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THE GAME IN SPACE – THE PHENOMENON OF AN URBAN GAME¹

ZABAWA W PRZESTRZENI – FENOMEN GRY MIEJSKIEJ

Abstract

In the paper, the phenomenon of the urban game is presented in the context of its applicability to architectural education. In the perception of the average inhabitant, the town is only a background for daily activities, and architecture is designed to secure his basic needs. The recent crisis in spatial interactions, analogous to the crisis in social interactions, can be overcome through skilful use of non-standard methods of activating inhabitants – fun and games.

Keywords: architectural education, urban game, space

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono zjawisko gier miejskich w kontekście możliwości wykorzystania jego potencjału jako narzędzia edukacji architektonicznej. W wyobrażeniu statystycznego mieszkańca miasto jest jedynie tłem dla codziennej aktywności, zaś architektura ma za zadanie zabezpieczyć jego podstawowe potrzeby. Współczesny kryzys interakcji przestrzennych, w analogii do kryzysu interakcji społecznych, można przezwyciężyć poprzez umiejętne wykorzystywanie niestandardowych metod aktywizacji mieszkańców – zabaw i gier.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja architektoniczna, gra miejska, przestrzeń

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*The city is 'the place', it is the way of being in the space
which allows the articulation of our feelings and sensations towards the space*
[5, p. 19]

1. Time and space

The inescapable intersection of time and space is a distinctive trait in the history of western civilization. The initially hierarchical layout of places that was specific to the Middle Ages, began to gain an open, infinite form in the 17th century (thanks to Galileo's discoveries). Time has become an important parameter of a space – now regarded as a point in time [3]. Contemporary human lives in simultaneous times, in the era of the juxtaposition of contrary things, close and distant, concentrated and distributed. Growing globalization results in a recognition that the recent World seems to be a net of intersecting directions, where the essence of time and place are relativized through developing media, Internet, and modern communication.

The space of the contemporary city is non-continuous, crisscrossed. Thanks to the fast public and private transportation the local nature of a space has been lost and personal experience of distance is distorted. On the one hand it is dominated by architecture: the life of the ordinary man is revolves around built-up neighbourhoods, among the streets and squares. Moreover, the pursuit to maximize the use of available space impairs the sense of human scale. Buildings are balanced by greenery ordered and trimmed only to a small degree, subordinated to the demands of the urban tissue, or arranged more freely, but closed in municipal parks. On the other hand – architecture very often becomes something completely obvious to the inhabitants, even to the limit of being imperceptible, not worthy of their attention and sacrifice of their valuable time.

The citizens of the modern metropolis move between points suspended in space (home, work, school/preschool, recreation) nearly unconsciously, depriving themselves of the pleasure of communing with the place, articulating their feelings and experiencing the surrounding area. As a result, they lose the ability to correctly interpret the complex relationships between the individual elements of the city.

In the words of Michael Wroblewski, one of the problems that currently bother sociologists the most is the crisis in **social interactions** – meaning activities that arise from “orientation on other people” and “are an answer to their behaviour and actions” [7, p. 289]. Paraphrasing the above definition, in contemporary architecture we can find a crisis in **spatial interactions** (the relationship between the space and its users) – meaning the actions of people's orientation on the surrounding space and their answer to its impact.

2. The game in space. The crisis diagnosed

The aforementioned lack of understanding of the rules governing any given space leads to a disequilibrium in the position of architects and urban planners in modern society. Projects concentrated on improving the condition of public spaces in cities often meet with indifference or, in extreme cases, with hostility from the stakeholders. Regulations aiming at the achievement of a harmonious image of the city are perceived as an attack on the freedom of citizens. The immediate environment is treated by the locals with disregard. Common

in society is the lack of consent to create a platform for discourse, polemics, or creative criticism of the proposed solutions. In return, there is a belief that “these matters” should be taken care of by someone else. Social participation and the adoption of democratic accountability for the public space is associated with active contribution, practice and personal experience of it. This is similar to working on the interpretation of a difficult literary text or an allegorical painting by the Dutch masters. It requires commitment, raising awareness, and dedicating time to the analysis of individual fragments and the relationships between them. Understanding comes later, but then often accompanied by delight and euphoria.

The aforementioned Michal Wroblewski sees an opportunity to overcome the crisis in social interactions in post-modern play [7, p. 296]. **Post-modernity**, the successor to **modernity**, is not merely its critique. It reworks the characteristic values in the search for a new quality and solutions that will prove to be effective in a postmodern society. To paraphrase again – we can search for the cure for the lack of **spatial interaction** in the modern city in the concept of playing and having fun. Using the phenomenon of the **urban game** (location-based game), has recently come into its renaissance.

What is an urban game? What does its growing popularity imply?

As we can read on popular Internet forums, the urban game is a new form leisure activity, popular in many cities around the world. Its sources can be found in a combination of actions such as flash mob, street happenings, role-playing computer games (RPG) or tactical role-playing games (TRPG) as well as in scout chases². The basic principle in the organization of the game is the use of urban space as an element of the game. The city then becomes a giant game board on which the players – like pieces – move from one point to another, playing pre-determined roles and performing tasks prepared by the organizers. Initiatives are characterized by a huge variety. They can be divided into:

- the topic: the story – issues related to universal history, events important to the local community (historical or contemporary), fiction (stories based on legends, criminal riddles, characters and literary threads, stories invented by the organizers, science fiction, historical fiction) or, the lack of the story.
- the envisaged objective: educational, integration, casual fun, celebration of holidays, interactive sightseeing.
- the manner of organization: grassroots, organized by urban game and street happenings enthusiasts, or commercial events planned at the request of individuals or businesses, for specific events (for example: a bachelorette party, corporate events).

The connecting element of these activities is always the urban space. Depending on the subject and the degree of dissemination of the game (typically the Internet is used for this purpose) the number of participants that takes part in the competition varies from a few to several hundred players. Currently, similar activities are held in almost every major Polish city. The most important name related to the organization of urban games in Poland is Krzysztof Bielecki, creator of the project *Urban Playground* (2005), which instantly gained enormous popularity and triggered an avalanche of similar initiatives across the country, for example those of Szymon Dabrowski (Poznań). In Poznan, another initiative was established – the tourist game, based on the idea of an urban game – an independent action allowing interactive sightseeing of the city space.

² According to http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gra_miejska [access: 10.06.2015].

Referring to the definition, every game has a double face: “the child, while playing, on the one hand learns generalization and abstraction, on the other hand control of their own actions in relation to the formulated principles” [7, p. 292] On the one hand, it has a strictly mapped set of rules, where features such as prediction and calculation matter (it is important to achieve the intended purpose of the game, which is winning), on the other hand every game is a reflection of **disinterested social interactions**³, which are characterized by freedom and loosening of rules. Understood in this way, the action becomes a useful educational tool through which the child (or adult) learn to live in society.

Similarly – through an **urban game** – players not only realize the goals of the organizers but also, indirectly, learn about life in the space of the city, rediscovering its merits and flaws. A suitably prepared game in this case becomes an important source of information on the city, its architecture and urban planning. Participants voluntarily engage in an analysis of the plans of the city, expanding their knowledge of its history, familiarizing themselves with the changes that have taken place in the space, and experiencing and assessing the given reality. It can be assumed that the effectiveness of such actions is much greater than normal “guided walks”. Importantly, the theme of the game seems not to be crucial in advancing spatial aptitudes – activities related to the history of architecture can help, but are not necessary. A group participating in an interesting gameplay of any story is likely to remember more significant details regarding the architecture and urban design of the city, than a similar group on a sight-seeing tour of the same area in a traditional way. In addition, the sporting rivalry intensifies the need for taking new challenges. A demonstration of this is provided by the numerous comments appearing online on forums related to particular games and still increasing attendance in subsequent editions.

3. The phenomenon of an urban game

The phenomenon of the urban game raises the question of the creative use of spatial values of the city. Referring to the specificity of architectural and urban design, the designer’s work also resembles, to a certain extent, the game located in the space of his mind – a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle in which each element must find its place and fill the role it has to play. A particular juxtaposition of “building blocks” is accompanied by both predetermined rules and a certain amount of freedom. As a result of the creative activities, a vivid space should be constructed, following the flexible needs of users, harmonious and balanced.

Urban game design allows for translation of abstract (at least for most users) concepts into concrete actions in the tissue of the city. It enables players to look at their own city from a new, previously unknown perspective and provides an opportunity to understand the multi-faceted processes in its space. As Johan Huizinga wrote – a game is an action that “runs within certain limits of time, space and meaning”, “in a visible order, according to voluntarily accepted rules, outside the sphere of material usefulness or necessity” [4, p. 189–190]. The atmosphere of playfulness, on the one hand leads to a feeling of unreality, but on the other it allows for the introduction of children’s elation, laughter, and delight during its experience.

³ In contrast to the **interested interactions** – based on emotional, business or economic reasons, which are characterized by rationality and the desire for maximum efficiency.

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