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THE IMAGINARY WORLD OF HISTORIC TENEMENTS

WYOBRAŻONY ŚWIAT HISTORYCZNYCH KAMIENIC

Abstract

Referring to the views that our perception of a city is based on memories of its past forms (Aldo Rossi) and that the idea of beautiful and liveable cities is constantly traced back to nineteenth-century or even older images and concepts (Alan Colquhoun), the following paper describes the renewal of Włókiennicza Street in Łódź. The starting point for this initiative was the desire to recreate fragments of an idealised past. There have emerged conceptual, or even postmodern, projects with a contemporary interpretation of historical detail. Stripped of detail and devoid of character, the tenements have become an ideal field for interpretation. The architecture has been supposed to engage in a dialogue with the cultural environment, tradition and context of the place. However, rather than reproducing conventional detail, the decision has been made to introduce imitation, parody, irony, de-realisation, abstraction, overscaling and excess. In line with postmodern thinking, historical architecture has been ingeniously and playfully transformed. The façades are reminiscent of stage sets or masks that are meant to recreate the imaginary world of historic tenements.

Keywords: renewal, Łódź, Włókiennicza Street, detail

Streszczenie

Artykuł, odwołując się do poglądów, że nasze postrzeganie miasta bazuje na wspomnieniach jego przeszłych form (Aldo Rossi), oraz że idea pięknych i dobrych do życia miast jest stale odnoszona do XIX-wiecznych lub nawet starszych obrazów i koncepcji (Alan Colquhoun), opisuje przypadek rewaloryzacji ul. Włókienniczej w Łodzi. Punktem wyjścia dla tej inicjatywy stało się dążenie do odtworzenia fragmentów wyidealizowanej przeszłości. Powstały projekty konceptualne, wręcz postmodernistyczne, w których dokonano współczesnej interpretacji historycznego detalu. Kamienice, ogołcone z detali, pozbawione charakteru, stały się idealnym polem możliwości interpretacyjnych. Zamierzeniem było, by architektura nawiązywała dialog ze środowiskiem kulturowym, tradycją i kontekstem miejsca lecz zamiast odtworzenia konwencjonalnego detalu zdecydowano się na naśladowanie, parodiowanie, ironizowanie, odrealnienie, abstrakcję, przeskalowanie, nadmiar. Zgodnie z myślą postmodernistyczną pomysłowo, zabawnie przetworzono architekturę historyczną. Fasady przywodzą na myśl scenografię lub maski, które mają odtworzyć wyobrażony świat historycznych kamienic.

Słowa kluczowe: rewitalizacja, Łódź, ul. Włókiennicza, detal

Whatever general attitude may be adopted as to the relevance of tradition to modern life, it cannot be denied that of all institutions it is the city in which the past is most tangible.¹

1. CITY

Today, a great part of architectural design is highly influenced by digital technologies, new materials and building techniques taken straight from science fiction. To deal with environmental, social, economic or communicational dilemmas and problems of an unbalanced contemporary world creators seem to look solely toward the future. Such architectural objects are being seamlessly perceived and accepted, some of them even becoming “icons of architecture”. At the same time, the popular idea of beautiful and good-to-live cities is constantly related to nineteenth-century or even older images and concepts. The statement of Alan Colquhoun made in the 70’s seems to be relevant: “To a large extent our ideas about pleasant and meaningful city environments are based on our actual experience of living and working among the buildings and city structures of the past”². Also Aldo Rossi searching for solutions that could help to regain balance in urban planning suggested that our knowledge of what is considered beautiful or ugly in the city is based on our memory of its past forms, since, without assuming continuity of cultural meaning, no aesthetic judgment is possible.

2. CITY BLOCK – STREET – HOUSE

Dariusz Kozłowski describes the city as a collection of “architectural things”. But before they could be named – a theatre, a palace or a temple – lines, surfaces and solids, rules for space had to be established³. He connotes the tradition of the city as based on forms: “streets” – readable space of people’s encounters, “houses” in lines of frontage – true shelters, and “city blocks” – external spaces and hidden interiors.

One of the cities whose 19th-century metropolitan centre was based on urban blocks is Lodz. It is a city with a particularly clear urban structure – a legible street and block system. After all, its heart is Piotrkowska Street. The metropolitan zone of Lodz⁴ is the largest homogenous city centre structure of its kind in Poland (with an area of 1,400 ha).

In the second half of the 19th century, Lodz was the fastest growing city in the Polish lands. In the 1890s, tenement houses built en masse filled the vacant spaces of the city blocks and replaced wooden buildings. Numerous residences of industrialists were also located in compact development. The space of the city centre is filled with comprehensible

¹ A. Colquhoun, *The Superblock* [in:] A. Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism. Modern Architecture and Historical Change*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1986, p. 83.

² *Ibidem*.

³ D. Kozłowski, 7 przypadków architektury. *Miasto idealne, kwarta zabudowy miejskiej, konteksty bliskie i dalekie*, “PRETEKST – Zeszyty Katedry Architektury Mieszkaniowej”, 2004, no. 1, p. 51.

⁴ “More than 10,000 buildings, erected in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, have nowadays become the historical centre of the Lodz Metropolitan Area, called the Greater Lodz Urban Zone”. M. Janiak, B. Poniatowski, *Introduction* [in:] M. Domińczak, A. Zaguła, *Typologia łódzkiej kamienicy*, Urząd Miasta Łodzi, Łódź 2016, p. 1.

and clear architectural articulation, so that the interface between public and private space, shaped by frontages and dominants, is unambiguous and characterised by diversity, which contributes significantly to the attractiveness of the urban walls⁵. The big-city tenements, constituting the basis of Lodz's urban substance, together with the factory owners' palaces and villas as well as the factories, parks and gardens, form a coherent and at the same time highly diverse urban landscape⁶.

Unfortunately, years of neglect of the technical condition of buildings and infrastructure, as well as ownership and social problems have led to the degradation of the urban fabric of the centre of Lodz. The condition has notably deteriorated since the 1990s.

In 2014, a decision was made to regenerate the downtown areas of Lodz. This was made possible by the emergence of relevant legal regulations, an influx of public capital and the possibility of obtaining EU funds. Włókiennicza Street was chosen as the first stage of regeneration. Two factors influenced the choice: the ownership structure of the buildings (most of them are communal buildings) and their excessive degradation.

3. WŁÓKIENNICZA STREET

Włókiennicza Street is a short street of 313 metres, connecting Jana Kilińskiego and Wschodnia Streets. Before the war, the street was called Kamienna and during the German occupation it was called "Von-Stein-Strasse". Delineated in 1880, it was created as a result of the secondary division of a large city block. It was not a representative street, cheap tenement houses of no particular architectural value were built along it (except for the villa of Hilary Majewski (1838–1892), the urban architect of Lodz). All the tenements were built at the same time and were designed from the beginning as low-standard flats, with the possibility of renting out individual rooms. Affected by the decline of the textile industry in the last decade of the 20th century, it became a street of ill repute, degraded in both architectural (abandoned, dilapidated tenements) and social terms. It was considered an enclave of poverty and exclusion. It became the set for many film productions because it reflected the atmosphere of pre-war and wartime cities. It is not without reason that this notorious city block around Włókiennicza Street was included in the regeneration programme as priority no. 1 area⁷.

Włókiennicza Street has become a symbol of the regeneration programme. The place has undergone an extraordinary metamorphosis. Under the Lodz City Centre Urban Regeneration Programme⁸ the city has renovated 15 tenement houses, including thorough reconstruction of their interiors and courtyards. The works on Włókiennicza Street also included the refurbishment of the street. Private investors have also become involved – a developer has renovated the corner building at the junction with Kilińskiego Street, and the Atlas Sztuki Foundation

⁵ A. Pyziak, *Strefa Wielkowiejska Łodzi* [in:] Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, 24.11.2022, <https://tup.org.pl/strefa-wielkowiejska-lodzi/> (access: 20.08.2023).

⁶ M. Janiak, B. Poniatowski, *Introduction...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁷ One of the eight parts of Lodz designated in the Area Regeneration Plan, covering over 1,700 hectares, or more than 6 per cent of the total area of the city.

⁸ The project entitled "Lodz City Centre Urban Regeneration Programme – an area of 7.5 ha delimited by Wschodnia, Rewolucji 1905r., Kilinskiego, Jaracza streets together with frontages on the other side of the aforementioned streets" is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund under the Regional Operational Programme of the Lodz Voivodeship for 2014–2020.

is creating a gallery at number 20⁹. The city is also trying to acquire the remaining properties, which would also allow them to be included in the regeneration programme¹⁰. Thanks to the regeneration, Włókiennicza Street has taken on the character of a woonerf (a kind of pedestrian-roadway with limited car traffic without a designated separation between the roadway and the pavement). The street has been paved with stone blocks and supplemented with greenery. A pocket park with a playground has been created, as well as a new space for rest, recreation and local events – the Hilary Majewski’s Passage.

The intention was that the regeneration would not result in gentrification of the area – communal flats would remain in the communal tenements. Some of the ground floors have been earmarked for service or retail purposes. Comparing the archive photos with the current state after the regeneration, it can be seen that the commercial character of the ground floors has been restored in many places. The mixing of residential and commercial functions was meant to activate the area of the block. Establishments with social and cultural functions were also created to serve the residents¹¹.

An undertaking in such a large inhabited area at one time, undoubtedly involves very complex administrative, financial and social logistics. However, what seems to be most remarkable about this renewal is that its initiators decided to follow a particular path of rare metamorphosis. In addition to improving the infrastructure, the aesthetic aspect of the project was very important here. They decided on bold designs that, in addition to general refurbishment and adaptation to modern standards, were intended to give the buildings a special, unusual, avant-garde character. “It has been possible to combine modernisation with an artistic programme on Włókiennicza Street. (...) Over the years, most of the façades have lost their architectural details, while some have never had them. We will restore the former to their former beauty, and we have designed new, stylish ‘robes’ for the latter” – says Agnieszka Kowalewska-Wójcik, director of the Municipal Investment Board¹². This is an unusual approach to the regeneration of historic buildings.

A team of architects from the City Architect’s Office, preservationists, lecturers, students and the originator and founder of the Atlas Sztuki Foundation Andrzej Walczak were invited to develop the character of the facades. There were student workshops organised, involving groups from the Technical University of Lodz (under the supervision of Professor Artur Zagula) and the Academy of Fine Arts (under the supervision of Professor Andrzej Wachowicz, Dean of the Faculty of Design and Interior Design at the Academy of Fine Arts). “We gave the young architects who worked on this project the task of showing historical detail viewed through the lens of modernity”¹³ – said Marek Janiak, Architect of the City

⁹ A. Zys, *Rewitalizacja Włókienniczej w Łodzi. Kolejne kamienice trafiają do remontu!* [in:] *Magazyn WhiteMAD*, 31.10.2022, <https://www.whitemad.pl/rewitalizacja-wlokienniczej-w-lodzi/> (access: 25.08.2023).

¹⁰ Three tenements could not be included in the regeneration programme.

¹¹ *Wzorcowa rewitalizacja w Łodzi* [in:] *Sztuka architektury*, 5.08.2022, <https://sztuka-architektury.pl/article/16015/wzorcowa-rewitalizacja-w-lodzi> (access: 15.07.2023).

¹² A. Hac, *Łódź Rewitalizacja: Właśnie tak będzie wyglądała Włókiennicza* [in:] *Urząd Miasta Łodzi*, 7.11.2019, <https://uml.lodz.pl/aktualnosci/artukul/lodz-rewitalizacja-wlasnie-tak-bedzie-wygladala-wlokiennicza-id31349/> (access: 15.07.2023).

¹³ M. Kamińska, *Kamienice przy Włókienniczej będą miały zdobione fasady. “Pokażemy historyczny detal widziany przez soczewkę współczesności”* [in:] *Urząd Miasta Łodzi*, 1.02.2018, <https://uml.lodz.pl/aktualnosci/artukul/kamienice-przy-wlokienniczej-beda-mialy-zdobione-fasady-pokazemy-histo>

of Lodz (since 2011). The project was approved by the then provincial conservator, who was also the municipal conservator¹⁴. The concepts¹⁵ became a component of the investment tender. Some of the proposals were used in the final designs. Marek Janiak describes the regeneration of Włókiennicza Street as a testing ground for socio-cultural discussion among architects, investors and residents¹⁶.

As the buildings have different conservation status and state of repair and preservation of elements, there are two types of approach, regeneration and conservation restoration. In the case of the listed Hilary Majewski's house at number 11, everything was restored in accordance with the designs and historical documentation. Another historic building is the tenement house once belonging to Moryc Tauberg (designed by Franciszek Chelmiński) at number 22, the latest building to be erected in Włókiennicza Street, a treasure trove of polychrome and architectural details.

However, the treatment of buildings not subject to historic preservation seems particularly interesting. New architectural elements and details have been superimposed on these ordinary, often undecorated façades. Colloquially speaking, the buildings were given new faces or even masks. It was not just a matter of beautifying the façades of the tenements. The priority was to combine the old and the contemporary. Thus, conceptual façades were created.

4. DETAIL

Kamienna Street was knowingly mutilated through the removal of historic details during renovations in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (Ill. 1). The regeneration projects, however, did not include a simple restoration of old elements and decoration. It is safe to say that the designers used a postmodern language to design the façades. The historic detail has been given a contemporary interpretation. The façades of the tenements have been treated as a flat canvas onto which elements and decorations have been applied, referring to the existing window layout and other elements. Some of the solutions consisted of adding decoration, in others missing elements have been recreated in a new shape. There is a distinct play with material, often unobvious, and with colours. Reference has been made to the 19th-century solutions when a detail was brought out with a lighter or darker shade. There has also been a return to gilded detailing.

Marek Janiak describes the activities in the following way:

The use of contemporary means such as stainless steel, aluminium details, large glazing and artistic transformations of the detail will allow the viewer to deduce from the façades of these tenements that this is a contemporary reinterpretation of the detail – a dialogue with history.

ryczny-detal-widziany-przez-soczewke-wspolczesnosci-id18056/2018/2/1/ (access: 10.07.2023).

¹⁴ M. Janiak [in:] ŁÓDŹ 2.0 – Ulica Włókiennicza, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mSTmBNI3cg> (access: 23.07.2023).

¹⁵ Authors not made public [See in] M. Szlachetka, *Nowa ul. Włókiennicza – kicz czy hit rewitalizacji Łodzi? "Widać że niektóre elementy zostały wykonane dosyć niedbale"* [in:] Wyborcza.pl, 11.03.2023, https://lodz.wyborcza.pl/lodz/7,44788,29528839,wlokiennicza.html?utm_source=mail&utm_medium=art_polecane&utm_campaign=artid_29528839&token=IeVMnkG2w-zEaLS6pPOmLpfDIHh-JWavT2ZHDrLgdiytp4lUIMh-fOOPjWaNuwm0 (access: 20.06.2023).

¹⁶ M. Janiak, *op. cit.*

Combining the beauty of tradition with the lightness and imagination of the present. It is also this extraordinary attention to historical detail, variations on a theme, one might say a kind of concert for cornices and columns that is a clear signal to the viewer that the cultural heritage of architecture is consistent with the present¹⁷.

The combination of a flat, detail-free façade with new, colourful and decorative details is particularly evident in the design of the building at 15 Włókiennicza Street¹⁸ (Ill. 2). Here, a maroon wedge cuts into the façade from above, demarcating two ways of regeneration. “The façade looks as if it was made of two parts from different structures which were juxtaposed in contrast or, as if from underneath the ornate but surprisingly obliquely cut façade, its second, simple and smooth layer was visible”¹⁹. The grey elements around the window recesses, which contrast with the maroon façade, are made of sheet metal and placed at a distance from the façade plane. The foregrounding of the details emphasises their “artificial”, unreal and abstract character. The rest of the façade is left white and undecorated. The contrast between a creative approach to regeneration and a mere “renovation” is particularly evident in this project. Such an exposed, one-dimensional, simplified detail is also used in the building at number 14 (Ill. 3) on the third and fourth floors. Here, the gold colour contrasts sharply with the maroon brick façade.

The originally simple, ornament-free building at number 6 (Ill. 4) has also undergone a bold metamorphosis. The low-rise, two-storey building has received a glazed middle storey and sculptures of 6 white caryatids in the Cubist style. The white female figures “supporting” the upper storey stand out strongly against the blue curtain wall.

In the case of the building at number 12 (Ill. 5), it has been decided to reinforce and complement the existing decorative elements around the windows and cornices in the traditional manner. The rustication has been introduced. However, irregular elements made of mirrors with vertical articulation have been superimposed on this conservative solution. The balcony railings are also covered with mirrors. It is only on close inspection that it becomes apparent that some of the mirror elements interfere with (decompose) the restored historical elements. The introduction of maroon joinery is also an interesting intervention.

The corner building at 54 Wschodnia Street (Ill. 6) was also devoid of decoration before the regeneration. Here, too, a strong intervention has been decided upon. A strong oriel referring to the truncated corner has been created and decorative details of window and door frames, panels under the windows, cornices and pilasters in the shape of columns have been added. The recesses have been replaced with windows. Some of the elements and the ground floor wall have been given a golden colour, which stands out clearly against the dark clinker of the rest of the façade. The tenement is an important accent that “starts” the street on the Piotrkowska side. The neighbouring tenement has received golden vertical bars to imitate the details around the windows, columns and cornices (Ill. 7).

¹⁷ J. Grudzień, *Łódź 2.0 – rewitalizacja ulicy Włókiennicznej*. Andrzej Walczak i Marek Janiak m.in. o Nowym Centrum Łodzi [in:] *Dziennik Łódzki*, 2.02.2018, <https://dzienniklodzki.pl/lodz-20-rewitalizacja-ulicy-wlokiennicznej-andrzej-walczak-i-marek-janiak-min-o-nowym-centrum-lodzi/ar/12902765> (access: 15.07.2023).

¹⁸ The project is based on a proposal by Marek Janiak.

¹⁹ Postmodernizm w łódzkim stylu [in:] *Sztuka architektury*, 27.04.2023, <https://sztuka-architektury.pl/article/16696/postmodernizm-w-lodzkiem-stylu> (access: 15.07.2023).

In the building at 4 Włókiennicza Street (Ill. 8), elements of the detailing have been restored and new ones added, which, although referring to historical forms, have been transformed into abstract ones (e.g. narrow pilasters of a half cylinder shape on the sides of the windows, which neither rest on the cornice nor support the heads rising above them at a distance). The dark grey brown façade was also decorated with golden drawings of rustications, cornices, panels and window framing details. The painted patterns are reminiscent of mapping applied to façades. The unreal sense of the “makeshift” is reinforced by the divisions on the façade, which, although not random, do not coincide with the drawings applied to the surface. The façade gives the impression of a theatrical decoration.

The most unconventional development (private investment²⁰) has been created at 20 Włókiennicza Street (Ill. 9), as the headquarters of the Atlas Sztuki Foundation. It has been most original in preserving existing fragments and most daring in adding new fabric. The tenement was one of the most devastated. After the necessary technical studies, the decision was made that the only way to save the edifice was to demolish and rebuild it. The building was demolished, saving only part of the front elevation up to the height of the first floor. These sections were preserved unchanged, with damage, with bricked-up windows, stripped of plaster, with visible bricks, damaged cornices, “decorated” with graffiti. This saved structure has been encased in modern architecture. The superstructure of the façade consists of a modern huge black glazing extending three storeys above the ground floor, set back on axis into a large recess. The recess is framed by a two-bay portico made of monumental columns with rich, golden capitals, with an abstract shape alluding in colour and strong geometrisation to the Art Nouveau style. There have also been introduced precisely composed dividing lines of the glass panes and a delicate circle, superimposed on the façade and permeating its elements. As Marek Janiak put it: “The scale and elegance of the columns and the proportion in relation to the entire façade, as in the Palladian buildings, make the design an architectural manifesto of the new renaissance. It is both very intimate and delicate and monumental, lofty and ennobling. It is classical beauty encapsulated in the technologies of the present day”²¹. The following words seem to have been close to the author of such a concept: “There is something appealing, even sensual, about a building that gradually becomes a ruin. Such a building reveals the impact of passing time, reminds us of the inevitable escape of the past. It thus powerfully awakens – far more powerfully than a renovated historical building can – our awareness of history, of past generations, of people living and dying before us”²².

5. THE IMAGINARY CITY

The revitalisation of Włókiennicza Street gives the impression of having been carried out in the spirit of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, author of numerous interpretive transformations of medieval monuments in the 19th century, who proclaimed: “to restore a monument does not mean to protect, repair or rebuild it, but to restore it to a state that may have never existed

²⁰ Designed by Andrzej Walczak.

²¹ J. Grudzień, *Łódź 2.0...*, *op. cit.*

²² H. Heynen, *Problem przemijalności w architekturze nowoczesnej*, “Autoportret”, 2016, no. 2(53), <https://www.autoportret.pl/artykuly/problem-przemijalnosci-w-architekturze-nowoczesnej/> (access: 16.08.2023).

at the time”²³. Stripped of detail and devoid of character, the tenements have become an ideal field for interpretation. The architecture has been supposed to engage in a dialogue with the cultural environment, tradition and context of the place. However, rather than reproducing conventional detail, the decision has been made to introduce imitation, parody, irony, de-realisation, abstraction, overscaling and excess. In line with postmodern thinking, historical architecture has been ingeniously and playfully transformed. The façades are reminiscent of stage sets or masks that are meant to recreate the imaginary world of the 19th-century tenements. To recreate fragments of an idealised past. But must the creation of a false lineage based on imagery, the desire to cover a void with a new disguise, be something negative?

Due to the accumulation of renovated tenements, the street contains a strong aesthetic tension. The experience of architectural space is intense here: a strong urban interior, a short straight street, with buildings similar in volume. The intensity of renovated tenements with such variety is incredibly impressive. Each successive one surprises. This gives the street, a section of the city, a strong character that can help residents identify and reclaim the identity of the place. The decision to regenerate the area in this original way can have an uplifting effect on the residents of the tenements. The new façades, even if controversial, will blur memories of the neglected and degraded past of the place over time.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The transformation that Włókiennicza Street has undergone is one of the most important and interesting actions undertaken in Lodz aimed at revalorising degraded buildings. Włókiennicza Street has become a showcase of Lodz’s regeneration and an impulse for further development of this part of the city. The unique and unconventional transformation of this space has undoubtedly piqued the curiosity of both visitors and locals. Although its full potential has yet to be unlocked, people are eager to explore this uncommon space.

In his new book “Gdynia obiecana” [*The Promised Gdynia*],²⁴ Grzegorz Piątek, an architectural critic and historian, notes that the on-going aestheticisation of city centres in Poland results in their depopulation and increasing elitism or “festiveness”. According to Adolf Loos, “ornament turns art into a commodity.”²⁵ Time will tell whether the regeneration of Włókiennicza Street has become only a “commodity” – a capital investment – or perhaps a foundation for the social transformation of the area and a tool for constructing local identity.

²³ M. Karpińska, *Wstępniak*, “Autoportret”, 2016, no. 2(53), <https://www.autoportret.pl/artykuly/wstepniak-13/> (access: 16.08.2023).

²⁴ G. Piątek, *Gdynia obiecana. Miasto, modernizm, modernizacja 1920–1939*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2022.

²⁵ B. Colomina, *Prywatne i publiczne. Architektura nowoczesna jako medium masowe*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2023, p. 63.



Ill. 1. Photo by Janusz Kubik, source: <https://expressilustrowany.pl/oto-jedna-z-najbardziej-znanych-ulic-w-lodzi-ulica-wlokiennicza-kiedys-ulica-kamienna-przez-lata-strach-bylo-tamtedy-cho-dzic/gh/c1-17644293/2> (accessed: 05.09.23).



Ill. 2. Building at 15 Włókiennicza Street, photo by Anna Mielnik.



III. 3. Building at 14 Włókiennicza Street, photo by Anna Mielnik.



III. 4–5. Building at 6 and 12 Włókiennicza Street, photo by Anna Mielnik.



Ill. 6–7. Building at 54 Wschodnia Street, photo by Anna Mielnik.



Ill. 8–9. Building at 12 and 20 Włókiennicza Street, photo by Anna Mielnik.

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