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## **INDIRECT REFERENCES TO THE SPATIAL CONTEXT IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE OF WARSAW**

References to the spatial context based on the traditional elements of architectural composition like scale, proportions, rhythm, colour, etc. are usually visible and easy to define by the people not related professionally to architecture. However in the contemporary architecture designers often reject classical canons of the composition, simultaneously emphasizing the reference to the spatial context. In this elaboration author describes and analyzes the indirect references to the surrounding areas of three modern buildings which were designed and opened in Warsaw over last two years: Copernicus Science Centre, Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and 'Vitkac' department store.

indirect references, spatial context, modern architecture

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

References to the spatial context based on the traditional elements of architectural composition like scale, proportions, rhythm, colour, etc. are usually visible and easy to define by the people not related professionally to architecture. However in the contemporary architecture designers often reject classical canons of the composition. Modern buildings made of glass, concrete and steel are usually at the first glimpse not related to the spatial context and unfortunately many times that's how it really is. However in case of many modern buildings, their architects emphasize the fact of existing many references to the context, even if it's not clearly visible. The question appears, if they could manage to do that in indirect or invisible way.

In this elaboration, the spatial context of three modern buildings opened in Warsaw over last two years will be described and analyzed. These are: Copernicus

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Science Centre, Museum of the history of Polish Jews, and 'Vitkac' department store.

## 1. EXAMPLES OF REFERENCE TO THE SPATIAL CONTEXT IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE OF WARSAW

### 1.1. Copernicus Science Centre

For Jan Kubec – architect of the Copernicus Science Centre in Warsaw the landscape is an integral element of his architecture<sup>1</sup>. However if we follow the surrounding area of this building the reference to the form is hardly visible. The areas connected to the Vistula river are characterized by the abundant but unkempt greenery. The main component of this space is a Vistula wide riverbed, which – apart from the green belts of plants – is complemented by the dominants of the cable-stayed Świętokrzyski Bridge as well as the National Stadium which distinguishes in scale and colour scheme.



Rys. 1. Copernicus Science Centre (fot. G. Grzeliński)

The form of the Copernicus Science Centre is much different from the surrounding area, though – despite from the large volume of 123 000 m<sup>3</sup> – it doesn't

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Kubec, architekt Centrum Nauki Kopernik opowiada o swojej architekturze, Archirama.pl, [http://www.archirama.pl/architektura/jan-kubec-architekt-centrum-nauki-kopernik-opowiada-o-swojej-nowatorskiej-architekturze,67\\_1317.html](http://www.archirama.pl/architektura/jan-kubec-architekt-centrum-nauki-kopernik-opowiada-o-swojej-nowatorskiej-architekturze,67_1317.html), dostęp – 11.06.2013

subordinate the landscape, and – through the articulations and niches in the facades – doesn't offend with a scale. Two main chunks of the building are composed with a different shades of bronzes, reds and beiges. But despite the fact that these colours are not a natural components of the surrounding area, its saturation makes them complementing the green riverbanks. The precincts of the Science Centre are deprived of the vertical articulation visible in the facades, as well as the orthogonal shapes. Instead of natural elements the most visible part of the building seem to be a huge industrial ramps covering the South-East and North-West facades.

So what is the way the designer refers his architecture to the spatial context? As he explains by himself<sup>2</sup>, the aim of his form was not to refer to the particular elements of the composition of surrounding areas, but to become a new, independent element of the natural landscape. He wants to achieve it by using the shapes, that resemble the boulders (the brown, orthogonal shape of the planetarium), volcanic craters (the wells introducing light to the interior), or the khaki colour of elevation full of apertures and breaches.



Rys. 2. Marks of the water flowing down the breaches in the facade (fot. G. Grzełiński)

Besides, there are much more references to the natural landscape in this building. It seems to be a subject of erosion. This effect is achieved by the marks of the water flowing down the facades after rainfall, or by the details on the facades which simulate the walls flooded by the waters of Vistula.

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<sup>2</sup> ibidem,

In fact the form of the Copernicus Science Center is strictly related to its location. It is pulled out of the front part of the densely built area of Powiśle district into the river. The building seems to be ejected from the built-up area and become a part of the natural landscape along the Vistula riverbanks. And that was the main goal of its architects.

## 1.2. Museum of the history of Polish Jews

The reference to the spatial context is also an important element of architecture of Rainer Mahlamaki – a designer of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which was opened in 2013 in Warsaw. As he admitted by himself: *the architecture must be always related to its surroundings*<sup>3</sup>. However, at the first glimpse these relations seem to be indirect. The form of the building designed by the Finnish architect comprises a huge cuboid covered with copper and glass panels with a mix of Polish and Hebrew letters. Although the surrounding area consists of the modern block of flats of 1960s the new Museum differs in terms of height, proportions, finishing materials and colour scheme. The central part of the building comprises an internal passage which links together a green space to the West, with a square



Rys. 3. Museum of the History of Polish Jews (fot. G. Grzeźliński)

consisting two Monuments to the Ghetto Heroes to the East side. However when one stay inside the building it appears that the lines created by the soffit of the main

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<sup>3</sup> Mahlamaki R. *Skromność i spokój*. Architektura-murator 06/2013, s. 44

hall and the curvilinear walls are not in fact a visual frame for none of two Monuments. Also in case of the idea of the passage itself it is very hard to find any analogies to the spatial context. Its form resembles dried up river valleys of the Middle East, or the parting of the Red Sea, but in fact there are some hidden references to the surrounding area.

When approach the Museum from the East side, and pass the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes one can seem that its solid, tapered walls form is an opposition to the form of building's main entrance, which basically is a crack in the glass facade composed of curvilinear walls also tapered to the top.

Its deep meaning has also a colour used on the walls of the passage. Rainer Mahlamaki admitted, that afterwards he's noticed that the general tone of Warsaw is light yellow<sup>4</sup>. However colour is not only element that refers building to its location. The passage which runs through the whole length of the building is not just an ordinary corridor. Referring it to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes on one side, and the park area full of greenery on the other, the architect links together the past times with a future, death with life. In this aspect the new building of the Museum which was built in the very heart of the Jewish Ghetto (brutally demolished between 1942 and 1943), seems to picturize the history of the Jews. Visitors can feel this game of impressions and emotions, when following two ends of the passage. Not many of them realize that underneath the new building there was an old Zamenhofa Street, which was demolished together with the rest of Ghetto during the World War II. So it all shows how heavy is an ideological yoke of this place. It seems, that it's different to each person who visits the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, but in fact it is always related to its location and its rich but cruel history.

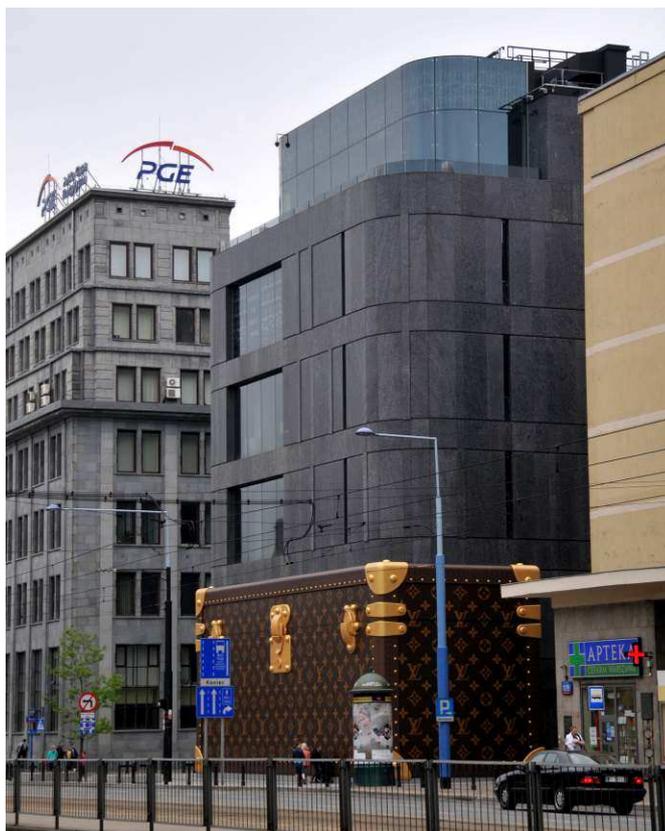
### 1.3. 'Vitkac' department store

Another building which was constructed in 2011 in Warsaw has an interesting relations to its surroundings. 'Vitkac' department store was designed by the practice of Kuryłowicz & Associates. At the first glimpse its dark-grey form composed of the huge Brazilian granite slabs seem to refer to the neighbourhood with its height only. It is elegant and a little bit harsh, but it doesn't show any other direct references. Its curved corners contrast with a modern, cuboid buildings located on both sides of 'Vitkac'. Moreover the construction process was preceded by the demolition of the legendary 'Chemistry' pavilion built in 1960 and written down to the list of the architecture master pieces of XX-th Century which shaped the city's

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<sup>4</sup> *Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich – Warszawa – Wywiad z prof. Rainerem Mahlamakim*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Win5y3DWB4> – dostęp: 13.06.2013

identity.<sup>5</sup> And finally the plan of this building disturbs the continuity of the diagonal Bracka Street.



Rys. 4. 'Vitkac' department store (fot. G. Grzeliński)

However apart from all above mentioned problems and mistakes there are some issues about the building form which make it referring to its spatial context. The first one are the curved corners of the building, which – as pointed out earlier on – do not refer to the closest neighbourhood, but to other legendary building in the area – CDT 'Smyk' department store, which was designed on the opposite side of the street by architects Zbigniew Ihnatowicz and Jerzy Romański in 1951. In the form of the 'Vitkac' one can also notice far references to demolished 'Chemis-

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<sup>5</sup> Lista obiektów architektury XX w. z lat 1945-1989 określających, zdaniem środowiska architektów OW SARP, tożsamość miasta i stolicy [...], <http://www.warszawa.sarp.org.pl/php/obrazki/lista.pdf> – dostęp: 13.06.2013

try' pavilion, which are visible in the form of large, frameless windows, as well as the long, heavy horizontal strips made in dark colours.

### 3. CONCLUSION

All above mentioned buildings have an individual relations with the surrounding area. These relations are indirect and base on the specific concept created by architects to introduce the users' emotions. It could be the calmness of the nature disturbed by the erosion process of the earth, water and air. It could remind the uncertainty of life, and bring reflection on past times. It could bring a feeling of nostalgia after times that had gone, about the human works which have to be saved, and those that didn't have a chance to survive. No matter what is the idea of this relationship, the fact is that three previously mentioned buildings refers to the context thanks to the message which could be decipher by the visitors.

In relation to Giuseppe Samona the context bases not only on the traditional elements of architectural composition. In his words the reference to the context could be based on urban motivations, as well as the specific qualities of a city, which could be analyzed and written.<sup>6</sup> As shown above, these qualities could different, from local history to the natural conditions. But the good architecture shows that the greatest quality of the city are people.

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<sup>6</sup> Kozłowski D., *Dzieło architektoniczne w przestrzeni miasta – o formie, kontekście, użyteczności*, Biblioteka Cyfrowa Politechniki Krakowskiej, [http://suw.biblos.pk.edu.pl/resources/i1/i3/i8/i4/r1384/KozlowskiD\\_DziełoArchitektoniczne.pdf](http://suw.biblos.pk.edu.pl/resources/i1/i3/i8/i4/r1384/KozlowskiD_DziełoArchitektoniczne.pdf) - dostęp: 11.06.2013

[6] Porębska E. P., Stiasny G., *Centrum Nauki Kopernik w Warszawie*, Architektura-murator 12/2011, s. 44-63

[7] Stiasny G., *Getto – warszawska architektura pamięci*, Architektura-murator 06/2013, s. 26-36

## **NIEBEZPOŚREDNIE ODNIESIENIA DO KONTEKSTU PRZESTRZENNEGO WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ARCHITEKTURZE WARSZAWY**

### **Streszczenie**

Odniesienia do kontekstu przestrzennego oparte na tradycyjnych elementach kompozycji architektonicznej jak skala, proporcje, rytm, kolor, itp. są zwykle czytelne i łatwe do zdefiniowania dla ludzi nie zajmujących się zawodowo architekturą. Jednak w przypadku współczesnej architektury projektanci często odrzucają klasyczne kanony kompozycji, jednocześnie podkreślając nawiązanie do kontekstu przestrzennego. W niniejszej pracy autor przedstawia i poddaje analizie niebezpośrednie odniesienia do przestrzeni otaczającej trzy budynki zaprojektowane i otwarte w ostatnich dwóch latach: Centrum Nauki “Kopernik”, Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, oraz dom handlowy “Vitkac”.