are people for whom watching others is as absorbing and addictive as biting seeds (...). For such people the intersection of Marszałkowska Street and Aleje Jerozolimskie in the early afternoon hours becomes a source of great pleasure similar to that experienced when you wash your feet with water with St. John’s salt after a long walk in tight shoes in the July sun – the pleasure is so strong that the person experiencing it wants to keep his feet in the bowl for the next three years” [10, p. 103].

The architecture of this place builds its atmosphere and energy, and this is what attracts or repels visitors. According to Juhani Pallasmaa, one of the tasks of architecture consists in reflection of the passing away of history. “The time of architecture is time frozen: in the most magnificent buildings time is frozen”. This means that buildings may take you to the past, just like a time machine. In a narrow mediaeval street the sensitive eyes and other organs of perception will spot and feel the dirty sandals going on the procession to a Gothic cathedral [8, p. 65–66].

An original, intimate atmosphere can be felt in Profesorska Street, which crosses the Warsaw escarpment. The street misleads its guests through a game of stairs, villas and wild gardens. Kolonia Profesorska, running from Myśliwiecka Street to Hoene-Wrońskiego Street, was built in the 1920s. A complex of more than a dozen single-family houses was designed and inhabited by architects from the Technical University of Warsaw. The idyllic and romantic character of this place is emphasised by a gate with the name of the street which takes visitors inside just like into a magical garden. This manner of spatial development where art, culture and nature permeate encourages visitors to contemplate or lovers to take a walk there. The architecture of abandoned villas brings the guests closer to their ancestors, thus stimulating the imagination and a nostalgia for interwar Warsaw.

4. Millennium Park in Chicago

An extremely peculiar example of space is the Millennium Park, which was set up over a railway and a ceiling that covers underground car parks. Therefore, the Millennium Park is considered by the inhabitants of Chicago and multiple tourists as the most amazing green roof in the world. The local architecture exerts a significant impact on the people by offering a variety of play and games. This contemporary complex that was opened for public in 2004 is situated in the city centre and covers an area of approximately 16 ha. It is composed of various functional zones for a wide spectrum of users. The group of its architects which included Skidmor and Owings & Merrill was supported by well-known architects Frank Gehry and Thomas Beeby [11].

Visitors are attracted to the park by the architectonic structure of the Cloud Gate, which is situated on the ATAT Plaza. This steel sculpture was designed by the world famous artist, Anish Kapoor. The design, which was selected in a contest, refers with its form and colour to liquid mercury and is commonly called the “bean” since its shape is similar to this leguminous plant. A deformed city panorama, especially the Historic Michigan Boulevard District and the local sky, is reflected in the silver surface of the installation. Its organic oval

shape stimulates social interaction and plays with the audience, thus creating an attraction that resembles a mirror chamber in the amusement park. The users surround the sculpture and go under its arch observing their own deformed faces as well as interesting reflections merged into this fairytale city world. The Cloud Gate intrigues as well as provokes laughter and unpredictable behaviour both in children and adults. Each visitor comes to the metal surface and preserves his original artistic poses and effects in photographs. The sculpture has become an icon of Chicago that is well-known not only in the USA but also worldwide. The architecture of this place provides visitors with an illusion and the optical tricks applied here allow nobody to remain indifferent to it.

A greater rumble can only be heard at the Crown Fountain where children wearing costumes run around the water surface. The modern form of the fountain uses the latest achievements in the field of audiovisual art. Two 15-metre high rectangular towers constructed from glass blocks have diodes installed which enable projection of digital video films. Portraits of the inhabitants are the most common motive displayed on the external surface of these structures. Images are integrated with the water splashing unexpectedly from the mouth of displayed characters thus creating a spectacular show. The youngest participants do not stay passive but on the contrary, they splash in the water and play games, thereby becoming actors in this water show. This interactive installation was designed by a Catalanian, Jaume Plens, famous for his artistic works that represent conceptual art, including light and water dualism. This object, which is quite controversial due to its large size and aesthetics, has quickly joined the canon of American pop culture, thus meeting the entertainment needs of the inhabitants [12]. This place integrates whole families offering an inimitable playground and providing the possibility of escape from the weather on a boiling hot day.

5. Summary

On the one hand, architecture reflects its times and creators; however, on the other hand, it tells us a lot about its contemporary audience. The creator builds a record of space that inspires people to a variety of behaviours. Buildings, original floors as well as artistic installations play with the audience through different optical tricks, illusions and mysteries. The atmosphere of a place, its shape, texture as well as its hidden values and symbols influence the mood of an individual, his manner of spending free time and even the creation of social relations.

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