

**SOCIAL CRITICISM OF THE POWERS OF TASTE IN A GLOBAL AND LOCAL
PERSPECTIVE: AN ESSAY ON URBAN AESTHETICS AND CLASS SETUP**

*The dual meaning of the word “taste,”
which usually serves to justify the illusion of spontaneous generation,
which this cultivated disposition tends to produce,
by presenting itself in the guise of an innate disposition,
must serve, for once, to remind us that taste in the sense of
the “faculty of immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values”
is inseparable from taste in the sense of the capacity to discern the flavours of foods
which implies a preference for some of them.
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1996, 99)*

In 1955, president of Brazil Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira signed a founding act which gave legal authorisation to an earlier decision to build a new capital amidst the jungle on a plateau one thousand kilometres away from the coast of the Atlantic. The construction was motivated not only by security reasons. The new capital was supposed to be a city of new people, a huge investment showcasing the political and economic ambitions of the ever more dynamically developing country. With the ideological appeal matching that of Mao Zedong’s propaganda, the “fifty years [of prosperity] in five” slogan, which heralded a civilization jump, thankfully did not have as disastrous ramifications as the “Great Leap Forward” or “Cultural Revolution” did. Nonetheless, it did tie in with an initially bloody socio-economic conflict that, starting in the 19th century, saw the advocates of modernisation through scientific and technical transformation (and, subsequently, industrialisation) clash with the population deeply attached to the vision of the world fostered within their traditional, religiously informed culture (cf. Savcenko, 2000, 78). The new capital was supposed to symbolise changes. Two Brazilian artists were selected to develop the urban and architectonic design of Brasília. Lucio Costa was entrusted with the city’s spatial planning, and Oscar Niemeyer, a fervent communist and member of the Partido Comunista Brasileiro, was made responsible for public buildings and residential areas. The two were exhorted to follow the latest trends and apply state-of-the-art solutions to be found in urban planning and architecture of the 1960s. Costa and Niemeyer opted for the aesthetic of futurist modernism. Even though in 1956 the building materials needed to commence the construction could still only be shipped to the site by air, on 21 April, 1960, Brasília was presented to the citizens (and the world) as the federal capital of Brazil. This is how the most expansive architectural project in the history of modernism came into being. With all its broad avenues, green areas, artificial

water bodies, functional zoning, advanced building technologies and innovative materials, the city soon came to be referred to as *ilha da fantasia* — a fantasy island. It seemed that a utopia had actually been achieved against all natural and economic odds. However, a question lingered on whether the aesthetic of futurist modernism (with the grand scale of the overall design and particular solutions alike) indeed matched human needs. And if so, how was that human defined and perceived? (cf. Berman, 2006, “Introduction”; Holston, 1989)? The flag of the Federative Republic of Brazil features an inscription that reads “Ordem e Progresso”, i.e. “Order and Progress,” inspired by the motto Auguste Comte coined for positivism: „Love as principle, order as basis, progress as end.” Strikingly, “love” has been left out from Brazil’s national symbol. Did communist Oscar Niemeyer take heed of this “principle” — the conflict-precluding foundation of social life — when designing architecture for the new capital? And whose needs did great modernist architects have in mind? What was that “progress” supposed to be?

Social sensitivity in and of architecture has never been a straightforward thing. Ever since its beginnings, architecture has undoubtedly been intertwined with the political production of reality. Still, it seems to make more sense to associate its engagement with the power embodied in a patron rather than to attribute its practitioners with some exceptional responsiveness to a diversity of ways and conditions of living. In the urban landscape, for all its complexity and variety of forms, what stood out and caught the eye most readily were grand, often monumental edifices commissioned by monarchs. The exigencies of habitation and daily living took on some relevance mainly when palaces or patricians’ villas were erected. Among all arts, architecture is the most common one, but is it actually egalitarian? To deny its availability and aesthetic openness would be a challenge. But who/what is it that its aesthetics and functional solutions serve in fact? What bearing do they have on the thinking about the communal nature of space, about collectivity and about differences or barriers?

Of course, I know that to regard any narrative on urban planning and building development as non-ideological is to entertain illusions. Following Krzysztof Nawratek, I could aver that “relations between political ideologies and architecture demand exposing their tacit assumptions and hierarchies of values, which could be interrogated through such reading. It is imperative to realise that interpretations are also context-dependent, and the conclusions I offer may be true, but they are certainly not *the only true ones*” (Nawratek, 2005, 22). I will try to keep that exhortation in mind particularly in the second section of this paper, in which I juxtapose the current trends in building development with avant-garde architecture of the 1930s, which sought to respond to housing and social problems Europe’s cities faced at that time.

The relations between aesthetic and functional improvements on the one hand and social stratification on the other have stirred many discussions and still prove an emotionally vested issue. The site where aesthetic, functionality and class differentiation produce most frictions is obviously provided by urban space. They are “organised” by political and economic power. How relevant these issues are in Poland can be seen, for example, in on-going disputes on the visual character of cities (re-ignited recently by Filip Springer’s features with their copious photographic documentation) as well as in urban resistance strategies (e.g. splashing paint onto a Polish fashion designer’s boutique housed in one of Warsaw’s old tenement houses). Mediated by various media, the polemics on interconnectedness of tastes with political and economic changes or on specific practices and preferences of social classes address, among others, the concept of aesthetic conditioning proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. In his *Distinction*, Bourdieu asserts that the class-inflected, dominant canon of “beauty” serves to legitimise the power wielded and coveted by the privileged social strata. Aesthetic is an element of the game played in the “field” (a segment of social reality) among members of groups that exert political and economic control who, pursuing similar goals, compete with each other for positions. Still, the title distinction refers to demonstrating the differences between the dominant and the dominated classes, which involves, first of all, deprecating the practical or utilitarian (functional) facets of objects and actions coupled with highlighting their aesthetic or pleasure-related aspects. On that model, accumulation of cultural capital consists in collecting “useless” artworks — objects of cultural value — that is, in aestheticising life-style, the ultimate end of which is a symbolic validation of power.

Drawing on the French sociologist, we could assume that members of the upper classes develop their competences in recognising forms of artistic (therein architectonic) expression due to “sensitivity” to the aesthetic dimension of reality they acquire in socialisation. This would be manifest, particularly, in their capacity to appreciate art in its pure form, with the iconic sphere becoming an element of the symbolic supremacy of the upper classes.

Though frequently ingenious, Bourdieu’s research and theses have an affinity with other post-Marxian frameworks, among which particularly interesting are, without doubt, philosophical and social ideas disseminated in the early decades of the 20th century by politician, thinker and culture critic Antonio Gramsci. Still, the first name to mention in any discussion on preferences, inclinations and tastes of social classes is, certainly, Marx himself.

In his outline of anthropogenesis, the author of *The German Ideology, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and *The Capital* underscores that human potential rests on the functions fulfilled by the senses. Through sensations and sense-transmitted meanings and their attendant values, various kinds of content are produced within social consciousness. Owing to the senses, man devel-

ops and creates in an abundance of cultural forms — and, thus, the ear becomes sensitive to sounds and the eye to beauty. Emphatically, this is a social process, which involves dispositions, experiencing and, it seems, acquiring particular competences of aesthetic perception. Therefore, although such sensations are founded upon the senses, which are common to the entire human species, they differ depending on social differences. According to Marx, it takes complete emancipation, democratisation of life, and political and economic equality for the human eye to become truly human and for the object produced by one man to be destined for another man (cf. Kłoskowska, 1969).

We are still left with the question whether — if human cultural potential, including aesthetic experience, develops through appropriate formation of sensory sensitivity, and given the existing class divisions — members of some social groups are not better trained than members of other groups for reception of works produced by fine arts (therein architecture)? Can they have competence enough to decide what is visually “valuable” and “proper”? It is difficult to decide whether this question can be ultimately answered by recourse to Marx. Yet, if it was answered in the affirmative, would that bode well for the “people”? Gramsci, who coined the notion of cultural hegemony, contends that because of differences in worldviews and aesthetics, artists (painters, architects, designers) do not truly experience the “feelings of the people,” even if they declare to share them. Divergent educations, experiences and culture-forming practices thwart finding a common language or vocabulary, which would enable various groups to engage in dialogue on production of things, objects, residential spaces or urban spaces. However, free and matter-of-fact communication is impeded not only by “aesthetic distinctions.”

That language, decisions and actions belong to agents whose reception of aesthetic values has been similarly formed is only one barrier. Another one lies in that the residents’ basic needs as to living conditions and life-styles are not taken into account when designing housing facilities, public buildings and infrastructure. The problem is related to a clear deficit in thinking on the social aspects of human cohabitation. Created by municipal administration, architects and urban planners, spaces and “representative” buildings are supposed to define the comprehensive images of cities. The prevalent political and economic model does not make room for varied visions of city-ness. All manifestations of life alternative to big-city standards and global aesthetic (including grass-root social initiatives of residents) are appropriated in dominant political games and business ploys. Architects and urban planners contribute to power-legitimising practices by producing edifices/developments which are not so much practical/functional as spectacular (in terms of image creation). At the same time, they are increasingly guided by ever steeper economic demands. Their responsibilities are gradually reduced to supplying investors with ornaments or em-

bellishments. Markus Miessen aptly observes that “while clients often demand more original design alongside increasing efficiency, improved detailing, and profit gains, the architect is left to juggle with outdated regulations, corrupt builders, and diminutive remuneration. Today’s architect is facing the paradox of the need for greater security assurance accompanied by the desire for more creativity and innovation. This evolution is without doubt one of the main reasons why the so-called ‘developer’ has become the ‘new architect.’ Many contemporary architects have succumbed to a position in which they are limited to just delivering form — a perilous progress, since most developers can do it either cheaper or faster, and simply outsource architects to produce form” (Miessen, 2010, 28-29). This sounds like an apt description of the current condition of architecture. What was it like previously?

In the age of modernism in architecture and urban planning, designers certainly shared similar aesthetic views. However, the aesthetic they proposed entailed maximum simplicity, clarity of lines and (strictly functional) economy of forms. It was intended for the broad public, as egalitarian as possible and, in this sense, universal. Even if model modernist buildings took on a unique, highly original form and, hence, were considered “luxurious,” this assessment was founded on their simplicity, modernity and pragmatism instead of on splendour. Admittedly, exactly because they were singular and exceptional, flats in such buildings were eagerly sought by artists and members of the so-called liberal professions rather than by workers. Nonetheless, I would posit that this very revolutionary “asceticism”, sterility and functionality gave architecture a highly anti-bourgeois tint. In designing housing complexes, architects no longer focused on the visual and semiotic representation of the owners or on their economic balance, attending instead to the real needs of future dwellers. They considered both specific solutions improving the living conditions and the life-styles of residents (which does not mean that their choices were always apt). They coped with what they saw as a significant deficit of discussion on social or communal dimensions of human cohabitation.

It may well be that modernism, at least at its onset, defied the popular dualism of the aesthetic and the pragmatic (the functional).

This is to some extent exemplified in WUWA — an experimental model residential development erected in 1929 in Wrocław (Breslau back then). WUWA is an abbreviation standing for Wohnungs- und Werkräumausstellung (Workplace and House Exhibition), and the development is one of several projects of this kind built across Europe, with its likes to be found in Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Prague, Brno, Vienna, Zurich and Basel. WUWA is located in the area delineated by today’s Zygmunt Wróblewski Street, Tramwajowa Street, Edward Dembowski Street, Zielony Dąb Street and Mikołaj Kopernik Street. It neighbours with the Szczytnicki Park, with the Cen-

ennial/People's Hall situated nearby. The exhibition's original aim was to present new types of small and mid-sized flats and single-family detached homes which, built with the latest technologies, were supposed to respond to the housing and social problems the city was confronting at the time. One of the problems was a rapid increase in Wrocław's population. In the aftermath of World War One, the city was one of Germany's most overpopulated urban centres, and hence the idea was to provide widely available class-less, optimised, useful and comfortable spaces in the "garden city."

Assembled in Werkbund from 1907 on, the progressive architects and designers, who collaborated with industry to develop modernist architecture, found it relevant to be guided not only by the demands of rationalisation and economy but also by the ideas of communality and cooperatives. The participants in the Wrocław exhibition were inspired by the Weißenhof estate in Stuttgart (1927), which re-invented residential architecture. Of course, the influence of such revolutionary concepts of social architecture as Vienna's Karl-Marx-Hof — a 1,100-metre-long modernist municipal tenement complex with 1,382 flats — is not to be discounted, either. Constructed in 1927-1930 by Karl Ehn, Otto Wagner's student, it was part of a project of intense housing development launched in what came to be referred to the Red Vienna period (socialist government of 1920-1934). Karl-Marx-Hof was meant as a self-sufficient whole with its own kindergarten, library, laundries, shops and green areas.

WUWA, however, exemplifies also another great urban development idea. Namely, based on the concepts proposed by Ebenezer Howard in the 19th century, it promotes human engagement with the natural environment. In the spirit of the latest aesthetic trends spreading across the world, i.e. modernism, the artists from the Arts Academy who organised the Werkbund exhibition were faced with a challenge of embedding the designed houses in the local geographic and cultural realities of Silesia.

It took merely three months to build the whole complex, which accompanied the exhibition housed in the nearby Centennial Hall (People's Hall back then). The visitors could see not only houses but also carefully arranged residential interiors (other exhibits included also building materials, lighting, utensils and electro-technical appliances). Although the buildings differed formally and relied on original designs each, they were all stylistically and aesthetically coherent. This was also true about their immediate surroundings — gardens around particular houses as well as recreational commons. WUWA included two types of buildings: apartment buildings with small, rented lodgings as a model embodiment of communal living and detached and semidetached houses for clients with more individualised needs (depending on the household size, job, etc.). The development had also its own model kindergarten.

WUWA was revolutionary not only in its novel functional arrangement and design (e.g. in some rooms zoning was defined by colours rather than by partitions) but also in its social approach inspired, among others, by American boarding houses and Soviet commune-houses. Buildings included spaces dedicated for common use — pram- and bicycle-storage rooms, play-rooms for children, reading rooms, workshops and rooms for social get-togethers. Extremely novel in assumption and execution, the whole project was informed by the designers' community ideals manifest in striving to improve the quality of life, in enveloping the houses in greenery and in promoting collectivism. Revisiting Gramsci, we could say that the members of the Deutscher Werkbund truly shared (created perhaps) “the feelings of the people,” at least to a degree.

It is illuminating to juxtapose that ideal city neighbouring with Wrocław's Szczytnicki Park and reflecting the worldwide architectural and ideological trends of the 1920s with the real city developing under the neoliberal economy in the first decades of the 21st century.

Today's thinking about architecture and the clash of the “ideal” and reality are revealed in the investment launched by the municipality of Wrocław in collaboration with the Lower Silesian Chamber of Architects and Wrocław's branch of the Association of Polish Architects. With its name explicitly referring to Wohnungs- und Werkraumaussstellung, WUWA2 is to be erected in Nowe Żerniki. A cursory glance at the proclaimed aims of the development suggests that in terms of aesthetic, rationalisation and functionality it is meant to correspond more closely to the 1929 project. The architecture of WUWA2 is supposed to provide an alternative to “assembly-line production” prevalent in housing construction (to the homogenised and quality-wise questionable offer “generated by the market”), meet the needs of “modern city dwellers” and facilitate “building social bonds.” Moreover, it is also expected to be “an architectonic hallmark of the European Capital of Culture in 2016,” as the project's website (<http://nowezerniki.pl/>) announces.

The complex of single- and multi-family houses will be furnished with typically urban features and amenities to enhance “the living comfort.” They include green avenues, “cosy” trade and services outlets, a kindergarten, a school, a community centre, a seniors' centre, tennis courts, playgrounds and a church.

However, whether the very development area indeed exemplifies city-ness is in itself a controversial question. If possibilities of ensuring security, providing recreation and making the construction environment-friendly do not raise particular doubts, integration, child care, education, economy, optimisation of communication, trade and even catering seem to be highly troublesome at this particular location. The area is situated far away from the city centre, and the remoteness is coupled additionally with a lack of any prior investments (it was supposed to serve as

grounds for the EXPO World Exhibition,). The proximity to the beltway and the city stadium does not really compensate for these drawbacks.

Does the new WUWA really respond to residents' needs or does it, perhaps, seek to create residential needs and promote Wrocław at the same time? Does it not, contrary to the intents and slogans reiterated by its founders, inscribe itself in the urban-development trends typical of post-socialist cities, and particularly in the processes referred to as suburbanisation? Leaving aside such issues as wasteland, sparse transport connections to the city centre and a lack of green areas, what is particularly troubling is that WUWA2 is not going to be an exhibition. The prior, by no means ideologically neutral architectural exemplar is being appropriated and its name symbolically seized for the sake of what seems to be a tool from a wide repository of devices employed by the political and economic power. Apart from disseminating a particular image of the city, the municipality relies on a collaboration with selected institutions and businesses opening up vistas of commercialisation and projecting future profits (various types of capital). What emerges thereof is a site of negotiation of the public and the private, instead of the declared cooperative. Communality is defined by the rationalising, functional and aesthetic visions/interest of the groups which exert political and economic control. A question arises whether in such circumstances at least the idea of social mix could even be actualised.

Still, does habitation as experienced now have anything in common with the lived realities of the 1920s in Europe? Globally, the constantly increasing role of developers is linked to the contemporary cult of ownership rights, to the requirement of heavy expenditures, the necessity to cater to the (usually middle-class) clients' tastes, to preferences for privacy, to individualism and to increased housing demands. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that WUWA2 designers associate collectivity largely with markets, parks, kindergartens, playgrounds and tennis courts.

Of course, modernism developed not only in Europe, and it involved more than just attempts to solve housing problems. Louis Henry Sullivan, a member of the Chicago School, who put forward one of the best known definitions of modernism, i.e. "form follows function," earned his reputation mainly by designing public buildings. One of his celebrated constructions was, certainly, the Auditorium Building (completed in 1889), a symbol of Chicago's new economic and cultural prosperity at the turn of the 19th century. Like other representatives of early modernist American architecture, Sullivan worked also on sacred architecture and office buildings. Although the ideas of the Chicago School did not find a direct continuation, the modernist boom, which took place in the USA in the mid-20th century, produced first of all public buildings, with European immigrants as the chief contributors to the trend. Walter Gropius (speaking of German and global modernism, we can not miss the name Bauhaus) and Ludwig Mies van der

Rohe shaped the style of America's post-war architecture and, subordinated to the market demands and empowered by new developments in building technologies, made the construction of public edifices and commercial buildings its major focus and trademark. While clearly showcased in such designs, the modernist influence is hardly visible in the residential architecture of American cities.

In South America, the most recognisable buildings (e.g. Palácio Gustavo Capanema in Rio de Janeiro, designed by Le Corbusier and a group of other architects invited to collaborate) house public administration and commercial institutions. Brasília is a notable exception in this respect, but it must be remembered that the ambitious modernist project consisting mainly of residential zones was part of the government's comprehensive modernisation plan. Currently, Brasília is one of the most dynamically developing cities of the continent. It is difficult to determine, however, in how far it is an effect of Costa and Niemeyer's grand-scale futuristic modernism and to what extent it is an outcome of efforts invested by the administration and capital in charge of the world's fifth biggest economy. What is certain is that nearly a half of the population of the Federative Republic of Brazil still cope with dismal living conditions, with 60-70% of the citizens living in *favelas* — slums built from demolition waste, sheet metal, cardboard and plastic.

Architectural modernism was one of many phenomena unfolding globally in the 20th century. However, across various periods and locations, its aesthetics and functions were shaped by diverse political and economic contexts together with specific practices of power and tastes. Hence it is imperative to read American modernist enterprises of the turn of the 19th century, Breslau's inter-war developments and mid-century projects for Brasília in their own, local contexts. This does not exclude them from the bigger whole of the globally spreading phenomenon, but at the same time their simplicity, economy, originality, modernity and pragmatism can hardly be viewed as producing a genuine breakthrough — a real advance in the social creation and impact of architecture. Availability and aesthetic universality turned out to be limited. They neither improved the living conditions of wider social groups nor fostered the communal nature of space in housing or bigger urban developments.

References:

- Berman, Marshall; 2006, *Wszystko, co stale, rozplywa się w powietrzu. Rzecz o doświadczeniu nowoczesności* [All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity], trans. Marcin Szuster, Kraków: Universitas
- Bourdieu, Pierre; 1996, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

- Holston, James; 1989, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kłoskowska, Antonina; 1969, *Z historii i socjologii kultury*, Warszawa: PWN
- Miessen, Marcus; 2010, *The Nightmare of Participation (Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality)*, New York-Berlin: Sternberg Press
- Urbanik, Jadwiga; Hryncewicz-Lamber; 2014, *Mieszkanie i miejsce pracy. Wroclawska wystawa Werkbundu*, Wrocław: Wroclawska Rewitalizacja
<http://nowezerniki.pl/idea/>
- Nawrotek, Krzysztof; 2005, *Ideologie w przestrzeni*, Kraków: Universitas
- Savcenko, Nicolau; 2000, *Peregrinations, Visions and the City: Canudos to Brasília, the Backlands becomes City and the City becomes Backlands*, in: Schelling, Vivian (ed.), *Through the Kaleidoscope. The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*, London-New York: Verso
- Springer, Filip; 2013, *Wanna z kolumnadą*, Wołowiec: Czarne