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KAWASAKI WAREHOUSE – IMITATION OR A SYMBOLIC MEANS OF MEMORY OF THE KOWLOON WALLED CITY

KAWASAKI WAREHOUSE – IMITACJA ALBO SYMBOLICZNY NOŚNIK PAMIĘCI O KOWLOON WALLED CITY

Abstract

Imitations – structures simulating something else – most often built of substitute and cheap materials – are treated as a deception, a lie. At the same time, an imitation has power to inspire memories of real things. While inspiring imagination, any imitation enters the world of fiction and abstraction, it becomes a fact. Kawasaki Warehouse – a Japanese mock-up of the long-demolished Kowloon Walled City, built for amusement, may be regarded as one of the attempts at reminding the meaning of the City of Darkness for the cultural identity of the site. The city of criminals, built beyond the law, razed to the ground in the 1990s, came to life again in the form of its imitation. Kawasaki Warehouse, just like the *Teatro del Mondo* by Rossi in Venice, symbolises the collective memory of the city, community and culture of Hong Kong.

Keywords: collective memory, cultural identity, Kawasaki Warehouse, Kowloon Walled City

Streszczenie

Budowanie imitacji – obiektów naśladowujących inne rzeczy najczęściej z zastępczych i tanich materiałów traktowane bywa jak oszustwo odbiorcy, kłamstwo. Jednocześnie imitacja dysponuje mocą budzenia wspomnień o rzeczach prawdziwych. Pobudzając wyobraźnię imitacja wkracza w świat fikcji i abstrakcji, staje się cytatem. Kawasaki Warehouse – stworzona dla potrzeb rozrywki japońska atrapa fragmentu dawno zburzonego Kowloon Walled City, postrzegana może być jako jedna z prób przypomnienia znaczenia Miasta Ciemności dla kulturowej tożsamości miejsca. Zrównane w latach dziewięćdziesiątych ubiegłego wieku z ziemią, wyrosłe poza prawem miasto przestępców ponownie ożywa w swojej imitacji. Kawasaki Warehouse, jak *Teatro del Mondo* Rossiego w Wenecji, symbolizuje zbiorową pamięć miasta, społeczności i kultury Hong Kongu.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć zbiorowa, tożsamość kulturowa, Kawasaki Warehouse, Kowloon Walled City

1. INTRODUCTION

Art reveals the truth in reality, according to Hans Georg Gadamer.¹ Truth happens in art itself and it cannot be compared to the external reality. Only stepping beyond reality makes it possible to experience the essence of reality. Art unmasks the fictitiousness of

¹ Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda [Truth and Method]*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007, p. 172.

what we often consider to be the undeniable reality. Art itself, as an inseparable connection of appearance and non-secrecy, is the privileged discipline of human activity, where truth may occur. Truth reveals itself in the very balance between reality and appearance. Anna Ziółkowska, writing about the contemporary art of happenings and performances notices that they do not aim at showing values or reaching towards the essence of the real. It is rather an opposition against the conventions of reality. Contemporary art is not linked to beauty and good anymore, but its relation with truth and cognition is still current: "...they are sometimes showing an unwanted, cruel, banal, irrational and absurd truth, thus denying the canons of traditional art based on mimesis and tendency towards *kalos*."²

That balance between sincerity and appearance always accompanies architecture as well. The essence of some (architectural) directions was based on clarity, self-explanation and unambiguity. Other ones were based on enigma, lack of clarity and on surprise.³ Imitations were there for ages. The column structures of temples in ancient Greece were following post and beam solutions in timber buildings. Medieval wooden floor slabs were disguised as stone vaults. In the 19th century false facades were decorated with imitations of old details. Modernists were erecting buildings by means of craft production while suggesting their allegedly industrial origin. Postmodernists were including replicas of historic structures in the new context, which was to lead to reinterpretation and enrichment of the old meaning. This emerging of a new quality through metaphorical meaning was evoked by the confrontation of reality and fictitious image.⁴

Imitations – structures simulating something else – most often built of substitute and cheap materials – are treated as a hoax, a lie aiming at deceiving their recipient. Le Corbusier wrote: "the lack of truth is unbearable, we are lost in lies."⁵ Truth and sincerity of its expression were to be one of the most important values of the architecture of Modernism. The truth of form was referred to function, material, logic of the structural system. It was the truth of reality. However, the truth may step beyond reality; then, architecture reaches for another tools. Imitation is one of them indeed. Imitation, treated as an element of the game of architecture between reality and appearance, is at architecture's disposal as it has power to evoke memories of real things. Inspiring imagination, an imitation steps into the world of fiction and abstraction, it becomes a quotation. The game of imagination that is played by architecture exposes that what is hidden in reality.

Kawasaki Warehouse – the Japanese mock-up of a fragment of the long-demolished Kowloon Walled City, built for amusement, may be considered as an imitation devoid of value. However, it may be also regarded as a game of reality and appearances, of the struggle of oblivion with salvation and one of the attempts at reminding of the meaning of the City of Darkness for the cultural identity of Hong Kong. City of criminals, razed to the ground in the 1990s, grown beyond the law, came to life in yet another reconstruction.

² A. Ziółkowska, *Prawda sztuki a rzeczywistość. Estetyka Hansa-Georga Gadamera wobec wybranych zjawisk sztuki współczesnej*, Kultura i Wartości, 2012, no. 1, p. 92

³ Cf. W. Niebrzydowski, *Imitacje w architekturze – zarys problemu*, Teka Komisji Architektury, Urbanistyki i Studiów Krajobrazowych, 2008, 04b, p. 150.

⁴ Cf. M. Charciarek, *O metaforze w architekturze współczesnej*, Rozprawa doktorska; promotor prof. Dariusz Kozłowski, Wydział Architektury Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 1999, p. 25.

⁵ Cf. W. Niebrzydowski, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

2. KOWLOON WALLED CITY AS AN ARCHITECTURAL EXCEPTION

The strategic layout in the north-eastern part of the Kowloon Peninsula in the Kowloon Bay was fortified in the 17th century. A small fort was built there in 1810, even before the colonial period, as a military stronghold of the Qing dynasty built against the British invasion. When New Territories were leased to the British, the fort was excluded from Hong Kong, which was transferred in the year 1898 itself. Hak Nam, the Walled City remained in Chinese hands. A year later, the Chinese army retreated; however, the area was not transferred to the British. It has been disputed for years, and finally it was forgotten by China, Great Britain and by the Hong Kong authorities as well. The area, excluded from the British governance and from the territory of China, was a refuge for illicit activities of all kinds, but it was also a home for ordinary people. After the Second World War, the Walled City became a place of drug dealing gangs, a hideaway of criminals and even illegal dentists. Since the 1960s, it also became the residence of illegal immigrants from China. British administration aimed at demolishing the city many times (1933, 1948, 1963); however, that was always met by the resistance of residents and opposition of the Chinese authorities. Finally, even water or energy supplies were cut. Without any legal control there was an outbreak of untamed urbanisation. Strict limits of the area have caused the vertical growth of urban fabric – which, due to the proximity of the Kai Airport, could not exceed 14 floors. Over 500 high rise buildings were erected on the area of 2.6 ha. 50,000 people lived there and flats provided an average of 3.75 m² per person. It was the highest density that was ever noted in history. Buildings had common staircases and were connected by walkways suspended over alleys. On the elevations balconies – with bars – were added, looking like birdcages, which enlarged the living space and provided contact with the external world. Elevations became half-private spaces of social interaction. Narrow streets – alleys of mostly 2 m width, between buildings of over a dozen floors were nearly completely devoid of daylight, even though at that latitude the sun is very high above the horizon. Buildings were devoid of ventilation, firewalls, independent structure and rooms had no daylight. Illegal technical infrastructure, next to the lit advertisements, became their ornament. Only electrical wires were realised according to the rules because of the fear of fire that could not be tamed. The only places where daylight could be enjoyed were roofs, which became public spaces of social meetings and relaxation. Such a density of population created particular forms of co-dependence in social life that grew quite like architecture – based on odd jobs and blooming grey economy.

The Kowloon Walled City became a symbol of hyper-density, darkness, narrow alleys and illicit activity. It also became an expression of the dark side of consumerism and of the way of life of the poorest residents of Hong Kong. Such a witness of the colonial period, of political and legal relations which moved the colonial rule could not be left.⁶ The Kowloon Walled City was demolished in 1993. A park of memory was built in lieu as a Chinese garden and opened in the year 1995. The place of the city once associated with crime was purged by the construction of the meticulously designed garden. That too is a symbol of policy of forgetting and memory in Hong Kong.

⁶ A. Fraser, E. Cheuk-Yin Li, *The second life of Kowloon Walled City: Crime, media and cultural memory*, Crime, Media, Culture, 2017, vol. 13, no. 2, p. 223.

From 1984, when Sino-British agreement on handover of Hong Kong was signed, its Chinese authorities demolished many other places, important for the identity and linked to the colonial period, such as Queens's Pier or Lee Tung Street. The Kowloon Walled City, on the basis of the agreement, was demolished by the British authorities, but it is that district that became an important symbol of the erased history of the city. The colonial period of effective administration that focused on economy did not leave space for political idealism and faith of citizens in building their own history. Due to land prices, speculation, great corporate investments, Hong Kong was undergoing constant rebuilding, becoming similar to the metropolises of the world built by famed architects. Architecture became the main element of its colonial space, a sign of economic growth. When the quest for Hong Kong's own identity started in the 1990s, the inhabitants turned towards the local culture of that Borrowed Place. Turning towards collective memory became the basis to discover the identity of Hong Kong. The need to preserve places of historic meaning became an important social issue in Hong Kong. There was a turn towards the Kowloon Walled City as a specific cultural and urbanistic form. Its anarchic urbanisation and bottom-up community, beyond jurisdiction of the UK and China, resonated widely in popular culture.⁷ The unbelievable scale of multiplication of "invisible architecture,"⁸ as one may deem this structure, is still an inspiration for artists and phenomenon for scientists. The Kowloon Walled City is considered to be a place of both historic and political values but also an architectural exception.

3. SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF THE KAWASAKI WAREHOUSE

Anarchic urbanisation of the Walled City is a spatial symbol of a bottom-up organised community, considered by the young residents of Hong Kong to be an important cultural heritage. The protests against limitation of the autonomy of Hong Kong, of freedom of speech and education as well as limitation of civil liberties by the Chinese authorities, are linked to building identity on true values, without purging them from odour and poverty, on real, full heritage of the place. Memory of the Kowloon Walled City – product of the Sino-British convention and collaborative colonialism⁹ – is an important element of that memory.

The city could not be rebuilt. Most likely, nobody would even wish to do so. The Kowloon Walled City found its "second life" in pop culture. The demolished City of Darkness found its place in the popular imagination – in books, photographs, video games, science-fiction films. The imagined space of the Walled City became a contemporary pirate utopia. Echoes of the "real" place are remaining in the new context but they are remade as a virtual space where the phenomenon of anarchic urbanisation is taken over by entertainment industry. In the Anata no Kawasaki Warehouse arcade in Tokyo, the unreal world of the Walled City gained its physical form. Kawasaki Warehouse, opened in 2009, was a five-floor arcade. It was created by Taishiro Hoshino, a set designer, with an experience in Japanese kabuki theatre. Two floors were a detailed reconstruction of a fragment of the city. Basic elements constituting the unique character of the place were built into the two-level structure, such

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

⁸ Cf. M. Twardowski, *Wieczne dziś architektury nieistniejącej*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2011, vol. 108, no. 4-A2, p. 437.

⁹ A. Fraser, E. Cheuk-Yin Li, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

as walkways hanging above alleys, “birdcages” on the elevations, neon lights in the alleys, “illicit” technical infrastructure hanging on the walls. Elements such as plaques with street names or escape route signs were also used. In this way, the Walled City became disconnected from its place and history. The cultural memory of the Walled City was liberated from its real place, introduced into the virtual reality and realised anew in its imitation. As such, it gained fame and was, for many years, a destination for those seeking experiences, from all over the world. In time its popularity waned, it ceased to make profit and it closed at the end of 2019.

Kawasaki Warehouse is an example how the past is a “battlefield” between annihilation and salvation in contemporary culture. This field is appropriated by politicians and authorities or by minorities pushed to the fringes of society and thus, historical narrations are subject to the rules of the free market.¹⁰ British authorities, in agreement with the Chinese ones, wanted to force the Kowloon Walled City – the district of criminals – into oblivion by razing it to the ground. Kawasaki Warehouse may be regarded as one of the attempts at reminding of the meaning of the City of Darkness in culture. Specific character of life of illegal immigrants from China created a community of strong bonds and interrelations and the Nam Ham – City of Darkness – and its hyper-dense structure became the spatial symbol of social identity. In Kawasaki Warehouse a characteristic element of this structure was recreated – an alley and a courtyard with walkways and caged balconies suspended above. This space was to be attractive for a player using the amusement arcade. This imitation of a place of exceptional ugliness, meaning to show a fragment of brutal reality, truth of the real world, was actually to serve commercial purposes of gambling. It has also strengthened the myth of the place – the image concerning people, past, and reality of the Kowloon Walled City. Kawasaki Warehouse – a product of pop culture – became the bearer and means of “essence of those images in general consciousness.”¹¹ This way it became a kind of metaphor, a symbolic figure organising the space of collective memory. The Japanese house of games, which was an imitation of a fragment of the space of the city, became its metaphor, thus focusing on the mode of life of the community in its concrete representation.

Aldo Rossi considered city as *locus*, a place of collective memory. He recognised places in the city, where memories are kept and he called them monuments. Monuments were to be the means of memory, metaphors of events, places, of spirit. He understood the city as a theatre of events. *Teatro del Mondo*, which he conceived for the Venice Biennale, was a real theatre which, while floating on the Venetian canals, created events in various places of the city. *Teatro del Mondo*, designed as a monument, had also the ability of reinterpretation of memory, when it travelled through the city, generating new theatrical sceneries. Fluid interactions between contemporaneity and history occurred. The use of typologies and references caused that the building became a part of the historic context while being isolated from it. It was a dialogue of the Theatre with the city of Venice. Kawasaki Warehouse, like *Teatro del Mondo* by Rossi in Venice, symbolises the collective memory of the city, community and culture of Hong Kong. *Teatro del Mondo* referred to the Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre not only by means of its name, but also by the layout of theatre space where an actor was in the centre.

¹⁰ E. Stanios-Korycka, *Między pamięcią kulturową a kulturą popularną. Wybrane aspekty relacji na przykładzie sposobów kreowania Bizancjum w historiach alternatywnych*, Acta Humana, 2014, no. 5, p. 54.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

In the Kawasaki Warehouse, space also has a theatrical character – walkways suspended over alleys and courtyards play the role of galleries for spectators. The central place – which was occupied in Shakespeare’s theatre by the stage and actors – is taken over by arcade games and players. Here, the Kowloon Walled City serves as such a model.

4. SUMMARY

Kawasaki Warehouse, a product of contemporary pop culture, itself an imitation of the demolished Kowloon Walled City, may be described as an implant of memory, quite like “secondarily created, post-factum buildings, records, images or films which are either to complement the deficits of memory, or recreate it or rather create it anew, in another form...”¹² As such, it undoubtedly contributed to the consolidation of collective memory. The place was not to be a testimony of the past, like most of the implants which have the character of reconstructions (e.g. the Royal Castle in Warsaw), belonging, above all, in the archives of history. Instead, it belongs to the resources of cultural memory, as a medium of symbolic character.¹³ It has two dimensions: symbolic and literal. It belongs both to the real world and to the world of fiction. While stimulating imagination, the imitation became a tool in the search for truth.



Ill. 1. Kowloon Walled City, a bronze model in Kowloon Walled City Park (photo: Christopher Lance)

¹² Notion of the “implant of memory,” cf. M. Golka, *Pamięć społeczna i jej implanty*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2009, pp. 120–121.

¹³ Cf. M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Universitas, Kraków 2009, p. 37.



III. 2. Kawasaki Warehouse, (photo: Ken Ohyama)



III. 3. Kawasaki Warehouse, interior view (photo: Ken Ohyama)

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