THE GARDEN CITIES OF KATOWICE: A STUDY OF CITYHOLIA

Abstract: Today we are witnessing some sudden changes concerning the perception of the urban space in Poland. The social and spatial consequences of the processes of rapid and chaotic development and transformation of the cities during the last two decades have been thoroughly investigated and criticized by the specialists from the fields of architecture, sociology and philosophy, and even covered in some recent popular bestseller books. It is thus not an exaggeration to state that the quality of the urban space is becoming an increasingly important issue for many Poles. It is striking, however, that the mentioned scholarly work offers more criticism than positive, innovative solutions for the future. It seems to be concentrated more on the defense of the modernist architectural heritage, the preservation of modernist urban developments and inventing new functions for old modernist buildings than creating ideas for the urban spaces of the future. The local Silesian context seems to fit perfectly into this pattern.

Keywords: garden, city, space, modernism, Silesia.

The myth of modernism

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The debate on the quality of the urban space of the Silesian metropolis was initiated by the controversial demolition of the old building of the main railway station in Katowice. The building, nicknamed Brutal by the city’s inhabitants, was a modernist construction from the 1950s, designed in accordance with the brutalist tendencies in the modern architecture of those times. In its best years, it was admired for its concrete pillars in the form of chalices, however in its last period, it was also given as an example of a nonfunctional, oppressive and neglected space. In addition to this, many of the older citizens of Katowice still remembered that the local authorities had decided to tear down some precious old tenements in the historical center of the city to make space for the building. Despite those arguments, Brutal soon became the subject of the famous “battle of Modernism” in Katowice. As the demolition date was approaching, the building started to gain more and more defenders, including local artists, journalists and even sportsmen. The well-known Polish skier Marek Doniec carried out an interesting project at the object during its clearing in winter 2011. The action, called Brutal, was a mix of sport activities and artistic performance including the use of the infrastructure of the building as a site for a ski jibbing session and the documentation of the process of dismantling the former railway station in the form of an internet gallery and a photoblog. As the author stated, the project was intended both as a tribute to the unique building and also as an occasion to create new, temporal contexts for the decontextualized construction. After five years,2 “The battle of Modernism” in Katowice continues. Its recent focus seems to be the building of the Bureau of Artistic Events, which is popularly rumoured as doomed for demolition. The artists grouped around the institution have already created the project

called *Widmo* [Phantom], presenting the spaces and objects of an uncertain (i.e. phantom) status in Katowice and also raising the question of the reconstruction of the modernist center of the city. The project includes an exhibition of installations, on-site activities and a publication containing interviews with the artists and a critical text by the renowned Silesian art historian Irma Kozina, recounting the story of Brutal. Isn't it really curious that so many voices are praising in a nostalgic manner the quality of the old urban planning and architecture instead of asking for new sites fitting their current needs?

**Cityholia**

Cityholia is an interesting term proposed by the renowned Silesian architect Tomasz Konior, the designer of the building of the National Symphonic Orchestra of the Polish Radio (*NOSPR*) in Katowice, intended as an important part of the Zone of Culture being developed in this city. In a recent interview for the Polish publisher Onet.pl, Konior points out that people living in modern cities have generally lost their traditional coordinates for the perception of the urban space. In his opinion, such traditional points of reference as the perpendicular grid of the streets, frontages, town squares, and parks, are absent from modern urban planning today. They disappeared decades ago, as a result of the changes introduced by the modernist movement, which, according to the architect, disturbed the relations between the people, architecture, and the city. It is striking, however, that in spite of that, modernism was still able to provide some kind of readable urban regulations, concerning the distances between the buildings, the location of the public places, the arrangement of the small architecture, etc. For many, modernism thus seems to appear as the last remembered period of order in urbanization. As Tomasz Konior says: "We were standing over the abyss in the Modernist period. Now we have made a couple of steps forward..."
The sentimental comeback of modernism can be perceived as a result of the attempts to bring back some order into modern urban planning and also to restore the right proportions between the people and the structure, bringing back the right scale. Those seem to be processes of melancholic nature however, as the wish appears almost impossible to fulfil. As Konior observes, modernism made a brutal intervention into the important relations established during the almost two thousand and five hundred years of evolution, counting from the era of the Greek polis. What happened then could be described as a radical switch from the sensual mode of participation in the city structure to an abstract one. During the modernist period, the concept of citizenship changed its meaning – from the idea of psycho-physical participation in the local community to the concept of affiliation based on such abstract criteria as zone coding, administrative planning or affiliation with one’s labor institution. What we lost then, according to Konior, is some kind of the “city genetics”, a map of the city behavior natural to all its citizens.

The City of Gardens

At a first glance, Katowice seems to be in the same difficult situation as thousands other cities worldwide, trying to redevelop their own, unique “city genetics” in the times when whole cultures and also particular cities frequently change their narrations and politics. However, during the city’s preparations for competing for the title of The European Capital City of Culture 2016, it became apparent that it probably still possesses such a unique code natural to its citizens. To understand its nature, it is necessary to move back a hundred years to the period of the rapid industrial development of the whole Silesia region.

Among the Silesian cities, the 150 years old Katowice is one of the younger ones. In fact, in the beginning of the 20th century it was still a loose project for a city, rather than a well-designed, organized urban area. However, that changed rapidly as a result of the unique ideas of Anton Uthemann, director of the huge mining company, Giesche. In 1905, just three years after the publication of the revolutionary book Garden Cities of To-morrow by Ebenezer Howard, Uthemann decided to build an ideal garden-city on the banks of the Rawa river.\(^8\) In fact, not one, but two different huge projects were created in less than 15 years, in cooperation with the architects Emil and Georg Zillmann from

Charlottenburg. Those two realizations, today two districts of Katowice known as Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec, seemed to establish the legend of Katowice as a “city of gardens”.

Although designed by the same architects, Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec are considerably different. They seem to be two alternative variants of garden cities rather than elements of one logical project. Giszowiec, with its rather irregular form, consisting of a loose network of green areas interspersed with small family villas, each of which was designed individually in accordance with the designs of the local, traditional village houses, is all about the appreciation of nature. The colony of houses appears as a shy addition to a huge garden. The German journalist Anton Klaussmann even described it as a pearl of architecture hidden in a forest. Nikiszowiec, in contrast, is all about geometry. It is a compact set of block of flats, based on one universal standard form, copied in a regular pattern. Each of the blocks has an inner yard filled with urban green. Nature is present there, however it seems to be subordinated to the logic of the abstract architectural order. If to treat both of those urban realizations as essential for the development of the idea of Katowice as a city of gardens, it is not an exaggeration to state that each of them promoted a specific perception of nature in the context of urban architecture. One of them offers the experience of huge areas of urban green (parks, gardens, forests), the other, the experience of nature in a micro scale, in the form of small city gardens incorporated into the geometric frame of the city (the idea of ajnfart). Is it possible, however, to recreate those experiences in the present situation?

The City of Gardens: a hundred years later

The city of Katowice competed for the title of the European Capital City of Culture 2016 with the slogan “Katowice – the City of Gardens”, in which the concept of garden was understood very broadly, including not only physical, but also metaphorical gardens, with all their associated complex and heterogeneous imagery. However, the idea of renovating the center of the city on the occasion was very down-to-earth and seemed to be based on a sentiment for the ideal cities of gardens such as the former Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec. In this context, it is important to mention that the center of the city had been reshaped in a modernist manner in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Not only was the new railway station built then, but also the buildings around the market square, and the huge sports and events hall called Spodek [Saucer]; in fact the whole center

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was rebuilt after World War II. Paraphrasing the words of Tomasz Konior quoted above, what had and still has to be done is to “take a couple of steps back from the edge of the abyss to remain on the ground”. This context tends to determine strongly the current debate on the actions to be undertaken both by the authorities and the local artists in the historic center of Katowice. The debate concerns not only the preservation of the heritage of modernism, but also the need to transgress the modernist architectural paradigm which had determined the character of Katowice’s city center, but is no longer compatible with the needs and standards of today’s urban living and seems not to correspond with the historical “city genetics” of Katowice, or the present habits of its citizens.

However, if we are to treat the metaphor of a “garden city” as a starting point for the project Katowice 2.0, we have to remember that the projects which the Zillmann brothers realized in old Katowice were not “garden cities” in the direct sense given by Howard in his book, but rather a kind of hybrid between “the garden city” and “the city as machine”. Just a few years after the publication of Garden Cities of To-morrow, the vision proposed by its author revealed its Utopian character. Howard’s ideal city was also a workers’ colony, however the project envisioned an equal balance between industrial and residential areas. Each garden city should be located in isolation from the industrial zone and another garden city. This, however, not only in the Silesian context, appeared as a mission impossible to realize. The dynamics of the growth of the industrial zones in those times was so high that the housing projects were developed not in anticipation of it, but rather in reaction to it, as the authorities needed to solve the mounting problems.

Referring this to the context of Katowice, it is important to note, however, that in the beginning of their existence, Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec perfectly fit the ideal project designed by Howard. Both colonies were built at some distance from each other, but it was easy to travel from one to the other, thanks to the local railway line nicknamed Balkan Express, which was free of charge. The workplaces were located in the neighboring cities of Janów (the coal mine Giesche, now Wieczorek), Szopienice and Roździeń (ironworks). Most importantly, both of the Zillmanns’ projects were built in a not yet determined context, in anticipation of the workers settling there in the future, so the architects were able to design housing for a limited number of people in accordance with the original idea of the “garden city” worked out by Howard. It was impossible, however, to maintain their “garden city” status for a longer time, as the development of the whole Silesian area was carried out by lots of independent agents. No other corresponding “garden city” projects were implemented, which resulted in the already mentioned change in proportions between the industrial and the green residential areas. In 1924 Giszowiec lost
its independent status at the administrative level and became part of the district of Janów. Nevertheless it preserved its unique spatial design until 1969, when the authorities of Katowice, in accordance with the global modernist trend, decided to promote the development of eleven-floor blocks of flats on its grounds.\textsuperscript{10} In sum, the context of the garden cities in Katowice seems to be complicated, as the projects were realized only partially and did not determine the whole city structure. In addition to this, they interfered with the influence of modernism on urban planning, which developed in the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. However, both Giszowiec (partially) and Nikiszowiec have preserved their unique character and can be treated as two ideal models of the special kind of experience of nature that developed on the scale of a city.

The micro scale

\textit{Ajnfart} is a word from the Silesian dialect. In a direct translation it means a gateway, an entrance to a building.\textsuperscript{11} However, a large part of its meaning would be lost if we stopped there, as it has gained a strong emotional connotation during its history. To understand some of its aspects it is enough to take a look at a picture of the Nikiszowiec colony in the summer, taken from the perspective of an airplane. What strikes the eyes of the spectator are the colours: regular sectors of juicy green fill the spaces between the buildings built of red brick. This is quite a surprise, as we hardly expect a miners’ housing colony being so green. In fact, of all of the Polish big urban areas, Silesia has the largest percentage of forests and urban green. To return to the \textit{ajnfart} – what is important is that the space connoted by this term is not limited to the gateway or passage leading to a building, but it also extends to the garden situated in the yard of the tenement.

The cultural role of the \textit{ajnfarts} was described insightfully by Małgorzata Szajnert in her bestseller book \textit{Czarny Ogród [Black Garden]}, whose action takes place in Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec and focuses on the daily lives of their citizens. We learn that the \textit{ajnfart} is not just an entrance space, but also a social space for relaxation, meetings, play and also for contact with nature for the people living in the industrial surroundings. This context of \textit{ajnfart} was exploited by the local street artists from Katowice in the 2011 project entitled \textit{Ajnfart Story}. The initiative was supported by the city authorities of Katowice, the


\textsuperscript{11} Ajnfart derives from German einfahrt – ‘entrance, gate’. 
cultural institution Katowice – The City of Gardens, and The Silesian Museum. The idea was to restore one of the old, neglected gateways near the Katowice railway station (12 Andrzeja street) by decorating it with a series of murals inspired by the ajnfart’s history and its climate. The gallery of murals created by Mona Tusz, Raspazjan, Magda Drobczyk and Miszmasz, the artists known from their previous mural projects in Katowice, can be still viewed today. The action was intended to draw attention to the ajnfart as a locus of daily activities, and the murals depicted a magic, ethereal dream world created in this space. However, to see the viability of the idea of the ajnfart, it is enough to enter one of those shady passages and discover that they are still a place to enjoy after work for many citizens.

The macro scale

While the ajnfarts seem to involve an intimate contact with nature, brought down to a human scale, there is also another dimension of the urban green in Katowice. Its presence seems to be strongly correlated with the experience of the relational space and the idea of emptiness. The American pragmatist philosopher, Richard Shusterman, has studied this type of experience in the context of the development of post-Cold War Berlin. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the city gained a large number of mainly postindustrial and post-military areas, which according to the American philosopher established a new type of spatial experience, where large empty, decontextualized spaces present themselves in their emptiness. This kind of experience also seems to exist in the Silesian context, as the whole region is filled with a similar type of post-industrial areas accompanied by large areas of urban green. It is significant that the artists engaged in the Ajnfart Story initiative mentioned above also presented a video project entitled Silens, confronting the images of decontextualized industrial objects with their neighboring natural landscapes. If we perceive the Giszowiec colony as a model in this situation, it should be remembered that the idea of an ideal garden city also foresaw a balance between the industrial zone and the large areas of the urban green, which were separated from each other, but

15 T. Rybok, J.W. Gawlik, Silens, a video project, artists home site: www.uppersilesian.blogspot.com (acces date 01.07.2016).
produced a specific kind of tension in experience, as both of these different realms were experienced daily by the workers. The process of the destabilization of this equilibrium, which began in the modernist period in urban planning, created the large decontextualised spaces that started to determine the spatial experience of the city’s inhabitants in a more dominant way.

Surprisingly, the experience of large empty spaces seems to be also regarded of value in the current urban plans for Katowice. Thus, it will be translated into architectural realizations in multiple ways. According to the Polish philosopher of culture Ewa Rewers, the architecture connoting emptiness often produces sad, nostalgic feelings. However, there are also some interesting attempts to incorporate emptiness in the form of the presentation, with no special connotations.¹⁶ It seems that this has (partially) happened in the case of the newly formed Zone of Culture in Katowice. The zone is composed of four large institutional buildings: The hall of Spodek, The Silesian Museum, The NOSPR and The Katowice Congress Center. Of those four objects, three were built in the recent five years; only the characteristic, saucer-shaped hall of Spodek comes from the 1970s and is also known as an icon of modernism in Katowice. It is important to remember that the context of the zone is also determined by the huge modernist monument of the Silesian uprising, situated opposite the Spodek. The area of the Zone of Culture functions quite well as a whole. It is noticeable that two of the mentioned buildings provide strong relational context, which seems to project on the two others.

The Katowice Congress Center was designed by JEMS architects as an irregular block, covered by large geometrical areas of grass planted on its roof. It is important to note that contrary to the modernist tradition of architecture, the form is complicated and is not separated from the neighboring buildings. Thanks to a system of paths and footbridges, it is connected with the NOSPR building and The Silesian Museum. Strikingly, the latter one seems to have been built with the same concept of relational space in mind. The project consists of some old, renovated industrial buildings, accompanied by transparent new buildings in the form of cubes, revealing the installations located inside them, but also of empty, postindustrial areas in between the buildings. The concept of exposing the empty spaces in the form of urban green (The Congress Centre) and the industrial zone (The Silesian Museum), which interplay with the buildings, seems to correspond logically with the perception of such areas which had developed in the context of Katowice. It is really interesting that a similar phenomenon can be observed in Japanese urban planning. It was described by the leading Japanese architect Kishō Kurokawa in his book entitled

¹⁶ E. Rewers, Post-Polis, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 43.
Intercultural Architecture: The Philosophy of Symbiosis. Kurokawa points out that there seems to be a specific logic in Japanese design which finds its manifestation in contrasting dynamic oppositions. The phenomenon of ma, Japanese “transitional space,” provokes the senses and blurs the borders between the inner and the outer in experience. Trying to define ma, Kurokawa makes a comparison between architecture and calligraphy: “In Chinese calligraphy, the space between the signs is more important than the signs themselves (…) Ma does not force opposing elements into compromise or harmony, but provides the key to their living symbiosis”. It is important to note that cities like Tokyo and Katowice are involved in very dynamic processes of reshaping the city structure, which are measured not in hundreds of years but definitely shorter time intervals; this probably accounts for the popularity of relational architecture in their urban planning.

In the described context, the whole project of the Zone of Culture appears as an attempt to transgress the modernist heritage of the city center, however not by negation, but rather through dialogue. That is how Tomasz Konior describes his own design of NOSPR, when he admits that the NOSPR building had to be somewhat modernist in character as a single, monofunctional object, however its context was designed to change this impression. This strategy is also visible in other projects in Katowice, such as the vertical gardens in Katowice market square or the exposition of the Rawa river (city beach) in the same area, which also appear as attempts at overcoming the modernist, monofunctional character of those places. Does it make Katowice the dreamt city of gardens? Well, there is no cure for Cityholia, as the ideal city had never existed. Nevertheless the quality of the citizens’ life can be improved.

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KATOWICKIE MIASTA – OGRODY: STUDIUM MIASTOCHOLII (streszczenie)

Jesteśmy współcześnie świadkami burzliwej debaty poświęconej przestrzeni miejskiej w naszym kraju. Jej efektem jest zarówno szeroka zmiana społeczna dotycząca postrzegania roli planowania miejskiego w codziennym życiu jak i intensywny rozkwit wyspecjalizowanego dyskursu w tej kwestii. Jakkolwiek, ten ostatni zdaje się zaskakująco często rozwijać w kierunku obrony modernistycznego dziedzictwa w architekturze i planowaniu miejskim przy równoczesnej krytyce rozwiązań współczesnych. Kontekst śląski nie jest w tej mierze odosobniony. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie roli jaką pełnią pre-modernistyczne i modernistyczne modele urbanistyczne w powstaniu i realizacji idei Katowic jako miasta – ogrodów.

Słowa kluczowe: ogród, miasto, przestrzeń, modernizm, Śląsk.

7. *The Katowice Congress Centre.* The hall of Spodek visible in the background
8. *The Katowice Congress Centre.* View on the NOSPR building
9. View on Spodek from The Katowice Congress Centre
10. Irregular block of The Katowice Congress Centre