

RENATA MIKIELEWICZ

ORCID: 0000-0002-6891-4138

Lodz University of Technology, Poland

ARCHITECTURE FOR ALL, HOME FOR EVERYONE – THE MYTH OF (SPATIAL) SOCIAL UTOPIA

ARCHITEKTURA DLA WSZYSTKICH, DOM DLA KAŻDEGO – MIT O (PRZESTRZENI) SPOŁECZNEJ UTOPII

Abstract

A constantly recurring idea of equality and dignified life for an individual and entire societies is traceable in the projects of detached houses, urban and architectural complexes, and urban and architectural theories. Building solutions do not always bring a long-term change in the space quality and realization of the myth of architecture affordable for everyone. The comparison of these theories and the reality made regarding the sustainable development principle shows that quite a lot realized urban and architectural objects deny the original idea of harmonious cooperation between humans and the environment.

Keywords: social inequality, social architecture, sustainable development

Streszczenie

W projektach pojedynczych budynków, zespołów architektoniczno-urbanistycznych czy teoriach kształtowania miast i osiedli odnajdujemy ciągle powracającą ideę zapewnienia godnego sposobu funkcjonowania dla jednostki i społeczeństw. Porównanie – w kontekście zasady rozwoju zrównoważonego, ideologicznych założeń i rzeczywistych działań – mitu architektury dostępnej dla wszystkich pokazuje, że realizacje architektoniczne i urbanistyczne zaprzeczają w dużym stopniu pierwotnej idei harmonijnego współdziałania człowieka ze środowiskiem.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura społeczna, rozwój zrównoważony, wykluczenie społeczne

With extreme urbanization the image of the city tends towards the dystopian. The most highly restrictive, totalitarian versions of this threatening image tend to compartmentalize human life into small, restrictive spaces – units organized to control individual life to the maximum degree. These are juxtaposed with massive public spaces dominated by the regime's ideology. Some idealized urban spaces (including Francis Bacon's description of Bensalem in *New Atlantis*, c. 1624, Charles Fourier's phalanstère buildings and Robert Owen's proposed communities of the early 19th century) pay little or no attention to this concept of policing. In other urban utopian images, however, walls and the construction of buildings are integrated into surveillance systems that facilitate obedience. Thus architecture, urban planning and even the design of entire nations have played a vital role in the utopian imagination.¹

¹ G. Claeyes, *Utopia. The History of an Idea*, Thames & Hudson, London 2020, p. 100.

1. ARCHITECTURE FOR EVERYONE

Every discipline or profession tends to draw on facts known to everybody because of the basic training or repeated opinions. Such stories with times start to live their own lives and begin an autonomous life of truths and misunderstandings, a life of a myth. In architecture, such a myth is a myth of socially engaged architecture and affordable housing with a house for everyone, and a solution of equal society inhabiting tranquil, well-designed urban space.

A house surrounded by a garden is a universal image shared by both the architects and their clients. The ownership of a house should be a remedy against a revolting society and many social problems. So, people are usually encouraged to poses houses, also by authorities.

Le Corbusier, one of the most significant, if not the most influential, social visionary among architects describes that an architect:

can create a magic box enclosing all that your heart desires. Scenes and actors materialize the moment the magic appears; the magic box is a cube; with it comes everything that is needful to perform: miracles, levitation, manipulation, distraction, etc. The interior of the cube is empty, but your inventive spirit will fill it with everything you dream of – in the manner of performances of the old Commedia dell’Arte.²

Around the same time as he wrote these words, in Paris, 20% of houses had no running water, only 15% of the inhabitants had a bathroom, and the majority lived in overcrowded flats with three or four people per room.³

The tools and solutions Corbusier strives to provide are designed for the modern machine-society. So, there is a need to make buildings an industrial product. Industrialization leads to lower prices and quality, and the house – a standardized unit, a perfect, usable concrete cell, can be reproduced in quantities. But these statements are coming from the belief that lasting architecture embodies the spirit of the cycle – a local form adapting to the needs and climate, over time evolves to the standard.⁴

A repeatable house is an answer for affordable housing also nowadays in the Elemental projects by South American Alejandro Aravena. This leading, socially engaged architect was rewarded for this design attitude by Pritzker Jury in 2016. In these solutions we are getting the use of concrete as the preferred solution. The architect also intentionally uses traditional house solutions in his projects. And he argues, like Corbusier, that traditional solutions evolve to a model and then, over time, to a type.⁵

But Aravena goes a step forward; he does not try to control the fulfillment of the project; he allows the user to do so. And his projects are available as open-source files of technical

² Le Corbusier, *The Core as the Meeting Place of the Arts* [in:] J. Thywitt, J.L. Sert, E.N. Rogers (eds.), *The Heart of the City: toward the humanization of urban life*, Lund Humphries, London 1952, p. 52 after: M.C. Boyer, *Le Corbusier. Homme de Lettres*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2011, p. 685; see also D. Sudjic, *B jak Bauhaus (a jak autentyk, b jak bauhaus, c jak cztery kółka. Alfabet współczesności)*, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2014, pp. 239–240.

³ M.C. Boyer, *op. cit.*, p. 609.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 367–368.

⁵ A. Aravena, A. Iacobelli (eds.), *Elemental. Manual de vivienda incremental y diseño participativo = Elemental. Incremental housing and participatory design manual*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2016.

drawings on his office website.⁶ This is quite contradictory to what was the intention of Corbusier's ideal world where architects should control all processes.⁷

Regarding these two attempts to solve social problems with a reproducible housing unit, it is interesting to see a completely different point of view.

Architect Aaron Betsky, Dean of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, in his experience-based and highly engaging book *Architecture Matters*, claims that the design of a single-family house, due to its complexity, is the most expensive architectural design.⁸ His statement stems from the experience of eight years of work on a house design in Frank Gehry's office and exchange with other architects. Betsky describes the complexity of the relationship between an architect and a client during the design process, defining it as "strange and intimate."⁹ The architect gains the most detailed knowledge about the client's life. He is also responsible for all the details and furnishings of the house. And this has an impact on the price of the design. The expense that can be considerable, and in the quoted anecdote prompts the client to say: "Well, I guess if you're buying a Picasso, you're paying for a Picasso."¹⁰ Anyway, after a few years, this particular client sold his Picasso house.

At the same time, the idea of an equal society where the citizens have civil rights and can fulfill their dreams, inspired many generations of architects to provide everyone with a house, a comfortable shelter for a dignified life, with at least some minimum of comfort.

Betsky's account somehow contradicts this dream.

But perhaps, first, such an antithesis can explain the myth of a spatial, social utopia. And shows it in the context of the social needs and determinants.

2. PRINCIPLES AND DESIGN IMPERATIVES

In the context of social implications, another interesting perspective on the myth of affordable architecture shows a change in the perception of a selected room in the house – in this case, the kitchen idea from the 1920s.¹¹ Designed by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, a Vienna-based and revolutionary, socially engaged architect, the Frankfurt kitchen, which with its compactness and functionality revolutionized the workings and integrated the previously more servant-specific living space. Recently, the kitchen got elevated to a part of a living room. This change started with the design of the Frankfurt kitchen, which itself was an energy-efficient and very rational place.¹² Away from rest and social gatherings associated with the main room of the house. Schütte-Lihotzky chose the architect profession because of the possibility of very matter-of-fact service to people.¹³

Anyway, even an accidental visit to one of Ernst May's Frankfurt housing estates impresses with rationality and clarity in the design of space, buildings, and flats.¹⁴ And a visible need

⁶ Elemental projects, <http://www.elementalchile.cl/en/> (access: 29.06.2021).

⁷ See f. ex. M.C. Boyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 366–367, 534–550.

⁸ A. Betsky, *Architecture Matters*, Thames & Hudson, London 2017, pp. 21–24.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

¹¹ Such an interesting perspective from the designer's point of view shows the chapter *k jak kuchnia*, pp. 205–210 [in:] D. Sudjic, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 205–206.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

¹⁴ An example of such housing estate is Heimat Siedlung in Frankfurt am Main, 1927–1934, arch.

to create a space where the needs of inhabitants stay in the foreground. But still, such estates, even when designed to serve everyone, remain elitist, as was the case of all Modern Movement housing estates in Łódź. They were inhabited by public servants, officers, physicians but not workers or other low-income classes.¹⁵



Ill. 1. Shanghai, China. Typical façade of a housing skyscraper. Photo: R. Mikieliewicz, 2010.



Ill. 2. Shanghai, China. New “ecological” houses in Yingdong Village, “the paradise for fishing village’s life” as the entrance noticeboard praise it. Photo: R. Mikieliewicz, 2010.

Frank Roekle. The article’s author visited it in 2019 and was also able to discuss the space solutions with one of the tenants.

¹⁵ An analysis of the ownership of houses in Łódź was prepared in the 1930s for the city authorities served as the source of such statement, document cited in Mikieliewicz R., *Strefa graniczna miasta jako kryterium warunkujące projektowanie urbanistyczne w obszarach obrzeżnych dużych miast na przykładzie aglomeracji łódzkiej*, chapter 5, Łódź 1999, manuscript in the TUL library.

Along with the industrialization and rapid growth of cities, there was a visible rise in the considerably poor housing. The people who build the workforce in the city-based industry lived in slums, congested conditions, and this situation needed solutions. And the answers were given in different theoretical and practical ideas – from phalansteries to the Modern Movement “house as a machine to live” architectural designs.

As in the age of globalization, the problem still needs to be solved (Ill. 1, 3). And yet again, architects like Alejandro Aravena address the issue and propose affordable designs of various houses (Ill. 2, 4), even if pathological solutions in housing prevail. Especially housing in the big cities and their centers filled with substandard design (also enabled by the building codes) – overpriced, oversized flats for the rich, and on the other hand, micro-apartments, seen as an answer for the problem of the lack of affordable living space.



Ill. 3. Shanghai, China. Slum house. Newer housing buildings in the background. Photo: R. Mikieliewicz, 2010.



Ill. 4. Micro-apartment. Proj. José Pequeno Portugal's Pavillion on the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, China.
Photo: R. Mikielewicz, 2010.

But still, for the right solution, the idea of a house is not enough, even if it was the Marseille Unite Habitation. The whole city has to change, remodel and redesign.¹⁶

Such an answer occurred to Le Corbusier.¹⁷ Such is also the direction in the architectural career of Aravena,¹⁸ who is exceedingly concerned about the social inequality of architectural solutions. His main concern is the size of the house and the displacement of people within the city space. He states that 'public policies, as well as the real estate markets, have developed two strategies to deal with the scarcity of means: reduction and

¹⁶ Compare f. ex. S. Gzell, *Urbanistyka XXI wieku*, PWN, Warszawa 2020, pp. 183–210.

¹⁷ M.C. Boyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 608–611.

¹⁸ A. Aravena, A. Iacobelli, *op. cit.*, pp. 1503–1509.

displacement.¹⁹ His work on social housing moved him into urban projects as the solutions to the complex housing problems did not lie in single cubes, whatever their beauty. Aravena's ambition is always a balance between reality and pragmatism, a cooperation with the users of the design spaces.²⁰

Corbusier's city repeats the geometrical poetry of his architectural designs. Aravena's city is about people and made with them, not so much about the pure beauty of the design.

This involvement is also an essential element of the sustainable development principle. Cooperation with the user, the accommodation of his needs is very significant in the design process. This is, to a degree, contradicted in the theory of a generic city formulated by Rem Koolhaas, an individual continuation of Corbusier's theoretical urban theories. The generic city, a city with empty boxes designs, is justified in its form because of the lack of historical and cultural associations. This lack of references can exclude some city's inhabitants who are foreign to such particular heritage. So, as the result, the cities have to be similar to each other and airports alike.²¹ In practice, the technologies of such smart cities have more similarities to the Big Brother world than to a place with real public participation.

The generic city, lifeless without its connotations, looks like an opposition to the slum. The existence of such slums in first industrial cities started all efforts to make the perfect city and provide affordable, good living space. Dejan Sudjic, a design and architecture critic, suggests that slum structures are unique to every culture, and as places have the strength to learn how a city should work.²² The knowledge of the density and intricacy of slums gives lessons about imperatives that enable an urban structure to work correctly or not. The rhythm of life in the slum shows its creative and negative aspects. The slum impersonates a liveable city, states Sudjic. And like every city is neither clean nor hygienic, it is an energetic space of possibilities.²³

Such a view matches the most significant meanings integrated into the notion of ecology and sustainable development.

3. THE MYTH AND REALITY

The Fridays for Future movement and the Plant for Planet initiative show the growing interest and environmental awareness of young people who are anxious to protect the rights and needs of future generations, as described in the 1987 classic definition of sustainable development by Brundtland Commission.²⁴ Both organizations, started by children, aim to make the grown-ups aware that the time is running out and the necessary change in attitude to the environment cannot wait and has to start now. That growth has to be sustainable, and ecology has to be the basis for every decision and action.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, f. ex. p. 1509.

²¹ C. Ellard, *Psychogeografie. Wie die Umgebung unserer Verhalten und unsere Entscheidungen beeinflusst*, btb Verlag, München 2015, pp. 166–168.

²² D. Sudjic, *op. cit.*, pp. 293–305, especially pp. 293–294.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 394.

²⁴ *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Annex I*, UN, Rio de Janeiro, 1992, updated 12.01.2000, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf (access: 15.06.2020).

The fact that such a radical action is necessary is visible in the problems occurring in today's economy and social issues. For example now, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This new awareness starts new discussions in the architectural and urban practice about some aspects of ecological solutions that are, perhaps, not so commonly acknowledged.

The idea of a circular economy and a 'cradle-to-cradle' design²⁵ have in their core notion a reconceptualized design based on a cycle of perpetual renewal of things, materials, buildings, etc., and the change of resource use, production, and consumption.

A cradle-to-cradle building should behave like a tree, (...), and be connected to the flow of natural energies around it (sun, wind, water), so that it is able to, for example, change with seasons, produce more energy than it consumes, and purify its own water. (...) In such biomimetic architecture, innovation is designed in from the start. Capacities of redundancy, convertibility, and adaptability are planned for on the drawing board, such the built end product can endlessly be redesigned in its material, ecological, and social realization. This is an architecture of perpetual beginnings.²⁶

And we get designs of whole zero-emission cities like Masdar and Neom, or prototypes of buildings that breathe, absorb water and flourish from solar energy as the 2011 Lips Tower Project of the Anderson Anderson Architecture in California, USA.²⁷ Such highly technological projects combine the newest knowledge with the necessity of the resource-saving mode. At the beginning, the environmental aesthetics get connected with everything environmental, so already the use of such natural materials or formal integration with the landscape provided arguments to count such buildings as ecological.

But what is not really acknowledged in these designs is the idea of the necessity of the integration of decay.

The implementation of the logic of natural processes into design means that suddenly, it is not only what is nice and beautiful, pleasing to the eye that matters. The elements of the process of dying and of constant renewal come into consideration. And, with mold, decay, waste, and rotting probably comes a smell usually connected with the process. So, nothing is seemly anymore.

Such is the design logic and aesthetics of the buildings by Hundertwasser in Vienna (social housing project of the city of Vienna, 1983–1985) and the Peter Haimel's farmhouse in Bavaria (2008). The designers follow the imperatives of integration of the passing into the design. They did it for a different motivation.

Friedenreich Hundertwasser, an artist, and self-educated architect, created a strong personal philosophy based on ecology and, already in the 1950s, rebelled against the prevailing aesthetic Modern Movement approach. His strong opinions build the basis of his visual art and architectural proposals.²⁸ Peter Haimel started his design from a very personal

²⁵ A concept formulated by a chemist Michael Braungart and an architect William McDonough in 2002 and presented in a book *Cradle to cradle. Remaking the way we make things*, North Point Press, New York.

²⁶ S. Cairns, J.M. Jacobs, *Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 224.

²⁷ Lips Tower Project, 2011 [in:] Anderson Anderson Architecture, <https://andersonanderson.com/lips-tower/> (access: 20.06.2021).

²⁸ Manifeste, Texte, Essays [in:] Hundertwasser [*Verschimmelungsmanifest gegen den Rationalismus in der Architektur*], <http://www.hundertwasser.de/deutsch/texte/philosophie.php> (access: 15.06.2020).

attachment to the object – a dilapidated farm building he tried to preserve and adapt for his family's needs.²⁹

“Only the engineers and scientists who are capable of living in mould and producing mould creatively will be the masters of tomorrow. And only after creative moulding, from which we have much to learn, will a new and wonderful architecture come about.”³⁰ This rather unusual statement of the *Moulding Manifesto against Rational Architecture*, even with the present commonly acknowledged ecological principles, does not enjoy widespread support. But the majority observe only the picturesqueness in Hundertwasser's Haus. Trees and flowing façade lines dominate. The philosophy behind it remains hidden. As the artist decided against straight lines, even the stairs he designed looked as already long time used element with the looking aged curve in the tread board. As the artist decided against straight lines, even the stairs he designed to look as already long times used element with the looking aged curve in the tread board. And such stairs are very uncomfortable to mount. The designer is just not able to repeat the wear of hundreds of years of use. The overall effect, as a result, is artificial. And in this sense, it has little to do with the notion of ecology as a life cycle.

The Bavarian renovation of an abandoned farmhouse is more sophisticated. The design adapts all existing imperfections, creating harsh living conditions with non-heated in-between spaces and even dangerous openings in the ceilings. Flaky wall plaster and stones at the bathroom doorstep completes the picture of repulsive deterioration. Revolutionary in this design is the reinterpretation of what is already known and familiar.

In understanding the application of ecology principles in the design, this deterioration aspect is crucial. It makes a change.

Many of us have limited and unevenly distributed choices with respect to how we deal with this world crowded with junk, obsolescence, and end things. Some, whose lives are already precarious will use such dross to build and design and make do. Others will do everything they can to forget it exists, and often employ architects to help them to do so. Architecture can design either facing toward waste and death or looking away. It is our view that looking away is useless (...).³¹

Decidedly, implementing such a new perspective into everyday design practice will take time.

And perhaps, over time, used, re-worked, and adapted in the architectural and urban projects of new generations of architects will establish another myth, of an equal and environmentally friendly, sustainable urban space for every- and any-one.

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²⁹ I. Mazzoni, *Wie im Märchen*, db Deutsche Bauzeitung, 2008, no. 11, pp. 46–52.

³⁰ Paragraph added as integral part of the text into the *Moulding Manifesto...* by Pierre Restany in 1958 [in:] *Manifeste, Texte, Essays*, op. cit.

³¹ S. Cairns, J.M. Jacobs, op. cit., p. 231.

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Author's Note:

Renata Mikielewicz, PhD, Arch.

Architect and designer of numerous civic and residential buildings; head of the Unit of Rural Design and Bioclimatic Architecture at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning, Lodz University of Technology; since 1989, concentrates her research on urban planning and ecology, especially on the problems of fringe areas of the cities and the planning criteria; special interests in the issues of the ecological philosophy and its implications on the urban and architectural procedures. Actively involved in international cooperation of higher education institutions – since 2003, regular lecturer at the Hochschule Mainz, Germany; for twenty-three consecutive years, organizer of international student workshops on steel frame constructions in TUL, Lodz.

renata.mikielewicz@p.lodz.pl