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MARGINALISATION OF THE INTERPRETATIVE POWER OF CONTEXT

RECONSTRUCTION OF CONTEXT

I was encouraged to look into the meaning of context in contemporary liberal arts for the first time by architects organising a conference on the locating/functioning of industrial architecture in various urban contexts. The architects concluded that industrial architecture design has to be connected with knowledge about the cultural context, that is about the place in which – or for which – the architecture is being created. I therefore asked myself the question: what new things might I, as a culture expert, tell the architects about the concept of cultural context? I assumed that for both architecture and the liberal arts the question about the context remains open and strongly connected to practice. I also realised that when talking about context two paths usually come to mind. The first is the path of language (colloquial

in the first place): we refer to the context especially when it occurs that our statements have been twisted, changed, when our words have been revised and placed next to (in the context of) somebody else's words. We say: "this sentence was taken out of context", that is "this is not what I meant", at the same time questioning the correctness of the message. Starting with colloquial, everyday communication, and ending with scientific statements, the context is recalled invariably to restore the primary meaning of the unfortunate quotation or to solve the communication problem related not only to conveying the message but also to violating the coherence and identity of the subject making the statements. On the other hand, the intertextual games played by artists and experts on their works may be treated as an advanced form of this phenomenon.

We encounter the second common-sense application of the notion of "context" when looking at works regarding contemporary architecture. This phrase is used by both architects and critics, as well as by the users of architecture, in the first place in order to assess the accuracy of a given architectural interference in the existing tissue of the city or cultural landscape. The situation of architecture seems to be more complicated than that of language since – as Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay *The Author as Producer* – its perception is full of inattention, and this makes thorough assessment of the semantic tension that occurs as a result of merging older with newer architecture more difficult or completely impossible. If we can talk about the generation of context here at all, it is related directly to the actual place in space and is based on the acceptance of the

semantic-creative function of the relation of being adjacent – that is on noticing the actual relationship between what is found in a given place and what is new there. It is performed in the first place in order to defend the coherence of the final effect of this confrontation. Advanced research expanding this common-sense perspective[1] places the problem of context in the centre of architectural discourse – that is in the circle of basic questions about the autonomy of creation on the one hand and about opening onto the users, environment and everyday life on the other. The physical context of new architecture in these deliberations is set aside, giving way to reflection on a given culture of living, on its cognitive and axiological texture, accepting and taking on together with the new statement – the architectural object – new interpretative challenges.

Both paths of thought intersect on the grounds of contextual concepts of meaning.[2] In particular they share the conviction that every move in the language communication space or physical space of the city that violates a certain "text" found there becomes the source of growth of meaning, and as a consequence, the beginning of a new text. Generation of new meanings takes place by negotiation of identities of speaking subjects and/or living in a given space, convinced of the necessity to achieve a consensus in this particular matter. Richard Serra learned that

[1] This is illustrated, for example, by the collection of texts *Nowa architektura w kontekście kulturowym miasta*, A. Niezabitowski, M. Żmudzińska-Nowak (eds), Gliwice 2006.

[2] In application to architecture this problem was described especially well by Umberto Eco in Nieobecna *struktura* [The Absent Structure] (Warszawa 1996, pp. 197–254).

this is a difficult, or sometimes even impossible, agreement, after he had installed his *Tilted Arc* on Federal Plaza in New York. The protests of the residents of the adjoining buildings, for whom Serra's monumental work made crossing the square more difficult, ended with the sculpture being disassembled and removed, which at the same time gave rise to many discussions over the meaning of the notion *site-specific*. Defending the work's location, Serra used this very term, in which common understanding of the physical context was intentionally redefined. What the negotiators were fighting over was not only the individual and temporary interference; it was about defending the coherence of two different space codes guaranteeing understanding of all statements – also those that will be formed one day in this or another space. Behind the game for a new meaning there is always a certain "I" or "we" hiding that is interested in disturbing the status quo of a given place, and at the same time strives to transfer the old meaning (and values) of the place into the new venture, trying to achieve it according to the rules understandable for a given communication community.

destabilisation of context
Starting from this conclusion, let us look more closely at the two strategies or identity scenarios that seem characteristic of the transformations that occurred in Polish cities after 1989. It is worth noticing that these strategies are not Poland-specific; similar processes occur in other European cities. As a result of these processes two categories appeared in the broad area of identity studies: first, the category of identity in transit,

and second, that of identity in synchronous contexts. The difference between the two categories is defined and specified by what in both cases goes beyond the "text", that is transit or synchronous contexts. Both can be found in the border space, but the first can be imagined as a border space built from stages, subsequent "present days" emerging from the past and passing into the unknown. In this case, when generating texts we go through a succession of stages, but neither the past nor the future close the space of transit and as a consequence the journey of meaning. Synchronous contexts, on the other hand, expand the border defined at the moment of text generation, stratifying it, multiplying the "here and now" of the generated statement and "postponing", as Jacques Derrida would say, the moment of constitution of meaning.[3] Often these two identity scenarios are very difficult to separate; this is what happens in Polish cities.

I would like to look at them as a culture expert who notices in both the first and the second strategy the ongoing marginalisation of the interpretative power of context. Sensitivity to the process of marginalisation and demarginalisation as an effect of certain social practices has to be considered constitutive for cultural studies. Its source has always been the attempt to discover and question the phenomena of marginalisation of various types of activities, phenomena and convictions, and to show these areas of marginalisation as worthy of particular attention. Initially, when analysing cultural practi-

[3] See J. Derrida, "Różnia", [in:] J. Derrida, *Marginesy filozofii* [Margins of Philosophy], Warszawa 2002, pp. 29–56.

ces researchers focused mainly on popular culture, its expansion and influence. British cultural studies were created as a spontaneous movement of demarginalisation of what was excluded from academic studies, high elite culture; later the scope of demarginalisation practices became significantly wider, and covered the entire range of identity strategies.[4] From the perspective of a cultural expert, cultural practices and projects that also have to include identity scenarios are connected with interpretation concepts; these, on the other hand, are associated with the specific models of contextualisation that the results of such practices sometimes undergo.

The problem of collective interpretation or functioning within a specific communication community has occurred many times[5] in the contemporary liberal arts. The communication community, its convictions, aspirations, values, goals, ways of operation and "dictionaries" would contextualise in the first place every new statement, communication event, cultural text, interference in space, participating in a constitutive way in the creation of meaning. Transfer of statements, architectural achievements or other communications from one communication community to another would be connected with the process of decontextualisation and then recontextualisation of their meaning. Hence it would resemble the process of translation, in which something is always lost, but where the place of the absent is always taken by new

meanings. This interpretation is very helpful in describing collective identities that shape and fulfil themselves in cities in which the exchange of the elements of context or even entire fragments of space is a commonly occurring phenomenon. On the other hand, still inspiring for cultural experts remains the hermeneutic tradition in which stress is placed on careful, understanding reading of texts. Here, placing a text, event or material object in a given context only opens room for interpretation. In both traditions the context appears to be a problematic, open, unfinished notion, subject to theoretical destabilisation but still very important.

Researchers such as Scott Lash try to combine these traditions:

What is needed perhaps for any sort of group of community, of the 'we', of national and other collective identity, is not any sort of hermeneutics of suspicion at all. What may well instead be needed is perhaps a 'hermeneutics of *retrieval*' … [which] unlike the masters … of suspicion, will not unendingly sweep away foundations but will attempt to lay open the ontological foundations of communal being-in-the-world.[6]

Lash sketched the tasks of the hermeneutics of recovery very "modestly": it is about looking under the surface of the signifying element and "gain[ing] access to the shared meanings which are conditions of existence of [...] the 'we'".[7] This is like suggesting to Serra and his

victorious opponents that they work together on the *site-specific* Federal Plaza in search for – hidden under artistic convictions and everyday practices – relations of collective identity whose manifestation can become this new place. Referring to *Being and time* with the key for Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, Lash continues by arguing for the need to have "concern for things and people in a shared world"[8] as an aesthetic keystone of all cultural practices. Does the stress placed by Lash on "settling in the world", on community knowledge seen as hermeneutical reflectiveness, strengthen the attachment to the context inscribed in the practices of a given community? Are the reflexive communities communities of shared meanings that are culturally structured or fluid gatherings of accidental, semantically unstable practices? To what extent do the contradictions inscribed in the notion, today used so often, of community, also tear apart the colloquial meaning attributed to context, revealing its weakness? And finally: how should we connect technological efficiency of modern societies with the care for the past and future of "things and people"?

In order to answer these questions without losing sight of the identity practices that can be observed in Polish cities, we should first emphasise that Lash's communitarian-hermeneutical perspective does not aspire to become the only correct way of seeing things. We can interpret it as one point of view that is worth taking into account when we are trying to understand the everyday, common-sense cultural practices of the users of new media of communication and new spaces. Some of

[4] See *Questions of Cultural Identity*, S. Hall, P. du Gay (eds), London 1996.
[5] This way of seeing interpretation became widespread in Poland mainly thanks to texts by Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish and their supporters.

[6] S. Lash, "Reflexivity and its Doubles: Structure, Aesthetics, Community", [in:] U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*, Stanford 1994, p. 146.
[7] Ibidem, p. 146.

[8] Ibidem, p. 152.

Demolition of the monument of Feliks Dzierżyński's at the present Bank Square in Warsaw, 16 November 1989

PHOTO: J. MARCZEWSKI/FORUM

these practices were superbly described in the novels of William Gibson, who depicted one of the protagonists in the following way: "Inability to focus, to faint in order to be registered by some examinations made him a born surfer, switching from programme to programme, from database to database, from platform to platform – in a, let's say, ...intuitive way".[9] These practices of course put pressure on the attitudes of researchers: they inspire, direct them and impose new solutions. As a result the interpretative power of context does not have to be the object of their obsessive interest. If it becomes weaker, this is in the first place because technological and cultural innovations enable intensive, effective life free from constant recalling of the imagination hindering context: historical, language, spatial.

Without this absolute anchoring in contexts also interpretation, in a traditional sense, becomes marginalised, giving way to new research (and common) strategies whose demarginalisation researchers seek today. The change in the concept of culture taking place at the moment consists in passing from domination of symbolic culture to culture understood as an element of present life infrastructure. This allows us to treat an entire city as a cultural space. In this sense in the urban space everything is connected to culture; this on the other hand is related to something very important for cultural experts, that is the effect of expansion of the notion of cultural context and at the same time weakening of its interpretative application. It refers to these elements that were/are despised in the urban

space and which can be/are used with better and better results and to an ever greater extent as elements of cultural identities. This assumes thinking that culture is not a closed area and thus does not produce ready answers or solutions.

IDENTITY IN TRANSIT

In the discourse of politicians, architects or urban planners who, like Krzysztof Nawratek,[10] want to see the city above all as a new *polis*, the category of identity in transit most often assumes the form of a political idea. One of the basic keystones of this idea is the conviction that both collective identities and their urban contexts require modernisation projects whose goals and results may often be reformulated. I understand the modernisation of the

city's identity (including identity practices of citizens but not being the sum of them) as the effect of a collective creative effort, and I refer here to collectivism understood in the way suggested by Antonio Negri in his letter on collective work.[11] The identity of a city created collectively has many historical and institutional faces to which stress on constant modernisation adds only one of many possible, external contexts. This modernisation may be at the same time organised in accordance with the logic of a historical process – starting, for example, with the end of the 19th century and reaching as far as the beginning of the 21st century. We can also look at its results from a topological perspective, that this from the point of view of its assumptions, often formulated simultaneously.

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[9] W. Gibson, *Idoru*, Poznań 1999, p. 25.

[10] See K. Nawratek, *Miasto jako idea polityczna*, Kraków 2008.

[11] See A. Negri, *Art & Multitude*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 33-43.
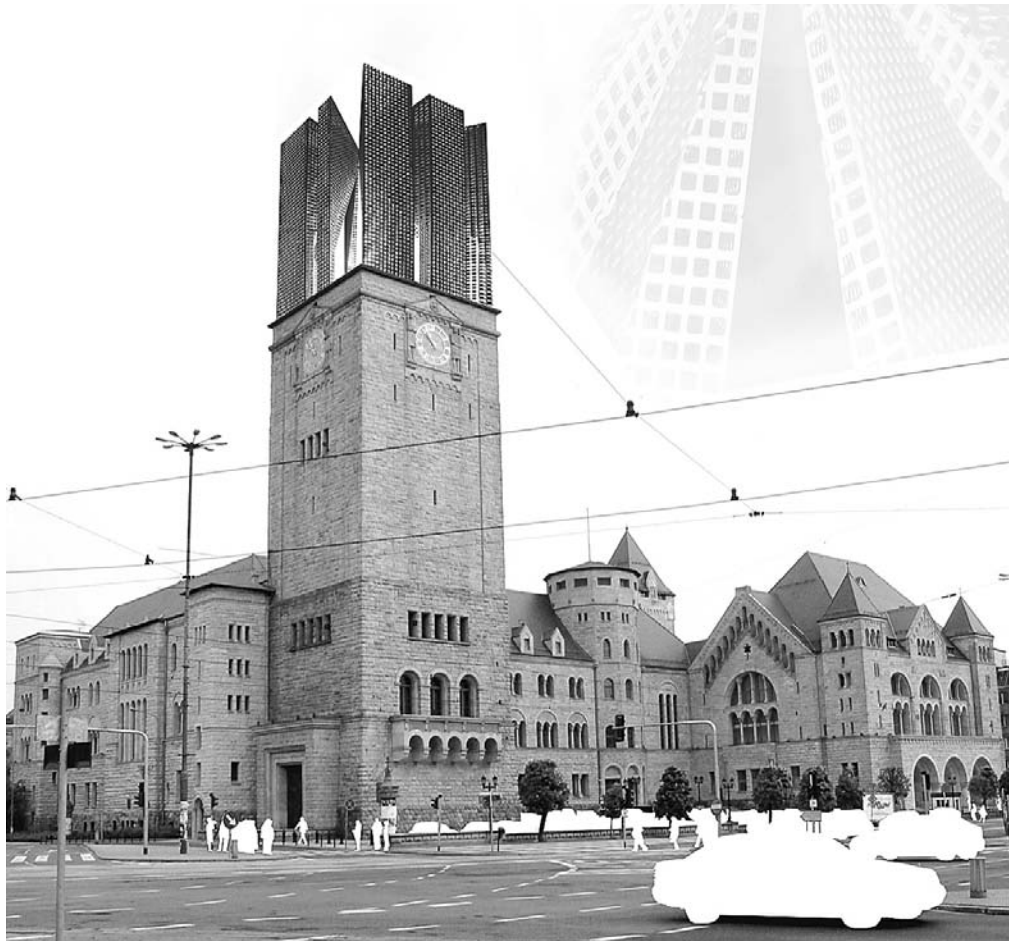
Andrzej Majcher, design for the finial of the tower of the Emperor's Castle in Poznań

The first stage or level of modern modernisation was connected with the "neutralisation of historical worlds of origin" and showed the past together with its signs and traces as an unproductive context. The neutralisation of historical worlds of origin is a term taken from *In Defence of the Accidental* by Odo Marquard. As a social process it has the ability to generate a certain type of environment in which constantly accelerating modernisation takes place. This environment is at the same time generated and used by this modernisation. I agree with the hypothesis – or in fact lament – of the German philosopher, who with a heavy heart had to admit that "less and less of what was the past may become the future; historical worlds of origin are in the

danger of becoming obsolete".[12] The communication and material context that create the past become less and less productive because they are to a lesser extent necessary for our identity strategies; we refer to them less and less when designing our future. Here we are dealing with the "withdrawal from the past" characteristic of the first modernisation.

The second, later type of modernisation is characterised by "methodological abandoning of worlds of origin" expressed for example in detraditionalisation, with special attention paid to traditions protected by the nation-state. Modernisation performed in Western

European countries, especially after World War II and ongoing until the 1970s to 1990s, was a process as a result of which the scope of responsibility and participation of the nation-state in construction of collective identities decreased. Among other things as a consequence of ongoing democratisation, liberalisation and globalisation, nation and national culture are sometimes treated as a context limiting individual identity constructions. Denationalisation takes place in the first place in the minds of citizens of big cities. After 11 September 2001, Susan Sontag disturbed the nationalist atmosphere of mourning and revenge with a confession that her homeland was not America, but New York. She did so in defence of the modern style of thinking, attacking and at the same time undermining the revenge thinking that was legitimised by the political idea of national interest. Recently, *toutes proportions gardées*, Maria Czubaszek said in an interview that she felt not so much a Pole but a citizen of Warsaw. In Poland this process is just beginning, but the birth of modern urban citizenship, without the need to reach to its long traditions, has to be considered a consequence worthy of note of the second stage of modernisation.

Finally, the third stage of modernisation, in which we are immersed at present and which we treat as taking place in fact independently from us, as something – as Zygmunt Bauman would say – that happens to us but over which we do not have much control. This is modernisation related to the generation of "material

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[12] O. Marquard, *Apologia przypadkowości*, Warszawa 1994, p. 107.

Poznań, the Castle of Duke Przemysł under construction
Below: a scale model of the reconstruction

worlds"[13] which leads to acceleration of the flow of products and meanings, making it impossible for them to settle down in historical contexts. Disparate people are replaced with exchangeable people; exchange of things and exchange of data push out their recontextualisation. In relation to the diagnoses of Polish sociologists, it is worth remembering that after 1989 a change took place in Poland that imposed acceleration and condensation of the process of modernisation. Its consequence is the fact that we are not undergoing modernisation in the same way as Western Europe, in a few stages, but in a very short period. For that reason in the construction of Polish urban identities after 1989 we may find all three types of modernisation, at the same time creating synchronous contexts and a kind of transit (in the meaning described above). Collective creation of collective identities in transit so understood constitutes the object of cultural analysis which is rarely taken into account by urban planners and architects.

MODERNISATIONS OF IDENTITY

Let us try now to recall a few examples of the above-mentioned three stages of modernisation of the identities of Polish cities after 1989. We can start with probably the best known, often presented as a symbolic event – the destruction of the Warsaw monument to Feliks Dzierżyński. On 16 November 1989, on Bankowy Square in Warsaw (then still Dzierżyńskiego Square), protesters gathered in order to demolish and remove the hated

[13] I owe the basic categories for this analysis such as the generation of material worlds or methodological abandoning of the worlds of origin to Odo Marquard. Their application to the contexts concerning urban identities is my own idea.

sign of an identity imposed on the urban space and citizens. The destruction of the monument was rather dramatic, and Polish magazines at the time were very interested in the event – in particular historical magazines, such as *Arte*, presented the photos documenting the destruction of the monument with the huge headline "Deconstruction". This was obviously a misunderstanding. On the one hand, literally understood deconstruction is much less than removal of political symbols from the public space, and on the other hand the philosophical concept was used by the magazine in the wrong context because philosophical deconstruction is more of a de-reconstruction than demolishing. On the square in Warsaw instead of deconstruction of the past a collective destruction took place, that

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PHOTO: T. KAMIŃSKI/AGENCJA GAZETA
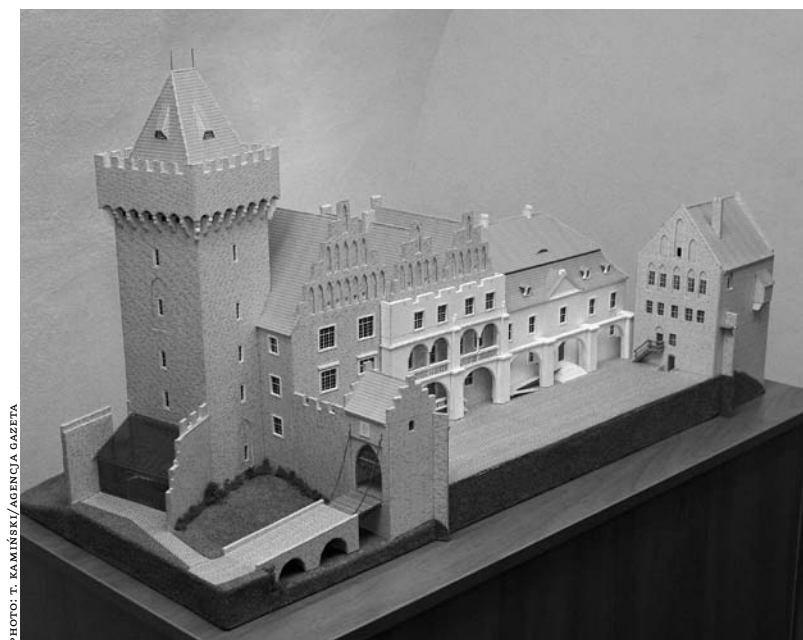
is, it was an attempt to erase from the urban context an inscription that lost the support of the influential communication group. In 2001 on the same square a monument to Juliusz Słowacki appeared. It is not located in exactly the same spot as Dzierżyński's – it was moved more than ten metres and the place where the demolished monument had been was covered with tarmac (which left a black mark). Słowacki became the new compositional keystone of the square. This was, then, a shift from a political idea (Dzierżyński was a figure about whom it is difficult to remain politically neutral) to a cultural symbol. The modernisation of the identity of this site led from grafting of a strange political idea to its total replacement by contents from the canon of national culture. This is a problematic example of the first modernisation, in which one past is erased in order to make place for a different historical context; not much results for the future from this exchange.

Another way of acting characteristic of the first type of modernisation in Polish cities may be observed with the example of Warsaw's Joseph Stalin Palace (Palace of Culture and Science). Its demolition remained in the sphere of ideas and dreams; the project of an underground Museum of Communism (connected to the Palace's underground labyrinth) created by Czesław Bielecki was also not completed. This unfulfilled project constitutes, however, an interesting example of modernisation of meaning of an important for the city's identity spatial sign. As a consequence of a relatively insignificant architectural interference something that I would call an attempt at musealisation of the past is taking place, because SocLand is the past read and named in

the modern context which unfortunately may not become fully materialised. Another way of dealing with these fragments of the "historical world of origin" by the citizens of Polish cities can be found in the popular, fashionable Poznań cafe club Proletaryat. Both the interior and the website try to lead the visitors into the past in a way that is typical of the pop-culture "vintage" scenario which takes gadgets from historical context and turns them into an object of fun. A club of the same name can also be found in Liverpool in the revitalised docks, and similar places are common in the cities of Eastern and Central Europe.[14]

Using the example of one motif of the most recent history of Polish cities, we can continue to trace the shift from actions aimed at erasing the past to those aimed at its commercialisation; from the exchange of contexts to their pastiche fragmentation; from convictions that the physical context of our life in the city is very important to considering it a manifestation of ephemeral youth fashion. The basic context most often recalled by humanist sciences, that is the past, in this transit loses its interpretative power, and at the same time the need for the "remembering"[15] function of the liberal arts dies out. No wonder that architects rarely expect their support when entering the historical space of the cities with their ideas.

The second modernisation is related to the progressing denationalisation of collective

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[14] See for example: Socialist Spaces. Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc, D. Crowley, S. E. Reid (eds), Oxford – New York 2002.
[15] Term borrowed from Odo Marquard.

identities. The cities at this stage of modernisation become the leading actors. An interesting perspective for observing this process is the report regarding global cities prepared in 2011 for *Foreign Policy* magazine. On the list of over eighty global cities not even one Polish city could be found – hence we could say that the thesis that no nation will be successful today as a nation that was formulated on the margin of the report does not concern us. Meanwhile it seems that even though the processes mentioned by the researchers preparing the list of global cities in Poland takes place in a different way and maybe on a different scale, it changes significantly not only the identity of the cities but also that of the entire country. The scenarios that appear here force us to pose the question whether there is any chance for the global modernisation of cities of such a size as the ones in Poland?

Looking at the list in question we see Copenhagen or Zurich, that is cities with hundreds of thousands of citizens but still smaller than Kraków. Among the 25 criteria that were adopted in the research, the majority are of a socio-cultural character: to gain entry to the list of global cities it is not only the size of population that counts, but also a set of indicators especially interesting for culture experts. For example, it counts how much global news appears in the local press. In order, therefore, to establish if Kraków has a chance of becoming a global city, we would have to check what percentage of information regarding global phenomena is published for example by the Kraków edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Another criterion is the way in which censorship, understood in broad terms, functions – not only national but also any other type of censorship.

Kimsooja, *Mandala*: *Chant for Auschwitz*, an installation at the Mediations Biennale in Poznań, 2010

Taken into account were also various cultural factors that prove the openness of a city and point to its international relations, making it a global communication centre.

Transferring the problem of denationalisation to the Polish terrain, let us first note the battle between the cities for revision of influence zones. In the dispute about the fast railway from Warsaw to Wrocław and Poznań the southern part of Wielkopolskie Province chose the variant unfavourable for Poznań but in accordance with the plans of Wrocław.

Hence we could say that Wrocław "annexes" the southern part of Wielkopolskie Province to Lower Silesia or that the southern part of Wielkopolskie Province is disloyal towards Poznań, the city that dominates in the region and is its historical centre. Modernisation of communication, even in a technical sense, is connected to the negotiation of identity in which the stronger communication community is successful. The second example is provided by Poznań and Szczecin, fighting for railway connections with Berlin to be correlated with public transport tickets in Berlin. The Polish railway company is trying to prevent this from happening because it is not in accordance with their economic interest. As we can see, the stake in this game is not only the interregional policy of the cities related to the transformation of the regions' identity, but also their pan-national policy, joined by their shared interest and tendency to look for a new reference centre outside the borders of the nation-state. This is a kind of "denationalisation" policy of the cities with a regional scope within the European Union. We can expect that the new concentration of power, including symbolic power (Berlin), will be connected precisely with such alliances.

At the same time we can observe a reverse process. An example that can be used here is the reconstruction of the tower of the Imperial Castle in Poznań. Almost every year young architects choose this object as the topic of their graduation project: the tower of the castle, initially topped with a tented roof, was demolished during the war, and to this day remains dead space, even though it is located on one of the city's representative squares. The former Prussian castle, the last built and

the most easterly seat of the emperor, was rebuilt during World War II by Albert Speer and intended as a residence for Adolf Hitler. Young architects, similarly to the residents of Poznań, generally ignore this historical context and treat the castle as a necessary element of the city's identity. At present the castle houses the Cultural Centre. The empty tower was used for example in a projection prepared together with homeless peopl by Krzysztof Wodiczko. Within this one city the attitude towards the past is defined by two policies: the city authorities, against the will of the majority of residents want to rebuild the Royal Castle on Góra Przemysła. Even though the dispute regarding the object continues and lack of documentation makes it impossible to define how the reconstruction should look, the authorities argue that it will help Poznań to join the Piast heritage of Poland. So in one city we have two castles – the Royal Castle, whose questionable reconstruction is the domain of the city authorities, and the Imperial Castle, which inspires the young and thriving generation of architects. Both strategies share marginalisation of the historical context. In this case we are dealing with modernisation in which nationalisation and denationalisation of urban identity play a crucial role.

Roland Schefferski, *Telephone Booth*, Wrocław 1981–1983

David Černy, *Golem*, ra sculpture on the square in front of the National Museum in Poznań

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The third stage, or – as others prefer – the most recent scenario of the modernisation of urban identity, is related to the generation of material worlds. Material worlds limit the need to use the category of context or manage perfectly well without it. Even though their products are still aimed at interpretation, they are organised as if they did not need the hermeneutical tradition we mentioned at the beginning. First let us recall the work of Roland Schefferski *Budka telefoniczna* [Phone booth] (Wrocław 1981–1983). The artist filled an urban phone booth with objects he found in its vicinity, so what was abandoned in the urban space, not needed and unimportant. Thus the material context of a place intended for communication was transferred to its interior. Schefferski carried out a similar project in the Łódź ghetto (*Memory of The Shoah*, 2003): he placed a caravan there and filled it with clothes from a second-hand shop referring to exhibitions showing evidence of the Holocaust and at the same time giving it a current character isolated from the historical context. Another example of communication through objects, also constituting an example of hybrid

global imagination, may be the work of the Korean artist Kimsooja Mandala: *Chant for Auschwitz, used clothes from Poland, Tibetan Monk Chant, CD player* (Poznań 2009, Beyond Mediations), presented at the Poznań Castle and also composed of clothes from a second-hand shop piled up in a room prepared for Hitler. This motif keeps reoccurring in contemporary art, which uses public spaces in order to modernise old solutions and answers, at the same time posing questions about identity. This solution has to be distinguished from actions popular around the world which dress sculptures or fragments of the urban infrastructure in knitted costumes. Creation of the identity of urban space more and more often takes from the household archive: it reaches for things and actions that originally belong to private biographies, in order to undermine through them the public images and traditional divisions, at the same time making it possible to maintain the continuity between the private and the public spaces.

We can see what the marginalisation of the interpretative power of context can lead to

with the example of a true story from Poznań. Judah Loew ben Bezalel was born here, the creator of Golem, and one of the most popular rabbis, who later moved to Prague. Referring to this biographical context, the renowned Czech artist David Černý prepared a sculpture of Golem for Poznań. Černý's Golem was initially placed in the middle of a path in front of the National Museum, where, in accordance with the author's idea, it was to be immersed in the stream of passers-by. The city's authorities did not agree to this, arguing that the metal construction was a threat to these passers-by's safety. So it was moved to the lawn and hidden in a row of oaks from where it observed them – even though this was not what the idea had been. After a long discussion it was decided that the sculpture would be moved again: it was placed with its back to the historic fountain topping the landscape axis of the carefully reconstructed avenue.

IDENTITY IN SYNCHRONOUS CONTEXTS
The second scenario that can be observed today in Polish cities locates their identity in synchronous contexts. In this scenario the identity is treated not as a political idea but as a cultural project based on collective interpretation, which can be understood very broadly as reinterpretation functioning in a given period of time – that is, let's say, after 1989. It can also be a project created on somebody's commission. When Polish cities were preparing for the contest for the European Capital of Culture it became perfectly clear that a city's identity may be created, starting with many interpretations later transformed into a cultural project; the scenario is prepared by operators or appropriate teams appointed by the authorities of the cities taking part in

the contest. The same phenomenon can be observed on a small scale: recently, in relation to a grant that we are working on together, students presented me with an interpretation of two signboards that hang next to each other – the Rialto cinema and McDonalds – as an example of an urban metaphor. A great observation, showing the simultaneous existence next to each other of two lifestyles and identity scenarios related to them.

"Is there a strict, scientific notion of *context*?" This question was posed by Jacques Derrida in a text dedicated to the signature and context that closes his *Margins of Philosophy*.[16] Context is an open notion not only because culture that brings it to life is an open category and practice or because it is a borderline category, so it makes sense only when it appears in a borderline situation to establish the meaning of relations between the two realities. Context is also an open category because, as Derrida wrote "it can never be certain, fulfilled";[17] it is never closed and its meaning or content is never fully spoken. All this is not compatible with the model of common-sense thinking which I started from and which inspired me to look into newly created industrial architecture. In architectural thinking according to which the project is not closed, context is treated as reality that is ready, closed and given to us and to which we have to adapt. But are we in fact dealing here with two elements on the border of which something new is being created? One can wonder if and to what extent public projects that are being fulfilled in urban spaces are built into the identity

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[16] J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 279.
[17] Ibidem.

structures of the cities with full recognition of their specificity, that is, their context.

Let us analyse this question using the example of city art. There was initially a dispute over the palm tree placed on Aleje Jerozolimskie in Warsaw by Joanna Rajkowska; however, later everybody got used to it. When Rajkowska completed her project many thought that the context she had chosen was too distant – not visual but mental. The first problem connected to the relation between identity and context in the urban space appears precisely when it occurs that the visual context and the mental context are not always the same thing. The second example is provided by the destroyed Jewish district in Lublin and a street lamp that is constantly on. It plays exactly the same role as the palm tree on Aleje Jerozolimskie – but the street lamp is from before World War II and was not imported into (or as) the context, but is what is left of it. It proves to be from here, joined with the place in every aspect.

All questions that are connected with context understood in this way have a social dimension, but from my point of view in the first place they carry a cultural message and are addressed to the liberal arts. Why do we need the liberal arts when we are talking about the identity of cities? At American faculties of architecture more and more often discussions refer to philosophy of architecture, architecture as a liberal art and the relations between the humanities and architecture. My question about the place of the liberal arts regards not solely architecture, but all the problems sketched above. In the relation between tradition and modernisation the liberal arts have for a long time played the role of a buffer thought,

muffling all inconveniences and tensions. This humanistic "airbag" has for a long time been built out of interpretations and contexts. Within the new understanding of culture as infrastructure, especially urban infrastructure, the fight is for every element and every fragment of the city in which the identity can root itself and on which the identity strategy can be based. It is no longer the use of the interpretative power of context that is the main weapon in this fight.

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY AMALIA WOŹNA

PHOTO: Ł. KOWALSKI, P. SZTAJDEL/OŚRODEK „BRAMA GRODZKA – TEATR NN"

Eternal lamp in the former Jewish district in Lublin