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Shaping Place Identity through Interaction on the Example of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk

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Abstract. The article presents process of shaping place identity on the example of an important for Pomerania region investment - European Solidarity Centre. The idea of a Solidarity social movement is strongly associated with the formation of post-socialist national identity of Poland as well as local identity of Pomerania, from which movement originates. The realization of the European Solidarity Centre aims to be one of the essential elements of shaping Gdańsk's identity of space. The article is an attempt to analyse how the presence of realization gradually affects the formation of the place identity of new urban space. Analysis of this realization will allow on the one hand to verify design assumptions made by authors, on the other provides the opportunity to search for best description of still vague notion of local identity. This concept, though intuitively close to everyone still seems to elude conceptual apparatus of theory of architecture. The intention of this article is to explore the notion of identity based on the observations of the newly realized significant cultural space. This analysis approaches the concept of identity from two perspectives. The first approach draws from the concept of identity of Christian Norberg-Schulz. Here, local identity is seen as a unique set of characteristics of space. So seen the concept of place identity is a correlate of concept of personal identity. In this analysis, methods of description of personal identity were transferred to the identity of the place. In the second approach, the identity of place is understood as a unique for that place way of being in space, way to spend time and development of the site-specific urban rituals. Such a concept of identity, draws from the concept of place of Kim Dovey. Both presented approaches seems to complement each other but they also emphasize different qualities. The now-traditional concept of Genius Loci sees architecture as a structural system of meanings. Meaningful elements are seen here primarily from aesthetic perspective. As something we can see. In this perspective, the concept of place identity is seen as a static formation. This perfectly corresponds to design determinants of historical spaces associated with the concept of cultural heritage. In the authors' opinion identity of the place is also built on the interactions that occur between users in space. The space in this approach becomes a catalyst for social contact. What is important for the user is the formation of identity through customs, rituals and urban traditions - that create new network of social connections. This concept of place recognizes dynamic nature of space identity - as a changeable formation which is continuously co-created. Such recognition can give better understanding of identity for specific design conditions, such as gradual formation of new urban spaces. It is so because this approach places emphasis on the processual nature of space identity - as in the case discussed in the article.

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1. Introduction

Article presents idea of shaping place identity on example of important for the Pomerania region investment - European Solidarity Centre. The building of the European Solidarity Centre was established as the seat of the institution serving two purposes. The first objective is to organize a debate on the contemporary political and social issues of the world. The second of the objectives is to commemorate and propagate the idea of Solidarity. The idea of the Solidarity social movement is strongly connected with shaping post-socialist national identity of Poles and identity of the local inhabitants of Pomerania, from which the movement originates.

The analysed object is located in an area inseparably connected with the idea of Solidarity, namely Gdansk Shipyard. This area has been transformed for decades from industrial function into new urban district called the Young Town. With this district are bound great hopes - it is to become a symbol of a new future of Gdansk. Building of the European Solidarity Centre is to be one of key elements of shaping a new identity for this district, drawing from its traditions and events that took place there.

Location of discussed building is a very attractive investment area. At the same time, this area is gradually devastated and faces the final destruction of the relics of industrial buildings. Of course, this causes the relics of historical memory and heritage to disappear. Because of that the building was created with the intention of becoming an important element of memory for that space.

A significant part of the author's assumptions was devoted to the problem of the place identity as a necessary point of reference for the created architecture and surrounding space [1].

The article is an attempt of analysis of how the presence of newly built edifice affects the shaping of the place identity of the new urban district. The analysis of this realization will enable the verification of established design assumptions as well as possibility of finding the best description of the still vague concept of place identity. This concept, though intuitively close to everyone, seems to slip away the conceptual description. It seems that the notion of identity exceeds the notion of meaning defined by the thinkers of the post-modernism. That notion of meaning is contained in the spatial and aesthetic code of architecture. In that sense, for postmodern thinkers, place identity is contained in unique spatial and aesthetic qualities of architecture.

It is sure, that notion of place identity is inextricably linked to thinking of architecture as a meaningful element. The term meaning is central to the postmodern understanding of architecture."If there is any single objective that unites (...) various [postmodern] concerns, it is the search for architectural communication, the desire to make architecture a vehicle of cultural expression. Postmodern practitioners and critics have tended to seek ideological justification, not in program, function, or structure, but in meaning", [2].

However, notion of meaning and place identity built on it can be understood in a variety of ways. Indeed, postmodern thinkers are right in thinking that sense of space is something more than a function. It contains a specific code that cannot be reduced to the physical properties of objects. This ephemeral value makes space a part of our culture. It is the cause of our migration around the cities of the world in search for uniqueness. „Modern tourism proves that the experience of different places is a major human interest, although also its value today tends to get lost. In fact modern man for a long time believed that science and technology had freed him from a direct dependence on places", [3].

So what is the unique meaning of the space that makes us identify with it and feel in it as in home? Norberg-Schulz, basing on the intellectual achievements of existential phenomenology, says that sense of identification with space is not a sensory experience, but rather a sense of existential foothold – sense of home."To gain an existential foothold man has to be able to orientate himself; he has to know where he is. But he also has to identify himself with the environment, that is, he has to know how he is a certain place." [4] We need to search new ways of describing that experience in architecture.

Authors' analysis approaches the concept of identity from two perspectives:

The first approach draws from, among other things, Christian Norberg-Schulz's concept of identity. Here the local identity is seen as a unique set of features of space that is gradually communicated to the user or rather discovered by the user. The concept of identity that is so seen is a correlate of the psychological concept of personal identity. For the sake of clarity, the identity of a place understood in

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this way will be called personal identity. This analysis has carried out the transfer of methods of description of personal identity to the identity of the place.

In second approach, the identity of a place is understood as a unique for that place way of being in space, a way of spending time and shaping place-specific urban rituals. Interaction with space and in that space defines identity. Such a concept of identity, draws from Kim Dovey's concept of place. For the sake of clarity, the identity of a place understood in this way will be called identity by interaction.

2. Identity of place as a correlate of personal identity

The notion of personal identity is an issue often analysed in past and contemporary philosophical thought. Especially in a situation of reaction to the world, this modern concept plays an important role in the stabilizing factor. Architect make the user feel safe in space through identity, familiarity of context. Despite modernist denial, often contextual relations weigh on the value of architecture - the concept of identity plays a key role here. Sense of contexts makes user feel secure.

The impression is that you can use, though only metaphorically, as a point of reference and helpful template, concept of personal identity and transfer the corresponding systematism to the concept of place identity, [5]. The identity of the place in this view is the identity of many constitutive factors: the intangible spirit of the place, temporal coherence as well as material coherence. All of this factors built up to a sense of totality, in which perceived space is understood as united whole. "Architecture comes into being when a 'total environment is made visible" [6]. The investigator must therefore be able to search for the unique features of space that make up the identity of a place.

2.1. Spirit of the place

Introduction of the notion of intangible substance is risky in scientific discourse. That is the case for both notions of identity: of the place and of the person. This un-empirical being is an elusive and insecure notion even of its existence. Frequently challenged from a material point of view, it is present as a valid notion of personal identity only in idealistic systems of thought. Speaking of the "spirit of place," a phenomenon whose existence cannot be proved, and which can only be apprehended, requires resignation of unequivocal argumentation, and agreeing for postmodern narration.

Post-shipyard areas, in which the building is located are linked to the legend of historical change. It is a landscape of civilisation changes of XX century as well as political changes connected to transition of Poland to democracy. The post-industrial landscape with the arms of the cranes rising above the horizon creates a unique setting inextricably linked to the maritime tradition of Gdansk. Solidarity Square with the Monument of Fallen Shipyard Workers, Health and Safety Hall, Gate 2 are covered by formalized protection of monuments and as such are a material testimony of history. It is more important, however, that they create a unique mood necessary to experience personally the myth of Solidarity. It may seem that just in the case of the spirit of place, logical command may be replaced by the obviousness of the sensation. At that moment, the world of meanings is revealed, invariably indispensable in artistic creation. [7]

The aim of the architecture of the European Solidarity Centre was to stimulate existential foothold needed to surrender to the unique atmosphere of the place. One must agree with the view that at the moment we cross the information layer of architecture and move deeper, the emotional experience of space have huge impact on the experience of events that take place in it [8].In order to create a residence, or rather a scenery for the Centre's business, it was also necessary to face this deepened sphere of influence of space being built. The building's architecture does not satisfy only the standard functional and aesthetic needs. The ECS building must meet the role of a monument-building that responds to the need to highlight the uniqueness of a place. Already a unique location at the Solidarity Square, just behind the epitaph of the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers, has become an element of architectural message. The memory zone has expanded.

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Figure 1. European Solidarity Center seen from Solidarity Square, photo: Wojciech Kryński, 2014.

The central point of the Square remains the monument of the three crosses. It is a space dominant (see Figure1). This spatial as well as symbolic role should not be questioned. That is why the building turns towards the square with raw metal plane almost without any holes, so as to descend to the background and become the screen for the statue's silhouette. The shadow of the cross rests on the flat surface of the façade, and their image literally and metaphorically deepens meaning of the building.

2.2. Time cohesion

According to many researchers, memory is necessary condition of establishing personal separateness and identity. For Locke, promoter of reflection on the subject of identity and numerous subsequent followers, the foundation of psychic continuity is memory. It is a factor that gives the feeling of continuity in time. Although not everything in memory is preserved, a number of important events and minor episodes are remembered to distinguish person from others, [9]. Similarly, Norberg-Schulz notes that temporal and spatial coherence is important for shaping the identity of a place [10].

For a description of additive personality growth, Freud used a comparison to the growing urban structure where the old centre continues to be surrounded by new rings of the developing structures. They are a memory resources sometimes hidden and unconscious, but always decisive in shaping one’s personality [11].

This metaphor very accurately shows the similarities between the creation of a personal identity and the birthplace of the identity of a place. This process does not have to be treated literally as a centrifugal space expansion. Rising can take place towards centre through further changes in the spatial structure of space.

Communities build collective identities not only by capturing major historical events or by memorizing significant peculiarities of history, but also by protecting the material heritage of generations. This resource of relicts documenting growth is particularly important for determining the identity of a place. Therefore, for the post-shipyard areas it is so important to fight for the preservation of as many original elements of the landscape as possible. Over the years, the landscape’s shape has undergone constant change. Old tissue grew with new elements, quite accidentally from the point of view of the requirements of spatial order. This often irritating disharmony raises objections, but is justified by the sincerity of the process dictated by the technical need of production. These specific overlays clearly illustrate the aspect of continuity in the creation of a place identity. Remnants of memory are also the remaining inscriptions on the walls of the shipyard and surrounding houses, remnants of infrastructure, remnants of cobbled pavements. One of the goals for which the European Solidarity Centre was established is to document and preserve the most valuable of them. In this way, the building becomes a carrier of meanings related to the past of the environment.

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The ECS is also another stage in the process of shaping identity. In deciding on its shape it was necessary to analyse possible variants of its relation to the existing environment. In situations of relations with the cultural landscape, the contextual approach is usually chosen. In this case, however, it was decided to introduce a new element as the dominant, so its presence will have cohesive impact on the environment. The way to implement such an assumption is to move from architecture to the context through a formally strong element [12].This role in antiquity was given to the stylobat of the Greek temple separating its massif from free environment. The ECS building was built according to this principle. It grows out of a watery pedestal accentuating the distinction between building and the present undeveloped state of surrounding, momentary even devastated. This treatment of space is also valid in the future - when the building's surroundings are built in accordance with the program vision of the Young City.

Figure 2 European Solidarity Center seen from Freedom Road, photo: Wojciech Kryński, 2014

Essential urban decisions for the ECS building have been dictated by the future vision of the Young City. In anticipation of its realization, the building consciously turns its front to the Freedom Road - a representative, pedestrian arterial part of district. It will be built in years to come (see Figure 2). On the side of the planned Road to Freedom the main entrance is located. The form of the building is closed on the other three sides. The compositional order of the edifice is a novelty in the unsettled environment of the shipyards. On the other hand, it has a close relationship with the Solidarity Square, which is behind the walls of the yard. This way the building expands the memory area with a new, comprehensively essential element.

2.3. Material cohesion

The body of man, in spite of his constant change, keeps its identity throughout his life. Over time, changing of one’s look makes it difficult or almost impossible to identify. However, with a careful study, you can still find elements that invariably identify the person. Similarly, the spatial structure of a place, as long as the continuation is maintained, upholds its uniqueness. Built from a specific material, on a skeleton of a selected construction and set in a unique relationship, the peculiar forms define the uniqueness of space.

The image of the yard was clearly different from the industrial landscapes of other industrial plants. It was characteristic of the multiplicity and size of steel structures. In addition to the masonry halls, concrete quays and docks in the landscape, monumental metal bodies of mounted hulls were strongly

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noted. Hull with bridges, surrounded by cranes, were clearly dominant in space. The form of the object being analysed is obviously related to these elements. Total scale in which this connection was applied allowed the manifestation of the decision to make the building an element of the identity of the place. This is an attempt to maintain and perhaps save the peculiar character of the landscape, but without the intention of imitating it .

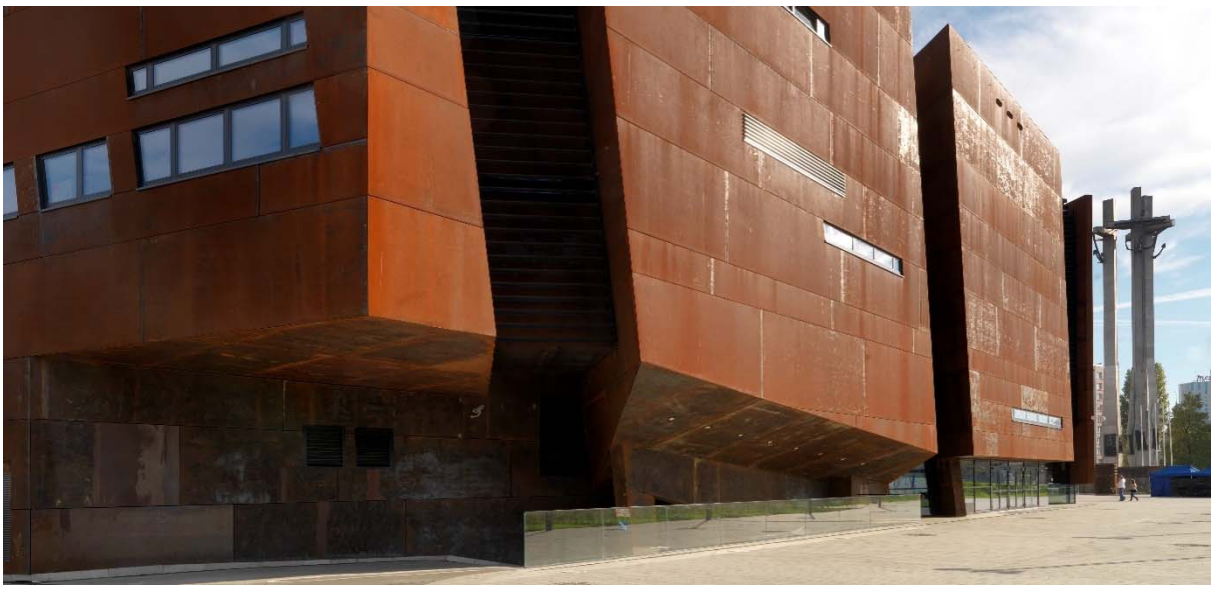

Figure 3. European Solidarity Center, detail, photo: Wojciech Kryński, 2014

The identity of the place is based on reference to specific characteristics of the environment and communication with the significant elements of the landscape from its past. In this way the analysed building in the literal and metaphorical sense is a tool of communicating the meaning of that place. The aesthetic and functional concept of the building seems to be clearly embedded in the concept of the Genius Loci of postmodernist thinkers.

3. Identity through interaction

Considerations of the identity of a place do not end with consideration of space and aesthetic codes. The object being analysed is, first of all, a museum. Its form is not only indicative of the history of the place, as the building is not merely a centre for recording events from the past. Enliven by activity of The European Solidarity Centre, the building has become a centre of cultural life and contemporary social thought. [13] This function, alive and really nurtured, is also crucial for shaping the identity of a place. The issue of place identity must necessarily relate to the social practices that the new building allows.

In this description, the phenomenological approach seems to better reflect the nature of the perception of identity. Identity experience is less related to experiencing space than feeling the overall atmosphere of a place.

Norberg-Schulz aptly states:

"In our context 'identification' means to become 'friends' with a particular environment."[14]

A place is a network of relationships between people on which practices are associated with it and they do not necessarily constitute a single spirit of place. In the new place, various practices are founded and nurtured. Identification is not only founded on the architectural expression of space connected with tradition or symbols. This new concept of place was introduced into the discourse by Kim Dovey:

"Such a sense of place is seen as primarily global rather than local, forged out of connections with other places rather than local contingencies, privileging routs rather than roots." [15]

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The nature of the place is not something that is fixed, and it constantly evolves as a result of changes made by users. By participating in space, users are bound with its surroundings and create a real, strong community. To obtain this goal aesthetic, historical and symbolic expression of places must sometimes give way to real, contemporary practices, hence the eloquent word game - routs rather than roots.

Here the analysed building becomes a catalyst for social change in the district. The building was set up in space in order to organize small squares around it - the spontaneous space in the city. This spontaneous presence, as for example sitting in the sun is an important factor re-colonizing the places so far abandoned. This factor should not be underestimated. The ground floor of the building, open with glazing, allows one to establish free contact between interior and exterior users.

The project intent was to connect the inner space of the Centre to the city space. The specifics of the Solidarity movement were its massive and widespread presence in everyday life, hence the activity of the Centre should become an indispensable part of the city's activity. Through the glass façade the passerby penetrates into the building, encouraging entry and participation. Behind the transparent facade we see shadows of the visitors of the exhibition. In the case of traditional museums, the exhibition space is closed, here the opening of the museum connected visitors with passersby. Currently the effect is not yet fully felt. The idea will come to light when the city will rise around the building, so the whole will become living urban structure. This is also important in shaping the interaction between users and the specific neighbourhood of a building – but we have to wait for the effect. This activity will allow the building to grow into the daily use of public space.

Figure 4 European Solidarity Center, interior, photo: Wojciech Kryński, 2014

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R. Sennett states that there is a need for a cultural anchor [16] that gives our everyday life a sense of stability in a chronically changing reality, full of change in work, place of living, multiculturalism. In a world like this so much more important than the artificial shaping of the sense of identity is shaping the network of functional links; diverse, intersecting narratives that allow you to form a community. Contemporary man is not supposed to feel at home by means of a staged landscape but by the sense of continuous participation in social activity. [17] The role of public buildings - like the European Solidarity Centre is crucial in this case.

A multi-site and multi-use perspective help to avoid these threats. As long as the space of an object remains open for multiple uses, it does not become a monolithic object of consumption. The realization of the cultivating role of the object requires at the same time for it to become a magnet of diverse activities. The building is not only a museum, it is also a place for local government debates with a local community, a place of cultural activity, a library, a bookstore, a gastronomy, a spontaneous visit, a social garden, a place to relax, or even a skateboarding site. This multithreaded use is extremely important in shaping place identity.

Nowadays, when the architect's activity is usually limited to the realization of an architectural object rather than its management, the placemaking role of architecture remains poorly recognized in the architecture discourse. It turns out that effective space management is an important factor shaping the identity of a place. This processual character is becoming a further factor in shaping the active vital space today.

4. Conclusions

Both presented approaches seems to complement each other but they also emphasize different qualities. The now-traditional concept of Genius Loci sees architecture as a structural system of meanings. Meaningful elements are seen here primarily from aesthetic perspective. As something we can see. In this perspective, the concept of place identity is seen as a static formation. This perfectly corresponds to design determinants of historical spaces associated with the concept of cultural heritage.

In the authors' opinion identity of the place is also built on the interactions that occur between users in space. The space in this approach becomes a catalyst for social contact. What is important for the user is the formation of identity through customs, rituals and urban traditions - that create new network of social connections. This concept of place recognizes dynamic nature of space identity - as a changeable formation which is continuously co-created. Such recognition can give better understanding of identity for specific design conditions, such as gradual formation of new urban spaces. It is so because this approach places emphasis on the processual nature of space identity - as in the case discussed in the article.

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