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THE TRUTH AND LIE OF ARCHITECTURE FROM THE URBAN PERSPECTIVE

PRAWDA I KŁAMSTWO ARCHITEKTURY Z URBANISTYCZNEJ PERSPEKTYWY

Abstract

If we assume that among the various criteria for assessing architecture in the city (including its truth or lies) there would be a criterion for its proper addressing in the existing urban context, then one should consider what conditions it should meet in order to be considered honest and free from falsehood. It is obvious that the overriding value in urban planning – a deliberate set of individual architectural facts – is spatial order, and this can only be achieved through harmonized actions in which the architectural truth does not become a lie in urban space. The article deals with the issue of policies and procedures developed in this respect by local government bodies – in this case of Krakow – based on research conducted by the author for several years.

Keywords: architecture, urban planning, spatial planning, sustainable development, urban analysis

Streszczenie

Jeśliby przyjąć, że spośród różnorodnych kryteriów oceny architektury w mieście (w tym jej *prawdy* czy *kłamstwa*) byłoby kryterium jej właściwego zaadresowania w istniejącym kontekście urbanistycznym, to należałoby się zastanowić jakie warunki winna ona spełniać, aby mogła być uznana za szczerą i wolną od fałszu. Jest bowiem oczywiste, że wartością nadrzędną w urbanistyce – przemysłanym z założenia zbiorze pojedynczych faktów architektonicznych – jest ład przestrzenny, a ten można uzyskać wyłącznie poprzez zharmonizowane działania, w których prawda architektoniczna nie staje się kłamstwem w przestrzeni. W artykule podjęta została kwestia polityki i procedur, jakie w tym zakresie wykształciły organa samorządowe – w tym przypadku Krakowa – w oparciu o badania prowadzone od kilku lat przez autora.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, urbanistyka, planowanie przestrzenne, rozwój zrównoważony, analiza urbanistyczna

I do not want to live in a city whose space becomes exhausted instantly and perhaps irreversibly because planning is regarded as a tool of oppression, while private land ownership – as an unalterable thing. Planning, which acts as the coordinator within the scope of the economy and ecology of cities expanding beyond the borders of imagination, has been rejected just like the notion of public interest which would facilitate market regulation. In Poland, there is always a lot of talk about the supposedly communist provenance of any regulation.¹

Sławomir Gzell, 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, while explaining what characterizes a good poem (“a really good poem”), Stanisław Barańczak drew attention to the fundamental difference from other forms of verbal communication (“verbal descriptions of the world”): the imposing non-randomness of words (“yes-or-not-otherness”). He wrote:

A truly great poem, with all its commonness and apparent spontaneity, differs from all other forms of expression in that it forces us to admit that nothing can be changed in it: cutting one syllable, substituting of one adjective, shifting one accent would be like taking out a brick, after which the whole building collapses.²

The above argument from Barańczak, and especially the reference to the terms “brick” or “building”, suggests obvious analogies with good architecture (really good architecture), which we deal with when the taking or adding any element violates the meaning of the whole, making it incomplete or exaggerated. The accuracy of the selection, combined with the necessity of all elements of architecture obtained through creative search for its individual expression, seems to be a hint, a necessary condition, but still an insufficient one.

Although it is difficult to judge architecture in terms similar to poetry, there are certain similarities – after all, it is the poetics of architecture – in both cases there are: composition, rhythms, dynamics, accents, repetitions and even rhymes. The undoubted difference is that the quality of architecture is the result of a complex process in which it is difficult to assess how much in the end is the truth from the architect’s original vision, and how much lies in the added ideology, covering the shortcomings of the possibility of uninhibited expression (if there is one at all).

2. POETICS OF SPACE

Referring once again to the poetic and architectural analogies, urban planning can also carry its poetics as a result of similar elements occurring in it: compositions, rhythms, dynamics, dominants, accents, repetitions and also rhymes. And as in poetry – words are buildings, and the poem is their collection. Contrary to pure art, which certainly includes poetry, apart from painting or sculpture, architecture is classified as applied art.

¹ S. Gzell, *Miasto przyszości, w jakim nie będę chciał mieszkać*, Czasopismo Techniczne, 2014, no. 1-A, p. 33 (translation: S. Gzell).

² S. Barańczak, *Tablica z Macondo. Osiemnaście prób wytłumaczenia, po co i dlaczego się pisze*, Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków 2018, p. 15.

Increasingly, however, due to the conditions in which it is created, one would like to describe it as “non-pure art.” To a large extent, it is determined by factors beyond the architect or investor himself. They both operate under the conditions of an increasingly complex law, and the authorities appointed to apply this law in determining the conditions of development seem to perform more “creative accounting” of space than balanced and responsible planning activities that bring us closer to *the truth*, and this certainly cannot be achieved in urban planning in calculation result only. Nothing can replace the words of evaluation and justification, because only such words can be formulated into qualitative determinants, and this is more visible in effect than hidden quantitative indicators, which should remain what they are, i.e. the control reference.

From the *principle of good neighbourliness* introduced in our country in 2003, as the key to the harmony of space (perhaps even optimistic) resulted undoubtedly the *principle of monotony* (which was rightly predicted by Zbigniew Paszkowski in 2004)³, and when the evil one case becomes the model quality, this rule even turns into the *principle of self-mockery*. Theoretically, we still have the poem – but do we want to read it, listen to it (watch it)?

3. “URBANISM” OF ARCHITECTURE

The “urbanism” of city structure’s architecture is obvious and not a subject to discussion. But what does this mean in practice? The city exists through spatial and functional relations of architecture created as a result of a well-thought-out composition: layouts of buildings and structures interacting with each other spatially and functionally, also reacting to changing natural conditions. Town planning is not a set of independent architectural entities, but a deeply thought-out composition and multi-layered arrangement in which there should be rational and clear relationships and obligations between them. Even the best architecture (in the context of the theses of the conference: *the truest*), if not located at the right urban address, becomes a false note in space (following the conference theses also: *a lie*). And it is not only about the buildings themselves, but also about the whole multi-component development of the space between them, serving all city users (not only residents), because it is in the space between buildings that city life takes place, and the whole sense of architecture is born only after connecting all its representations to the efficient bloodstream – public spaces, spaces of all communication, space that is a *public domain*.⁴

A single architectural entity does not yet create urbanism. A building is the basic component of the city that contributes to it and which should follow the rules of harmony, understood as in the case of poetry and architecture. This is, of course, an ideal, but the one you should strive for, and it has been legally defined as *spatial order*.⁵ Moreover,

³ In the article *Miasto zaplanowane w mieście bez planu* [City planned in the city without plan], written one year after the entry into force of the new Act on spatial planning and development (Ustawa o planowaniu i zagospodarowaniu przestrzennym), Zbigniew Paszkowski (2004), extremely accurately “predicted” all the threats to be expected as a result of the new planning order in Poland.

⁴ *Public domain* as a place where exchange between individuals or social groups is possible and desired. It is a place where one is confronted with the other, where it is possible to change perspectives – a term defined by Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp in: *In Search of New Public Domain*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2002.

⁵ Spatial order: “[...] such a configuration of space that creates a harmonious whole and takes into account

sustainable development has been mentioned among the basics of activities related to spatial development, which should clearly guide the efforts and activities of all participants in the city's development process. However, everything indicates that everyone seems to understand it in their own way – including the activities of those on whom the detailed determination of these management principles depends. Each new added architectural fact changes and co-creates the urban planning of the city anew, let alone a group, a complex of buildings, and for this reason nothing can be left to simple arithmetic, especially based on a weak qualitative foundation.

4. CASE STUDY

I present one, albeit significant, example of how *the truth* in architecture can turn into a *lie* in an urban context. How is it possible that the tempting image of nice architecture presented in the developer's visualizations (Ill. 2 – even *truthful* implementation, at the end), will soon be supplemented with an operational nightmare due to the duplication of a bad precedent in the neighbourhood (Ill. 5) and consent for its further cloning without concern for *spatial order*, *sustainable development* and, finally, *the public interest* – or simply put: without a sense of place and the actual possibilities of building and functioning. This is how architecture begins to *lie*, that it interacts with something, that it co-creates something and that... it is possible to reach it and leave without any obstacles.

The analysed area of Krakow is situated in a very attractive location, in the strip between the Rudawa river bed and Królowa Jadwiga Street on the outskirts of the prestigious area of Wola Justowska. This location covers a dozen or so plots of land still free from development or used until recently as garden farms and small production workshops, concentrated around Piotr Borowy Street and, with the disappearing in this section from the west, Emaus Street (Ill. 1).

The area around the described location is dominated mainly by detached and semi-detached single-family houses, in some places there are also terraced and multi-family houses, such as “city villas” (Ill. 3). The strip along the Rudawa River is one of the most attractive recreational areas in the western part of the city, leading from the far outskirts of the city (Mydlniki, Olszanica, the suburbs of Krakow) to its strict, historical centre areas (Błonia, Salwator – the mouth of the Rudawa river to the Vistula river). It is a place for walkers, runners, a route and a destination for bicycle trips, all in the natural, semi-wild scenery of riparian greenery, you could say: a very charming place.

The subject concerns the development that is being built here on the basis of a number of decisions establishing development conditions for several independent housing investments, issued in recent years (2015–2019), due to the fact that this area has not been covered by a local spatial development plan so far.

For all investments specified in terms of development, building permits were issued in 2017–2020, therefore it should be assumed that the form and layout of the planned development included in the construction designs and in the plot development plans is the image of the area planned by the city, which will be built in the near future, or as can be estimated, by 2022.

all functional, socio-economic, environmental, cultural, compositional and aesthetic conditions and requirements in orderly relations” – see Art. 2. item 1 of the Ustawa o planowaniu i zagospodarowaniu przestrzennym [Act on spatial planning and development].



III. 1. Krakow – location of the area covered by the case study against a fragment of the city (source: <https://www.google.com/maps/>, access date: October 9, 2020)



III. 2. Krakow – Wola Justowska, Piotr Borowy Street. Visualization of the architecture of one of the newly designed multi-family residential complexes from the analysed area (source: <https://www.google.com/maps/>, access date: October 9, 2020)

The total area of these investments is 3.6 ha, and together with the existing (the only such complex in Wola Justowska) multi-family housing complex from 2013, it is an area of nearly 4.0 ha. The whole is carried out by five developers, each reading the possibilities of filling the area in their own way, provided for in the decisions determining the development conditions. The image of the entire area planned in this way is shown in the two attached drawings (III. 4), prepared on the basis of land development plans (PZT), provided by the Department

of Architecture and Town Planning of the Krakow City Hall⁶ together with conditions of development and building permit decisions (selection in the text III. 6–9).



III. 3. Krakow – Wola Justowska, area of Piotr Borowy Street. The state of development of the analysed area around 2016 (author's own study)



III. 4. Krakow – Wola Justowska, area of Piotr Borowy Street. The state of development of the analysed area around 2022 – implementation in progress (author's own study)

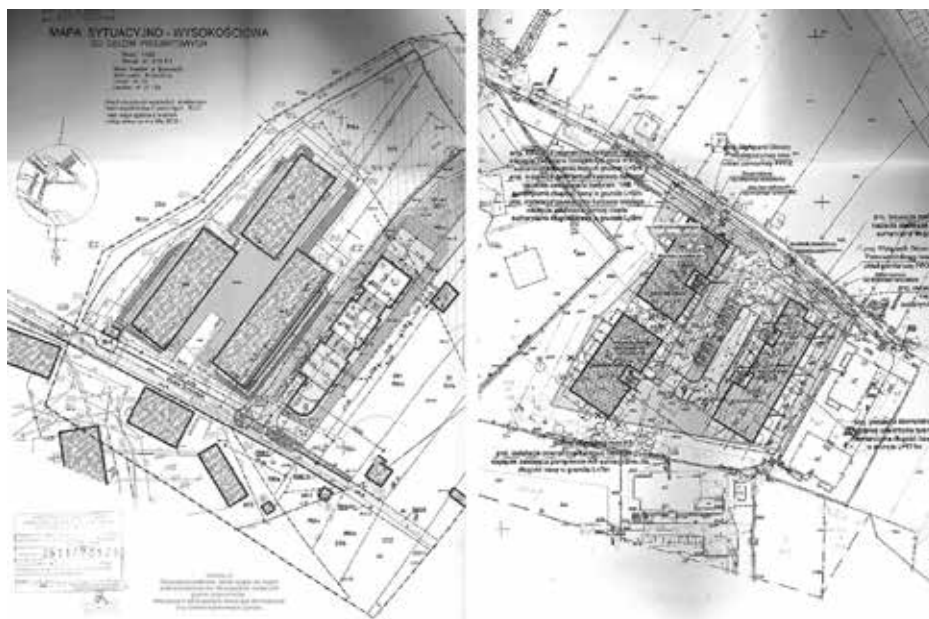
⁶ The analysis was carried out on the basis of copies of decisions determining the conditions of development and building permits, together with drawings of plot development projects, which has been obtained *ex officio* at the request addressed in the manner specified in the *Act on access to public information* of September 6, 2001 as amended.

The common denominator of the issued decisions was the type of housing: multi-family. The typology of buildings adopted in construction projects (apartment blocks in a linear arrangement) resulted from the indicators of building density, biologically active area, building height (indirectly: intensity), the width of the front elevations as well as the current line of buildings – all marked as “very controversial” basics, as convinced by the reading of the attached urban and architectural analyses prepared in accordance with the procedure *ex officio*. In terms of shaping the form of the roof, freedom (and even choice) was given, as it resulted from the existing diversity of roof forms in the area.

The determination of all parameters in the issued decisions was based on one precedent: a multi-family residential complex consisting of three blocks at Piotr Borowy Street 41, 41A and 41B, built in 2013 (Ill. 5). At the same time, it is difficult to understand what was the basis for determining the development conditions for this investment (multifamily blocks with linear building typology), since there was no such example in the vicinity. It seems obvious, however, that the implementation of these three blocks was a serious mistake, both in terms of the established urban indicators and building parameters, mainly due to the adopted typology of buildings, completely foreign in the analysed area. This applies equally to the immediate and further neighbourhood. If it was possible to adopt any type of multi-family housing for this part of the city, it would be only in the form of point development such as city villas, which would harmonize with the single-family detached and semi-detached houses dominating in this area. Also, in the context of the Rudawa River, this would provide a chance to create a spatially acceptable layout. It would also be a reference to the previously built in the neighbourhood a quite successful precedent, which is a complex of city villas realized by Echo Investments (buildings adjacent to the south of the plot of the Institute of Meteorology and Water Management). It is difficult to assume that the case justifying the content of the decision determining the development conditions was the nearby complex of buildings of the Institute of Meteorology and Water Management, because in this case, the decisive factor for the architectural form and all its parameters was its non-residential function.



Ill. 5. Krakow – Wola Justowska, Piotr Borowy Street 41. An architectural precedent from 2013 – a multi-family housing complex created on the basis of a decision determining the conditions of development (source: author’s own materials)



III. 6, 7. Krakow – Wola Justowska, area of Piotr Borowy Street. Land development plans (PZT) for two of the currently implemented housing investments – in III. 7, the complex plan with III. 2 (source: copies obtained from Department of Architecture and Town Planning, Krakow City Hall)



III. 8, 9. Krakow – Wola Justowska, area of Piotr Borowy Street. Land development plans (PZT) for further currently implemented housing investments (source: copies obtained from Department of Architecture and Town Planning, Krakow City Hall)

As a result, a total of 13 new apartment blocks are being built here (16 with the existing precedent of three blocks built in 2013), sometimes squeezed to the limits of the possibilities specified in the Construction Law, with built surface sometimes exceeding six times the area of single-family buildings, which will completely change the current image of this area of Krakow. And it is not about change as such – the city is not a finite organism at any stage of its development. It is about the direction of these changes.

All planned investments are implemented without the city's participation in the expansion of the existing communication system, and no conditions have been imposed in this regard on individual developers (apart from *the face-lifting* of sidewalks). The entire system will use a rare network of existing narrow streets connected to Królowa Jadwiga Street, and if we omit the planned unit connections to the extended, apparently “by the forces of nature,” Emaus Street, the majority of future traffic will be charged by the narrow isthmus of Piotr Borowy Street.

In terms of all investments planned for implementation, it will be several hundred new cars supplying the already overloaded road system in this area of the city. While it was possible to hide these vehicles inside huge, multi-bay underground garages, their movement will be undoubtedly “very visible” outside. And certainly, it may not be like on the developer's visualization...

The issuing of individual urban planning decisions for this area was not accompanied by any attempt to functionally save the situation – individual decisions in the field do not have to be coordinated with each other. Decisions were issued for a wide variety of shapes and sizes of plots, which only multiplied the variety of building forms and the chaos of the entire layout. Bad news for residents of nearby single-family houses is also the fact that the access to recreational areas along the Rudawa River will be significantly limited for them – there is no indication that there will be any publicly available connection between the newly erected buildings.

Finally, after a very active period of determining the development conditions by means of individual urban planning decisions of the conditions for development by the Department of Architecture and Town Planning of the Krakow City Hall, on May 8, 2019, the Krakow City Council passed a resolution to proceed with the development of a local masterplan for the Wola Justowska – Hamernia area.⁷ The review of the issued building permit decisions shows that everyone in this development zone was “on time” – implementation in progress.

5. CONCLUSION

The cited case is not an isolated one, and for this reason it may be suggested that there is a specific tactic of the city, consisting in issuing individual decisions determining the conditions for development, and when key fragments of the areas intended for development are filled with them, then local plans are prepared.

⁷ See: Uchwała nr XV/307/19 Rady Miasta Krakowa z dn. 8 maja 2019 r. w sprawie przystąpienia do sporządzenia miejscowego planu zagospodarowania przestrzennego obszaru “Wola Justowska – Hamernia” [Resolution No. XV / 307/19 of the Krakow City Council of May 8, 2019 on commencing the preparation of the local masterplan for the “Wola Justowska – Hamernia” area], https://www.bip.krakow.pl/?dok_id=167&sub=uchwala&query=id%3D24128%26typ%3Du (access: 18.09.2020).

This is due to a simple reason: the ease of establishing individual development conditions, which are usually limited to the real estate being the subject of the proceedings, they are not subjected to the procedure of extensive public consultation. Only the parties to the proceedings, usually limited to neighbours, have the right to argue with the decisions of development conditions, and the content of the decision does not have to comply with the Study of the Conditions and Directions of Spatial Development. Whereas the process of creating and adopting a local masterplan requires a comprehensive approach to the area covered by the plan with all its consequences in the form of the commune's responsibility for its future spatial shape and proper functioning, it is subject to public discussion and evaluation, and the masterplan itself must comply with the findings of the Study.

Such a tactic of small steps is by all means convenient and easy to submit to uncontrolled decisions, the consequences of which one does not even try to predict. These become visible only after implementation – that is, only after the planned investments are completed. Individual decisions are not coordinated with each other, simply everything that is required by the regulations is calculated and a city is to be created from this simple calculation. Only then it turns out that there is a violation of the specificity of the location (in the discussed case: loss of the existing landscape and natural values) or distortion of the spatial image of a given area of the city, concerning both the immediate vicinity and the broader area beyond the analysis specified in the Regulation,⁸ and very much often, as in the analysed example: duplicating negative patterns – all this together multiplying places and areas of disharmony.

At the same time, in determining the development conditions, the practice of avoiding the use of “gates” contained in the Regulation, left by its authors, is noticeable. In addition to the provisions specifying the methods of determining five parameters characterizing the future development, i.e. building line, building area, width of the front elevation, height of the front elevation and roof geometry, the Regulation allows for “other designations” of these parameters.⁹ It is obvious that reaching for these possibilities would require argumentation, explaining “why”, and the organs avoid this, apparently feeling insecure in such situations. For this reason, only “space arithmetic” is commonly practiced, that is calculating the average of the parameters in the neighbourhood, and that's it – because this seems to be a sure and difficult to question recipe for a city, after all, the numbers do not lie.

The same applies to the method of determining the area of analyses specified in the Regulation – the offices strictly adhere to the minimum scope specified in it (area with a radius of at least three times the width of the plot front, at least 50 m),¹⁰ because, of course, increasing the area of analyses should be “somehow” justified. By the way, it remains a mystery how the authors of the Regulation have determined a sufficient minimum, ignoring such significant in urban planning issues as the impact of planned buildings within the street space or

⁸ The author wrote already in 2008 in the article *Przestrzeń niezrównoważona [Unsustainable Space]*, about the dangers arising from the provisions of the *Regulation on the method of determining the requirements for new buildings and land development in the absence of a local masterplan* of 23 August 2003, *Czasopismo Techniczne*, 2007, vol. 104, no. 1-A, pp. 203–212. It is interesting that this is probably the only legal act that has not been subject to any changes since its issue (that is for 17 years).

⁹ See: § 4 section 4, § 5 section 2, § 6 sec. 2, §7 section 4 of the *Rozporządzenie Ministra Infrastruktury z dnia 26 sierpnia 2003 r. w sprawie sposobu ustalania wymagań dotyczących nowej zabudowy i zagospodarowania terenu w przypadku braku miejscowego planu zagospodarowania przestrzennego*, Dz.U. 2003 nr 164 poz. 1588.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*: § 3 sec. 1–2.

cohesion within the building block as the basic unit of the city structure, and these usually go beyond the minimum scope of analyses specified in the Regulation. The real problem begins when these good models and cohesion in the environment are missing. However, one would be wrong to think that this is an appropriate and sufficient argument for extending the area of analysis.

The procedure described above (both in the course and in its consequences, unfortunately) could also be observed in many other cases, including the area of the former airport in Czyżyny¹¹ or the area around the Bagry reservoir,¹² as well as many other areas and places in Krakow. Therefore, it is difficult not to ask the question about the sense of creating local plans *post factum* of prior issuing individual urban planning decisions for all key places. Such plans do not plan anything anymore, do not solve difficult situations, do not define the commune any tasks in the field of infrastructure development, do not define the directions of compositional activities giving (or restoring to) the city its proper shape and which would implement the principles of *spatial order* and *sustainable development*. Such plans become mainly an inventory of the city's spatial resources, previously distributed only according to *the economic values of the space*, without other important elements, including *the needs of the public interest*. Yet, the city space is a common good and it should be expected that the officials representing the general public should understand it and feel responsible for the effects of their activities.

After all, local plans created in the above-mentioned manner have one major advantage – they are relatively easy to construct and approve. Rather, no one will protest anymore, everyone got what they wanted – most of all developers. And there is nothing malicious about them in this statement: developers operate within the framework created by local authorities, and if decisions are not specified in the appropriate standards, they will primarily implement their own, guided by the still shallowly understood economic calculation (although, in this regard, positive shifts in consciousness are taking place – at least this is being discussed).¹³ However, this is a very short-sighted point of view of spatial policy, also for developers. While they are the first to bear the possible costs of the standards approved by the city, however, only until the constructed real estate is sold. The city remains with these standards forever.

After all, it is impossible not to notice one obvious fact – a timely local spatial development plan would prevent the emergence of such forms of development, possible as a result of individual decisions, because it is usually based on analyses that are broader in the context, the results of which give completely different conclusions. At least in theory, assuming that including the local masterplan does not mean stiffening the rules beyond the measure of the place, but creating general foundations of harmony with surroundings to the local conditions

¹¹ The area currently covered (read: *post factum*) by the local masterplan for the area of “Czyżyny – Dywizjonu 303 and 2 Pułku Lotniczego estates”, date of commencement of the study: December 7, 2016, date of adoption: January 22, 2020.

¹² The area currently (read: *post factum*) with the local masterplan of the “Bagry” area, date of commencement of the study: September 14, 2016, date of adoption: December 18, 2019.

¹³ The author, being an invited speaker at the 6th Conference of the House and Apartment Builders' Association (Cracow, Sheraton Hotel, April 26, 2019) drew attention to the so far “undeveloped” fields of developers' activity: searching for appropriate spatial standards, increasing the compositional value and quality of public spaces within the housing complexes under construction in the absence of clearly formulated requirements in this regard, both in decisions of development conditions and in local masterplans.

of the natural and built environment, and providing elementary foundations for functioning. This clearly presents an uncoordinated problem with several individual decisions setting the conditions. Not to mention taking into account other needs – because these may not fit the municipal office analysts in the characteristics of the neighbouring buildings.

6. POST SCRIPTUM

Perhaps we should humbly agree at this point with the reflections of Zygmunt Bauman and his affirmation of dissimilarity, diversity, spontaneity, and the acceptance of informality as opposed to dehumanized town planning idealism, which he included in a significant, though not devoid of controversy, essay from 1996.¹⁴ However, one should be concerned whether this type of discourse is not possible during the “meeting of the urban and architectural team on ...”

Nevertheless, I am convinced that urban design makes sense, provided that it is practiced wisely.

I do not want to live in a city which challenges the need for urban design, especially in places where it should lead to the creation of public spaces. In relation to the rejected comprehension of urbanism as an art, planning refers to every geodesic division of an area into plots with residential houses only, without any other unprofitable functions.¹⁵

Sławomir Gzell, 2014

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¹⁴ Z. Bauman, *O ładzie, co niszczy, i chaosie, który tworzy, czyli o polityce przestrzeni miejskiej*, Kultura i Społeczeństwo, 1996, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 3–14.

¹⁵ S. Gzell, *op. cit.*, p. 33 (translation: S. Gzell).

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