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COMMON RESPONSIBILITY AND PUBLIC SPACE

WSPÓLNA ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚĆ A PRZESTRZEŃ PUBLICZNA

Abstract

The goal of this article is to warn Polish society about the effects of contemporary transformations on the public environment. It is a form of a manifesto, referring to the current fragmentation of public space and its further social segregation. It is also a trial to compare Polish society of the individuals and Dutch mass-consuming society I grew up in. The text is my personal opinion on current conditions of urban space, as well as on the obligation of the public space users towards one another, and the designers towards the inhabitants of their designs.

Keywords: public spaces, social fragmentation, architectural ethics, gated communities

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ostrzeżenie społeczeństwa polskiego przed wpływem współczesnych transformacji na domenę publiczną w miastach. Wypowiedź ta jest formą manifestu, odnoszącego się do obserwowanej obecnie fragmentacji przestrzeni miejskiej i wynikającej z niej społecznej segregacji oraz próbą porównania polskiego społeczeństwa indywidualistów z holenderskim społeczeństwem masowej konsumpcji, w którym przyszło mi wzrastać. Zaprezentowany tekst jest moją prywatną opinią na temat warunków, jakie oferowane są ludziom przez współczesne przestrzenie publiczne, a także zobowiązań, jakie powinni mieć użytkownicy tych przestrzeni w stosunku do siebie, a projektanci w stosunku do odbiorców ich twórczości.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczna fragmentacja przestrzeni publicznych, etyka architektoniczna, osiedla strzeżone

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I understand that the individual perspective like mine in current design process has lost its importance. The design industry is primarily focused on profit, status and exclusion of the less fortunate. In the design process there is no place left for hobos, and no other attitude than to force them out. But where are they supposed to go, if not to the public spaces? Even there they are only allowed to sleep on unfriendly benches. How many 'unwanted' people do we need in the public realm to realize that something is not working? In the opinion of Geert Bekeert [1], influential Dutch Architectural critic: "The big mistake lays in the fact that the architect sees the architecture as his objective and not the living human. The living human is for him nothing else then spoiling the fun, because he doesn't offer himself as a static manipulative element, as a lifeless construction material, because it is not satisfied with the position the architect gives him but wants to realize his own originality"¹.

Do we want careless designers to be in charge on how we are living and communicating with each other? Of course, nobody wants to live next to a homeless person. But what if somebody would stand up and say it is your individual obligation to help the outcasts.

Exclusion is a trend. But is this exclusion really giving us a high living quality? Does this exclusion contribute for all the other gated communities in the world? I am afraid, that we are not solving a problem, we are only relocating and thereby enhancing it.

These walls and fences won't be necessary when we start to care about one another. Frank van Klingeren, Dutch architect specialized in socially focused design, presents appropriate examples of the need of social interactions. According to him, this need is a basic human instinct, stimulated by the thin separation of public and private. Van Klingeren calls this the 'camping principal', as it might be easily noticed that under minimal living conditions, e.g., when camping out, the sociability increases. This can be also observed when we show the others with pride what we make ourselves. So why are we so vulnerable to mass consuming? Is it because we are 'evolutionally constructed' in the way to believe that to own more means to have a higher status?

It is an instinct of man to accomplish his own dreams because this is what makes him proud. But we don't need an architect that explains how we should live. We need an expert that helps us to shape our home, and its relations with the surrounding. We do not need a salesman with nice visualizations that will never become real, but a designer who feels responsible for society and writes possible scenario's to (offering solutions) find solutions to social problems. We might refer to Amos Rapoport [3], the founder of Environment Behavior Studies as well:

"It is a normal phenomenon that the living human can't rely on the architect any more. Because he knows, aware or unaware, that the architect will on some point escape him, that he will have his own will driven against everybody else, to realize his own dream"².

Maybe therefore, we need a critical institution that corrects the design industry as Manfredo Tafuri [4], famous architectural historic critic, suggests in his book: *"Theories and history of architecture"*³. In this book he tries to keep distant from the mainstream design critics who only write positive articles to improve their own position. Amos Rapoport is also looking for a critical institution but he is focused on the importance of 'sociology of the household' and its position within society.

"A house is more then only a construction object, it's an institution that is developed to fulfil a complicated whole of goals. Because constructing a house is a cultural phenomenon, its shape and organization are strongly influenced by the cultural environment which it is a part of"⁴.

Control and gain seem to be main motives in current design industry. To maximize these two options Western society is trying to monitor and regulate more space every day. How do we define 'public', when it is only going to be used by a small amount of people. It's not meant for every person, it's meant for an average person. How can we call this space public when it's optimized for commercial gain and maximum controllability? Public space is being commercially exploited, and it has the tendency to manipulate it's visitor. Other effects and their consequences for the public realm are well described by Neil Leach [2], a Director of the Architecture and Critical Theory Program at the University of Nottingham:

"This privileging of the image has led to an impoverished understanding of the built environment, turning social space into a fetishized abstraction. The space of live experience has been reduced to a codified system

of significations, and with the increasing emphasis on visual perception there has been a corresponding reduction in other forms of sensory perception”⁵.

“The blasé attitude is therefore an adaptive phenomenon” in which the nerves reveal their final possibility for adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them”⁶.

Is public space so far decontextualized that social interaction has become impossible? Is society so heavily fragmented that we don't trust our neighbour anymore? The public space has to be the mirror of our society and should be designed for each inhabitant living in our city. It should be the context for social cohesion, confrontation and interaction.

When will we start to focus on the people that are picking tin cans out of the garbage? When will society start to understand that to be happy doesn't have anything to do with the amount of money or products you possess? Can we find a connection between a height of the income and a suicide rate? The joy and happiness comes from the position one has within a group of people. It is not based on his status or bank account, but on what he means for these people. I know that only a few could understand this because the rest simply doesn't care. But this is what is called social relations, community. Something that has become distinct.

Like a herd we are following the others, not wondering what the possible effects are. A good Dutch example can be found in the education system. Dutch schools and libraries used to be owned by our government, but ten years ago they were sold to private companies. Did the government really think that these companies would care about the quality of our education? No, they do not, their only concern is profit. For every student that graduates, they receive a donation from the Dutch government. Thus, to maximize profit, they are doing everything to make the study programmes as short as possible with the least amount of teaching hours. They don't care about an individual anymore. We should question ourselves what the consequences for our economy it creates? Or more importantly how does it affect our society?

What is the actual reason for capitalism? Was the exchange based economy, with the market place as its cultural heart, so bad? A market was a place where everybody knew each other and was able to exchange his goods. Where the leftovers were given to unfortunate ones. Presently markets became recycle centres for mass consumption. On the market, people still see the value in every object. They shouldn't be pushed into the anonymous alleys of the city. Markets should return to the place they always occupied in society, to the centre. They should be places where 'leftovers' can find a new purpose in our society.

I know that my words are controversial, that they are seemingly close to anti-capitalist thinking and somehow close to socialism. I don't want my perspective to be placed in any group or category. I want people to understand that whatever they do and wherever they live, **the most important in life is not to stop caring**. I want to share my passion, my worries, and most of all, the issues for which I care. Ever since I started my design studies I have been practicing designing for the unfortunates in Africa. At the moment I'm a chairman of my own foundation and realize 15 projects per year in Africa beside my studies at the TU Delft. During my working periods in Africa I started to understand what does it mean to be a part of community. These people live and work for each other. They form a unity in life and society.

If I take a close look on Dutch society we are still capable to adapt in bad situations just like the Africans. Our post war blocks of flats maybe inhumane, but it seems that in some occasions they bring good cultural values forward. As there is no space inside, a lot activities need to happen outside and, thereby a further confrontation and social connection are possible. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe talked about 'silent architecture' – a tongue-tied architecture where the physical form is a stage that focuses mankind on his surroundings. Tafuri supported this idea of a humble form of architecture.

'The tent city'⁷ is a good example of humble architecture. When American economy crashed a large portion of its citizens had to live in tents. They realised that without their precious television and other luxury products they were having fun together. It shows that in the worst circumstances people are appreciating life and each other the most. Why does this happen? Because there is nothing else anymore. There are no possessions, only you, your tent and everything that surrounds you. These people used to have nothing in common. Now they had everything in common, when the only thing left is each other.

Now, a few questions remain. So, if we can make everything positive even when it's very bad, does it mean that we should still let designers create unsociable spaces? Or should we rather learn from the positive 'side effects' of post war design and try to enhance them?

Maybe the opinion of a single person should be also taken under consideration. Of course we are not experts but it does that mean we shouldn't be taken into the design process? Does our opinion not count to the 'professionals'? For me the most important part is that I still care. I do care about my neighbour, about poor African people, hobos, and all the other 'secondary' subjects. **I care.**

Endnotes

- ¹ G. Bekaert, *Architect and Architecture*, Dat is architectuur, 010, Rotterdam 2004, p. 144-145.
- ² G. Bekaert, *Architect and Architecture*, Dat is architectuur, 010, Rotterdam 2004, p. 144.
- ³ M. Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, Granada Publishing Ltd, London 1980.
- ⁴ A. Rapoport, *House, form and culture*, Dat is architectuur, 010, Rotterdam 2004, p. 140.
- ⁵ N. Leach, *The anaesthetics of architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 10.
- ⁶ *Op. cit.*, 34-35.
- ⁷ The tent city': temporary living facilities for homeless people. After the economy crashed in America homeless people had the opportunity to rent a tent. Often these were positioned on parking spaces inside the city centre.

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- [1] B e k a e r t G., *Architect and Architecture*, Dat is Architectuur, 010, Rotterdam 2004.
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- [4] T a f u r i M., *Theories and History of Architecture*, Granada publishing ltd, London 1980.