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Culture in the city – the case of Gądów Mały housing estate in Wrocław

Introduction

Landscape is one of the basic elements of the environment and its perception is determined not only by the geographic conditions or terrain but also by the vegetation and even the weather of a given season. Conventionally, there are two kinds of landscape – natural and cultural, however, they both are equally important for contemporary man. It is obvious that due to its uniqueness the so called “primeval” natural environment is protected with utmost care. However, it should be stressed that any natural landscape, regardless of the extent to which it has been processed, should be treated with due respect and care [4].

Cities which have been developing their cultural identity over the centuries provide characteristic elements of processed landscape. The first urban plans date back to the ancient times and it is known that already then they were carefully designed or at least their layouts were maintained and developed. The culture of designing according to the main ideological assumptions of a given age has always been very important. The Medieval grid plan of the streets with the market in the center by definition imposed a specific plan and spatial order. The regular designs of Renaissance cities were supposed to satisfy the needs of man in compliance with the humanistic thought, whereas the Baroque urban planning, aiming at symmetrical and axial

perfection, developed space and green areas in the city. The significance of culture of urban designing slightly declined in the 19th century, commonly known as the “age of steam and iron”, which promoted the development of industry. So called industrialization exerted a lot of influence on the design of the cities where more and more area was occupied by different kinds of factories. The decades that followed saw primarily more diverse functional programs, expansion of urban structures, complete redesigning and extension of circulation routes (mainly vehicle traffic) as well as more and more popular high-rise buildings [5] built right next to historic sites. The natural consequence of such changes is the totally different character of contemporary cities. It’s a shame that old landmarks, both architectural and functional, are losing their significance and in a way they are “overwhelmed” by the structures of contemporary cities.

The demand for residential buildings has grown along with the intense development of cities. The influx of newcomers to the cities resulted directly in the development of better or worse designed large prefab panel housing projects. Each major city has that kind architecture around it. Gądów Mały¹ in Wrocław is a perfect example of many such housing estates.

Materials and methods

A fragment of Gądów Mały housing estate in Wrocław has been selected to illustrate the subject in question. The

basic methods of studies and research have been forced in a way by the objective and nature of the development,

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¹ Gądów Mały in Wrocław is located in the west part of the city, administratively in Fabryczna Quarter.

consisting mainly in redesigning the space between the large panel apartment buildings to make it more resident-friendly both functionally and aesthetically.

First of all, the materials regarding historical issues and composition changes were found and collected. Next, the basic survey work as well as analyses of the functions of individual buildings, circulation routes, age and condition of the structures located there as well as the vegetation growing in the area in question were conducted. The conclusions regarding the project issues were formulated on the basis of conducted analyses and only then were they the basis of the development of the project conception in compliance with the tradition of the place and its residents' expectations.

This way, that is in compliance with the art of design, Conception I (described in detail further in the paper) was

developed. It should be noted that along with those field and historical analyses an attempt was made at familiarizing with applicable legal acts² [2] regarding that fragment of the housing estate. Only at the moment when the design work on Conception I – referring to the historical location of an airport in that area – was almost over, was the local development plan made available. The local plan extract indicated that the central part of that housing estate should be occupied by high-rise dense architecture that would divide, deliberately or not, the existing settlement in two separate structures. Furthermore, the layout of new buildings imposed a totally different layout of roads and walkways. This is how Conception II (described further in the paper) was born.

² Especially the land use plan, local development plan, conservation guidelines.

The functional and spatial characteristics

The fragment of Gądów Mały housing estate³ described in the paper is located in the west part of Wrocław and it is easily accessible from its center. The area of the study borders in the north on the commercial buildings located between Lotnicza Street, with high traffic intensity, and Szybowcowa Street, with medium traffic intensity. Its west border is Bajana Street, east border – Drzewieckiego Street⁴, in the south it has further residential buildings (large panel apartment buildings) and their surroundings.

The area in question can be accessed through spaces in between individual large panel apartment buildings or drive through gates located directly under them. Both vehicle traffic and pedestrian circulation is efficient. Those buildings were constructed as large panel apartment buildings in the 1980s and they have several to about a dozen floors. Their architecture is typical of large panel apartment buildings of those times with their cookie-cutter forms with no architectural details whatsoever. Their ground levels have commercial space and basic services as well as garages with terraces above them. The proper business facilities are located along Szybowcowa Street with e.g. “Biedronka” chain supermarket⁵ (9), hairdresser's (4, 23), optician (5), bar (6) and even a gas station (2) (Fig. 1). The residents of that housing estate make use of the sufficient transportation, commercial, and business facilities. Speaking about the design culture in the city and meaning that specific part Gądów Mały, we suddenly face a kind of bipolarity of that culture. It is positive that the general idea of the design is correct. On the other hand, the way the space in between

the buildings is used raises some objections. Unfortunately, that space is developed the same way as around most other large panel apartment buildings in Poland. That space has some green areas but their design is totally random. Most of the space is grass area and in some places (mainly by the buildings) there are bushes and trees that grow with no maintenance, and that is why there are a lot of self-sown plants there. In the direct vicinity of the buildings, there are even enclosed mini gardens, some of them maintained by the residents who created them. There is no system of pedestrian circulation routes, because most roads and walkways are actually shortcut footpaths that create a special, chaotic web⁶. The parking spaces are also worth mentioning. They are located along the streets and longer sides of the buildings but their number is definitely insufficient for the number of the apartments. Consequently, soon after the new residents moved into the apartment buildings, a paid parking lot was established and enclosed in the east part of the square. The residents park their cars also along access roads to individual entrances – stairshafts. The elements of street furniture don't meet the residents' needs either: it is insufficient or in poor technical condition. The only rise in the north-south part of the area has been converted into a skatepark by the youth.

The lack of a clear and a well thought-out development of that area, in respect of both functions and aesthetics, is evident. Looking closer at that briefly described housing estate, there can be some doubts as to the correctness of the culture of designing of urban structures, and that is why the following is the presentation of the basic actions and efforts which would result in improving the quality of life in this kind of residential units.

³ The history of Gądów Mały dates back to the end of the 18th century. It was a village with not more than 100 residents. Their number grew to almost 400 at the end of the 19th century. As there was a lot of undeveloped area there, a military airport was built there in 1910. The area was intensely developed only in the middle of the 1970s when a decision was made to liquidate the airport and build a housing estate there [1].

⁴ The names of the streets in Gądów Mały allude to its former function – airport.

⁵ “Biedronka” supermarket is located in a former hangar – the only original building in the whole airport complex.

⁶ It should be kept in mind that when it rains or snows those paths get damp, ruts and puddles appear in them and then they are useless.

Project assumptions

The part of Gądów Mały housing estate in Wrocław which is described in this paper is easily accessible from other parts of the city, so no changes in that respect are needed. No corrections are needed in respect of commercial services either as a broad offer of such services is available for the residents. On the other hand, the condition of the large panel apartment buildings located there is not quite satisfactory – for instance the quality of their exterior wall finishing has deteriorated over the years (e.g. there are numerous cracks, chippings, areas with no plaster) – that's why their renovation has been suggested. The uniform and tasteless architecture, so typical of the 1970s and 1980s, does not have a positive effect on the aesthetics of that housing estate and that is why introducing some elements adding individual qualities e.g. in the area of entrances (so called stairshafts) has been suggested.

As almost the whole area in question is undeveloped, the design work should be approached very carefully, including

a thorough analysis of both the functional and spatial issues. First of all a sufficient number of parking spaces should be secured on properly designed parking lots – in this specific case underground structures are suggested. A completely new layout of roads and walkways in between the apartment buildings, including bicycle lanes – should be designed with the use of adequate surface materials. The area in question should be divided into different zones for leisure activities (e.g. playgrounds, skatepark, mini sports fields, etc.) and for passive recreation (e.g. contemplation places,) keeping in mind they should be used by people at different age. It is suggested that the existing elements of street furniture (e.g. lamps, benches, garbage cans, etc.) be removed as they have no value whatsoever and replaced with new elements with more interesting forms. In respect of green areas, the existing plants should be kept and maintained, if possible, and new plants should be selected in such a way as to encourage the residents to spend time together in the open air.



Fig. 1. Plan of current development of part of Gądów Mały housing estate in Wrocław⁷, source: [3, p. 23]

Il. 1. Schemat obecnego zagospodarowania fragmentu osiedla mieszkaniowego Gądów Mały we Wrocławiu⁷, źródło: [3, s. 23]

⁷ The figures used in this paper come from the Anna Domaradzka's master's thesis titled *The Conception of Development of Part of Gądów Mały Housing Estate in Wrocław* (2009) under EngD Renata Gubańska at the Institute of Landscape Architecture at Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences [3].

Description of conception I⁸

The interior space plan of the enclosed structures located in the area in question should be kept unchanged: especially the compact housing estate buildings, commerce, and services. Some correction should be made only to the entrance gates leading to individual stairshafts. Due to the uniform architecture of the large panel apartment buildings, all entrances are actually the same or very similar and they present no individual qualities; that is why each entrance zone should have a unique and distinctive element. The transportation system connections with the center and other parts of Wrocław as well as “access gates” to the area in question do not need any redesign intervention, whereas the whole area in between the buildings needs drastic development work, including a new layout of roads and walkways, division into zones connected with their specific functions, and appropriately selected plants.

First of all, an area for a new parking lot was designated as the existing ones are too small. Due to a large de-

mand for parking space, two underground parking garages were suggested – located symmetrically to each other: in south-east and south-west parts of the area, in the broadest space between the buildings, with entry driveways from Drzewieckiego and Bajana Streets. Next, a new layout of internal roads and walkways, resembling an airplane from a bird’s eye view, was designed, which undoubtedly alludes to the former function of that area i.e. an airport. The main footways were designed in the shape of an airplane, others – more or less symmetrically, depending on needs and directions (pedestrian circulation). The whole area of the design, except for transportation system connections, was divided into several recreation zones, depending on the users’ needs and their age groups. The area of the existing skatepark was extended by introducing a more difficult layout of paths and more obstacles (A) (Fig. 2). A traffic park (B) would be very popular and appreciated by a little younger children, where they would learn about the basic traffic regulations. The south part of the area has predominantly recreation and sports facilities. A running track (F) with stands (G) was designed in the airplane tail, and two basketball courts symmetrically right under its wings (C). Two tennis courts are visible north of the track (E), and an area with tables for board games above them, between the basketball courts (D). Several of different size play-

⁸ Conception I was developed according to the art of designing, however, with no regard for the requirements of the Local Development Plan because in spite of several requests it was not made available. Only when the conception and design work was almost over, was that plan made available. Consequently, the design work on a new design on the basis of the local plan extract (Conception II) began in compliance with the applicable local legal act.



Fig. 2. Conception I – plan of the area of the housing estate in question developed on the basis of conducted historical and field analyses, source: [3, p. 86]

II. 2. Koncepcja I – przykładowy schemat zagospodarowania omawianego osiedla wynikający z przeprowadzonych analiz historyczno-terenowych, źródło: [3, s. 86]



Fig. 3. Conception II – plan of the housing estate in question developed in compliance with the provisions of the local development plan, source: [3, p. 94]

II. 3. Koncepcja II – przykładowy schemat zagospodarowania omawianego osiedla zgodnie z założeniami miejscowego planu zagospodarowania przestrzennego, źródło: [3, s. 94]

grounds for children at different ages with various facilities were designed all over the area. The last stage of the area modernization works is closely connected with the adequate selection of plants in respect of both composition and species. The design made the most of the existing plants, applying their necessary maintenance and additions. New green areas were designed along with the new layout of circulation routes. Additional trees were planned mainly in order to improve the quality of leisure activities as well as to provide shade for the people visiting that area in summer heat. Two parallel rows of big trees were designed

in the middle section of the area and they emphasize the significance of the central meadow which is supposed to encourage people to play together and at the same time build the bonds in the local community. The green areas, which were designed with primarily perennial and ground-cover plants, are supposed to improve the image of that part of the housing estate, making it more friendly to the residents.

All designing tasks described above shall improve the standard of living of the residents of Gądów Mały in Wrocław.

Description of conception II

Conception II (Fig. 3) was developed on the basis of the provisions of the valid local development plan⁹. The basic design assumptions presented in Conception I have been in a way transferred to this design; the functional specification of the buildings has not changed, with the suggestion of adding certain individual features to specific stairshafts. There are no changes in the transportation system outside or the entrance areas to the area in question

which require repair and improvement in respect of both circulation and space for leisure time activities.

In the first stage of work the minimum setback was marked in the plan from the Local Development Plan. Taking that into account, a new system of vehicle traffic system was suggested and a tentative plan of new apartment buildings was plotted, keeping in mind that they are a few meters taller than the existing buildings. The demand for new parking spaces grew dramatically along with the substantial increase in the number of apartments in this area. Just like in the case of Conception I, building underground parking garages was suggested – only bigger ones.

⁹ The part of Gądów Mały housing estate in Wrocław in question is governed by the local development plan adopted on April 17, 2008 by the City Council in Wrocław (Resolution no. XX/577/08).

The next stage of the project work included the designing of new internal circulation system adjusted to the altered and congested plan of apartment buildings as well as delineation places for leisure time activities that meet the expectations and needs of all age groups. The design assumptions provided in Conception I regarding skatepark (A), traffic park (B, changed location), basketball courts (C), tennis courts (D), playgrounds and the composition of green areas remain unchanged. Due to the introduction of new buildings which clearly divides the area into two separate settlement units, the number of planned trees was

reduced. The suggested composition of green areas results from the new layout of internal roads and walkways. Similarly to Conception I, they include primarily perennial and ground-cover plants.

The project solutions presented briefly in this paper, which in most cases refer to Conception I, shall improve the activity and integration of Gądów Mały housing estate in Wrocław, and consequently, the improvement of the aesthetics and image of that place shall contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of its residents and the visitors.

Conclusion

The deliberations presented above demonstrate that due to the significance of every housing estate, as one of the basic elements affecting directly the composition and aesthetics of urban landscape, their image should be improved not only on paper but first of all in reality which is done mainly by architects, landscape architects, urban planners and officials working on selected administration units.

Each form of intervention should be preceded by a careful analysis of primarily landscape transformations of a given place. First, it should be checked if the existing plans are consistent with reality. In many cases it is necessary to update them. With a valid local plan extract the analytical design stage can begin, including the issues regarding the functional and spatial design, circulation system, the condition of enclosed structures and the rest of the area, the issues of nature and landscape as well as conservation protection zones, etc.

The carefully delineated area should include the precise height and size parameters as well as colors of external wall finish. Such guidelines would make the provisions of law which have been applied so far more clear and precise, and consequently, facilitate the work of specific bodies of public administration. Their main objective would be to leave free and undeveloped space to enhance the perception of height and aesthetics. At this stage the role of landscape architects is priceless. Already in the preliminary design stage they should take into account first of all the local needs as well as footpaths for school children, bicycle routes, recreation and leisure facilities. Furthermore, they should emphasize in a special way all attractions of the landscape. Following those principles shall guarantee the maintenance of the current functions of the existing backyards and improve their functionality as well as attractiveness and result in true culture of urban designing.

*Translated by
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References

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Kultura w mieście – omówienie problemu na wybranym fragmencie osiedla mieszkaniowego Gądów Mały we Wrocławiu

Gądów Mały jest jednym z wielu wrocławskich osiedli mieszkaniowych wybudowanych w latach 80. XX wieku w typowej zunifikowanej, bezstylowej architekturze tegoż okresu. Kilku- lub kilkunastupiętrowe bloki wyznaczają granice terenów publicznych dla mieszkających lub przebywających tam ludzi. Przestrzenie te powinny być przyjazne mieszkańcom, m.in. zapewnić dogodną komunikację kołową i pieszą, podstawową bazę handlowo-usługową, strefy wypoczynku biernego i czynnego, a także „miłe oko” wrażenia estetyczne.

Niestety, wybrany do szczegółowego opracowania fragment działki śródblokowej nie do końca spełnia kryteria dotyczące właściwego za-

gospodarowania terenu. Jej obecne rozplanowanie daje duże możliwości projektowe planistom, a przede wszystkim architektom krajobrazu. W artykule przedstawiono dwie koncepcje projektowe – podobne pod względem programu funkcjonalno-przestrzennego, jednak całkowicie odmienne ze względu na układ infrastruktury komunikacyjnej. Koncepcja I odwołuje się do wcześniejszej funkcji opracowywanego terenu, natomiast koncepcja II – do obowiązujące miejscowego planu przestrzennego. Niezależnie od uwarunkowań mających wpływ na ich powstanie, oba zaproponowane rozwiązania są zdecydowanie dużo ciekawsze od tego istniejącego.

Key words: Gądów Mały, culture, development

Słowa kluczowe: Gądów Mały, kultura, zagospodarowanie