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Infantilization of the Urban Space

Skulpture originally was first of all a sign, its formal aspect remained important only as means of making its content understandable. It was a landmark in a literal sense like so called “Kurek Wrocławski” (Hahnenkraehe) placed on the border between estates of City of Wrocław and those of Saint Claire Convent or symbolic as for example numerous statues of St John of Nepomuk or St Mary claiming recatholization of Habsburgs’ lands and discreetly promoting the dynasty as champions of the Church.

Prussian Wrocław gained a number of impressive monuments of generals, rulers and politicians placed in most representational sites. They were symbols of military power of the new masters but also ruthlessness of anti-catholic Kulturkampf

After 1945 they were dealt with mercilessly and replaced with much more drab landmarks. Images of heroes of the new pantheon appeared in the city, as well as monuments important to new inhabitants remaining them of their home – eastern borderlands - lost for ever.

The end and official bankruptcy of communism was met with the obvious hope to commemorate traumatic events and people significant in the history of the nation. Unexpectedly this natural desire was resisted by the new official ideology, that had just started a next “reforging” of the souls, this time “European” one.

Since 1989 we have been witnessing an ideological guerilla war between uprooted “Europeans” and their tradition-loving opponents. Variety of methods are involved like media attacks on the form of some “controversial” monument rather than its content, ridicule or stigmatization as backward. Thinking about space has been also included. Traditional monument on the high pedestal was condemned as outdated and representing patriarchal point of view whereas modest objects set on the ground level mimicking the public were declared progressive.

Ordinariness or even banality tries to replace heroism and nobleness, heroes and martyrs have to give way to ordinary people, anonymous passersbys, animals and gnomes.

In 2001 at the spot famous for The Orange Alternative happenings (Świdnicka Street) in the late 1980-s a monument was erected (founded by Agora ountadion) called Papa Gnom, designed by Olaf Brzeski. The smiling, naked, corpulent figure dressed only in a pointed cap stands on the top of human thumb. The proportion suggests a liliput size of the gnom.

Nobody suspected then what an avalanche had been set in motion.

Soon after that local government got inspired by the idea and 5 new gnomes (really small this time – about 30 cm) appeared in the city centre.

In the next years 30 more have been installed by the city and another 30 by private businessmen in front of the headquarters of their companies. Nobody controls it any longer, new ones are appearing everywhere including hanging on the lamp posts.

They are also promoted on the Internet where their supposed “heroic past” is emphasized. Even so called “Gnom Festival” is celebrated by the school children.

The gnomes are the most radical but not the only one symptom of infantilization of public space. Some companies use urban sculpture as a form of advertising. They install in front of their headquarters objects that are connected neither with the site nor with company’s profile just to attract attention by their surreal unexpectedness like the two rhinos (a mother with child) in the city centre or a real steam engine locomotive in almost vertical position as if moving towards the sky.

New iconography has been developed. There are at least two sculptures called “Integration” – rather risky attempts to represent abstract idea by the means of abstract art. Even the old concept of female personifications has been reinterpreted - a coquettish young lady represents the Earth (Crystal Planet) peacefully integrated and another one - a mischievous teenager as symbol of Wrocław has been installed in front of a shopping mall.

Another category of sculptures favoured by the city authorities and placed in the area frequented by tourists are monuments representig Polish-German reconciliation or commemorating heroes of German Wrocław (Breslau).