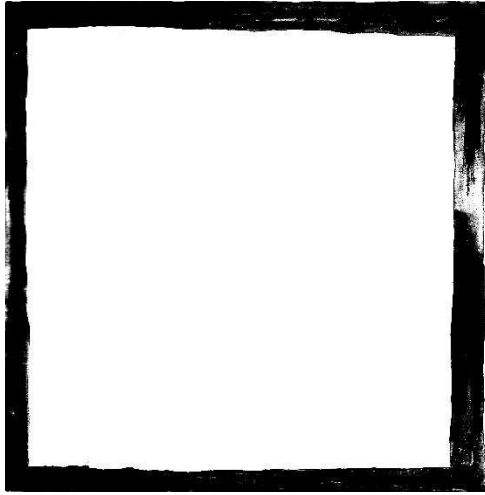


# Life



# through

# spaces

Anna Drupka  
14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2014  
Amsterdam  
Textile Design  
Gerrit Rietveld Academy

## Stuck in grey

In this thesis I will describe my experience of living in many different places. My story could be as simple as: I'm from Grudziądz and I live in Amsterdam right now. However I can continue by mentioning that I used to live in Warsaw and England, and that I actually grew up in Silesia. Depending on my mood or the interest that I have in the person, I would either give you a short or a more lengthy response. When I mention that I'm a resident of Amsterdam rather than being a girl from the north of Poland, the reactions are noticeably different. Even in Poland it matters if you are from the north or the south of the country. Then I ask myself:

How important is it to answer this question: *Where do we come from or where do we live?* It might actually be more important to ask ourselves: *How do we live where we are?*

When talking about my life I tend to totally skip the fact that I lived in Silesia, a region in the South of Poland. Even though I spent half of my life there I still refer to myself as someone from Pomerania, a region in the North of Poland which is my place of birth and where I resided only five years (from 14 years old until 19). When I left Silesia, I moved north and never returned. I know the dialect but I never spoke it even whilst living there. When analysing my memories from that period I do remember very well the architecture, and the interiors of the communist housing blocks.

Each part of Silesia and its suburbs resembles and reminds me of another. You won't be able to distinguish any remarkable differences; all of the buildings were copies of each other; all of them in the same dark colour of concrete. Silesia is visually very repetitive. I used to visit my cousins, who lived in another district of the city Ruda Śląska, called Halemba. My district and theirs nearly looked the same; sections of these districts were just duplicated. There were as many of them as you wanted. I felt like I couldn't escape the plan, the layout, and the colour. Everything in Silesia was part of some urban plan, but not an urban play, just applied solutions. I was stuck, I was stuck in grey.

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## 1. The places I lived in

“The house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme” J. Pallasmaa<sup>1</sup>

Unconsciously we make choices which have been made before. By making the same choices we might not make the right ones. But the familiar feelings by making the same choices somehow make us feel ‘safe’, it’s comforting. If we are like a diagram how can we change the path of lives? Sometimes it seems that whatever we do it does not make a difference. We often have a tendency to recreate our first home, maybe that is the problem. With those two thoughts in mind I decided to think of all of the places that I lived in.

### 1. Kamienica, Pomerania, December 1984

The place where I was born but never lived. One of my strongest memories is connected to this place. My family in the north of Poland was living in a beautiful *Kamienica* (a Polish term describing a type of residential building made of brick or stone) from around 1900. It had four levels plus an additional cellar and attic. This place was one of the tallest buildings on the street. The height of the apartment was 3.28 meters, and the apartment was about 130m<sup>2</sup> big. My family still lives there on the ground floor. The *Kamienica* sides are beautifully symmetric. There was a small, but charming courtyard. During the WWII neighbours grew some vegetables there. There was also a place for children to play and a wooden shed to store bikes. My home town, Grudziądz is as old as Amsterdam. It had been developed from a village into a town in the year 1234 by the Order of Brothers of the German House of Saint Mary in Jerusalem (also named the Teutonic Knights), previously it was named Graudenz. The city and its architecture always impressed me very much.

The apartments inside that *Kamienica* used to have marvellous floral decorative elements made out of plaster, placed in the middle of the ceiling for crystal chandeliers. There was an oval shaped one in the dining room, and a round and large one in the main room. The rest of the rooms had some smaller round ones, and all the rooms had linear ones running alongside the walls. On the outside of the building the decorations on the elevations still exist today. One day I found myself in the middle of the main room, full of hopeless anger and tears in my eyes begging my grandmother and my aunt to change their mind about removing all these decorations. They decided to demolish the original *kachelofens*<sup>2</sup> as well as the original wooden sliding doors between the main room and one of the bedrooms. They argued that they were modernizing the look of the apartment so the new lamp and furniture would look better in this place. The furniture was white and lacquered, made from particle board. It was the same set which my parents bought a year earlier in black colour. The main piece of the set looked like a coffin. I completely rejected their reasons for these decisions. Every time I went

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<sup>1</sup> The eyes of the skin, Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> Kachelofen is a clay stove that burns wood extremely efficiently - allowing for a clean and long lasting radiant heat. The heat is stored in the clay kachel (clay brick) thermal mass, and then slowly radiates into the house. Source: [www.stonehousepottery.com](http://www.stonehousepottery.com).

to Grudziądz I was studying and admiring the overgrown historical traces in the details of the city. The holes in facades left after WWII, variety of ceiling choices, cobble stones polished through centuries by horses, cars and citizens to such a perfect shine and smoothness. I was practically obsessed by it. After the summer when I returned to Silesia I could go on and on arguing about how beautiful that city was. In the architectural features of Grudziądz you can find all sorts of information, details and characteristics. And all of it could trigger your mind and imagination. Those memories were richer than memories of grey masses of concrete. In Grudziądz every building was different from each other.

## 2. Small summer house, Silesia, 1985-1986

I'm actually still not sure whether the time spent there was during a holiday or not. I think we stayed in someone's summer house and lived there until my parents sorted out whether we would stay in Silesia or not. I remember that the walls were wooden and painted white, I liked the place very much. I think it was a small house because most of my memories from that early period were about being and playing outside in front of the place. My father fished a lot and we barbecued regularly in the summer. My parents never admitted we lived there, probably because they were ashamed if their mothers and the rest of the family would find about the poor conditions of living. I enjoyed being close to the water.

## 3. Black forest house (Czarny Las) Silesia, 1987-1992

The building was made of beautifully dark red coloured bricks. The hallway was painted light green with a traditional white floral pattern. The entry was a kitchen. We spend most of our time there because the enormous iron cooking stove from before WWII made it the warmest room in the house. From the kitchen you could walk through all the other rooms. The second room was for my parents. It was the biggest room of all. I enjoyed the rhythm that the house was giving to our lives. The stove ran a timetable of the day for the family. We also had a big wooden table in a light colour. Of course the top was painted with lacquer but underneath it was raw wood. No need to paint the bottom, as no one sees it, right? That wasn't exactly what my sister was thinking. Often she would hide by lying underneath the table when my mother was busy in the kitchen. She would draw whatever she would imagine with a piece of coal on the bottom of it. Eventually my parents painted the whole table black. The last room was for my sister and me. The room was light and quiet, I remember it well. It felt quite private and I liked it very much. The place was heated by coal.

## 4. Block house, Ruda Śląska, Silesia, 1992-1998

This grey block was my least favourite. It was a house in a communist block. My family lived on the top floor. As the entire structure was quite poorly isolated we even had the coldest apartment. I remember that eventually my sister and I received a huge electric heater in our room. It was one of those heaters which runs on electricity heating up some metal located inside some bricks. The hot air was flowing into the room through a metal plate with equal holes. My mum thought it was nice because it was yellow. Unfortunately they placed this heating device next to the window. This meant that if I wanted to look outside I would have to carefully bend over it by stretching myself. I got burned on my thigh constantly. The walls were covered with some fancy wall paper. It was decorated with a whole range of pastel

colours it had some strange foam texture. My parents believed that it would keep the heat in the room better. The best thing in this apartment was a bath with hot water; however the kitchen could not fit more than two people at a time.

#### 5. Mould house, Grudziądz, my hometown, 1998-2000

This was an apartment with a low ceiling on one of the most busy and dangerous streets in the city. I think my parents picked some really random place in a rush. It had a fungus problem. The bathroom was just a super small bath and the toilet was located in the kitchen separated with just a foldable plastic door. Furthermore there was a tram stop and a night club opposite the house which made it impossible to sleep in the weekend. The street was considered as one of the most dangerous in town which proved true on a few occasions. Luckily we lived there only two years, no one in the family spent much time there.

#### 6. Attic house: Grudziądz, 2000-2001

My grandmother's place. My grandparents gave up their beautiful house, giving it to their daughter when she got married, and moved into a smaller place in the next street. They illegally converted their attic into a flat. The owner of the flat was related to their son in law. This was the most funny and dangerous place that I ever lived in. My grandfather still lives there today. The building was built before WWII. The attic was previously used as a laundry room that became our apartment after the conversion. Before my grandfather could begin work he had to deal with some squatters. He brought me there to show me the graffiti that was made by them. He covered it with layers of Styrofoam and cement. The apartment was extremely hot in the summer and cold in the winter. The place did not have heating due to the fact that my grandfather was good with walls but not with electricity. We heated the place with a gas bottle. You could never leave it on when you were not there. The flame could extinguish by itself resulting in the gas flowing freely. I remember that every time that I wanted to take a bath we would have to carry the gas bottle to the bathroom that always terrified me. Some winters were so cold that we would sleep with full clothing on and hot bricks in bed covered with two blankets. One winter my uncle decided to build a fire place. He did manage, but it was not working properly as the smoke was staying inside the apartment. My grandmother used it as a flower decoration stand instead. I never understood why my grandparents agreed to live in these conditions

#### 7. Sixth and a half place: Grudziądz, 2001-2002

Magazine above a shop. For a short moment my sister and I lived with my father. It was a strange place, a single very big, bright room. My father and my uncle made another amateur solution in this place that was basically never designed to be a living space. They created a floor halfway in the room. After entering the apartment there would be a stove and a few cardboards on the left, on the right a self-built bathroom with toilet and shower. It actually was quite well done. The lower ceiling above your head functioned in the same time as a floor for the upper room. It would continue for three meters then the rest of the room would be at full height. My uncle built the custom wooden stairs to that upper room. The stairs were extremely steep and dangerous and the steps were too small to walk on safely. They as well

covered up the front for privacy. So it practically became a box of one and a half meters in height without air circulation.

#### 8. Riverside house: Grudziądz, 2002-2003

Just before I turned eighteen I decided to move into my mother's place. It was just as cold as the previous one, but at least it had a green masonry heater which strangely was not heated by coal, but worked on electricity. The place was simply cold because we did not have enough money to pay for the electricity. It was a 20m<sup>2</sup> apartment without a bathroom. There was one room with space for one bed. I slept on a sponge mattress behind the bed during the night. Never the less the place was very pleasant and cool during the hot summers. It was also close to the river. The lonely walks that you could take along the water were somehow making up for the lack of private space in the house.

#### 9. Suburban house: Grudziądz, 2003-2004

I moved into my boyfriend's place, outside of the city. We lived together with his mother, stepfather and sister in a family house built by his father. There were two rooms upstairs and we occupied one of them plus a bathroom. Together with my boyfriend I installed a hammock in the room, so we could watch movies while hanging at window level.

#### 10. Studio house: Tarpno, district of Grudziądz, 2004-2005

My first 'parents free' place. I rented a small one bedroom apartment with my boyfriend; it was more or less 25m<sup>2</sup>. We had a kitchen, bathroom and living room and four pieces of furniture: bed, desk (for a computer), wardrobe and stool. The TV was standing on the stool and I turned the wardrobe into a cage for my ferrets. The window had a beautiful view; only grass and trees could be seen from it. It took three layers of white paint to cover up the previously pink wall. It was my fifth year without a washing machine, meaning that I had to wash all our clothes. But it was mine. I liked this place. There was a park and a public swimming pool nearby. It was warm and quiet and it had a clear design.

#### 11. Shared room: Warsaw, winter 2005

Blank place in the middle of nowhere, it had maybe a 20m<sup>2</sup>. I was renting a room in a house outside of Warsaw, in a place called Ząbki, sharing the place with a girl called Kasia. I only lived there for a couple of months, without TV, radio or computer. As soon as I realized that my boyfriend would not be joining me in Warsaw, I moved.

#### 12. Place of blocks: Jelonki (suburbs of Warsaw), 2006

One of the bigger and nicest apartments I ever lived in. It had a fine domestic quality. It was situated in a block that was four levels high. I was living with my flatmate on the top floor. We had chosen this apartment together. It had a small but cosy kitchen with a breakfast table. There was a bathroom and two further rooms. The two rooms were actually one room but divided up into two living spaces. At the end of the big room we had a balcony that was accessible via a sliding door. The door was made of see through glass. The two middle glasses would slide apart creating a beautiful space to enter the 8m<sup>2</sup> balcony that seemed enormous. It felt so good to open them every time. The view was of a green so called garden city named Jelonki. This was actually a set of wooden building complexes made for the builders of the

Palace of Culture and Science (Pałac Kultury i Nauki) in Warsaw, originally known as the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science. This building complex (not the Palace of Culture) was supposed to be temporary but later on it was converted into accommodation for students. The communist style blocks followed and eventually Jelonki was joined to the city of Warsaw. Furthermore it is the edge of the city, beyond Jelonki there are only fields.

#### 13. Doll house: Coventry, England, 2006-2009

In the summer of 2006 I moved to the United Kingdom. This was my first time abroad. A large iron gate at the entrance of the apartment complex welcomed me and behind it there was a neatly cut grass field. It was a complex of one main building and two smaller ones, called Tudor Court. The apartment was above a set of garages on the left side of one of the smaller buildings. It had a creamy coloured carpet all around. For the first time at the age of twenty-one I had a separate room for sleeping, a proper bedroom with a bed, not a sofa. This place offered me a lot of firsts. First functional oven, first washer-dryer combination machine, first dishwasher and safety windows that were impossible to be washed on the outside (as they cannot be fully opened like in hotels). I was quite shocked at how thin the walls were. They reminded me of a cardboard dollhouse. I stayed there for three and a half years.

#### 14. Jeff's house, Amsterdam, Netherlands, summer 2009

In 2009 I moved to the Netherlands, I rented a room inside the ring (A10) in Amsterdam, located in Bos en Lommer. I shared the place with an Irish girl and the owner lived in a room above the main part of the flat. It was a small room with direct access to the balcony. I stayed there only for two months during the summer of 2009.

#### 15. The walk-in closet, Utrecht, Netherlands, autumn 2009 – spring 2010

Space so small, it could fit only a bed. For eight months I was occupying a room on the top floor of a house. There was a bed and a book shelf used by me for clothing storage. The house was typically Dutch, a narrow staircase, two floors, a lot of white walls and red decorative elements. I didn't like to live in someone else's place. I rather live with someone. I hated the temporary nature of the situation. So I spent a lot of time in bed and taking long hot showers.

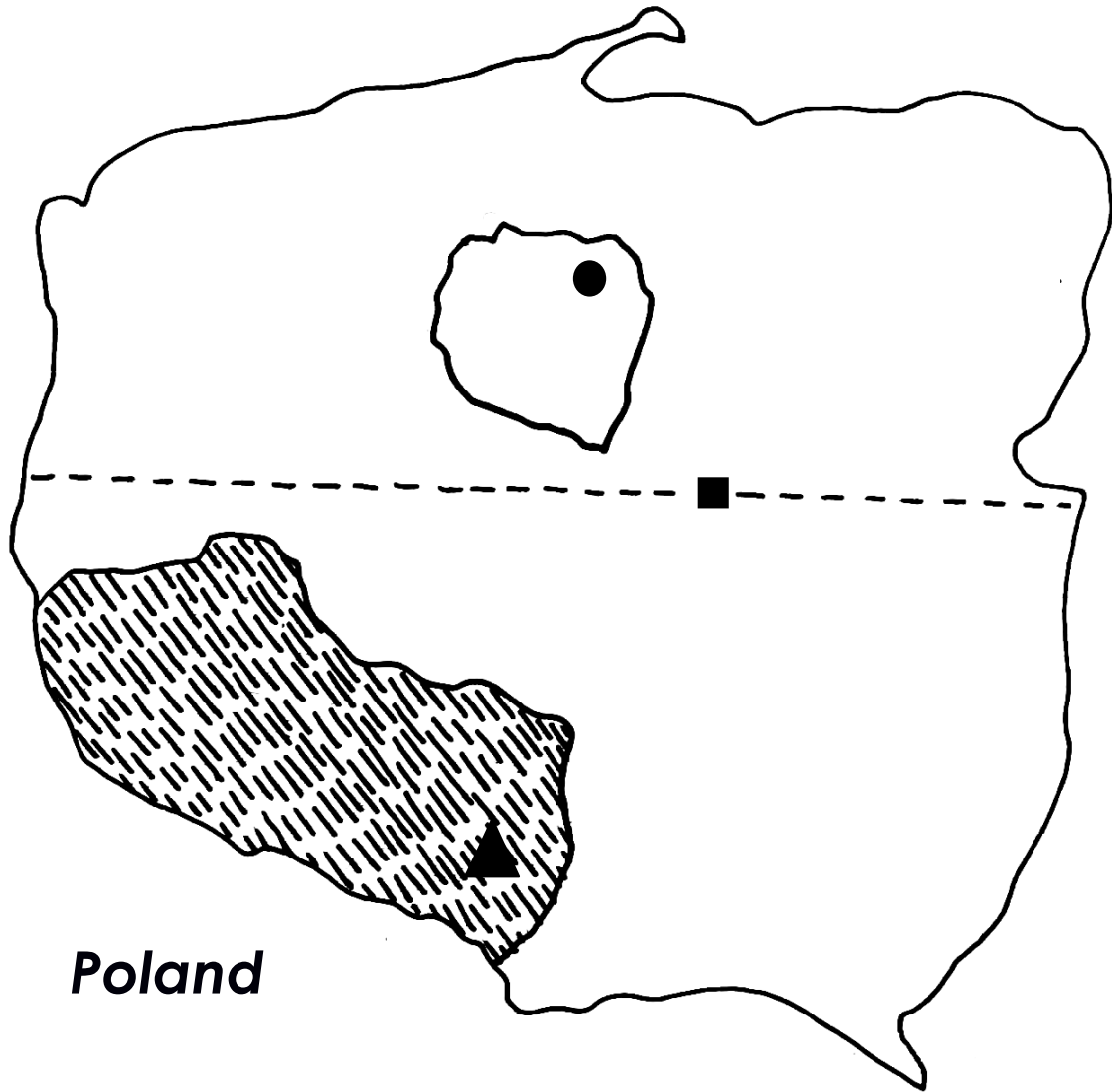
#### 16. Platynowa, Warsaw

I am the owner of that place. It is exactly 38m<sup>2</sup>, situated in a central district of Warsaw, named Wola. The construction of that building is disc-like, structure H, similar to the buildings in Silesia, although the windows are larger and apartments have balconies. I never lived in this place, but I would not mind. I own it for five years now.

#### 17. Big window house, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2010-

The apartment I live in right now, place of my own choice. It is made out of bricks and is situated on the second floor of a four level building. It contains big tall windows, no curtains on the front of the house, just in the bedrooms, wood like floors (laminated), a kitchen with oven, a big dining table, and the walls are white. My bed is enormous. I have three neighbours and I know them all. There are two wild cats in the back garden area just like in my home town.





**Poland**



Warsaw: 11, 12, 16



Grudziądz, Pomerania: 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10



Ruda Śląska, Silesia: 2, 3, 4

**1060km**

United Kingdom: 13



**570km**

Netherlands: 14, 15, 17

## 2. Bricks or Blocks?

“The timeless task of architecture is to create embodied and lived existential metaphors that concretise and structure our being in the world.” J. Pallasmaa<sup>3</sup>

Because I had moved about seven times before the age of fourteen, I built up quite an experience of living in different houses. There were differences in size, type, height, windows and construction. This had an influence on my taste and preferences. There is more space in houses from an older style of architecture, as a result of the higher ceilings and larger windows. These houses were built for the simple function of living space, whilst blocks were more necessary actions to generate fast and economic solutions. Communist housing blocks were built in a time of a fast growing population due to the baby boom in the 60's and 70's. Furthermore they were built to place workers outside of the cities closer to places of industry such as mines and factories. Unfortunately most of them became permanent housing estates without further improvements or development plans. For me it's important how things are made. A simple block cannot satisfy me. Communist blocks are just made of a grey mass of cement wired with metal. They were made fast and cheap to be functional. Similar to a Chinese attempt to make a copy of a 'van Gogh' painting, forget about the uniqueness.

Just like any product, space has a certain quality. For example a high ceiling in a building comforts me by providing a greater sense of space, and a town square can be a great place when you are lonely. For my secondary education I opted to go to a school that specialized in renovation of architecture. This is why I know from which materials buildings are made of and what techniques can be used. When you need to renovate an old building usually you will be asked to clean the dirt from the brick on the outside. More work will be on the inside. If you need to renovate a building like a block then you will need to fix all of the cracks in the concrete or fix a layer of elevation outside by covering it with a new one. Bricks have been regarded as one of the longest lasting and strongest building materials used<sup>4</sup>. It's almost like saying 'you are what you eat – you live like you build'. Building with bricks takes time and more precision is needed. Every brick is held in your hand before it is laid down the right place. I had always wondered... can you compare the people to the places they live in?

This question leads to the book *Respect* by Richard Sennett<sup>5</sup> in which he talks about his childhood in the suburbs of Chicago, he explains to us that: “respect cannot occur simply by commanding that it should happen. Mutual recognition has to be negotiated; this negotiation engages the complexities of personal character as much as social structure.” What exactly does this mean? Sennett calls it “the psychology of autonomy”, which involves “accepting in others what one does not understand”. Poor design decisions ruined the anticipated benefits of the 'block' type buildings which were idolized by Le Corbusier. Most of the blocks built in the PRL<sup>6</sup> (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa) were made according to specific norms for size

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<sup>3</sup> The eyes of the skin, Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Wikipedia

<sup>5</sup> Respect in a World of Inequality, 2003 Richard Sennett, W.W. Norton & Company New York

<sup>6</sup> People's Republic of Poland, the official name of communist Poland from 1952 to 1989

and space measures (based on the production availability). There was no space for any dignity in communist architecture. Most of them don't meet the requirements of the individual and his comfort levels. Often still too many people inhabit those small spaces. As a child I always thought that bedrooms are made only in American movies. No one in my family had a bedroom in their apartment, like in most Polish households. There was a 'duży pokój' (big room) and this room would typically serve as the room in which you would receive guests. The same room would serve as a dining room for the family when the midday meal was consumed, as the kitchens in the blocks were too small to fit a family table. In the evening the same room would be used as TV room for the parents and the kids. Finally in the evening the big room would be transformed into the parents' bedroom. In the morning everything would be stored away neatly. When you enter the Polish household you will never be able to tell that the guest room is the bedroom as well. All traces are well hidden. This reminds me of Pallasmaa's <sup>7</sup> words: "Architecture cannot however become an instrument of mere functionality, bodily comfort and sensory pleasure without losing its existentially mediating task"<sup>8</sup>. Not only the architecture but also the interior that surrounds might play the same role. The bed even does not look like a real bed. It does not have proper mattresses. It's simply a hard sofa which you can unfold and make flat. But it was function over comfort. Just like blocks themselves.

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<sup>7</sup>The eyes of the skin, Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

<sup>8</sup>The eyes of the skin, Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

### 3. BAZA

“When such daydreams as these take hold of meditating man, details grow dim and all picturesqueness fades. The very hours pass unnoticed and space stretches out interminably.”<sup>9</sup>

BAZA was a building across the street of my house, the grey block in Silesia. It was the most original building in the area. The design was well done, so different from the blocks surrounding it. The building was disused and empty, and bigger than the block I was living in. It was made out of orange coloured brick much lighter than the Germanic dark red brick used for buildings in the town. The building was left abandoned and there was a lot of space around it. You could as well see traces of simple decorative pavement. I could sense that once the building had its own glory. It was however in a rotting state for quite some time as there were small birch trees growing on the roof. It was standing there alone and available to me. The space allowed me to discover myself, all my fears, thoughts and feelings, there was the space to do so. Not only was it a prohibited space it had cellars which were sealed with cement into the entrances. There were a lot of homeless people that were hanging around in the confines of the building. All of this did not make the place unpleasant to me. When the place was empty I would use the possibility to spend my time over there. The cellars made me feel like an archaeologist in a tomb. And another time I felt like a miner walking through a dark corridor. In order to discover the underground I would make myself a torch from textiles lying around and any long enough wooden stick. Upstairs however there was plenty of light coming inside from enormous windows and few entrances which probably were so big that I assume it was previously a fire station. I was always trying to read the remaining texts that were painted on the walls and guess what the building previously served as. I believe that it may have served as a maintenance station for cars and busses. There was a row of abandoned bus size garages and some of them were used as metal and cardboard scrap yards. The place and the surrounding space had a huge impact on me. BAZA was asking for daydreaming, there was plenty to discover. With the objects that I discovered I would play for hours on end. The bricks that were lying around would be turned into any kind of new creations which I loved to make.

From an early age tactility was very important to me. Cotton, iron, clay, water and paper were materials that I enjoyed to play with as a child. It seems that I always picked a material for which I would understand the source and how it was made. On my own terms I would be experimenting with these materials. Nowadays still the mostly picked materials for my textile practice are silk, wool, wood, metal and clay. In BAZA huge parts of the white and green coloured plaster had come off in many places and had exposed the pattern of the clean bricks. This always fascinated me because it was interesting to study the system and understand how they were arranged to form the structure. I read this passage in Pallasmaa's<sup>10</sup> book: “memory arises in connection with the imagination”. My interest in BAZA's brick structure made me understand that we can use one material in many different ways and that one's imagination is

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<sup>9</sup>The poetics of space: Gaston Bachelard, 1994, Beacon Press Books

<sup>10</sup>The eyes of the skin, Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

the limit. The remaining parts of the plaster displayed parts of old advertisements. “Letters read by eyes turn to oral impressions,” as Pallasmaa<sup>11</sup> calls them. That always made me wonder how the place was used in the past as well as how many people had actually been occupying and working in this space.

In fact I think that all memories of the materials used in BAZA are recalling the memory of the first place in Silesia, which was called the ‘Czarny Las’ (Black Forest) which I described earlier (place number three). My parents were pleased to upgrade into a more modern facility after moving to a grey communist block (place number four). When I asked my mother what she remembers of Czarny Las (number three) she said it was the worst place she lived in. I see more quality in things that are well made, even if they are old or ugly. Communist blocks were never to my taste.

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<sup>11</sup>The eyes of the skin, Juhani Pallasmaa, 2012, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

#### 4. Kopernik

“The architecture is important, but life is more important” Oscar Niemeyer<sup>12</sup>

Oscar Niemeyer, a Brazilian architect whom I admire because of his wonderful works with concrete, says: “I think that architecture is about invention. We can obtain the intended result from a project but to invent is something very different. Architecture should not only be about designing a building that works well, it can also be beautiful, it can be different, and it can be surprising, can't it? In fact the surprise is the main element of a work of art”.

Unfortunately in the so repetitive Silesia the main objective is the attempt to be original. Rather than conducting urban planning Silesians were simply trying to add what was missing to their expanding cities. Oscar Niemeyer had the following point of view: he said “when a form creates beauty it becomes functional and therefore fundamental in architecture”<sup>13</sup>. The form of concrete I know sadly holds no beauty. Brasilia created by Niemeyer and communist blocks in Silesia is a whole world apart, economically and aesthetically. The great architect will always build, or design what was needed (not necessary). What does that say to us? I will use the words of the worldwide renowned British architect Norman Foster who admired Niemeyer, which are: “Brasilia is not simply designed, it is choreographed”. It was thought of for the public, the general public, not a target. That's why alongside the spaces to be lived in at the same time church, hospital, squares and narrow streets for pedestrians were added. In Silesia however the four walls of each apartment in each building block were the same as their neighbours' four walls within a radius of at least forty kilometres. The residents therefore attempted to fill the lack of creativity with their own fantasy of the interiors.

One of the most precious items in communist Polish households was a furniture piece called Kopernik. It came only in four different combinations and it was the only one available from the ships in Soviet Union times, if you were lucky to get one. In order to obtain such an item you would have to wait two to four weeks without any guarantee that anything would arrive. And there was no complaining; whatever set or colour was available you would take it. They were massive, made from wood, and not pressed shading or something else to imitate the real thing. All four of them were called Kopernik; V, VI, VII, VIII. If you were the lucky owner of the Kopernik you would try to expose the treasure. Usually Kopernik was therefore installed next to the biggest longest wall in the big room (‘duzy pokoj’). Some of these Koperniks are still standing in people's houses. My parents never got a Kopernik. Instead after the fall of the Soviet Union they had a black, glossy set made from pressed wood with a centrepiece that looked like a coffin. Now IKEA ‘Malmo’ sets are placed in these spaces. None of it ever looked right; they are all too big for the space.

People always compete. In Silesia, in communist times households were competing to have the whitest curtains, or the most original wood for the flower stand, the most colourful and soft velvet sofas and anything that imitated gold and marble, just like in Dynasty. It was sad to

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<sup>12</sup>Oscar Niemeyer and Norman Foster in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2013, Ivory Press

<sup>13</sup>Oscar Niemeyer and Norman Foster in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2013 Ivory Press

see that later everyone was competing about the same things. Post communism when most products became available, the competition changed into having new products first, and later this changed into having the most.

## 5. The Southern way of living

My time in Silesia is a very clear chapter in the memory of my childhood, up to the age of fourteen when I moved out. It is not that I do not like Silesia; I just always felt that I belong to the north of Poland. My intuition was telling me that one day I would return to where I came from. In fact I waited for this moment; the Silesians were waiting as well. The beginning of change for Poland came in the early nineties. They were waiting to see what would unfold and how that would impact them. The heavy industry wasn't controlled anymore by the USSR, and Poland had not yet joined the European Union. The new authorities were just trying to learn how to manage the new Third National Polish Republic. On top of that more and more people were changing the heating systems in their households with more modern solutions than coal, reducing the demand for this raw material and thereby reducing the requirement for mines in Silesia. In 1998 I left Silesia and moved back north.

One of my clearest memories was that the air in Silesia was different from the air in the rest of Poland. The air was 'visible'. It was so polluted that you could feel it in your throat and that it irritated your nostrils. My younger sister and I were only allowed to wear a lighter shade of clothes on Sunday. On other occasions the clothes would become dirty too fast. The light blue denim jeans could only be worn to school disco and church. My mother used to say that the air in Silesia is polluted and grey as the air on the day of 'All Saints' in Pomerania, when you are lighting up hundreds of grave candles at the cemetery. Even the wall paper of the small foyer was chosen by my mother to be dark (silver and black), to not become visibly dirty from the shoes and outdoor clothing such as coats. The room looked like a part of a funeral house. My parents even chose black furniture. Silesian people chose a red paint to colour their window frames, so that the ash from the air would not be noticeable as much as on white frames. Silesian people are really united. They tend to be practising Catholics and especially the mining community tends to support each other as if they are one big family. Being a child of a miner I knew my neighbours very well and I have been invited to all of their houses and they have been regular guests at ours. Even the refurbishments of the apartments in my block tend to happen at the same time as my neighbours' refurbishment as a result of good Silesian planning and efficiency.

There are a number of characteristics that define a typical Silesian household. Even if communist times were challenging, the Silesians always try to decorate their household as best as they could. Often they tried to find laminate flooring for the kitchen that imitated the wood. The same material would typically end up on the front door to cover up the state of the door. The biggest pride and must for a Silesian housewife are clean windows, no matter what time of the year. For Silesian women washing windows in the middle of the winter is not a problem. They add just a bit of alcohol into a hot water bowl with cleaning solution to make sure the water does not freeze while cleaning the windows. The snow-white curtains covering the windows have to be very decorative, the more, the better. The husbands if they have any 'do it yourself skills' (most of them have) make their own unique flower stands. In my youth the most fashionable home decoration was a flower stand made out of a tree trunk with



branches. The pride of the women is their home, waiting to welcome guests as per the saying: *Bog w dom gosc w dom* meaning to receive a guest is to receive God. For a woman in a Silesian household it is your duty to always be prepared to be a host. As with everything else in Silesia the cleaning of the house is well organized and scheduled. The whole family is included and the tasks were shared.

The task of a man was and still is to clean the car. The alternative task for the man once in a while is to air and beat the rug with a willow carpet beater. As the oldest child I was given the task of cleaning the carpet with a red sponge, after which I brushed out all the hair from the surface of the rug. As a last step I combed the edges of the fringe to ensure that they are all well presentable. If you do something in Silesia, you do it well. The cleaning of the house done by four people lasted approximately five hours. The ritual of cleaning in Silesia always happens on a Saturday. Sunday is a day for church, family and rest, absolutely no exceptions.

## 6. Space does matter

“I wish that all of us could choose and live in the spaces and places as we wish for. Maybe not all of us want that, but surely some of us need it” (A. Drupka).

All elements of the pattern from which our life is built and created have a role to play. Through describing the places where I lived with a strong focus on the fragments of my life in Silesia, I realised that elements such as specific materials and different typological spaces might go unnoticed. For example the feeling of the textile used for our beds; the temperature of the walls; the type material the house is built from; whether there is a window in our room; the number of chairs around the table; The weather can have an impact on our mood, but the space we live in will impact the quality of our lives, and it will be remembered by us. And by this first information we will compare any other fabric, room, and building to the first one. Material such as bricks or cement might be a binding element in the living memory. Then we will judge the comfort, style function, etc. But you will need the previous experience of space and living to judge the other. The pattern of our life is handmade by us individually, it takes time and effort. But it will result in quality. For example Picasso as a penniless adolescent living in an attic, expanded the quality of his live by spending a large amount of time in the streets of Barcelona with his companions thereby enlarging his space perception. There are many other examples of artists like Dali, Kafka and Beethoven trying to expand their space by occupying publicly available places such as walking on the beach, through a forest on a daily basis as part of their creative life. As a child and as an inhabitant of a communist block I escaped the limits of my living space by riding my bicycle. This gave me the ability to make my own decisions (speed, distance, duration). Nowadays I still enjoy cycling but the effect of freedom is broader. My current apartment in Amsterdam was chosen for two main reasons: enormous windows at the front and a balcony at the back. The windows do not have curtains and I enjoy deciding how much my life is shared with others. I live as I want, not ashamed of anything, which is the complete opposite from my communist childhood.

Le Corbusier, the French architect<sup>14</sup> who was dedicated to providing better living conditions for the residents of crowded cities was completely aware of the quality of space and this was exemplified by the 'Cabanon' which he designed and built in 1951 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France. The Cabanon was his holiday house on the coast of France. A space of 14m<sup>2</sup> with built-in furniture and one of the walls entirely covered with his painting. One of the most beautiful things about the house was the view from the window. He even got the idea to cover the window shutters with mirrors to bring the ravishing peaceful view inside the house, together with more light, without exposing any more of himself to the outside than he wanted to. I found the perfect balance between need and privacy by living per an 'open house' policy. Everyone is welcome at any time. Privacy might be achieved by balancing your private time with work duties as well as finding the right amount of private and public functions of space around you.

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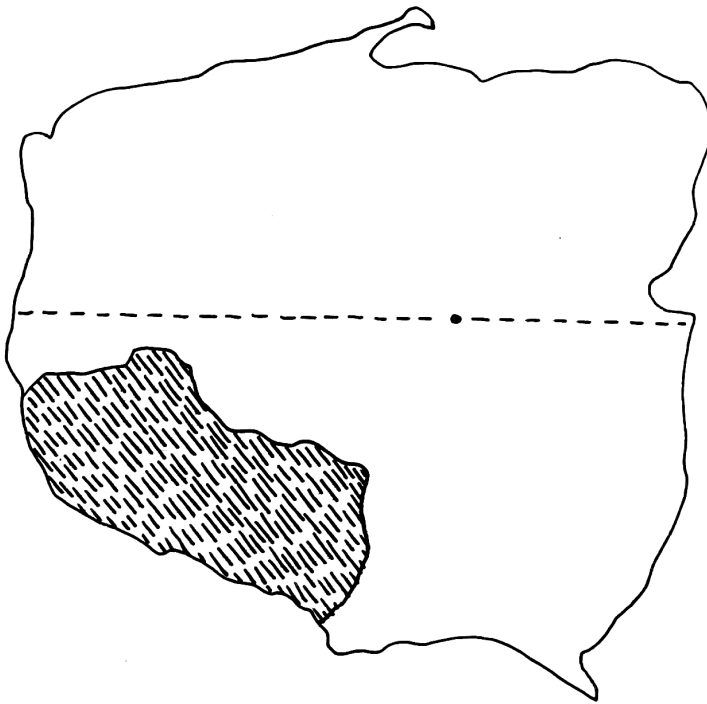
<sup>14</sup>Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris better known as Le Corbusier (1887-1965)

Privacy is a privilege, you need to earn it. There is you and the space that you are occupying. It might be a public space, a home, a hut, a farm, a villa, just any space. Often I'm doubtful if by closing open spaces we are able to make them more private. You might gain a feeling of privacy, but closing off your living space from others might actually result in limiting yourself. In my experience, the more public the space that I'm able to use freely, the more independent that it will make me feel and that assures my privacy. In Silesia there simply was no space for privacy, the thin walls were 'transparent', transferring any activity in the household to the neighbours.

Privacy was therefore not a choice.

I'm not saying that we all need to pay attention to every detail, but we should be aware of the space and place we are in.

## Appendix I: About Silesia



Silesia is a specific part of Poland and has its own strong dialect which cannot be understood in other parts of Poland (I refer to this part of Poland like Dutch people refer to Friesland). Beginnings of Silesia can be found as early as the eleventh century (Greater Poland). In the Middle Ages Silesia passed from Polish hands to Hussite rule in 1430. It was governed by Austria from 1526 onwards, and eventually became part of Prussia in 1742. Despite foreign governance, the Polish national movement remained strong in Bytom, and

during the second Polish Republic (1918-1939) the city which still partially belonged to Germany, upheld its connections with Poland and Polish heritage. Bytom was officially incorporated to Poland in March 1945. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginnings of industrialization, with the establishment of ironworks, factories and coal mines. The industry expanded under the Prussian rule, but after the city's liberation in 1945 it appeared that many of its assets had been demolished by the Red Army. The city would be dealt with another devastating blow the same year, when all adult men were arrested and transported to the USSR. State owned industrial plants (including 11 mines) were growing in size. In the 1970's the city of "coal and steel" thus employed over 63,000 industry workers. In the period of systemic transformation in the 1990's (post communism) the comprehensive restructuring of the sector led to dramatic changes in the city's social landscape. Only the Bobek-Centrum mine remained operational. The former industrial sites were neglected and eventually abandoned, leaving many spaces in the cityscape that await redevelopment.

In Silesia people talk about their childhood with a special sense of melancholy. They know that those times will never come back and the saddest thing for them is that their children won't be able to have the same experience of the autonomous Silesia that they know.

My view is that they somehow realised that with Poland joining the European Union they will become less independent, and it will be unavoidable for them to become more united with Poland. Not only more united with the rest of Poland, but the whole of Europe.

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