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Contemporary Spaces of Memory - Towards Transdisciplinarity in Architecture

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Abstract. The paper explores new phenomena in the contemporary practice of commemoration implemented through architecture. Architectural objects related to memory can be a place where new trends and phenomena appear earlier than in other architectural objects. The text is an attempt to prove that these new spaces of memory are a kind of laboratory where new ideas taking place in architecture and related disciplines are being tested. Research focuses on the bond between the complex and difficult problem of memory and the issue of transdisciplinarity in architecture. Over the last few decades architecture has been - in comparison to other areas - a relatively closed domain of knowledge. Contemporary places of memory - different from the traditional - may be the evidence of changes. On the basis of theoretical approaches, interdisciplinary surveys, in-field analyses and case studies the paper give insight into the relationships between architecture and other areas, emerging in the recently created spaces of memory of different types. The text indicates that today both the study and the design of such places is difficult without going beyond the field of architecture. There is a need for further extensive research, but the paper confirms the potential of this research direction. Spaces of memory offer the opportunity to capture the transformation of the discipline at the moment when the process begins.

1. Introduction

The profound impact of emerging communication technologies and Big Data on almost every area of life of contemporary societies is a hallmark of the current social reality [1]. Paradoxically, our time has also become the time of flowering of interest in memory and the past (the so-called “memory boom”). Memory is one of the key concepts in many disciplines - the notion is used by researchers of many disciplines, and this can be regarded as the birth of a new paradigm, referred to as “the memory turn” [2].

Although the architecture remains a field relatively closed against assimilation of achievements in other fields, which is indicated by some scholars [3], it is simultaneously associated with many social processes, and is therefore also influenced by the phenomena outlined above. This text not only aims to determine the scope of this impact, but also its potential in terms of setting trends in the development of both research and design practice in the field of architecture.

Contemporary architectural objects whose task is to restore memory, also for educational purposes - the contemporary spaces of memory - are the place where processes that will soon become characteristic of the whole creation of architecture, appear earlier and are more clearly visible. The article is an attempt



to answer the questions: how these seemingly unrelated processes affect both theory and practice of architecture and their relationship with other areas? Could these transdisciplinary processes involved in the creation of contemporary spaces of memory be captured at the time of their emergence? Could architecture be a more open domain as part of a multidisciplinary research field?

2. Architecture as a form of memory

Social relations, including patterns of behaviour, rituals, processes, institutions and networks become more stable when they take the material form. Only when these relationships are preserved in the form of an architectural object, they can last much longer. Buildings make visible social processes, rituals and structures that would otherwise remain hidden [4,5]. As Georg Simmel pointed out, “the ... significance of space for social formations lies in its capacity of fixing their contents.” [6] Meaning, values and goals materialize in space. For this reason, when considering issues of collective memory of a community very often we refer to the architecture as the carrier. Memory spaces are also a kind of emanation of social processes, not necessarily related to memory. Architectural objects related to memory can be a place where new trends and phenomena appear earlier than other architectural objects - this also applies to the phenomena mentioned in the introduction to the text.

Architecture as a potential memory container is the subject of many studies, which - through the construction of ontological foundation on the basis of other disciplines (including history, art theory, psychology, sociology) - legitimize such a role of architecture. An example of such transdisciplinary approach to issues of memory can be the book from the author of this text on architecture and memory [7]. Different ways in which architecture is intertwined with social memory while being its material expression is one of the main issues considered in this text. Contemporary spaces of memory, in contrast to previous ways of commemoration - monuments and traditional places of memory [8] - are currently interpreted, described and studied with a clear, active participation of other disciplines. Beyond the areas traditionally associated with architecture (such as civil engineering and urban design), this also includes theory art, history, sociology, aesthetics, science, and many others. Also, the design process and subsequent functioning of memory spaces would not be possible without a transdisciplinary approach.

3. Contemporary ways of commemoration

The current flowering of interest in memory and the past - “memory boom” - has also brought a variety forms of remembrance and commemoration. New art forms related to memory and new spaces of memory, different from those that were created in the past, indicate the need for re-examination and reinterpretation of the material forms of memory created by means of architecture [7].

The monument is the most conventional way of commemoration. Although often used nowadays, the monument has ceased to meet the contemporary expectations related to memory. Robert Musil in one of his texts defined monuments as objects “so conspicuously inconspicuous”. He also noted that “[t]here is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen - indeed to attract attention. But at the same time, they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment.” [10]

Lewis Mumford wrote about memory and its material forms in a similarly irreverent way: “Why should each generation go on living in the quarters that were built by its ancestors, in quarters many of which are stale and dirty, most of them planned for other uses and other modes of life, a good part of them mere makeshifts even for the purposes for which they were originally intended?” [9] Text by Mumford was written in 1937. Shortly afterwards World War II began. Its brutality and effects lasting until today changed our understanding of memory, but traces of disregard for the past and its material remains are still present in contemporary societies.

The paradigm of the monument as a way of commemorating has been challenged by the notion of the counter-monument [11], which appeared in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and which was articulated by J. E. Young [12, 13]. According to the researcher, in the traditional concept of the monument lies a risk that the attachment of memory to the monument takes off from communities the duty of remembrance - a monument would do for us all the “memory work”. Counter-monuments that can be seen as a response to the dilemmas related to commemoration, are defined by J. E. Young as “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being.” In a word, they are objects that by their forms should question the very idea of the monument. An example would be the so-called vanishing monument - Monument against Fascism in Hamburg-Harburg (Jochen Gerz, Esther Shalev-Gerz, 1986). [12]

The search for the proper form of representation of memory - as essential for contemporary communities - is still going on. The way in which the past is intertwined with the future, says a lot about the society. The remains of the past can be at best treated with indifference. Such a fate befalls cemeteries belonging to the “other” religions. Krynki, Punszk, Sejny - there are many such forgotten places in the borderlands in the east of Poland, which were areas of mass migration, border changes, and whose pre-war inhabitants were victims of war. The cultural heritage of these disappearing minorities was destroyed or stolen, and the remaining buildings were used for a purpose other than the original [14]. Nowadays a gradual change in attitudes occurs - local communities have recognized the importance of remembrance of the past and undertake initiatives for its protection.

Still, the monuments are considered a troublesome relic of the past - such as the Kunc Brewery, which was the part of the former Jewish quarter in Suwalki (a city in the eastern Polish). This property, which is not only a witness to the past, but its active participant - it was a place to hide people from the occupying forces during the war. Another kind of example is the former prison built in Suwalki in 1903 and in use also after World War II. It has been absorbed by the mall “Suwalki Plaza.” The prison walls are surrounded by the new object in such a way that they form its central part.

Thus objects, referred to as cultural heritage, seem to be affected by a similar fate as monuments. Even objects that have their own pages in the textbooks of architecture and which - according to Young - do the memory work for us, do not constitute important points on the “imaginative geography” map. A characteristic case of such an attitude may be the ruins - the remains of the war in the French village Oradour-sur-Glane. In 1944, the town was destroyed and its inhabitants murdered by a Nazi Waffen-SS company. The ruins of the city were left as a monument - to commemorate the victims of the massacre and as a warning to remind that the past can return. They should become a sign of memory, but do they speak to the contemporary people in the same way as to the previous generations?

4. Contemporary spaces of memory - changing attitudes towards memory

The existing ways of memory representation seem inadequate to contemporary social challenges, and memory work in society is difficult and often painful. The process of discovering the blank spots in the collective memory of society is accompanied by conflicts, but as a result of new picture emerges: a new memory map of society.

An example might be Jewish Heritage Trail Bialystok in eastern Poland. The aim of the project is to present the history of Bialystok Jews and Polish-Jewish relations, to describe historical sites connected with Bialystok Jews and to weak mutual Polish and Jewish stereotypes. The Route includes almost forty former Jewish objects or their remains: synagogues, cemeteries, hospitals, school buildings, townhouses and palaces, libraries and theatres. Such initiatives gradually and imperceptibly shape the landscape of memory and contribute to the recovery of the memory of the city - the city where most of the inhabitants at some point in history were Jews.

Through architecture forgotten past regains its proper place. The past is being worked through in the search for forms of representation of memory, corresponding to the contemporary challenges. Places of memory created by the previous generations are included in the emerging forms of commemoration, creating a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional forms of memory. Their interpretation requires different from the previous ones, multidisciplinary frame of reference, while the architecture as a discipline in the service of memory exceeds its borders towards transdisciplinary. An example of such a complex project is the commemoration of the Warsaw ghetto lasting since the war.

Action of liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto began in July 1942 and lasted two months. About 300 000 prisoners of the ghetto were transported at that time to the concentration camp Treblinka. World War II left behind destruction and objects that are witness to the events of war - ruins, camp barracks - were ubiquitous element of the post-war landscape. Artists after the war felt obliged to make these signs of memory important elements of the horizon of values of the post-war societies. The Ghetto Heroes Monument (by Natan Rappaport and architect Leon Marek Suzin) was unveiled in 1948, while residential quarter Muranow Poludniowy created in 1948-1955 in the Warsaw Ghetto was designed by Bohdan Lachert as a quarter-memorial. The buildings were made of prefabricated rubble-concrete air-bricks, pre-war street layout has also been preserved [15].

Another phase of the commemoration of the ghetto was the idea of "signs-commemorations" (by Eleonora Bergman and Tomasz Lec). These signs, unveiled in November 2008, were placed in twenty-two points on the border of the ghetto. They have been designed as homogeneous in form - in selected places concrete steles were placed together with information boards: a map of the ghetto against the background of city maps and historical photographs with commentary, and signs on the sidewalk in the form of a bilingual inscription "Mur Getta / Ghetto Wall 1940-1943." Inconspicuous spatial interventions, however, are a clear sign of memory in the urban tissue - trace of the presence of the absent. [16] In immediate proximity of one of these spatial interventions discussed above is the so-called Keret House - temporary art installation by Jakub Szczęsny of 2012. A small object was placed in a gap between two buildings, and its width - at the widest point - is just over one and a half meters. The project did not meet the requirements for buildings and could be constructed only as an artistic activity. Therefore, the project has entered a long list of artistic activities, the subject of which is memory [17].

Signs of spatial commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto, Keret House, and especially Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN also located in this area (and discussed further below) bring some hope after all. Since it is not possible to change the past, our generation should mourn the victims and fulfil the duty of remembrance.

5. Towards the Future

Contemporary forms of memory and commemoration - spaces of memory - become a place where memory work is still going on, and where the discussion about the past continues. These spaces are more open than before - both to other areas of knowledge, as well as to a variety of interpretations. In this way more dynamic, rich in meaning and complex places of remembrance are created.

An institution which undertakes the task of presenting a comprehensive, multi-threaded and corresponding to the contemporary challenges narrative about the centuries-old Jewish presence on Polish territory is the previously mentioned Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN. The exhibition in synthetic and thus also simplified manner proposes a journey through 1000 years of the history of Polish Jews - from the Middle Ages until today. The aim of the museum's main exhibition, among others, is the answer to the questions "how did Poland become the centre of the Jewish Diaspora and the home of the largest Jewish community in the world?" and "how did it cease to be one, and how is Jewish life being revived?" Made up of eight galleries, the exhibition is presenting the heritage and culture of Polish Jews using artefacts, paintings, interactive installations, video projections,

reconstructions and models. The narrative begins with legends of arrival and settlement in Poland and the development of Jewish culture. Then it shows dramatic events from the past, the Holocaust, and concludes with contemporaneity.

Museum building (designed by the Finnish studio Lahdelma & Mahlamäki) is recognized as an outstanding work of architecture and has won many awards. Simple structure of the building in glass, copper and concrete, and internal walls cutting through the height and length of the building create the empty space inside the Museum, the space symbolizing the void left by the Jewish community in Poland. Another interpretation could be the metaphor of the Red Sea, which was parted during the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. On the facade of the building are glass panels, where Hebrew and Latin letters are arranged in the word “Polin”, giving its name to the museum and recalling the legend of the arrival of Jews to Poland. Museum exhibitions - such as the exhibition “Frank Stella and Synagogues of Historic Poland” - also refer to the cultural heritage, more firmly binding architecture and memory.

Also, other attempts to dialogue with the past are undertaken - in Bilgoraj in the south-eastern Poland a housing estate is being built, which is intended to remind pre-war borderland towns and their architecture. The house of Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer has been rebuilt and is now the seat of the Singer’s Museum. Seventeenth-century wooden synagogue of the village Wolpie near Grodno, considered to be the most beautiful one in Europe and burned by the Germans in 1942 has been reconstructed on the basis of pre-war master thesis - it will become a museum of Bilgoraj Jews. Construction of some new buildings is also planned, including the Christian church transferred from Tworyczow near Szczepieszyn. Such projects are changing both spaces of memory and architecture.

6. Conclusions

Over the past few decades, architecture focused on introspective insight into their own procedures for research and design. Architecture, however, is a part of society. Methods for commemoration by and with the participation of architecture, discussed above, demonstrate that the “black box” has become too small for the field. [3] New challenges arise, which are the basis for new research - this research process is only just beginning. New areas of research are opened, of which only a small part has been examined in this text. Because of their unique bond with society processes, spaces of memory represent a kind of laboratory of the emerging trends in architecture and new activities involving architecture. Research results show the new directions of the development of architecture and other disciplines related to memory, as well as their mutual bonds. Both theoretical and practical explorations of architecture are moving towards transdisciplinary, towards redefining and re-conceptualization of the discipline in relation with other domains of knowledge, in one word - towards multidisciplinary. In conclusion, there is a need for further extensive research, but the study confirms the potential of this research direction. Spaces of memory offer the opportunity to capture the transformation of the discipline at the moment when the process begins.

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