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THE THEORY OF OPEN FORM AND NARRATION IN CITY ARCHITECTURE ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE WORKS OF OSKAR HANSEN

TEORIA OTWARTEJ FORMY A NARRACJA W ARCHITEKTURZE MIASTA NA PRZYKŁADZIE TWÓRCZOŚCI OSKARA HANSENA

Abstract

Various creators and theorists who originated from the Warsaw School of Architecture exerted an influence on the educational and professional activity of subsequent generations of architects. Oskar Hansen, together with his studies on “open form” was among them. The concept of “open form” evolved within the architect’s work and was verified by theoretical and design studies of exhibition pavilions, the Droga (The Road) monument, as well as the architecture of housing estates in the cities of Warsaw and Lublin. Most fully, however, it was validated by the design of Hansen’s own house in Szumin. The “open form” theory is analyzed in terms of the semantic application of the narrative architecture of meaning. In the theory of “open form”, the author explores the possibility of contextualization and challenges the user. Additionally, he builds architectural narratives. Architecture becomes a cognitive form; it forms a person’s background; it is an environment in which people’s relationships, elements of everyday life and the art of events occur.

Keywords: narrative architecture, open form, theory

Streszczenie

Wielu twórców i teoretyków wywodzących się z Warszawskiej Szkoły Architektury miało wpływ na dydaktyczną i zawodową aktywność kolejnych pokoleń architektów. Należał do nich Oskar Hansen ze swoimi studiami nad „otwartą formą”. Idea „otwartej formy” ewoluowała w twórczości architekta, znalazła potwierdzenie w opracowaniach teoretycznych, projektowych pawilonów wystawowych, pomnika Droga i architektury osiedli mieszkaniowych w Warszawie i Lublinie, a najpełniej zaistniała w jego domu własnym w Szuminie. Teoria „otwartej formy” zostanie przeanalizowana pod kątem zastosowania semantycznego narracji architektury znaczenia. W teorii „otwartej formy” autor buduje możliwość kontekstualizacji i stawia wyzwanie użytkownikowi, z drugiej strony buduje narracje architektury. Staje się ona formą poznawczą, tłem dla każdego człowieka, dla ludzi relacji, elementów codziennego życia i sztuki zdarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: narracja architektury, otwarta forma, teoria

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a centenary was celebrated by the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology (Wydział Architektury Politechniki Warszawskiej). Even though The Warsaw School was established during the occupation of Poland, the School was characterized by the autonomy of the creators who worked for it. Even in the challenging post-war years, when leading professors were under the influence of socialist realism, teachers continued to develop their independent ideas concerning design. Although many began to design in accordance with the contemporary ideology, others continued to develop concepts that were not granted approval from the oppressive communist system. Various creators and theoreticians working at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology influenced the academic, educational and creative activities of subsequent generations of architects.

Oskar Hansen was among numerous outstanding graduates of the Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology. He worked as a teacher at the Studio of Visual Structures (Pracownia Struktur Wizualnych) at the Academy of Fine Arts (Akademia Sztuk Pięknych) between 1954 and 1983. His unconventional creativity greatly impacted the research conducted in the “experimental laboratory” of the Department of Sculpture (Katedra Rzeźby) at the Academy of Fine Arts. In Polish and English, Hansen’s architectural and didactic activity was widely described in both scientific and popular science literature. The most well-known books about Hansen include *Leaven. About Zofia and Oskar Hansen* by Springer and *To See the World* written by Hansen himself. In the latter book, Hansen puts forward his theory of open form and discusses publications in the weekly “Przegląd Kulturalny” and the “Architektura” magazines. The following research work analyzes the available literature on this topic, including the publications by the author himself, as well as articles and monographs where his work is described, specifically the architectural practice that applies the “open form” design theory. The “open form” theory is analyzed in terms of the semantic application of the narrative architecture of meaning. The research is conducted with the use of the case study method.

The topics have been carefully selected with the view to demonstrating the multi-layered quality of the “open form” theory. The impact this theory exerted on the design of modern objects related to symbolic narrative, memorial sites and sacred spaces constitutes a vital element of this study. An attempt at an overall analysis of the “open form” theory presented in Hansen’s writings entitled *To See the World* is an innovative element of this work. The study of these specific elements and features incorporated in Hansen’s work, such as Juliusz Słowacki housing estates in Lublin, Przczółek Grochowski in Warsaw, a residential house in Szumin, memorial monuments and sacred buildings, all of which belong to the school of open architecture, poses the question of the place of semantics in the era of globalization. In the “open form” theory, the author explores the possibility of contextualization and challenges the user. The issue of open form can also be associated with the educational practice at the Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology, at the Studio of Sacred and Monumental Architecture (Pracownia Architektury Sakralnej i Monumentalnej). The university’s long-standing teaching practice reflects the importance of “Hansen’s open form”.

2. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CREATIVITY

Hansen was a versatile person, both an architect and an educator; a theoretician and a visionary. However, he was also an artist, painter and sculptor. Despite his passions, he was unable

to implement the majority of his projects due to the doctrine of socialist realism prevailing at the time. Paintings from the 1960s concerned studies on the image and the tool of impact. He designed exhibition pavilions presented abroad; these pavilions became “a laboratory for original exhibition designs”. This provided the foundations for formulating the concept of the “open form”, understood as a process engaging the viewer. The most outstanding pavilion created by Hansen, the *HT Structure* pavilion was based on the shape of a hyperbolic paraboloid innovatively shaping the space. In 1958, a project for the Road monument (pomnik Droga) dedicated to the victims of the concentration camp in Oświęcim-Brzezinka, was created. In the design, the camp area as a whole was seen as a monument; the road coincides with the general human experience of the place. The most important aspect of the design, however, is the open form and its space and time. The concept was transferred from an urban-planning scale as the structure of the space of housing estates and the concept of environmental art. Architecture was a cognitive form; it formed a background and a spatial form for every person, for people’s relationships and for the art of events¹.

Hansen’s sensitivity made him feel responsible for the world he wished to heal. The concept of “open form” was the idea of “art as a process, eternal transformability and art awaiting changes (...) an evolution otherwise marked by the cyclicity of nature, repetition, the daily desire to order the world (...) to subordinate it to oneself” [Trans. by the author]². The search for the causes of the crisis in the surroundings gave him the reason for the analysis of space and paved his way to creating the concept of “open form”. Hansen saw his theory as a comprehensive approach to the assessment of architecture, art and design, but also as a method of approaching design from the recipient’s point of view³. He attentively saw a human being as the narrator of events against the background of architecture and its structures.

3. OPEN FORM IN THE CITY STRUCTURE

The construction of the Juliusz Słowacki housing estate in Lublin⁴ became the embodiment of an innovative vision to organize space as a Linear Continuous System. The process consisted of a strictly planned, or systematized, segregation of functions related to work, housing, recreation, services and communication, separated by strips of greenery, known as linear segregation of zones. The zones of the housing estate body were supposed to serve as a tool for visual impact, simultaneously leading to a unification of social space⁵.

The design assumption behind the housing estate in Lublin⁶ was to reduce implementation costs, but also to create favourable housing conditions and proper “urban planning

¹ O. Hansen [in:]: Culture.pl, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/oskar-hansen> (access: 2.09.2023).

² D M. Lachowski, M. Linkowska, Z. Sobczuk, *Wobec Formy Otwartej Oskara Hansena. Idea-uto-
pia-reinterpretacja*, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 2016, p. 6.

³ E. Odyjas, *Teoria i praktyka formy otwartej Oskara Hansena*, “Zeszyty Naukowe, Architektura” 2014, no. 54, p. 128.

⁴ Zofia and Oskar Hansen and their team were the authors of the architectural design; Jerzy Dowgiałło was responsible for the construction. The project was designed in the years 1960–1963, and implementation was conducted in the years 1964–1972.

⁵ A. Cymer, *Architektura w Polsce 1945–1989*, Centrum Architektury–Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, Warszawa 2019, pp. 191–193.

⁶ The location of the estate covered an area of 16.5 ha of the Rury district, the estate was planned for 7,300 inhabitants.

expression”. Long buildings were constructed to make economic use of the area, while the area of streets and housing estate access roads was reduced to a minimum. Additionally, the area of access to buildings, garages, parking lots, utility spaces and garbage bins was increased⁷. The organizational layout of the estate was defined and divided into two major zones, i.e. the serviced and servicing zone. The serviced zone consisted of residential interiors sheltered from the wind and exposed to sunlight. Additionally, two servicing zones were planned. One of them, northern-oriented and shaded, had access to the blocks, parking lots and garages; the latter one was designed as a community garden with recreation for children and teenagers and a community center. The zoning of the system allowed for complete collision-free pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The serviced and servicing zones did not intersect⁸. Semicircular rows of five-story buildings formed a spatial accent and separated a protective zone of the interior. The long building forms were intersected by groups of short, low-rise blocks, while the entire complex was closed by eleven-story high-rise buildings⁹. The rectangular buildings formed a puzzle of simple forms resembling one another. Balconies, placed towards the inside, on the side of the entrance to the buildings, constituted a spatial puzzle on the façade. The originally used colors distinguished individual parts of the building.

As Oskar Hansen wrote in 1965 in the “Architektura” magazine, “economic and functional conditions have shaped the estate into a form that, when built, will start to fulfill its function – it will begin to influence the resident-recipient. This form should, therefore, be legible and understandable; it should specify the relationship between the individual and the group” [Trans. by the author]. According to Hansen, the open form could emerge and gain meaning only when people start to act in it; when the events of everyday life of the inhabitants form its background. The creator of the narrative and the author of the project was convinced that his design intentions would be properly understood through the readability of the layout of the estate. Spatial clarity was ensured by defining the visual scope of the estate from the inside and outside through continuous and high-rise forms. Moreover, the division into three differently situated units having a combination of different building forms was used, as well as a diversified layout of apartments inside the buildings themselves¹⁰.

Another example of an open form and the implementation of a utopian vision of the city is the Przechówek Grochowski estate in Warsaw¹¹. The architecture of open form exerts a special impact on the recipient’s psyche. The human environment is shaped jointly with the development of the inhabitants’ awareness. While presenting the idea of the estate, Oskar Hansen stated that this issue should be considered in relation to the criteria of the Linear Continuous System layout, as well as to the implementation of the Słowacki estate in Lublin with the LSC elements contained in it. The author considered the location of the estate to be accidental; its size, shape and location resulted from the grid of the centric city, while the plot was abstract in relation to the surroundings¹².

⁷ The construction technology is based on the Żerań brick with individually designed elements of prefabricated construction, such as external beams and columns, and typical staircases. The design assumed the possibility of connecting apartments.

⁸ O. Hansen, *Osiedle im. Juliusza Słowackiego LSM w Lublinie*, “Architektura” 1965, no. 10, p. 423.

⁹ J. Zętar, *Oskar Hansen – osiedle im. Juliusza Słowackiego w Lublinie* [in:] Teart NN, <https://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/artykuly/oskar-hansen-osiedle-im-juliusza-slowackiego-w-lublinie/> (access: 21.08.2023).

¹⁰ O. Hansen, *Osiedle im. Juliusza Słowackiego...*, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

¹¹ The Hansens started work on the project in 1963, and its implementation took place in 1968–1974.

¹² O. Hansen., *Osiedle Przechówek Grochowski w Warszawie*, “Architektura” 1971, no. 10, p. 367.

The spatial concept of the estate comprises one 1.8-kilometer-long building with 22 gallery segments. The building winds around three semi-open courtyards¹³. The whole is connected by galleries and corridors from which residents can gain easy access to the apartments. Traffic is separated at pedestrian and vehicular levels. The estate is surrounded by a depression of land with garages and economic squares, over which footbridges were built leading to the residential level, as well as to commercial buildings. The spatial clarity of the layout of the estate is visible. A strong form of architecture is created by means of repetition of volumes and rhythmically designed prefabricated details. The estate serves as an example of a multifunctional residential structure with communication continuity, the relationship between servicing and serviced zones, and the connection of the facility with its surroundings¹⁴. The elements of the information system were developed through experience obtained from the implementation of the housing estate in Lublin.

The concept of the open form was most fully implemented in Zofia and Oskar Hansen's summer house in Szumin on the Bug River¹⁵. The facility was built entirely in accordance with the author's concept, regardless of the limitations of the prefabrication system of the time. The building has a sloping roof, which is a reference to local architecture and local materials. Visible modernist motifs emphasize the flow between interior and exterior. The idea was to revitalize architecture; to adapt it to changes resulting from the activities of its inhabitants¹⁶. Architecture continued to provide a background for events, meetings and activities as well as changes in use; thus, it became a living form of narrative. In the Hansens' house, the meeting place on the ground floor was the most important part. It had a table where the circulation areas met. A transverse opening on the ground floor introduced light and airflow.

4. THEORY VS. PRACTICE – THE ROAD PROJECT

The project by Oskar Hansen, carried out between 1959 and 1967, aimed to create a symbolic asphalt road that would intersect the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp site. This road was intended to be the main element of the project, symbolizing the boundary between life and death, freedom and captivity. Hansen proposed that the road be narrow and straight, leading visitors through the camp area to allow them to experience the atmosphere and history of this tragic place. The project did not include the construction of a museum at the end of the road, but rather a symbolic plaque that would separate the road space from the surrounding nature. This plaque was meant to serve as a place for reflection and tribute to the victims. Unfortunately, the Hansen project was not realized. It did not meet the requirements of the competition and was not accepted by the survivors of the camp. As a result, the asphalt road was never built, and the project was not implemented at all. In later years, some witnesses and individuals associated with Auschwitz-Birkenau expressed concerns that the Hansen project might be forgotten or erased by nature. They feared that vegetation and time could obscure

¹³ The estate covers an area of 11.3 ha and is intended for 6,600 inhabitants. 1,800 apartments were designed.

¹⁴ O. Hansen, *Osiedle Przyczółek...*, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

¹⁵ The facility was built in 1968.

¹⁶ Dom Hansenów w Szuminie [in:] Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/wystawy/dom-hansenow-w-szuminie-2/1> (access: 2.09.2023).

the memory of the tragedy that occurred in the camp. However, many others believed that natural processes could further emphasize the tragic nature of the place and convey a message of the necessity of remembrance and prevention of similar tragedies in the future.

As part of the commemoration of the Bełżec extermination camp, a project for a symbolic road was proposed to cross the site of the former camp. The project was completed in 2004 and was inspired by Hansen's work. The project was intended to pay tribute to the victims and enable visitors to understand and reflect on the tragic events that took place there. The road was to be narrow and straight, leading through an area that was once a site of murder and suffering. Its construction was to symbolize the boundary between life and death, between freedom and captivity. Symbolic elements were planned to be placed along the entire length of the road to reinforce the message of remembrance and reflection. One of the elements of the road's design was the placement of information boards that were to depict the history of the camp, describe the living and death conditions of the prisoners, and convey information about the mass murders. These plaques were to serve as an educational tool to convey knowledge about the Holocaust and prevent forgetting. Another element of the project was the placement of symbolic graves or memorials to commemorate the victims of the camp. These sites were to be places of reflection, prayer, and tribute. They were also to remind us of the individual fates and suffering experienced by the prisoners. The Bełżec road project was intended not only to memorialize the victims but also to educate and convey the message of the need to remember and prevent similar tragedies in the future. It also aimed to create a space where visitors could stop, reflect, and understand the tragic events that took place there.

5. CONCLUSION

Oskar Hansen, a Polish architect, was a pioneer of his time owing to his innovative theory of open form. The theory assumes that architecture results from events and human activities. The architect's theoretical works, individual exhibitions presenting the concept of open form, pavilion designs, the Road project and the Linear Continuous System for housing estates can all be seen as an attempt to implement the theory of open form. The architect's own house near Warsaw, in which all the principles of open form were applied, is an interesting example of such an implementation. The external and internal space interpenetrate, while the objects are completely modified, even if some of them have not stood the test of time. Hansen's work continues to serve as an inspiration for young architects; his teaching methods are still used in faculties of higher education, which contributes to a better understanding of the implementation context. In conclusion, Hansen's work and influence on the field of architecture can be seen as extremely inspiring and important to the development of the field. Furthermore, Hansen designed the unimplemented Road project to commemorate the victims of Auschwitz Death Camp. This project failed to be implemented due to the inability to meet the competition conditions, but it became an inspiration for various creators, including a project to commemorate the extermination camp in Bełżec. Hansen broke the rules of a traditional monument; he treated a monument as an individual manifestation of participation in an event. This form inspires young people, even though Hansen himself did not assume the existence of this type of architecture. The project proves that form and its meaning play a crucial part in architecture. Through their openness and transformability, architecture and art are bestowed with the characteristics of a process and are variable in time and space.



III. 1–4. The Słowacki housing estate in Lublin. Author of the photographs: Anita Orchowska.



III. 5–8. Przyczółek Grochowski housing estate. Author of the photographs: Anita Orchowska.

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