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URBAN VOID AS A POTENTIAL OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY DEVELOPMENT

PUSTKA PRZESTRZENNA JAKO POTENCJAŁ ROZWOJU WSPÓŁCZESNEGO MIASTA

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Summary: A city is a cluster of buildings and areas of activity. The spaces between urban structures are often treated as a side effect, an accidental phenomenon present due to the location of buildings. However, in contrast to the buildings that have their functions established once they are erected, urban voids contain the potential for rapid change of use constituting an important element of both planned and unplanned activities. Empty spaces are possibilities for future arrangements and evolution of needs that are often unknown at the time of construction. The main objective of the article is to define the concept of 'urban void' and to analyze the hidden potential of it. The author emphasizes the need to create empty spaces as deliberately as architecture itself, including them in the urban tissue.

Keywords: urban void, temporary use, city, urban planning, potential, adaptability.

Streszczenie: Miasto to skupisko budynków i obszarów działalności. Natomiast przestrzenie między strukturami tkanki miejskiej traktowane są najczęściej jako efekt uboczny, przypadkowe działanie spowodowane rozmieszczeniem budynków. W przeciwieństwie do budynków, których sposób użytkowania zostaje ustalony już na etapie budowy, puste przestrzenie zawierają potencjał szybkiej zmiany użytkowania, stanowiąc ważny element zarówno planowanych, jak i nieplanowanych działań. Otwarte przestrzenie to potencjał przyszłych ustaleń i ewolucji potrzeb, które często nie są znane w czasie budowy. Głównym celem artykułu jest zdefiniowanie pojęcia „pustka przestrzenna”, a ponadto analiza ukrytego w niej potencjału. Autorka podkreśla konieczność tworzenia pustych przestrzeni tak świadomie jak architekturę, włączając je w tkankę urbanistyczną.

Słowa kluczowe: pustka przestrzenna, tymczasowe użytkowanie, miasto, planowanie urbanistyczne, potencjał, adaptacyjność.

1. Introduction

Open, undeveloped spaces have become increasingly disputed areas in the context of urban scale. In modern dense cities, public spaces have become rarity, because of high land prices. Another problem in the design and urban planning is ignoring public spaces in this process, which causes the space is perceived as neglected and unnecessary. Due to the lack of attachment to these areas, people tend to perceive them as dead and impossible to use. Spaces, designed by urban planners in a two-dimensional plan, often do not provide for society needs and requirements as well as the quality of life in the city. There is no interaction between planners and residents. Due to various perception of space by users and urban designers, many hidden potentials are overlooked, which in turn contributes to creating empty, neglected and unused spaces. Urban voids are therefore the results of ineffective spatial decisions, poor land management, and bad coordination between urban designers and decision-makers, which have a huge impact on the potential of making the place better and the creation of a stronger urban tissue of the city [Kushwah, Rathi 2017].

The main aim of this article is to define the concept of ‘emptiness’ and to present the possibilities of its use. The regeneration of neglected spaces by responding interventions could change the perception of urban voids. In fact, these areas have the great potential, which, in times of development intensification, can be used as urban public spaces that can initiate community involvement and strengthen the public sphere.

2. Genesis of urban void

The discussion about urban voids was initiated in the late 19th century, when architecture began to be understood as the ability of shaping the space – not only the buildings’ structure. The spatial perception of architecture was initiated by technological revolution, the breakthrough in science and art, and the contemporary architectural avant-garde efforts. Initially, however, the problem of emptiness was not directly raised, because of the negative associations in the Western culture. Space was still discussed in terms of fullness, not emptiness. A decisive moment in considering the above issue was made by the builders of modern architecture: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, and especially Frank Lloyd Wright. Through their fascination in Japanese architecture and Lao-Tsy’s philosophical thought: “We fashion wood for a house, but it is the emptiness inside that makes it livable. We work with the substantial, but the emptiness is what we use”, the problem of ‘urban void’ saw daylight. Additionally, the fashion for Zen architecture and minimalism in the seventies and nineties, contributed to the popularization of the emptiness issue. Finally, at the end of the 20th century, the term

‘void’ came to be a true ennoblement, becoming a basic and timeless concept [Głowacki 2007, p. 12].

In urban planning and architecture, the notion of ‘emptiness’ is closely linked to the term of ‘space’. It is an undisturbed and preserved space, free from restrictions. According to Martin Heidegger the definition of ‘space’ is to create and make a place for a site. Referring to the above, Werner Blaser – a Swiss publicist and architect – established that the essence of space is in the emptiness which longs for giving it a shape. The empty space allows for the appearance of things and people [Głowacki 2007]. Claudio Silvestrin, an Italian architect and designer, claims that the first stage of the design is an attempt to preserve urban void. “Emptiness does not exist, space is not empty. It is space in its essence. It is freedom”. He complained that space today is treated as something to acquire, while the empty space should not be considered as useless or wasted. It should be present, with the minimal number of objects [Silvestrin 1994, p. 147]. The fact that in the minds of many architects, urban void is getting so important, is not only a reflection of the changes that took place in the understanding of architecture, which evolved from the notion of solid to the concept of space. The contemporary fascination with emptiness is also a response to the violent transformations taking place in the almost every area of life – universal globalization, urbanization, environmental pollution, etc. The visible presence of the concept of urban void in the newest architecture and urban planning results firstly from the need to provide a free, undisturbed space necessary to function, and secondly to protect the existing environment from being filled with new building matter.

3. Concept of urban void

The space in which one lives is a collection of goals and roads – a map of everyday life. The city we inhabit is always boring compared with other foreign destinations, visited for touristic purposes. Between the everyday life and tourism is the emptiness not belonging to anyone. It is a place of nobody, without any concrete importance. It concerns both abandoned, neglected and forgotten urban spaces. Urban voids can be unused, not because of their limited functionality, but also due to the fact that people do not notice them at all. These places are not separated by physical walls, not prohibited – they are inaccessible because of their invisibility [Kociatkiewicz, Kostera 1999]. Urban voids can be seen as incoherent with their surroundings and out of the context, thereby disturbing the urban fabric. The empty space is, however, an integral part of every city, an unseen connection between its elements. It is precisely in urban voids that the opportunities for changes are hidden, occurring outside strictly defined city development plans.

Despite the physical aspect of the urban void, it also occurs in the mental dimension in contemporary cities. In our daily lives we pass some places in the city where we suddenly experience a gap in our environment, a pause in the stream of

activities. This phenomenon can be understood in two ways: as an emptiness in the memory of residents and as an invisible place. Urban void is often a place not functioning in the consciousness of a human, it is not present in his or her private map of the city. People identify the city most often with the place where they live, work, shop or with the historic center or well-known routes. As a result, many other places are negligible elements in the perception of a given city [Bauman 2006]. This discussed emptiness is often perceived as a forgotten and insecure place, a vague area in the urban fabric. One example of such completely invisible places is the urban tissue underneath and around flyovers of massive transport arteries. People are aware of the existence of such places, but they are imperceptible to them in everyday life.

Urban voids as a term in urban research refer to spaces that rupture the urban tissue, leaving it inchoate, and put into question the use of those areas. “Urban voids are undesirable urban areas that are in need of redesign making no positive contribution to the surroundings. They are ill-defined, without measurable boundaries and fail to connect elements in a coherent way” [Trancik 1986]. Discussed spaces are dispersed without any order or relation all over the city. In the face of a significant number of them, they are serious threats to the integration and the order of arrangements in the urban tissue. The limitation in the management of urban void is often the lack of a specific responsible owner or organization that causes necessary solutions for them to be postponed to an indefinite time. These places usually transform into ‘the trashes of the city’, places that in addition to the physical collection of dirt and garbage, weaken the aesthetic aspects of the city. These are the most favorable areas to attract homeless people and criminals – thus generating a concentration of various social problems.

4. Categories of urban voids

‘Urban voids’ are as important as the creation and infill of urban mass, according to Roger Trancik [1986]. These spaces are needed to be carved out and pushed into the solids to ensure visual and functional continuities, thereby creating an integrated environment, where architecture and external space are inextricably linked.

Trancik, in his book “Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design” published in 1986, identifies five types of urban voids as degrees of openness and enclosure considering urban tissue of cities: entry foyers, inner-block voids, networks of streets and squares, parks and gardens, and linear open space system (Figure 1). Currently, the emptiness is perceived differently than before. Nowadays, public squares, streets and parks do not make up the definition of the word ‘void’. As one can see, this concept has a lot of contexts and it also evolves over time. Not every place without buildings can be called an ‘urban void’. Public squares or streets are spaces deliberately intersecting the urban tissue, designed by professionals. The square is

a free, undeveloped space, however, it is not a neglected, abandoned or deprived of a function, area. The public square is a deliberate planning treatment that fulfills the function of the communication, representation and leisure. Therefore, it is not a kind of emptiness, it can be rather added to the category of urban interiors located in the urban tissue. Likewise, the street is also an important element of the spatial composition of the city. The street is a narrow thread interweaving between buildings, defining the boundaries of areas and allowing contacts. On the other hand, a park is a recreational area with lots of greenery, which has been shaped and designed in a conscious way. All of the above examples are an important planning elements in the city [Pluta 2016].

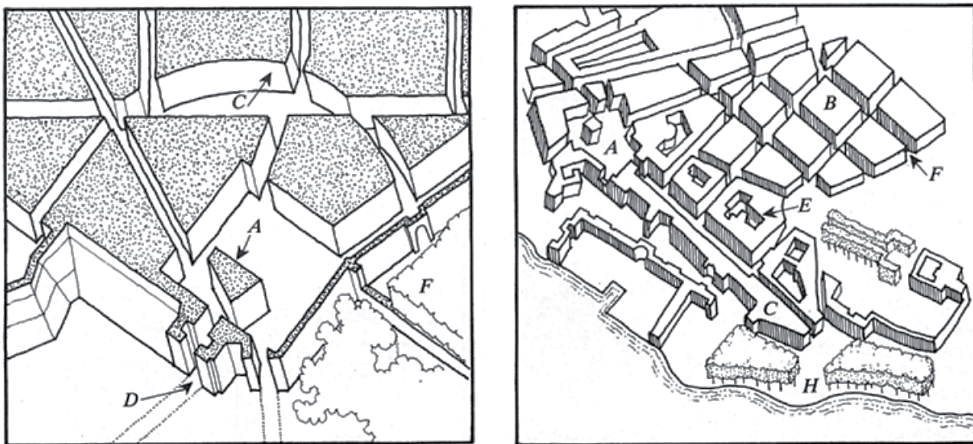


Figure 1. Types of urban voids and solids¹.

Source: [Trancik 1986, p. 102].

At present, an urban void is created mainly due to three factors. These factors that create an emptiness can also become the basis for the classification of these urban voids [Kushwah, Rathi 2017].

1. Planning voids – emptiness created due to inefficient and incorrect planning processes. They are created due to planning in separation from the understanding of the urban tissue.

2. Functional voids – these are dead empty spaces in the cities. They become defunct, when the spaces are not used as they were designed to use. Functional voids

¹ Trancik indicates that different types of voids and solids contribute to the design and perception of urban space. A spatial network can operate effectively only if the dialogue between them is complete and noticeable. In the traditional city there are three main types of urban solids: (A) public monuments and institutional buildings, (B) the field of urban block, (C) edge-defining buildings. There are also five principal types of urban voids that fulfill various functions in the external space of the city: (D) entry foyers, (E) inner-block voids, (F) networks of streets and squares, (G) parks and gardens, and (H) linear open space system.

contain a number of legal aspects: general defunct areas and buildings are under litigation, or are owned by the government, where relocations of functions have to go through a complicated bureaucratic process.

3. Geographical voids – these places are geographical features in the city (rivers, hills, valleys, etc.). When the city planners and designers do not react to these geographical features, voids are created around them making the space useless.

5. The importance of the urban void

When considering the potential of urban voids, the negative aspects of the problems caused by them should be analyzed, and appropriate responses and actions should be taken. There are many ways to make these places habitable, transforming them into safe and productive places. It can be a new function that meets the needs of society or a new configuration that attracts the attention of a passerby and falls into his or her memory. It should be a place that belongs both to the private and public, so that the users find themselves a part of it, and consequently, feel responsible for it. The goal is to use the potentials of urban void and transform it into a functional space that can serve for the city and its society [Stefanović, Seifi, Khoshdel 2013].

The progressive urbanization and congestion of the modern world and the accompanying degradation of natural environment induced the dramatic disappearance of empty spaces and silence zones. Consequently, the importance of undeveloped, open space has increased. The presence or absence of emptiness becomes the measure of reference for future project activities. The awareness of the limitations of empty space induces urban planners and architects to take a new approach – the doctor of space. A space should be developed carefully, realizing that now it is a scarce commodity – like water and air [Głowacki 2007]. For this reason, the need for the new investment in the urban void should be realistically assessed. There are a number of other possible solutions for use in the empty space, without losing its greatest advantage – adaptability.

Urban voids are outstandingly important for the city development, and should be treated in a special way because of their flexible structure. The city can experiment and carry out many different activities on the emptiness. A vacant building can be subjected to renovation, expansion or be redesigned for a new function (as social or commercial). In terms of post-industrial areas, they can be revitalized in several ways. The area can either be restored to industrial functions or be adapted to new functions by transforming industrial facilities. The buildings of the old industry can be also completely demolished and the nature of the site and its function can be changed. In all these cases, the financial intervention of the city is required. Urban voids, in the form of buildings, are often associated with the reconstruction and the introduction of new elements into existing structure. All activities should be carried out with the respect for the character and value of the historical building complexes.

The revitalization, rehabilitation or renovation are connected with strong interventions in the place. However, without appropriate actions, the technical condition of the buildings will deteriorate and thus increase the cost of their repair. With the proper preparation of an area and the renovation of buildings, such places can become clusters of diverse activities. The use of building does not have to be associated with the search for an investor; it is enough to allocate the space for public or local businesses.

A kind of emptiness which is worth more attention is urban voids that are the most common sight in cities: empty and abandoned areas. The reason is often the lack of financial resources for their renovation or the absence of ideas for new development. Empty spaces have a negative impact on the image of the city and, left unattended, become increasingly devastated. The city often sells the damaged areas to developers as soon as possible, who build the investments there, not necessarily in line with current demand of the society or with respecting the nature of a place. The open, empty area in the city, however, has far greater potential than the next investment. The repair of such a place does not necessarily have to involve its development. The urban void creates a real opportunity to create places so far non-existent. Due to the adaptability of emptiness it is possible to create a variety of activities, with small financial expenditures and no significant interference in the area.

There are a number of potential uses of empty space in the city. The urban void can be developed, changed or it can create new features and activities. Real demand for the emptiness should be realistically assessed. If in the city there is a lack of dwellings for residents, it is natural to develop the empty area for a new housing estate. However, the value of emptiness should be protected as much as possible, through the introduction of a temporary use [Pluta 2016].

6. Temporary uses

In every city there are places where something existed at some point (e.g. a building).

After a place has been abandoned, the new building which is planned there has to be created within that emptiness. However, with regard to temporary use, it is not the building that is important, but the empty space that is there. Erecting a new building takes time – waiting for permits and decisions may take months. Urban voids, which are interrupted for a period, can be described as a time gap, a standstill period between the end of the previous use and the start of a new one [Urban Catalyst 2003]. From the perspective of current urban development, empty spaces seem to be useless, not suited to the needs of society. However, having in mind the strong demand for open spaces where people can take part in the city life, wasting the potential created by such spaces is unacceptable. This kind of emptiness – space ‘in transition’ – provides the opportunity for new, unplanned activities and uses.

There are a number of uses which can be a base for temporary use: housing, work, consumption, social services or leisure. Most usually the temporary use programs for urban voids are connected with new forms of art (and other forms of mainly youth culture), music or start-up companies, social services or recreation. In any case, these empty spaces are an experiment for a new kind of activities which can be undertaken with a low financial risk. Of course, such experiments are often prone to failure. However, they can also become extremely successful and provide a place for a new kind of activities. Temporary uses can play a significant role in the future development of urban life. Free access to them grants the public an opportunity to grow in a flexible, open environment. Because of temporary uses urban dwellers can actively participate in the shaping of their surroundings, even if the activity within an urban void is only seasonal. Notably, most contemporary ideas in art and popular culture appear in urban voids [Urban Catalyst 2003]. This can activate a space and allow for a change in the perception of voids, which is crucial for seeing the emptiness rather as a potential than a problem.

7. Conclusions

Urban voids are places without meaning, but not because they are empty. On the contrary, these places are empty, because their significance has not been assigned yet. In fact, the emptiness can become anything. Their adaptability is their strength, which is extremely useful in times of progressive urbanization. Due to the phenomenon of continuing densification of the city, urban voids can act as a mediator between what exists and what is not yet established. Empty, open spaces are therefore an opportunity for the development of the city. When deciding to include voids in the urban tissue (through building), their adaptive capabilities being one of their features may be lost. We should therefore reflect on the architectural use and leave them as a reserve of a space for future and an inherent part of the landscape. Urban voids have a clear potential to create open-space prospects such as temporary use, creative and active non-commercial uses.

The greatest advantage of the emptiness is its adaptability, which is a potential in the dynamic development of cities. It is a concept of the city management that uses the potential of bottom-up and spontaneous actions to revitalize empty spaces. The temporary use allows the participants of urban life to significantly improve the quality of space and stimulate it to live. The uniqueness of temporary use lies primarily in working with people, spaces and processes that have so far been considered useless.

The task of planners and decision-makers should be to identify the needs of urban voids and test their potential. Temporary projects should become an indispensable tool for the design and planning of the city. The city should enable the local community to make temporary use of empty spaces by coordinating the processes and introducing facilities into local plans, instead of imposing their

direction. Necessary for this are legal requirements that cover, directly and comprehensively, the issue of urban voids, including the problem of property ownership, which is an important barrier in the temporary use of emptiness. The potential of temporary emptiness as a part of the planning policy can also contribute to creating more flexibility in the planning process, which is a good thing at this time of dynamic and rapid change. Therefore, the right of existence of empty spaces, parallel with the built-up space, should be secured.

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