Halina Skibniewska’s Good Flat

Iwona Szustakiewicz

1Department of Architectural Heritage and Art, Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology, 00-659 Warszawa, Koszykowa 55, Poland.

iwona.szustakiewicz@wp.edu.pl

Abstract. The search for the best solutions in residential architecture has been one of the major areas of interest of architects connected with Warsaw University of Technology’s Faculty of Architecture ever since it was founded in 1915. Great achievements in the field were made by Halina Skibniewska (1921 -2011), who designed many housing developments Warsaw: Sady Żoliborskie (1958-1963), Sadyba (1972-1974), Szwoleżerów (1974), the Winograd estate in Poznań (1963-1964) and the Białołęka district of Warsaw (1975-1986). Her contribution to residential construction led her to receiving numerous awards, including the Mister Warsaw title given for the best building in the city, although the true measure of her success was the fact that all of her contemporaries wanted to “live at Skibniewska’s”. The article describes the most important objectives assumed by Halina Skibniewska when designing residential buildings and estates, illustrated with examples of her designs. It was her conviction that designing is the culmination of a long process and should be preceded by analysis, taking into account the local landscape conditions, and sociological, demographic, psychological and economic aspects. She valued direct social consultation just as much as she did scientific research, even carrying out discussions with children. She paid a great deal of attention to the structure of the family as the main users of residential buildings, and to the effects of this structure on the spatial and functional arrangement of the home, which was reflected in the doctoral dissertation. These studies resulted in the creation of the so-called open home model method, which is a concept of a flexible flat which can be modified in response to the changing needs of its users. Halina Skibniewska’s social sensitivity meant that she was the first person in Poland to analyse the problems of elderly and disabled people, and to design flats in response to the conditions shaped by the state of their health and how able-bodied they are. An extremely important question for Halina Skibniewska were the surroundings of buildings, which she considered a kind of extension of home. She became famous not only as a designer who was concerned with providing housing developments with the necessary services and facilities, but also as a zealous defender of existing nature, capable of changing the location of the stairs on a block of flats being designed in order to preserve two old mulberry trees for future residents. Not all the suggestions of this Warsaw architect proved possible to implement in the politicised economic conditions at that time, but many of her ideas were reflected in the architecture of housing developments and estates, which had and still has a positive influence on the residents’ quality of life. There is no doubt that many of her views are still valid today, and can be an inspiration for contemporary architects in their quests.

1. Introduction

The search for the best solutions in housing architecture has been an important area of interest for architects associated with the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology since its foundation in 1950 to the present day. Halina Skibniewska had some outstanding achievement in this field. She was the author and co-author of designs/projects for many Warsaw housing estates: Sady Żoliborskie (1958-1963), Sadyba (1972-1974), Szwoleżerów (1974), as well as the Winograd estate in Poznań (1963-1964) or the whole district of Białołęka in Warsaw (1975-1986). She was honored with numerous awards for her contribution to housing development, including the "Mister of..."
Warsaw" award for the best building in the city, but the real measure of her success was the fact that all her contemporaries wanted to "live with Skibniewska", i.e in a house she had designed. This article summarizes the search for an answer to the question what made her proposals for architectural solutions so immensely popular.

2. Halina Skibniewska- some facts from her life and architectural studies

Halina Skibniewska was born on January 10, 1921 in Warsaw. During the Second World War she was a member of the Home Army – the underground resistance movement) and of Żegota – the Polish Council to Aid Jews. It was in the Warsaw Ghetto that she was arrested and brutally beaten. She began to study architecture in 1940 at the S. Noakowski Women’s School of Architecture in Warsaw, which she attended for two years, and continued her studies at the underground Technical University. Clandestine classes were taught by lecturers from the Faculty of Architecture. Some of the teachers were from the Workshop for Architecture and Urban Planning, PAU, associated with the Warsaw Housing Co-operative and Social Building Company, and included architects, co-operative activists, sociologists and others who worked on concepts of housing districts, means of supplying the city and a concept of Warsaw against the background of a regional plan. At PAU Skibniewska came across Helena and Szymon Syrkus, leading representatives of Polish avangarde architecture, members of CIAM, advocates of the idea of social housing. It was probably at this time that she became convinced about the educational possibilities of architecture.

After the war, Halina Skibniewska started teaching architectural design at the Faculty and continued to do so for the next 55 years. She obtained a doctorate in 1971 and, in 1975, the title of professor. From 1948 to 1957, she collaborated with Romuald Gutt at his design offices. The choice of the mentor was not accidental, Skibniewska shared his views. Years later she mentioned that Gutt understood the scale of man and his place in the world, also in the world of nature.

Eventually, Skibniewska specialized in housing architecture - in her opinion, the basic architectural task, the basic landscape material. From 1958, she worked in state-owned enterprises as a housing estate designer, but her design activities were not limited to the planning of housing complexes and residential houses mentioned in the Introduction. She was the author of numerous complementary projects: the Community School1 in Sadyba (1972); a commercial and service building on the Szwoleżerów housing estate in Warsaw (1974); a kindergarten in Sokółka (1975); a large self-service store in Wola in Warsaw (1978). In the years 1965-1985 she was a Member of Parliament, from 1971 to 1985 she was deputy speaker (as the first woman in the history of the Polish parliament). She was active in many scientific and social organizations. Halina Skibniewska died on April 20, 2011 in Warsaw [1-6].

2.1 The flexible apartment

Halina Skibniewska believed that the creation of architecture had many sources: knowledge, analysis, experiences, contacts with people and nature, aesthetic preferences - in her opinion design was the culmination of a long process and should be preceded by research, taking into account local landscape conditions, sociological aspects, demographic, psychological, economic. She also highly valued direct consultations with the public and talked with all potential users of the housing estate, including children who, she believed, often reasoned more rationally than many adults [4].

Seeking high-quality solutions that would meet the needs of users, Skibniewska began to study the structure of a family and the stages in its life cycle2 and how these impacted on its needs in terms of shaping the flat. The results of her research were later included in her doctoral thesis. An important conclusion from the research was the conviction that when planning the layout of the flat it is crucial to take into account not only the size of the family, but also other elements of its structure, such as internal relationships, age, composition and gender, occupations, habits and preferences, the mother’s work. It should also be noted that he family is subject to change, it is dynamic, and its needs change

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1 That is a school with an extracurricular program serving the local community.
2 As the most frequent user of a flat. In her studies she also used the concept of household.
over time. Observation of the numerous activities of users pointed to the need, varying over time, to create in a flat a very subtly balanced space of intercourse, contact and seclusion, from full participation in the group, through the diminishing of contacts, to total intimacy. Noting the general rules as to how flats are used, Skibniewska did not ignore the ideas of specific users about their life needs and hierarchy, which prompted her to seek solutions that could satisfy general tendencies but leaving a margin for individual interpretation [7].

The problem of adapting the layout of a flat to the structure of a family was of special importance when space was limited. In socialist Poland, the rules of the market were not the deciding factor as to who would use the flat, and the size of the premises was dependent on the number of users. The size of the flat was determined by legally sanctioned so-called norms, living space allocated per person. In 1959 the normative was adopted 11 m² per person, in 1974 it was reduced to 7-10 m². The restrictions adopted were mainly due to economic reasons.

As a result of theoretical studies and in response to economic and legal constraints, Halina Skibniewska created the so-called method of open models of flats, ie the concept of a flexible flat that can be modified in response to the changing needs of users. She used it in the housing projects of the Sady Żoliborskie I estate (from 1958). The task was to find open and universal solutions within a certain range of needs and standards of future users, despite the use of closed building systems. The basic assumption was to avoid, as far as possible, the introduction of fixed elements, structural and installation, within the area of the flat, to place vertical plumbing and ventilation stacks at the edge of the apartment and to avoid placing load-bearing partition walls within the flat. This made it possible to leave a large area at the disposal of the residents. The most variants were achieved by placing flats at the corners of buildings. Applying these assumptions, four baseline models of apartments with areas of 46.5 m², 56.3 m², 61.4 m², 65.9 m² were developed, together with eight functional variants. Example transformations of a flat with an area 56.3 m² is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Flat for five people, 56.3 m², various plans for use [7]
The concept was complemented by the design of furnishings and the division of space using pre-packaged furniture designed by Skibniewska, allowing a significant number of combinations with a relatively small number of basic elements produced in short series with different finishes (Figures 2, 3). The furniture was never actually produced.

According to Skibniewska, the proposed model of an open apartment had significant economic and social benefits, allowing growing families to avoid troublesome and costly moves. She also saw the environmental aspect and believed that due to the longevity of the building regimes being implemented and planned for further implementation, it was necessary to look for solutions allowing easy functional and technical modernization of flats in subsequent periods of changing standards.

2.2 The estate as an extension of the flat

Skibniewska felt that the shared facilities were an important continuation of the flat itself, both within the residential area and, above all, in the wider residential environment. She associated the functional aspects with spatial and aesthetic ones, and said that it is impossible to separate buildings from the context - the negative of the form, that is the free space, the landscape.

These views were reflected in the housing estates designed by Skibniewska, where it was not limited only to offering the broadest possible service program. In the design of housing complexes, she adopted two guiding principles: 1) the residential environment is a social environment; 2) the residential environment is a part of the natural environment - because man is a social being and one of the elements of nature [8]. This translated, on the one hand, into a wide-ranging analysis of the needs of residents, with particular emphasis on mothers with children, children and young people, and older people, which in practice resulted in numerous, varied playgrounds designed taking into account research into child psychology (Figures 4), and in attempts to create separate zones for other users. On the other hand, it resulted in a greater awareness in the planning of the surrounding greenery, and especially preserving the existing vegetation, particularly trees as an important element of the landscape. This care was already very evident during the building of the Sady Żoliborskie estate, which took its name from orchards and gardens that were previously in this place. There were even stories about an architect who changed the location of the stairs in the designed block to save two old mulberry trees, and the inhabitants recalled being able to pick cherries straight from their balconies.
In times pervaded by the idea of typification, Halina Skibniewska always looked for individual elements that would allow residents to connect with the housing estate. These could be, for example, vases from a devastated palace from Silesia (figure 5), or vegetable patches within the Białołeka estates, unfortunately never introduced. The composition of a building complex was determined by every valuable tree, existing building, view. She was convinced that the right design decisions on the scale of the estate could significantly improve the quality of the residential environment, and, through the participation of residents in managing the housing estate, identifying with the widely understood residential environment contribute to shaping civic attitudes.

A chance for the implementation of these plans appeared along with the project of the Sadyba estate (1968) - as part of the "housing estate for all" concept. Also here the plans were preceded by in-depth studies. Skibniewska cooperated with Professor Marian Weiss - director of the Metropolitan Center for Rehabilitation of Motor Diseases in Konstancin and housing cooperatives. For the first
time in Poland, an experimental research institution was created, whose aim was to determine the most appropriate type of housing for a given disability. The result was not only planning decisions on the scale of the housing estate and residential premises, but a comprehensive program of care and integration activities, unfortunately - it was only partly undertaken. The program envisaged the self-sufficiency of the disabled and making them independent of outside care.

The principles adopted in the planning, design and implementation of the Sadyba housing estate were primarily: integration - location of special flats within a housing complex, among flats for healthy residents, close to services and health care facilities; self-sufficiency of the proposed flats, allowing the greatest possible user autonomy and removal of barriers within the housing estate\(^3\). Halina Skibniewska designed two types of special flats in small groupings, located on the ground floors of buildings. The first type was a flat for single people, adapted for disabled people in wheelchairs (Figure 6). These were temporary flats where the patients of the Metropolitan Rehabilitation Centre for Motion Disorders were taught during a three-month training cycle how to live independently. If necessary, they could ask for help from a nurse who was on duty in a specially adapted apartment. The flats were completed adapted to the needs of the disabled with special bathrooms and kitchens, as well as such features as very light sliding doors, and special furniture (designed in cooperation with the Institute of Industrial Design). There was also a light and sound alarm system. The second type was a family flat, suitably adapted, located in a 5-story building (Figure 7). All flats, for single people and families were equipped with loggias and small gardens, containing equipment and features designed with specific therapies in mind. Services were located nearby: a multi-purpose pavilion, a medical clinic and special parking lots. Moreover, wheelchair users, after leaving the temporary flats were moved to adapted individual flats located elsewhere on the Sadyba estate in buildings with special lifts for wheelchairs.

3 The fourth postulate was economy, necessary in conditions of a very large housing deficit. This postulate was met, the implemented elements of the program for the disabled did not increase the investment costs.
The third element of the program was to be a house with independent flats for one or two people, older and/or disabled (Figure 8). Most flats were designed to be adaptable to the changing needs of residents taking into account their probable, progressive loss of autonomy – up to the moment when a wheelchair would be needed. It was an ambitious attempt to design a flat whose layout could easily be adapted to the life cycle and therefore to avoid the need for moving elsewhere. Housing residents with varying degrees of mobility created conditions for mutual assistance and internal integration. The house, with its own green area, was to be located next to a service and commercial center and health center, connected directly with a day care center open to the elderly from the district. Again, the project was never realized.

Figure 8. Building with flats for the elderly, with possibility of adaptation, plan of ground floor and plans of flats with examples of various adaptations [4]

The adjustment of the service program to the needs of all users, including the disabled, required special consideration, especially taking into account building regulations 4. The architect proposed, for the first time in Poland, a decentralized social welfare system based on two small health centers, each with three doctor’s offices, located in the vicinity of the flats for the disabled. The Environmental School also had an innovative character with a separate social and cultural program designed for all residents. The housing barriers for wheelchair users were abolished, the disabled were provided with access to buildings with their own flats and to doctors and a nearby service and commercial center, parking spaces for invalids were located near their houses. Only in the realm of plans remained A swimming pool adapted to the needs of the disabled and outdoor exercise facilities for everyone, but tailored to the needs of people with disabilities remained in the realm of unrealized plans [9].

3. Conclusion

Halina Skibińska's theoretical and design activity was part of a discussion which had been going on since the World War the First on the improvement of living conditions, and especially of the residential environment and utility of modern apartments. Her views were founded on the ideas of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, CIAM, and in Poland, among others, the Polish Society for the Reform of Housing, Warsaw Housing Cooperative, Praesensu. On this basis, she created her own original concept of a good flat, which she tried to consistently pursue in the belief that the work of an architect also has an ethical dimension. Not all the proposals of this Warsaw architect were feasible in the conditions of the politically motivated economy of Poland at that time, but many of her ideas were reflected in the architecture of the estates, which had and still have a positive impact on the quality of

4 Especially as the estates were built on the outskirts of the city, far from amenities and services.
life of the residents. Although Skibniewska was active in a specific political and economic reality, the ideas she developed are universal and can be an inspiration for today’s architects.

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