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URBAN BLOCK – A UNIVERSAL CODE OF CITY SPACE

KWARTAŁ ZABUDOWY – UNIWERSALNY KOD MIEJSKIEJ PRZESTRZENI

Abstract

Throughout the ages, cities have been built on a grid street plan filled with blocks of buildings. The edges of these blocks were formed by the street frontages – buildings' facades. Unbuilt urban blocks became squares and parks. This way of forming cities remains a universal canon. Rejected by Modernists, it took on the characteristics of revolutionary solutions in urban planning, primarily based on shaping individual buildings, resulting in the ongoing “arbitrariness” of designed architecture.

The subject of this discussion is the phenomenon of the urban quarter, using the example of Katowice and considering the author's experiences with two completed designs in the city centre. The extension of the Diament Hotel closes off an existing block. Whereby, the urban block is recreated through the Supersam building, which takes over the character of block development. The organization of the urban fabric is based on the structure of the new building, its scale, and the facades forming the edges of adjacent streets. The interior of the block takes the form of a covered agora. The building becomes an integral part of an important area of the city.

Keywords: urban block, urban fabric, architecture, urban planning

Streszczenie

Przez wieki miasta powstawały na planie siatki ulic i wypełniających ją kwartałów zabudowy. Ich krawędzie, w postaci pierzei, tworzyły frontowe elewacje budynków. Niezabudowane kwartały stawały się placami i parkami. Taki sposób budowania miast wciąż pozostaje uniwersalnym kanonem. Odrzucony przez modernistów, w urbanistyce przybrał cechy rewolucyjnych rozwiązań, opartych głównie na kształtowaniu osobnych budynków, co skutkuje do dziś „dowołnością” projektowanej architektury. Przedmiotem wypowiedzi jest fenomen miejskiego kwartału, na przykładzie Katowic z uwzględnieniem doświadczeń autora: dwóch zrealizowanych w centrum obiektów. Rozbudowany hotel Diament „domyka” istniejący kwartał. Natomiast na nowo tworzy go budynek Supersamu, przejmując charakter zabudowy kwartałowej, gdzie porządkowanie miejskiej tkanki oparto o strukturę nowego budynku, jego skalę i elewacje tworzące pierzeje przylegających ulic. Wnętrze kwartału przybrało formę zadaszonej agory. Budynek stał się częścią całości – ważnej części miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: kwartał zabudowy, tkanka miejska, architektura, urbanistyka

1. INTRODUCTION

Katowice is only 158 years old. It is worth outlining the specifics of the dynamic development of this young city in the context of its architecture shaped by urban blocks.

2. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CITY

In the short period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, neighbouring villages, along with the dynamic development of the mining industry and the creation of an important railway route, were transformed into a significant urban centre that gradually gained crucial importance for Upper Silesia. Illustrating the development of Katowice at that time are the workers' colonies. Two neighbouring company settlements, Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec, built between 1906 and 1919 on the outskirts of Katowice, according to the design by Georg and Emil Zillmann from Berlin Charlottenburg, characterised the ongoing transformation and ideological confrontation. They remain closely related to the lively debate at that time about the advantages and disadvantages of two forms of workers' housing: the rural house and the tenement block. Irma Kozina writes about it as follows:

The architecture of workers' settlements became the battleground. The development of capitalism, intrinsically linked to industrialization, was ideologically based on the Enlightenment concept of empiricism, which means complete trust in naturalistic analysis and common sense. (...). On the opposite side, somewhat weaker but still supported by influential proponents, was a traditionalist movement, based on romantic ideology. Its proponents extolled the virtues of living in harmony with the laws of nature, in formations shaped by civilisation's development, according to the principles and customs inherent to ethnic communities. Around the mid-19th century, Victor Aimé Huber, a reformer and social activist who published articles on industrial workers' housing issues, sought to demonstrate the advantages of projects adapting the cottage house model over tenements. Unfortunately, compared to high-density multifamily buildings, maintaining such houses turned out to be much more costly. At that time, the idea of the garden city formulated by Ebenezer Howard gained significance in Great Britain, while in Germany, discussions initiated in the mid-19th century by Huber were revisited¹.

Presumably influenced by these ideas, the planning concepts for the industrialists-sponsored settlements of Giszowiec and Nikiszowiec were developed. These concepts were overseen by Anton Uthemann, a mining councillor who served as the general director of the Silesian company belonging to the mining and metallurgical company Georg von Giesches Erben from 1905 to 1913. Giszowiec (Gieschewald), designed for 600 families, was planned as a garden suburb with the character of a rural settlement centred around a square. Descriptions from the time of its construction presented it as a mining village (Bergarbeiterdorf). In addition to the loosely arranged residential buildings featuring 40 types of one-, two-, and four-family houses that stylistically referred to the traditions of Upper Silesia, the settlement included an inn, schools, laundries, weaving mills, a grocery store, a bakery, and hotels for single workers. It is noteworthy that even with the quasi-rural loose development, the houses were built along the road, giving it special significance and leaving maximum space in the garden area. This fact can be considered an archetype of frontage development².

Nikiszowiec (Nikischacht), in contrast to its neighbour, is an example of an orderly ensemble of frontage development, where its individual parts form adjacent urban blocks.

¹ I. Kozina, *Ikony architektury w województwie śląskim w XX i XXI w.*, Muzeum Śląskie, Katowice 2019, pp. 19–25.

² K. Seidl, *Mieszkania robotnicze w górnośląskim przemyśle górniczym*, KWK „Staszic”, Katowice 1995, pp. 40–52; L. Szaraniec, *Osady i osiedla Katowic*, „Śląsk” Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Katowice 2010, pp. 152–169.

This classical solution is based on a grid of streets, which serves as the framework for these blocks. The individual tenement buildings adjoin each other, creating a compact urban fabric – a common model of European city development. In this case, the design utilized the principles of a self-contained company settlement intended for lower-level workers and their families.

The perimeter arrangement of residential blocks, made of red clinker brick, is adorned with bay windows and brick ornaments. Characteristic arch-shaped vaulted gates, locally known as *einfahrts*, create a sense of connection. These gates lead to spacious inner courtyards, where ancillary rooms and bread ovens were located alongside the tenement buildings. Today, these courtyards are used as internal gardens.

The most important urban interior is the triangular square located in the central part of the settlement, surrounded by the frontages of the adjacent blocks. Ground floors with arcades are designated for essential service functions. In the immediate vicinity, you can also find a church and a school. Together, these elements make the settlement a self-sufficient town. Nikiszowiec housing estate, designed for nearly 8,000 people, fostered the development of independence and self-awareness among its proletarian residents, as well as their aspirations for urban community³.

During that time, plans based on urban block development were also being created in the immediate vicinity of the centre of Katowice. One of them is the complex located at Barbary Street in Katowice, designed by Bruno Taut, among others. The character of the block directly draws from urban planning typologies. In 1913, the author became associated with the movement of propagators of the idea of garden cities. However, (...) “since the 1920s, his views on residential construction underwent significant radicalization”⁴. Despite the prevailing modernist forms, his later achievements in Upper Silesia demonstrate the preservation of classical urban planning patterns of block development. Such a trend in the urbanization of Katowice has been maintained since the mid-19th century. Numerous examples from the early 20th century illustrate the dynamic transformation of Katowice’s landscape, moving away from loose villa, house, and farmstead development in favour of a compact structure: tenement blocks arranged in a grid of streets and urban squares. An important phenomenon is the significantly smaller area of Nikiszowiec, which provided comfortable living conditions for a much larger number of residents compared to the vastly spread Giszowiec housing estate. This fact can be attributed to a consistent urban development process based on plot division and the layout of street grids that designated areas for dense block development.

3. THE INTERWAR PERIOD

The interwar period, spanning seventeen years and two months between the two World Wars, marked another turning point in the development of Katowice. As a result of plebiscites and uprisings in 1921, Katowice was incorporated into Poland and became the main centre of the Polish part of Upper Silesia. Initially, the authorities decided to create administrative autonomy, which was intended to gradually assimilate Upper Silesia with the rest of Poland. As a result, the Silesian Voivodeship had its own parliament, and local legislation respected many

³ K. Seidl, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–52; L. Szaraniec, *op. cit.*, pp. 152–169.

⁴ I. Kozina, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

German regulations. The enormous industry provided significant financial opportunities, and the city's development during that time was unprecedented. The Master Plan for Greater Katowice was established in 1926, serving as the basis for further expansion⁵. The base for searching for modern architecture remained the proven, classical urban planning. The dynamic construction of the city relied on comprehensive and bold projects related to electrification, the rebuilding of the Rawa riverbed, the expansion of the railway and road networks, as well as the construction of a series of public buildings. The massive Silesian Parliament edifice occupied an entire block and stood out from the city's modernist structure, whereby the Silesian Museum assumed a different form in relation to the urban structure. Within a short period, several hundred urban tenement houses were built. The scale of planning and the consistent construction of the capital of Upper Silesia continues to impress to this day.

Waldemar Odorowski describes this period as follows: "Avant-garde forms were meant to be a visible sign of modern development and civilizational progress in Silesia", and further adds, "The functionalist forms of this architecture emphasize the representative character of the buildings through the use of massive, monolithic structures that create distinct urban accents. A particular characteristic of this architecture, especially in the case of large tenement buildings, is the use of modern forms in a 19th-century manner, creating la rue corridor"⁶. Considering this fact as a particular feature shaping the character of Katowice as a metropolis, it is difficult to agree with the view expressed later in the statement: "That superficial and external use of modern forms gives the impression of functionalist costumes imposed on the well-known 19th-century type of appears to be a Functionalist costume, imposed on a tenement building known from the 19th-century"⁷. A different perspective is presented by the renowned Silesian architect Tadeusz Michejda. In his original text from 1932, he poses a question and provides an answer: "What is the essence of change and what characterizes modern architecture? For previous architecture, the architectural problem primarily focused on designing beautiful facades, whereas today's architect begins by properly planning the interior"⁸.

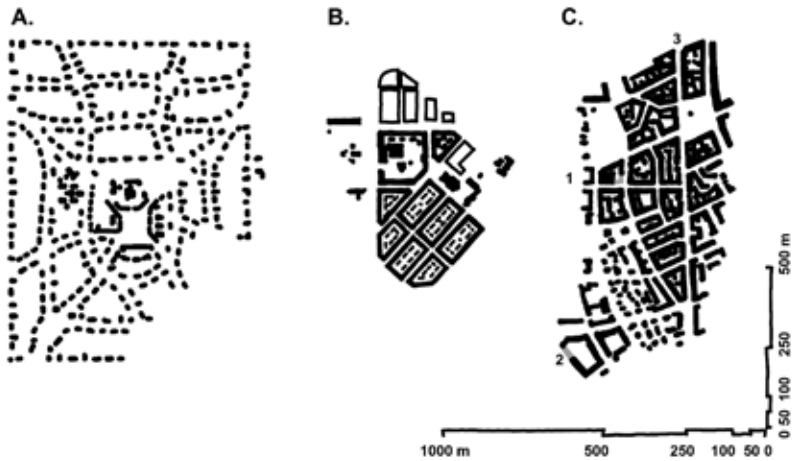
A significant example of this thinking is the southern district of Katowice built during the interwar period. Modern Functionalist tenement houses, with their characteristic rounded corners, horizontal divisions of facades, and a new approach to comfortable living spaces filled with light and equipped with the latest technological advancements, were built in regular block structures. On one corner, an avant-garde fourteen-story building was erected: the Tax Office Building (arch. Tadeusz Kozłowski 1929–1930), still known as the "cloud scraper" today. The exceptional concentration of functionalist tenement houses designed by prominent architects of the interwar period, such as K. Schayer, Z. Rzepecki, H. Schnidtko, F. Brenner, and S. Tabeński, creates a fully preserved and still astonishing district of modern architecture in a cohesive and compact block development layout. The exception to this rule was the scarcity of religious buildings and villas in Katowice. It is a unique phenomenon that, apart from Gdynia, cannot be found in other Polish cities.

⁵ M. Chmiel (ed.), *Promenada na południe. Historia ulicy Kościuszki w Katowicach*, Katowice Miasto Ogrodów – Instytucja Kultury im. Krystyny Bochenek, Katowice 2019, pp. 22–23.

⁶ W. Odorowski, *Architektura Katowic w latach międzywojennych 1922–1939*, Muzeum Śląskie w Katowicach, Katowice 2013, pp. 263, 321–325.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 263.

⁸ T. Michejda, *O zdobyczach architektury nowoczesnej*, "Architektura i Budownictwo" 1932, no. 5, pp. 137–139.



II. Comparative analysis of urban typology - drawn by the author

LEGEND:

- A. Giszowiec
- B. Nikiszowiec
- C. The interwar district
 1. The skyscraper
 2. Urban block with B. Taut's building
 3. The axis of Kościuszki Street

III. 1. Comparison of Giszowiec, Nikiszowiec and the district of the 20th interwar period in Katowice. Author's sketch.

4. THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The third distinctive period of Katowice's development took place in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, the modernist doctrine dominated thinking in both architecture and urban planning. The most significant difference compared to the city's previous building history was the rejection of urban block development in favour of individual buildings. The architects and authorities succumbed to the influences of Le Corbusier⁹ and the lofty ideas of the Bauhaus. Consequently, one broke apart from the age-old and tested definition of the urban plan¹⁰. This led to the disappearance of urban structure and, consequently, spatial chaos¹¹, particularly in Katowice, a young city lacking historical substance. Contrary to earlier standards, predominantly freestanding buildings were constructed in both the city centre and its outskirts. A notable transformation was the establishment of a new north-south axis, in contrast to the city's previous development along the railway route, which involved demolishing the northern side of the market square. The former Armii Czerwonej Avenue (now Wojciecha Korfaiego

⁹ C. Montgomery, *Miasto szczęśliwe*, Wydawnictwo Wysoki Zamek, Kraków 2015, pp. 46–47.

¹⁰ L. Krier, *Architektura wspólnoty*, Wydawnictwo Słowo/obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2011, pp. 119–123.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

Avenue) aimed to meet the new urban aspirations of the capital of Upper Silesia. With a width of 78 meters, it featured three-lane roads in both directions separated by a tramline. The loose composition of modernist structures of varying scales, including the distinctive residential block known as the “Superjednostka” (arch. Mieczysław Król, 1970) and service pavilions with their own network of service roads, characterized the avenue. The northern closure of the central artery consisted of a roundabout with the monumental monument of the Silesian Uprisings and the iconic “Spodek” arena (archs. Maciej Gintowt, Maciej Krasiński, 1971).



II. Disappearance of the urban fabric in Katowice since the 1970s - drawn by the author, LEGEND:

- 1. Rynek - Market Square
- 2. Railway
- 3. Wolności Square
- 4. Diament Hotel in the extant urban block
- 5. The block with the new Supersam
- 6. The Rawa River

III. 2. The disappearance of the urban fabric in Katowice since the 1970s. Author's sketch.

By studying the plans of Katowice from both the earlier and later periods, one can clearly observe the break with the classical structure of urban blocks in favour of dispersed development, where urban planning was reduced to experimental compositions of free-standing buildings. Previously, one of the main attributes of urban planning was the street shaping the urban tissue. Now, devoid of distinctive features that defined its character and scale, such as building facades enriching its multifunctional diversity at the ground level, the street has been reduced to a transportation route, serving solely as a means of transport between buildings with a “free plan”, resulting in loose arrangements and free forms of development¹². This unprecedented way of thinking about shaping cities has fundamentally changed their appearance. It continues to dominate the direction of designing and constructing urban spaces until today. The exceptions are urban infill developments or urban projects in which the ambition of clients and architects is to shape the urban fabric within the existing structure of the old (e.g., post-industrial) development, fitting into the existing and complemented network of streets.

5. MODERN TIMES

Despite rooted Modernist standards, attempts are still made to design according to the principles of classical urbanism. A heated confrontation of attitudes and views in approaching the design of urban space emerged after the team of architects from the Konior Studio won the competition for the redevelopment of the city centre of Katowice in 2006. The fundamental assumption in the winning entry was an attempt to shape the urban structure based on a grid of streets and squares within the existing space between W. Korfantego Avenue, the Market Square, and the roundabout¹³. As a result of further planning actions, the so-called Coordination Plan was created, which defined the basic assumptions for future transformations in this area. However, it does not constitute a binding document or a basis for further actions carried out in this area¹⁴. Despite numerous investments in the former market area and the Rynek – Rondo [Market – Roundabout] zone, which have had an impact on the aesthetics and functionality of this place, the character of the Modernist space from the 1970s has not been changed. The ambition to restore the status and central urban significance of the former Market Square also failed. The role of the urban agora is starting to be taken over by the revitalised area of the old railway station. The impressive hotels, bourgeois tenement houses, elegant shops, and restaurants that have been present here since the beginning of the 20th century have created the atmosphere of the pre-war centre of Katowice. Today, based on the existing urban fabric and the former Dworcowa Street, transformed into a piazza, this place becomes the most important urban space.

¹² J. Gehl, *Życie między budynkami. Użytkowanie przestrzeni publicznych*, Wydawnictwo RAM, Kraków 2009, pp. 45–46.

¹³ Open urban-architectural competition for the development of an urban-architectural concept for the development of the center of the city of Katowice, 2006, Organizer: SARP branch Katowice, Katowice City, I place: Konior Studio, archiwum.sarp.katowice.pl/2006/2006_17.htm#k (access: 15.06.2023).

¹⁴ Coordination Plan for the center of Katowice by Konior Studio, commissioned by the Katowice City Hall, 2007, <https://koniorstudio.pl/projekt/przebudowa-strefy-srodmiejskiej-katowice/> (access: 15.06.2023).



Ill. 3. Diamant Hotel Plaza in Katowice, designed by Konior Studio, realization: 2021. Photography by: Jakub Certowicz.

The design by Konior Studio has its role in this transformation. Opposite the main hall of the old railway station, an extension and rebuilding of the Diamant hotel were carried out in 2021, within the urban block shaped in the 19th century. A complementary structure was created on the site of a dismantled tenement house, filling the existing frontage. The contemporary architecture of the building enters into a dialogue with the surroundings, respecting its scale and the line of the existing buildings, in keeping with the standards of a modern hotel. The use of brick as the primary facade material is a new phenomenon in the surrounding development. A regular, massive brick grid creates deep window recesses implemented in the form of porte-fenêtre balconies. The extended facility was designed in the form of a five-story tenement house with an inner courtyard. In the new part, the entrance to the extended hotel complex was exposed. The height and large windows emphasize the importance of the ground floor, which houses a two-storey lobby, a restaurant, and representational hotel rooms. The setback top floor, together with the adaptation of the historic building's roof, contains exclusive apartments with terraces. It accentuates the regular tectonics of the facade and combines the hotel complex into a compositional and functional whole. The former courtyard has been covered with a glass skylight. Below it, there is the main banquet hall.

In the new wing located inside the urban block, an arranged relaxation area was shaped to ensure proper lighting of all rooms and compliance with applicable regulations. The contemporary facility achieves the specified goals of the client, while complementing the missing fragment of the urban block and adding value to the created square space. The contemporary language of architecture, along with modern material solutions used in the new design,

respects the principle of shaping the urban block development. The form is distinctly different from the 19th-century style of the neighbouring tenements buildings¹⁵.

Another example by the author, that fits into the discussed topic of urban block development, is the “Supersam” shopping centre. It was designed by Konior Studio, is located in the centre of Katowice and was completed in 2015. Previously, there was a market hall (1937) designed by the renowned structural engineer, Professor Stefan Bryła¹⁶. The unique structure of the hall, consisting of 12 arch trusses creating a single-nave open interior without supports, was a distinctive feature in its time. Efforts to preserve the existing hall and expand it to meet contemporary needs within the extant structure were unsuccessful. Instead, a new building was erected on the site of the former freestanding hall, filling the rectangular plot between the existing streets and the former course of the Rawa River, now transformed into green areas. The building’s facades form frontages of the neighbouring streets, engaging in a dialogue with them through glazed shop windows, numerous entrances, and passages, which continue inside the building.



Ill. 4. Supersam – view from inside, Katowice, designed by: Konior Studio, realization: 2015. Photography by: Tomasz Zakrzewski.

Initially, the building was designed as a “high street” department store. After multiple changes to the functional program, a shopping centre was created with three commercial floors, including an underground level. It also includes a service and office space

¹⁵ Diament Hotel Plaza Katowice, project by Konior Studio, project: 2017, realization: 2021, <https://koniorstudio.pl/projekt-hotel-diamant-plaza-katowice> (access: 15.06.2023).

¹⁶ I. Kozina, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–125.

and a multi-level parking lot in the upper part of the facility. Inside, in line with tradition, a multi-story agora was shaped in the usual courtyard space, covered by a glass roof.

Numerous escalators, elevators, and staircases provide circulation between the floors within the agora. In the central area of the agora, en lieu of the former market hall, a fragment of the original structure in the form of three restored trusses was placed. This unique witness of history creates the identity and atmosphere of the new place.

Typically, the dominant commercial function undermines the urban character of similar developments. Such buildings often isolate themselves from the surroundings, becoming introverted enclaves. In this case, a dialogue with the city was successfully established, and the large-scale shopping centre was integrated into the urban structure. Although the Supersam Shopping Centre is an autonomous building, it adheres to the universal principle of urban block development and becomes a part of the urban tissue¹⁷.

6. CONCLUSION

The preservation of urban tissue from previous periods and the associated principle of block reshaping, as well as the subsequent trends in urban shaping since the 1970s, indicate the need for deeper reflection on the further development of urban space¹⁸.

Current attempts to design based on the proven layout of urban blocks face real challenges posed by existing legal regulations, ownership structures, and enduring modern design standards. Achieving the desired effects becomes difficult to implement or even impossible.

Modernism imposed its hierarchy, and in this process architecture gained new meanings, often constructing itself while devaluing the significance of urban tissue. By departing from block development, the primacy of the street has been diminished¹⁹. Therefore, it is all the more important to pay attention to the phenomenon of the urban block, whose qualities, despite the prevailing trend of freestanding buildings since the modernist era of the 1970s, still embody a universal canon of city shaping.

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¹⁷ *New Supersam*, project by Konior Studio, project: 2012, realization: 2015, <https://koniorstudio.pl/projekt/supersam-katowice> (access: 15.06.2023).

¹⁸ J. Rykwert, *Pokusa miejsca. Przeszłość i przyszłość miast*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2013, pp. 21–41.

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