IN SEARCH OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM – IDENTIFICATION OF PLACE. 
DESIGN OF A CITY BENCH IN STUDENTS’S PROJECTS (WORKS)

Ewa RACZYŃSKA-MĄKOWSKA a, Romuald FAJTANOWSKI b

a MSc; PhD student at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Technology in Gdańsk
Lecturer in the Department of Design, University of Science and Technology in Bydgoszcz, Poland
E-mail address: ewarm63@gmail.com

b PhD; Designer and Lecturer in the field of Design, University of Science and Technology in Bydgoszcz, Poland
E-mail address: romuald.f@op.pl

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Abstract
Identification of a PLACE through conscious application of given forms correlated with spatial conditions is a demanding task for a designer who needs to take into consideration the context and history of the space they are supposed to function within. The authors of this study have presented four application examples for a city bench as a form interacting with a selected space in Bydgoszcz (350-thousand inhabitants, a town in the north-west Poland, situated at the confluence of two rivers The Vistula, Brda and Bydgoszcz Canal). The research results allow to identify the main models to be used for defining a PLACE through selection of the form.

Keywords: Bench; Bydgoszcz; Context; Design; Form; Place; Space.

1. PLACE – IDENTIFIED SPACE

PLACE – its definition, paradigm of space, does it create itself or is it created? Does it come into being? or does it just exist? Eventually, where should it be looked for and is it needed? The subject of analysis is the issue connected with selection of small spatial forms (in this case benches) and their importance for identification of a PLACE as a specific space.

1.1. Research methodology

The research methodology was based on an analysis of available literature and workshop activities including field tests, comparative analyses, and first of all, empirical tests with the use of students’ projects prepared for a competition. The results of a survey carried out among city bench users benches provided a significant research area. The survey consisted of two parts, in situ and via the Internet with the use of an Internet portal Survivo – questions made available by means of Facebook. Nearly 200 respondents took part in the survey. In both types of surveys the same questions were asked. It should be noted that, most of the respondents were under 30.
Public spaces of Bydgoszcz have been analyzed (Poland). The town boasts of its location on two rivers: the Brda, Vistula and the Bydgoszcz Canal, and this is the water which is supposed to become the city landmark. The process of the river area identification started a few years ago and the experiences gained during the research has provided important empirical material.

1.2. The present state of research

The importance of a PLACE in the city structure has been explored by researchers involved in sociological and anthropological sciences as well as architects and space planners.

Marc Auge, in his introduction to anthropology of hypermodernity deals with the notion no-place. His work from 1992 focuses attention to the danger which is posed by life in a rush, among anonymous, meaningless spaces; superficial, “movable” and prosthet-

ical. In opposition to this, a PLACE is always concrete, identifiable and alive [1].

In 1999 American sociologist Ray Oldenburg expressed his concern about contemporary life style. In his work “The Great Good Place” he uses the notion “a third place”. The author analyzes the lives of average citizens in his country. He has come to the conclusion that the need to socialize with other people is slowly disappearing. However, homes and offices are enclaves of life where people stay and move without feeling the need to stay longer in “a third place” to socialize with other people with no special reason, for pleasure, relax, just to talk and just to look around [11]. In fact, the author investigated the American society as compared to the European lifestyle – not at home in front of the TV sets but in public spaces, queues, coffee shops, outdoor performances, etc. The two common places where people spend their time are home and work. According to
Oldenburg’s *third place* is an area where people can just come and go whenever they wish; a neutral, undemanding and simple place where they do not need “to bear any costs”. Oldenburg is of the view that the basic social activity is a conversation. Location of the third place should be available to people, it needs to provide the possibility of having a rest and doing routine activities. Over time, Oldenburg’s assumptions, despite some provenience, have been modified. The third place has been transferred to shopping malls, libraries, banks and cyberspace has attracted the third place users to its virtual world. The third place is becoming no place – it undergoes transformation at an alarmingly fast pace, which affects the public space, particularly the places that are far from being attractive. Designers of public spaces should be aware of these changes.

For the first time in history, more than half of the world population are living in towns. In Europe the rate has already exceeded 75%, whereas in 1980 it was 29% [9]. In the era of globalization and growing mobility, attention is more and more frequently being focused on the importance of active attachment to given places. The New Athens Card indicates the target vision of the city with the focus on people, their contribution to creation of the city, its public space, cultural integrity of the city structure, identity referred to *genius loci* and sustainable development. [8]. People who do not belong to any community are without a place and one of the major factors which determine the relationship between a man and a place is contact with the people who live in that place. [17]. This contact is possible through proper interpretation of Oldenburg’s “third place”.

The value of community, created by residents as well as visitors, is the key factor determining creation and development of a friendly space. Yi-Fu Tuan who studies relations between the concepts of space and place, highlights the importance of the latter, its subjectivity in the context of universality of the first [15]. It can be accepted that “identification” of a neutral space by means of its being attached to the man makes it a place, that is, a specific, defined space. The place then becomes known and, hence safe. In this light a space is open, strange, anonymous, immeasurable and disturbing. Yi-Fu Tuan highlights the importance of public places and activities of inhabitants that turn spaces into places.

Places can be used to keep mental balance and too rapid change in the environment can cause anxiety. The situation is similar if these places are centers of individually perceived values and meanings [10].

Pred says that places are important for the process of society creation and legitimization of social rules. „Sensual landscape of a city “towns and emotional – psychological impressions of these invisible, undefinable, soft entities” [13]. It is worth trying to find these values as they attach people to a PLACE; it is important that the designers take them into consideration – also designers of urban furniture – which sometimes make up the frontline of the man’s physical contact with a PLACE, determining whether they will stay or walk away.

When studying the social and individual space and the way it is perceived by people, Edward Hall has introduced the concept of “proxemics” [5]. He defined, among others, “social distances”, that is, conventional distances for different communication forms which become a precious indicator, especially for organization of the public space. In order to enhance the relationships – benches may be placed in a special way, that is, in a corner, which would make it possible for their users to observe other people or something interesting – the space can also be arranged in an interesting way. Awareness of the relationship between apparently unimportant details provides the possibility to create a place which, due to reasons unclear for the user, becomes a friendly one.

William H. Whyte [16] focuses attention on the fact that these are spaces of smaller, poorer town districts that exhibit more pro-social character than many other “beautiful” structured and organized spaces. He explores bottom-up development of the town space (Do it Yourself DIY). He became a precursor of prototyping, that is, using cheap, experimental solutions to check how a given place functions, e.g. with the use of selected elements of small architecture. White’s research results indicate benefits from using cheaper materials and tolerance for errors, as compared to acceptance of implementation of ready designs. Thus, the concept of a place creation is interpreted as a dynamic process, undergoing modification and, as if unlimited, accumulating over time. Think-tank Project for Public Spaces is responsible for creating places [6]. Prototyping in the conditions of Poland is not an uncommon phenomenon, and implementation of individual student’s projects can, in a sense, be considered to be like that.

Analyzing the conditions that a space with characteristics of a PLACE need to fulfill it is necessary to focus attention on the way it is perceived, which has been analyzed by J. Żórawski. The research covers, among others, visuality, recognition of an image, as a
system of points and looking at things according to the set rules, seeing and not seeing [18]. In addition, if we realize the meaning of completely different “components” which significantly complete the perception of a place – such as smell, touch - haptic values, light, sounds[12] and apply them in turning a space into a place – undeniable effects can be achieved.

Małgorzata Dymnicka [2] makes a specific summary of the research by contrasting places treated as sets of socially generated spaces, filled with historical references, human interrelations and sense of identity – with no-places – rapidly growing network spaces, hang out areas, places to be occupied not to be utilized. Places and no-places function close to each other, entering into interactions – it is a sign of the times, and at the same time an indicator of conscious actions, including design.

2. FORMS IN A PLACE – BYDGOSZCZ – CASE STUDY

When the analyzed PLACE is assumed to be included in a public space, it is possible to list its most important features which should also be shared by a PLACE being a specific case of this space [7].

- availability
- providing safety
- having recognizable identity
- providing a variety of behavior
- encouraging inhabitants to be active
- balance of functions
- providing friendly environment
- inclusion in a wider context
- attractiveness of space
- diversified community

Students of Design who are familiar with the above factors and possess the knowledge how to define a place, first of all the social aspect of its perception – undertook the task to design individual forms performing the function of a city bench. Searching for architectural forms to define a place is part of the current trend to create local values for space. In the times of omnipresent globalization which makes the environment look the same, actions aimed at finding identity of a place, among others, through applying specific solutions are absolutely right. This kind of behavior is in contrast to unreflective transfer of elements of different structures into other random spaces with completely different cultural and social values.

“The impact a form has on a given space is still underestimated by designers of urban furniture and interference with a given context involves a completely different approach to the design and its role in creation of a PLACE. Here, serial products are replaced by individual solutions assuming that their impact on the surrounding space can contribute to strengthening or triggering the process of PLACE creation, the third place – that is, a place used by choice and affecting the relations with its users” [4].

The study of the Bydgoszcz case can help designers to make decisions concerning development of the urban space with the intention to define this space in reference to PLACE. As many towns – Bydgoszcz has to cope with issues connected with identification of the character of particular elements of space, finding their sense of identity, restructuring or leaving them unchanged, anonymous and ambivalent. Places interfuse with no-places which are taking over. This is caused by the lifestyle, speed of life, anonymity, superficiality but also there is a need to stop and think, reflect in a place of one’s own choice and such spaces cement and integrate the town. Bydgoszcz identifies specific spaces thanks to social activities and actions ordering esthetics [14]. Conscious creation of a form to be used in a given PLACE or selection of a proper context to fit with the designed form – each case involved designing a form which would create a new quality of space or would adequately complete it, marking the beginning of a new place or “adjusting” the one which has already existed. 47 new forms were created as part of the project. Each of them interpreted the design task in a different way.

The entire R&D project made with students’ cooperation was led by Romuald Fajtanowski PHD. Analysis of spatial context was led by Ewa Raczyńska-Mąkowska M.A.

Four designs which have already been implemented or are under implementation have been discussed for the purpose of illustration of the research conclusions.
2.1. Four models

“Sluice bench” (aut. A. Bryk), its form refers to the Bydgoszcz Canal old infrastructure representing the relict of technology of old times in a creative manner. The designed bench was dedicated to a concrete space having become a form co-creating a PLACE, marking the space with its individuality. On the other hand, it turned out that the proposed bench can find its PLACE also in a different location and become a form redefining this space. In both cases the design proved to be useful and became an element willingly chosen by users and enabling interactions, which provided the basis for the expected quality of PLACE. In both cases the form is connected with the context of the embankment.

A survey that was carried out among the bench users confirmed their acceptance. Respondents highlighted attractiveness of the form, its dynamics, possibility of its being used in a diversified manner to encourage interaction – in this case, entertainment. At the same time location of the form in a consciously selected spatial context made the bench a participant of its users' more intensive activeness and purposeful selection of this specific PLACE. In both cases the form is connected with the context of the embankment.

The next form chosen to be discussed – project “Ring” by A. Cichosz treats interaction between users in a very different way, placing them across from each other and providing more direct form of contact than a traditional bench. This project in turn gives priority to finding an interesting form. Intriguing shape and the way users are seated in it is supposed to encourage them to use it, treat it as a curiosity, which needs to be seen, so the PLACE of its location needs to be found. Such an attitude to the form provides the possibility to choose location which we want to highlight, focus attention on its attractiveness, make it a new PLACE. What happened in the case of his project if it was the reverse to the previously discussed one. It was the bench that was provided with a location, appropriate context, and at the same time a PLACE which makes it possible for users to observe both interesting objects and people around. Two Ring benches were placed in the surroundings of the Bydgoszcz Opera Nova (similar roundness of shapes), in the neighborhood of the embankment with a view of the most interesting objects of the neighboring amphitheater. Ring benches have become a natural complement of a PLACE, one of the users’ favorite, defined and accepted places.

Forms whose task was to accent attractiveness of a PLACE and become inseparable parts of the environment so as not to destroy the already structured space. At the same time they are independent objects which capture attention regardless of their location.

These are benches where one can look into the eyes and into the distance, talk, stay and come back, thus an ideal of Ray Oldenburg’s third place.
The third example “Tram Bench” by J. Walczak, skillfully uses the model of an old Bydgoszcz tram as an inspiration for creation of a new form of bench and in this case even something more. It is a very strong, dynamic form whose effect in the space will be powerful, it will even define it – hence, the choice of a location was not an easy task. The author inspired by the design of an old tram performed a specific deconstruction, adjusting the form to modern esthetics. This kind of combination of tradition with a modern style is the biggest advantage of the design, opening wide possibilities of its application. Electric tram was first used in Bydgoszcz in 1896 – it makes Bydgoszcz one of the first towns in Poland to use this type of transport. The designer was inspired by Konstal 5N type from the 50s-60s of XX-century. If we analyze the design in terms of the conditions it should meet as a part of a public space and define it as a PLACE – we come up with a conclusion that this form becomes itself a PLACE. Thus, it is possible to create a PLACE from scratch, or perhaps convenient conditions for its existence in a space, thanks to being accepted by its users. The project was highly rated and appreciated. However, the choice of location was not that easy as in the previous cases. In the beginning the bench was supposed to be just a bench though with a more developed and highly specific form. However, it was used as a stop shelter in a proper spatial context. The analyzed form went through spatial simulation tests, which verified the originally chosen location in a little bit narrow perspective of Gdańsk street. Eventually, the object was introduced into the open space of Plac Teatralny. Combination of its brave shape with a public space of a real city and road infrastructure was found to be more difficult than expected. An interesting, widely approved, long awaited form which could make up an identifiable PLACE – got stuck in the implementation process, however, it is a different interpretation way of a design task important for the research purposes.
“The last case to be presented is a design by E. Grzelczak, whose form is dedicated to the potential customer of the Gotowski company which is involved in construction of bridges. An analysis of location of the most attractive forms and their social acceptance allows to assume that the forms designed for sitting in the proximity of bridges can generate good conditions for creation of another PLACE – chosen by users due to an original form, interesting surroundings – proximity of a river and a bridge. This is another example of space “modeling” in reference to a PLACE, this time with consideration for the context including an already existing and strongly defined form. The relationship between these two forms and the potential they can provide for defining another PLACE is being analyzed with the use of a prototype” [4]. In this case, some questions should be answered such as: will the designed “bench” properly complete the space? or will it dominate the space by marginalizing the object of inspiration? – and how will it affect perception of the location chosen by the users?

3. CONCLUSIONS

Four models to be used for designing a PLACE through selection of a form have been determined on the basis of the carried out research:

1. A form dedicated to an already existing PLACE which completes it, and in consequence is used in an analogical spatial context to create a new PLACE.

2. An individual design, for which a location with potential of a PLACE is chosen on the basis of space analyses.

3. A form, which exhibits features, that let it become a PLACE.

4. A form connected with another object being an integral part of the space – by completing the object it allows to provide good conditions for a new PLACE to be created.

“Designing small forms for a specific context can go far beyond correctness of shape, material and functionality. Specific spatial acupuncture enables conscious search and “stamping” the selected area.

A city which seeks its identity or wants to highlight it needs to build a conscious definition of a PLACE, third place – for people and their free choice. Projects which were created in result of the research allow to define a neutral space, highlight unseen features, and most importantly – make the users who find them attractive feel the individuality and uniqueness of the PLACES” [4].

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REFERENCES


