



## ARTICLES AND TREATISES / ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

### The specifics of suburban architecture

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#### ABSTRACT

The fundamental differences between the suburbs and the city centre that I would like to point out concern the pace of life and the intensity of urban development. Certainly, these differences are not absolute but are rather relative, as they are defined in relation to the surrounding neighbourhood that serves as a reference for self-determination. A suburb has some small-town traits, but its close location to the city prevents it from becoming a local centre. The same concerns the architecture whose intensity is, after all, a consequence of the increasing intensity in other aspects of life, the differentiation of sources of people's income, the demand for services, trade contacts, *etc.* Its incompleteness, imperfection, slower pace and focus on an unattained and unattainable ideal can make one see in the suburb as a theoretically extremely promising area. Indeed, its promise lies in this aspect of failure, incompleteness and fragmentation — which is long lasting and relatively permanent. Many traits of suburban architecture are conservative; whereas others, such as its impermanence and improvisational qualities, are experimental and are characterised by an almost guerrilla-like aspect. However, present-day advanced postmodern thinking at times achieves an ability to take contradictory spatial, visual, artistic and functional characteristics and, through a theoretical analysis, make them into a complex 'difficult whole'. Here, the combination itself is probably not so much harmonious but rather contains certain internal tensions, imbalances and longings of one opposite towards another. Anyway, this combination does take place and — in line with the direction of many diagnoses of contemporaneity — instead of creating abstract constructs, we must register the facts and try to conceptualise them.

#### KEYWORDS:

suburb architecture; suburb life pace; city centre space; suburb inside the city centre; potential of the suburb

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## CONTEMPORARY CITY CENTRES IN FORMER SUBURBAN AREAS

By way of introduction let us note that almost all city centres in contemporary large cities are located in areas formerly occupied by outer suburbs, which had been gradually taken over by higher, more intensive and more prestigious urban development that eliminated the previous suburban landscape. Traces of tensions that such transformation once produced can be seen around the Planty Park in Kraków — situated along the old city walls and therefore being a well-defined city limit — and even on the inside of the old walls *i.e.* within the limits of the medieval old town.

Collegium Novum, the main building of the Jagiellonian University (1883–1887) designed by Feliks Księżarski, is facing Planty in a way that seems obvious nowadays considering the appropriately elegant square situated in front of the building with a flowerbed and the ‘tree of freedom’ planted in 1919 on the first anniversary of Polish reclaimed independence. However, from the point of view of pre-modern urban hierarchy based on prestige the building’s placement is simply wrong, since it does not face either Jagiellońska Street or Gołębia Street, both leading to the Market Square *i.e.* the city proper. Indeed, Collegium Novum was not meant to face the Planty, but to face away from the Market Square, without being directly connected with the city centre by either of the above-mentioned streets.



Ill. 1. *Collegium Novum* of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, 1883–1887, Feliks Księżarski. Photo by P. Winskowski

Who knows whether this symbolic orientation (towards the Planty, *i.e.* towards old city walls, moats, and suburbs that since then have transformed into a densely built up Straszewski Street) of the building housing main offices of the university once chartered in the medieval Kraków did not give rise to more speculation at the time than the fact of bringing down city walls and creating the Planty did in 1822–1830. It was one thing to create a public park in the place of once malaria-ridden, neglected and no longer useful fortifications; but for a building of such importance to face towards such area was something else entirely. It was not the first nor the last time when not so much the innovation itself, but the impressive consequences resulting thereof — artistically, visually, and in terms of ideas and prestige — made people realise *post factum* the importance of a previously implemented change (in this case the change consisted in the city's spatial development and the fact that the walls no longer defined its limits).

#### PACE OF LIFE, INTENSITY OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND EXISTENTIAL AUTONOMY AS INDICATORS OF CITY CENTRES AND SUBURBS

For the purposes of this paper, let us define the characteristics of major forms of spatial development that will serve us as reference for characterising suburbs.

Village (traditional): it is existentially self-sufficient; its development is extensive and obviously based on farming, hence it is subject to the rhythm of nature — *e.g.* *The peasants* by Władysław Stanisław Reymont, a novel divided into four volumes titled after four seasons of the year (Reymont, 1962); it is autonomous socially and axiologically, 'it is its own', it has enough 'critical mass' in the mind of its residents to become their microcosm. This occurs despite its small number of inhabitants thanks to their isolation and reduced contacts with other villages and towns that do not disturb the rhythm of life in the countryside (normally villagers do not go farther than to a nearby market or on pilgrimage).

City (city centre): it is also existentially self-sufficient in the sense that in the mind of its residents it achieves a sufficient 'critical mass' to become their microcosm, despite their frequent contacts with distant business partners. Hence, the city symbolically 'is its own' due to its large population and the high levels of activity of its residents. Its development is (obviously) intensive and normally based on artificial professions and activities, producing and processing materials and information, and satisfying needs that are non-existent outside of the city.

Suburb: when compared to the previously outlined characteristics of a village and a city, the suburb appears to be an area without its own 'critical mass';

it is dependent on the city centre; it is not self-sufficient; its development is lacking, with some local services satisfying the needs that the locals could not afford to satisfy in the city centre, although the needs are the same as those in the city; the residents practise urban professions equally often (*e.g.* on behalf of those who live in the city). Higher mobility towards the city centre makes suburbanites outward-oriented; perhaps they feel condemned to living in the suburb and dislike it; in this sense it 'is not its own'. There is some activity aimed at social integration (*e.g.* committed local school teachers), but this is done in the spirit of 'it's so bad that we need to do something' and not generated spontaneously as in 'so much is happening here'.

The suburban mindset tends to perpetuate itself: poverty and feelings of inferiority breed more poverty and feelings of inferiority. This is evidenced by the difficulties encountered by local activists and animators who try to make any kind of change or involve people in any kind of initiative. The suburb has some small-town traits, but its close location to the city prevents it from becoming a local centre. It is dependent and focused on the city instead of itself. This produces a sensation of alienation, slow pace of life, being marginalised, and a feeling that life happens (at a faster pace) somewhere else.

Suburban buildings are usually similar to those in small provincial towns, in the countryside, and even those removed from populated areas. I believe that there is no well-defined architectural style typical of the suburbs like that seen in a Polish highlands village (*e.g.* Chochołów). The difference lies in spatial development, neighbourhood, and the resulting sociocultural autonomy reflected in the architecture and beyond (*e.g.* graffiti). The fundamental differences between the suburb and the city that I would like to point out concern the pace of life and the intensity of urban development. Certainly, these differences are not absolute but rather relative, being defined in relation to the surrounding neighbourhood that serves as a reference for self-determination. The pace of life always tended to rise along roads, which was where cities developed. But the roads were there first, subsequently becoming surrounded by infrastructure that isolated distant areas and their inhabitants from the pace imposed by the road, while at the same time spreading the impulses brought by the road deeper into the surrounding lands and accelerating their slow pace of life. The same concerned spatial development whose intensity is, after all, a consequence of the increasing intensity in other aspects of life, differentiation of sources of income, demand for services, trade contacts *etc.*

As opposed to the countryside with its slow pace of living and extensive development far away from cities and along local roads, the discrepancy between own pace and imposed pace still originates tension in the suburbs. Along a local road life is only slightly faster than in complete wilderness, with only the locals using it: once they stop, they become completely familiar, native, unhurried. On the other hand, main roads crossing the countryside and

connecting distant cities are used only by outsiders, who rarely stop (Dürrenmatt, 1988: 7–9, 13).

In turn, the suburb's proximity to the city makes it a passing point for the residents of both. As previously mentioned, the city is a point of reference for the suburb, and the question of road users only confirms this. The suburb is inferior compared to the city and this position of inferiority is confirmed on a daily basis through the daily encounters of suburbanites and city dwellers. The road passing through the suburb leads to a place that is within reach: to the city centre visible on the other side of a river, a railway line, or other similar border. It is true that the border can be easily crossed and is stretched in space, thus creating places that are ambiguous in terms of their urban or suburban status. Still, even the daily 'trips to the city' (*e.g.* for work, shopping, leisure) highlight the differences existing between the two.

Tension existing between the intensity of life and urban development in the city and in the suburb has a considerably greater impact on the latter. It is the suburb that is transfixed by the city, and not the other way round. When strategic car parks are built in the city, they are put underground so as not to damage the city-like quality, while the locals complain about traffic generated by incoming visitors. They will force them to pay for coming there, parking their cars, breathing *etc.* When a similar thing happens on the periphery of the city, the general reactions are quite different: it is said that the area 'was given an opportunity for growth'. A new car park, transport node, railway station, underground station, or even a simple bus station become the centre of the suburb filled with shops and hot-dog stands, a *de facto* branch or agency of the city tailored to suburban needs and means. Its central character will be anchored to the city instead of the suburb. It was created to cater for the needs of incomers from the city, even if they are really just locals coming home from work in the city.

Therefore, the suburb is taunted on a daily basis by the proximity of the city, and it snaps back; the suburb is dependent on the city and it lives from its closeness.

## EXCEPTIONS

Evidently, there are some exceptions to the above-described generalisations. An obvious exception is a suburb where the more relaxed pace of life, extensive spatial development, and dependence on the city is perpetuated and which enjoys a status equal to the city; but let us leave this case aside. An enclave recognised and treated as if it was a park within the city is not an issue; the issues arise due to the suburb's illegitimate status. Henceforth I will consider the complex spatial phenomena accompanying the contacts between the suburb

and the city, the status of the limits between the two, as well as the status of suburban enclaves in the city centre (suburban traits within the city) and city enclaves (central traits) in the suburbs.

Another exception to what has been said about the suburb is the concept of 'city without qualities' (*Stadt ohne Eigenschaften*<sup>1</sup>): a city that is rather contemporary than modern, with what is left of its modern style with structures freely arranged in space after several decades of use (Koolhaas, 1997b: 30–36; Lenartowicz, 1998: 95–104). This does not refer to the present state of neglect of Polish or Eastern German districts of blocks of flats, but to problems stemming from success and prosperity. Cities such as Los Angeles, Atlanta or Las Vegas, built from scratch on naked ground and devoid of tradition, do not perceive even their own short history as something worth preserving — e.g. 'we are a city of pioneers and gunfighters from the age of gold rush' (Koolhaas, 1997a: 835–859; Koolhaas 1997c: 961–971). In fact, these are cities where urban development is determined exclusively by economic growth. Cities where 30 years old offices and commercial centres are torn down to be replaced by newer and more modern offices accompanied by theme parks, which have become today's centres of leisure and commerce alike since malls and theme parks have become so similar (Ghirardo, 1999: 63–69; Ritzer, 2001). Such cities are devoid of either the city centre or the suburbs with fluctuating intensity where intensive development does not necessarily equal city centre, as this intensity does not create any kind of *genius loci* and the only thing that it achieves is infrastructure overload, like the city *Pentesilea* in the essay *Invisible cities*, by Italo Calvino (Calvino, 1975; Sławek, 1997: 11–40). Infrastructure, the only important element of such areas, is either overloaded (in the quasi-centre) or redundant (in the vacated areas). The latter, depending on further investment and land prices speculation *etc.* may once again become quasi-centres (Czapnik, 2001: 54–63). A city without qualities does not have a suburb as defined above either. The city centre-suburb tension exists only where these two qualities meet. But to do so, they must exist. If one is missing, the other will have trouble establishing its own character.

An area 'without qualities' is currently in the process of creation west of Kraków along the road to Olkusz. There are new buildings, a new road, and nothing else. Before this area had a chance to become a suburb in the traditional sense of the word or to acquire suburban traits, it became a location for functions supporting the centre (Kraków) and for transport to another centre (Silesia), hence a place of transit. People stop there only in passing and hardly ever for its own sake; the area is not a destination in its own right. From the very beginning it has been 'an area without qualities', like Janki near Warsaw

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<sup>1</sup> Term coined by Rem Koolhaas, which follows the Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* by the way, easy to recognize.

and like practically all road exits from Warsaw and the access road leading to Poznań from the A2 motorway. Other access roads to Kraków have character because they have been access roads for a long time, passing through suburbs and developing gradually as the city expanded around them.

In a 'city without qualities' built 'from naked ground' and one that never put down roots (even though some did, like *e.g.* Gdynia) the city centre has a more temporary quality, it is developed in a less intensive and more chaotic manner, it has less prestigious buildings. What are the suburbs of Las Vegas, Los Angeles, or Atlanta like? How are they different from the city centres? Development is less intensive, but the quality of activities, the relation of dependence, and the pace of life are the same as in the city. There, the pace of life in the suburbs is not artificially increased by impulses incoming from the centre: in fact, the pace is the same because in both the city and the suburb the impulse is the same and there are no distinct traits that would make one perceive such an impulse as internal or external. Instead of an inner city surrounded by suburbs, the above-mentioned cities is a condensed *no man's land* surrounded a dispersed *no man's land*. Casinos, entertainment centres, and luxurious chauffeur limousine rentals are surrounded by motels, cheap bars, and used car sales points.

In today's Poland, territories with weak structure are prone to become 'areas without qualities'. Above all, this process affects the suburbs, *i.e.* less densely developed areas where there is still space for new construction projects and where new investments receive a warmer welcome than in the centre. It is even possible that in the future city centres will not be surrounded by suburbs, but by 'areas without qualities'. In this case, such lack of character would probably transform the authentic and unique centre into the culmination of infrastructure, as a tourist attraction: there are no shopping malls in the world with its own royal palace *in situ*. Such unique situation may, after all, be put to use commercially... But commercialisation of city centres is another matter that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

## SUBURB INSIDE THE CITY

Let us go back to the fundamental qualitative differences between the suburb and the city, as this will allow us to identify certain suburban features inside the city and certain city features in the suburbs, as well as to determine and name the types of limits or frontiers that separate the two.

Evidently, sometimes one may find relics of the suburban past — suburban buildings, suburban lifestyle, suburban fixation on the city, and suburban insecurity — in places long absorbed by the city (city centre). There are also areas within the city that suffer secondary slowing down or scattering: places in

space and moments in time when the natural rhythm prevails, when biological human nature demands some rest and downtime from the artificially boosted pace of the city life.

Examples illustrating the first case are all kinds of neglected courtyards, gardens, hen-houses *etc.* that once in a while spark the interest of journalists who take pictures and marvel at such places as if they dropped out of the sky. They wonder: 'How can this be... in Kraków... two hundred metres from the Market Square... chickens', as if such a view automatically infected the surrounding space with neglect, abandonment, and inferiority complexes.

The second case — suburban enclaves within the city — include gardens or swimming pools on top of skyscrapers, places for walking dogs, sunbathing *etc.*, courtyards, parks, green squares, and other spaces where functionality, efficiency, and other parameters characteristic of urban landscape were deliberately disregarded or where their implementation failed.



Ill. 2. Place du Parvis de Notre Dame in Paris, mid-nineteenth century, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. Photo by P. Winskowski

One of such paradoxical places is the Place du Parvis Notre Dame in Paris. The existing townhouses were torn down in the mid-nineteenth century



during the cathedral's restoration and transformation directed by Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. The goal was to obtain an adequate distance from the cathedral that would offer an opportunity to admire the immense façade in all of its glory. Nowadays, only some tourists are willing to walk the distance of one hundred metres to admire the façade, and since there are no other attractions the spot has become a natural enclave of peace. People in this space — considerably less crowded than the area by the cathedral's portal — freed from hectic sightseeing and the guide's rigid supervision start seeing one another, move to let others take photographs, eat sandwiches, and have time (*i.e.* it is not that those frenzied tourists suddenly have a revelation and slow down, but rather through a natural process of selection only those with more curiosity and willingness to dedicate more time reach the place).

A similar thing occurs on the Mariacki Square in Kraków: the murmur of the fountain is heard, there are less people (as compared to the main Market Square and the neighbouring Small Market Square), and each passer-by or tourist is seen as an individual and not as part of indistinct mass. We have already mentioned that this pace and intensity is perceived in relative instead of absolute terms. It is enough that there is less traffic, less rush, and less activity as compared to the surrounding areas, as long as (visual) contact is maintained between the two that allows one to appreciate the difference while achieving a necessary distance so that the noise and the crowd not to disturb the peace of the enclave. These are the suburban qualities possessed by the Mariacki Square.



Ill. 3. The Mariacki Square in Kraków. Photo by P. Winskowski

The most visually interesting examples are neither the atmospheric but randomly distributed alleys, nor the quiet rooftop gardens or swimming pools (designed only to ‘increase the standard of living’ in the luxury apartment house, that local residence in time somehow manage to make their own), but the buildings and open spaces deliberately designed to offer qualities that we have described as suburban, especially those located in the inner city, surrounded by densely-packed buildings, heavy traffic, noise *etc.*



Ill. 4. The square in front of the Arab Institute in Paris, 1981–1987, Jean Nouvel. Photo by P. Winskowski

This feeling of an open yet somehow isolated enclave characteristic for the above-mentioned Place du Parvis Notre Dame square is also present at the square squeezed between buildings of the Arab World Institute (1981–1987) designed by Jean Nouvel and Universités Paris VI — Paris VII, Pierre and Marie Curie. The square is spacious enough and designed in such a way that the farthest end offers a view on the original southern façade of the Institute equipped with mechanically controlled apertures reminiscent of arabesques (Boissière, 1996: 53–56; Winskowski, 2000: 115–116). The placement of the benches in recessed niches of the hedges the square gives a chance to rest and observe people busying along and inside the building. The buildings enclosing the square — the Arab

Institute on one side and the University on the other — provide isolation from the noisy boulevard while limiting the view on the Seine. The size of the square (ca. forty meters wide and sixty meters long) provides enough space to experience the contrast between those resting and those in hurry (passers-by) between buildings being the destination for the latter as seen from retreats among the hedges. It is also small enough as to avoid getting lost and be perceived as more cosy than the surrounding areas, despite the complete absence of any attractions such as fountains, flowerbeds *etc.* The only elements are the motifs from the Institute's façade repeated on the pavement inviting another comparison — between the square and rectangular patterns of identical proportions appearing in glass and steel (and visible from afar on this perfect building) and the same patterns replicated in a lot cosier stone on the pavement within our reach.



Ill. 5. Lowered pavement level under a terrace connecting the Cracovia hotel and the Kijów cinema in Kraków, 1959–1967, Witold Cęckiewicz *et al.* Photo by P. Winskowski

A similar role, albeit on a smaller scale, is fulfilled by the lowered area between the Cracovia hotel (1959–1967) and the Kijów cinema (1959–1966) in Kraków designed by Witold Cęckiewicz *et al.* This refers to the space under the terrace connecting the two buildings. The space — situated five steps below the pavement and the bus stop on the Krasieński Avenue — has a terrace with café tables protected from the elements and to certain extent also from the noise, thus creating a ground for comparison between the restless activities of the city and the leisurely pace of the suburban ones. At this same bottom level, in the back and behind the terrace-shaded space we find a lawn bathed in sunlight. The lawn elevates the rank of the lowered space: it no longer seems

deficient, sunken or flooded. On the contrary, it is the pavement and the bus station on the ground level that — seen from below — seem raised, isolated, noisy, and dedicated exclusively to traffic. The lowering does not bring to mind a ditch, but a green haven, especially considering that it offers both a place and a reason to stop there.



Ill. 6. The entrance of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków, 1990–1994, Arata Isozaki with Krzysztof Ingarden and JET Atelier. Photo by P. Winskowski

We see more complexity in the sequence of frames, forms, architectural details, and the accompanying time sequence that gradually prepare visitors approaching the entrance to the Kraków's Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology (1990–1994), designed by Arata Isozaki in collaboration with Krzysztof Ingarden and JET Atelier (Winskowski, 2004a: 34–37). Located amidst the surrounding courtyards, outbuildings, and additions visible from the busy two-lane Konopnicka Street, the entrance to the museum appears among small, similarly stacked forms. Following a low wall we reach another similar wall and the entryway leading between the two; at this point, we have to either take a turn by the tree and continue straight forward by the wide staircase, or take a turn later and follow the extended ramp dedicated not only for the disabled, but also for those who want to find some tranquility and lose themselves in the single activity of walking towards the entrance to the museum while finding their own rhythm and hearing their own breathing. When following the ramp, the line of sight is gradually limited on

both sides by massive, filled-in railing, while it offers a wider view upwards (on the museum itself) and downwards (on a patio at the lower level with a pool paved with stones, a wire sculptural installation by Aiko Miyawaki, and another ramp leading to that level). The final destination and the formal culmination — *i.e.* the entrance to the museum itself — turns out to be a mere opening in the ground-level wall, low, devoid of monumental quality, and topped with a soft wave of the roof and another one of the skylight. Still, it holds its ground against other urban attractions assaulting the senses that the visitor lost from sight a while back and have already forgotten. The oriental strategy of leading up to and gradually revealing the destination works equally well for Westerners (Chang, 2001: 205–215; Sasaki, 2001: 216–233; Slawson, 2001: 234–246).



Ill. 7. A meadow leading to the Kold College — agricultural and gardening school in Odense. Photo by P. Winskowski

The grass field in front of the agricultural and gardening school (Kold College) in Odense in Denmark, designed as a surface undulating like a regular sinusoid, organises the vast area separating the school from the busy Odensevej Street. At the same time, it is a blatantly artificial demonstration of rural character and a mischievous allusion to the open spaces of rural Denmark — an allusion that is geometrical, with a meticulously maintained gravel path that emphasizes further this geometry, and with an equally meticulously regular heather moor. The balance between the natural elements and their artificial,

abstract, geometrical shape is continued in the architecture of the buildings. Some of them are parts of an old farm, while others are a result of the extension realised in the 1990s. The visual contrast between the old and the new does not illustrate a gradual modernisation of the rural landscape nor does it serve to demonstrate the progress leading from past agricultural techniques to more advanced modern technology; however, it does create a tension characteristic of what has already been said about the city and the suburb.



Ill. 8. Expansion of the Kold College — agricultural and gardening school in Odense in the 1990s. Photo by P. Winskowski

On one hand, we have buildings made of brick, which is a traditional Danish material; on the other hand, there are structures that do not even resemble buildings, with slanting walls, covered with stripes of metal sheets in the colour of faded turquoise. The details of the latter — strong lines of the edges, with dynamism added by juxtaposition of parallel stripes and slanting edges of the structures, corners shaved to make place for extravagant windows, and the reflections in the surrounding pools — are all powerful examples of purely urban and even metropolitan architecture. The character of these surfaces — smooth, reflective, even glamorous — ‘does not match’ rough brick. However, this tension is balanced thanks to the similar scale of both types of architecture and the character of the whole that brings to mind a (good!) cubist sculpture. The mono-pitch roofs of the inclined structures, created by a single slope, and the proximity of vertical brick walls also covered with pitched — but this

time tiled — roofs create a certain compositional rule thanks to the significant number of slopes and their mutual proportions. The edges of walls, the ridges of roofs, the triangles of gable walls similar in their length and the way in which they delimit the structures in space: all this creates a whole that is a lot more coherent than it may seem at first glance.

The suburban character is achieved by the tension existing between metallic, nouveau riche glitz and traditional brick, if one were to consider the conventional distinction between traditional and modern attributes. Still, this traditional distinction has been overcome by the functionality of the new buildings (classrooms, gymnasiums, cafeterias) as necessary elements of the school and as colour accents (complemented by the colours of trees, shrubs, and lawn), thus allowing to discover the harmonious whole created by the combination of materials, surfaces and colours — some unabashedly artificial, some slightly transformed, and others simply natural.

In this case, the suburban penchant toward urban architecture does not consist in ‘tuning’ metal parts in order to achieve an imperfect version of metropolitan extravagance; instead, structures and materials typical of advanced technology were applied in a subdued, sensible and solid manner in the larger structures of the newer parts of the school, while other utility buildings were kept ‘in an honest manner’ in a cheaper and more conventional form with more resemblance to the older farm buildings.



Ill. 9. Single-family houses near the Kold College — agricultural and gardening school in Odense. Photo by P. Winskowski

Extravagance is thus drowned in conventionality, while the authors create many transitional states between the two. Such transitions are found in many surprising places, both those artistically and visually stimulating as well as those whose role is mainly functional, *e.g.* the cafeteria's terrace that occupies part of the lawn with paving blocks overgrown by wide stripes of grass. However, the nearby pavement does not allow overgrowing grass. The distinction between the pavement, the terrace and the lawn corresponds to the distinction between the busiest, moderately busy, and least crowded areas and is reflected in the durability of their surface. Similarly, the proximity of single-family houses with pitched roofs and brick walls provides the school with additional landscape context.

The Mannerheimintie Street in Helsinki leads north, from the city centre located on a peninsula jutting out into the Gulf of Finland towards the forests inland. It connects the city with the rest of the country, and the city centre with the suburbs. The neighbouring green area (Hesperian park) situated along the shore allows one to observe, from the city centre, a combination of forest and water *i.e.* typical elements of Finnish countryside landscape. Inland is also the only possible direction of development of the city — it is surrounded by sea in every other direction — the important aspects being the preservation of the forest-park and the orientation towards the north (Finnish *pohjola*), a concept that has a mythical status in the Finnish culture. Since the nineteenth century many buildings of importance for Finnish national identity were erected along the street in question and in the area surrounding the park. They were built outside of the rigorous, orthogonal, classicist city centre (with its square-shaped Senate square) that was designed by a German architect Carl Ludwig Engel and commissioned by the Russians. Obviously, the city developed in the areas that offered available space, but the symbolic rank of buildings constructed outside the strict city centre became evident over time. Starting with densely packed urban quarters in the south and moving north, we see an increasing tendency to avoid frontage or street facing development that gives way to relaxed layouts increasingly surrounded by greenery. It is noteworthy that these are not at all buildings performing suburban functions. Indeed, we see this tendency in the architectural design and location of the Theatre of Sweden, department stores such as Stockmann, Sokos, and Forum, the Main Post Office, the Glass Palace (*Lasipalasti*) with a cinema, a restaurant, shops, and a bus station, the nearby railway station in the south, as well as buildings essential for national existence in the middle part of the street: the Parliament, the National Museum, the philharmonics and congress hall Finlandia-talo (1971–1975) designed by Alvar Aalto and situated practically in the Hesperian park, and finally the new Opera House and the Olympic Stadium — in the north.



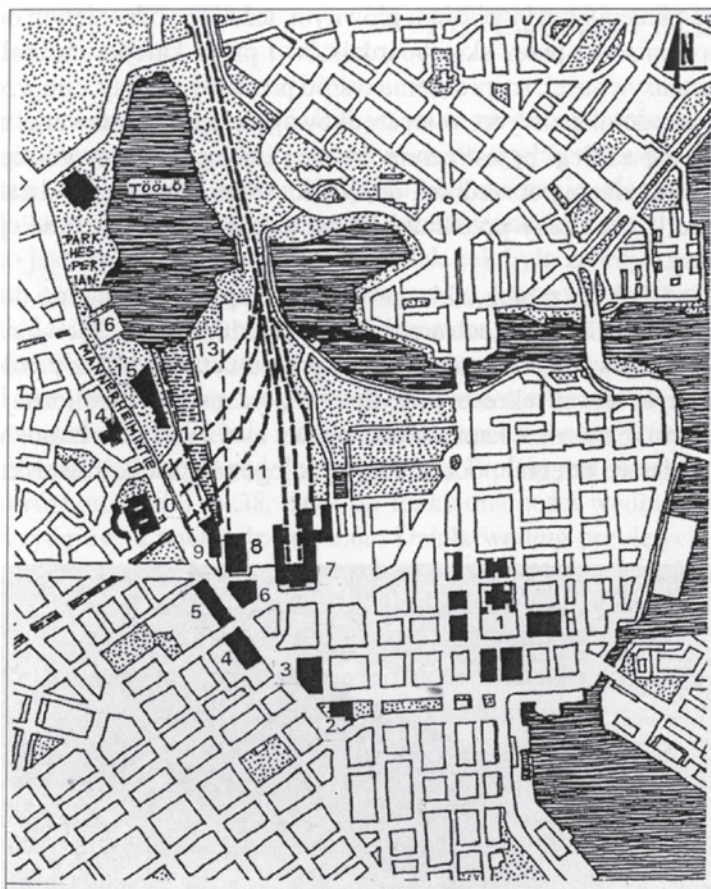


Fig. 1. Layout of the centre of Helsinki, state in 1998, by P. Winskowski

1. The Senate Square and classicist city centre; 2. The Swedish Theatre; 3. Stockman department store; 4. Forum department store; 5. The Glass Palace; 6. Sokos department store; 7. Railway station; 8. The Main Post Office; 9. Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art; 10. The Parliament of Finland; 11. Railroad sidings; 12. Outline of the canal designed by S. Holl (1993–1998, not executed); 13. Outline of terraces designed by A. Aalto (1961, not executed); 14. National Museum; 15. Philharmonic and congress hall Finlandia-talo; 16. Other cultural buildings, designed by A. Aalto (not executed); 17. The new Opera House

The contemporary edifice in this area — the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art (1993–1998) designed by Steven Holl (Winskowski, 2004b: 30–41; Winskowski, 2005: 268–273) — continues this principle with the aim to enrich the Mannerheimintie Street with another important public building and to establish its position as ‘the salon of the city’ in opposition to the Senate Square.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Such an opposition between the old centre (*i.e.* the square) and the new centre (*i.e.* the street), with a tendency to emphasize the street’s role at the expense of the square, was indicated as one of the goals of the Museum of Contemporary Art architectural project competition by

The freestanding structure of Kiasma — with a wide lawn in the foreground (used by tourists), a pond, and a paved square in front of the main entrance, also slightly receded from the street (shared in the spirit of compromise by skateboarders and the museum's cafeteria) — takes the principle of extensiveness and dispersion amid nature applied in the previous buildings in the northern stretch of the street and puts it into practice in the street's central and more densely developed section. The building uses various spatial means in order to achieve a simultaneously suburban and central character; therefore, it makes use of previous experiences and using elements of architecture, it drives these suburban qualities southwards into the more densely developed city quarters.

It could be said that such means introduce nature directly into the city centre; however, this is done through the qualities of suburban architecture. While qualities such as slow pace and extensiveness are primordial and natural, through culture they are perceived as essential not for the recreational but rather symbolic role of the street named after Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim: a Marshal, a Regent, and a liberator of Finland whose role in the Finnish history is comparable to that of Józef Piłsudski in Poland.



Ill. 10. In front of the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, 1993–1998, Steven Holl. Photo by P. Winskowski

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Tuulikki Terho, a representative of the Ministry of Education who participated in formulating the goals in competition (Terho, 1988: 14–15).

## POTENTIAL OF THE SUBURB

Is the suburb condemned to being forever incomplete, imperfect, flawed, fragmentary, unable to fulfil its aspirations, and fixated on something outside itself, namely the city centre? Not necessarily, but it is thanks to these socio-cultural traits that it gains certain spatial qualities that are absent elsewhere, in places that do not suffer from insufficient funding and where projects get completed without deviating from the original design. These circumstances present in the suburbs often irritate architects/designers, who perceive them as construction company's or investor's fault and which they count among their professional failures; however, these also have a positive side, despite sometimes ruining in part the artistic concept or the artistic quality of space. In fact, the latter does not always depend directly and entirely on the former or whether the project was completed in line with the original design. The design is always a simplification when compared to the diversity of life: its aim lies in functionality, but it is based on certain preconceived criteria, therefore rejecting others. It functions according to the adopted rational categories and it optimises the needs based on the existing conditions and financial means. Therefore, a completed project becomes — in a way — a fragment of the city centre, even when the building is actually located in the suburb.

The true suburb is a place where different people spend money to achieve different and not always mutually consistent goals. Therefore, the approach to spatial development based exclusively on financial and efficiency criteria (even with low intensity thereof) does not produce a thus understood suburb.

Its incompleteness, imperfection, slower pace, and focus on an unattained and unattainable ideal (even despite the architect's will, who presents his or her proposition as an ideal of a kind) make one see in the suburb a theoretically extremely promising area. Indeed, the promise lies in this aspect of failure, incompleteness, and fragmentation — long lasting and relatively permanent — not treated as state of permanent fault, missed deadline, delay in schedule, or any other financial, technical, or organisational imperfection. Therefore, when one designs architecture for the suburb while wanting it to retain its suburban quality, or creates a suburban enclave in the city centre, or defends the suburb against acceleration and intensification of strictly urban qualities, while at the same time increasing its technical standard, it is worth to ensure that their own projects are characterised by similar incompleteness, openness to continuation, 'imperfection' of form, that they require a slower pace of life, *e.g.* by designing longer, time consuming, walking access (to some nice place, at the end).<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this does not refer to an extension that pedestrians in a hurry would find irritating, but one

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<sup>3</sup> Traits already promoted by Christopher Alexander (Alexander *et al.*, 2008; Lenartowicz, 1984: 373–381).

that ‘sets a good example’, *e.g.* grandparents on a walk with their grandchildren, without smothering them or making them feel ‘out of place’ with their slowness amidst the business of others, but ensuring simultaneous contact and distance between the two types of users, for them to see and be seen as slow as compared to those who are only dozens of metres away — farther, lower, or higher — but are in or aspire to the city centre, living its intensity and rapid pace. Then the suburban character of this fragment of space — with its slow pace, sense of calm, and extensive development — will be evident to everyone.

Many traits of the suburban architecture are conservative; others, such as its impermanence and improvisation, are experimental and characterised by an almost guerrilla-like character. However, present-day intellectually advanced postmodern thinking achieves at times an ability to take contradictory spatial, visual, artistic, and functional characteristics and, through theoretical analysis, make them into a complex, ‘difficult whole’ (Venturi 1977: 88–104; Welsch, 1998: 441–454).<sup>4</sup> The challenge is even greater in the case of spaces that are, in some ways — light, mobile, changing and dispersed, and in other ways — heavy, immobile and consolidated, or where the functions that once used to be fulfilled by heaviness, immobility and consolidation are now fulfilled through actual lightness, mobility and dispersion. Here, the combination itself is probably not so much harmonious but rather it contains a certain internal tension, imbalance, the longing of one opposite towards another. Anyway, this combination does take place and — in line with the direction of many diagnoses of contemporaneity — instead of creating abstract constructs we must register the facts and try to conceptualise them (Winskowski, 2004c: 137–167).

Modern qualities — such as rationality, efficiency, and organisation — do have real value considering that modernity have marked our existence for more than one hundred years; in fact, we benefit from its achievements in many areas without even realising it. It is possible to create designs that go against this rationality by complicating it or emphasizing certain aspects, but not as far as to eliminate its functionality. In turn, functionality itself is also based on certain changing standards, but not so extreme as to prevent people from using buildings (although *e.g.* the issue of accessibility for the disabled was not raised in Poland until less than two decades ago).

These considerations on the relation between the suburb and the city centre are based on an assumption that it is possible to situate these opposites along

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<sup>4</sup> Within Polish authors: Angelika Lasiewicz-Sych writes about attempts to formulate a ‘new whole’ on the level of the theory of architecture at the beginning of the present century (Lasiewicz-Sych, 2001: 180–191); Barbara Stec notes the state of ‘weariness of deconstruction’ or fragmentation, dispersion, especially in its conflictive form in architecture (Stec, 2000: 14–18). Hence the resulting ‘new whole’ in (even only partly) completed project sets this proposition apart from the idea of incompleteness inscribed in Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist concepts.

one axis and bring them closer or even switch their places, that they are not incomparable. This is a question that, therefore, should not be considered in an all-or-nothing way: like the futurists or constructivists who once ruled only in favour of the centre, the city, the artificial and the civilised, or on the contrary — like Jean-Jacques Rousseau once and some radical environmentalist movements nowadays — only in favour of the long-gone ‘untouched nature’. The suburb is not a ‘bosom of nature’ but a hybrid: the hybrid of what has been left of nature and the more natural, more relaxed, and less intensive way of life (resulting by the way not so much from the suburbanites’ self-restraint but from having fewer opportunities), and of what has not yet matured into present-day artificial, intensive, excessively fast-paced, and metropolitan central character. Postmodern culture teaches us to accept this hybrid as it is, see its creative elements and bring them out. The answer as to how to do this will depend in each case on the architect’s talent and creativity, as well as on his or her ability to persuade the investors. But in order to have something to argue for, first one ought to study and gather facts, phenomena, spatial relations, people’s behaviours in actual space *etc.* The suburb is beyond doubt a more interesting field than the city centre for this type of research.

Comparing the suburb and the city centre is like comparing a truant and a top student. Despite the intentions of the teachers, well meaning but lacking sensitivity, such comparisons not only confront the truant with the perfection impersonated by the top student, but may also inadvertently expose certain qualities of a truant in the top student. Therein lies an opportunity for both of them.

*Translated by Joanna BACZMAGA*

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