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ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORY

ARCHITEKTURA I HISTORIA

Abstract

The article reflects on the contemporary condition of architecture and art in the postmodern era. The author emphasises that the former ideas of the avant-garde and modernism have lost their strength, giving way to a diversity of forms, the absence of coherent manifestos, and a pursuit of novelty. Contemporary architecture combines contradictory styles – from minimalism, through deconstruction, to ecology – and its true value will only be verified over time. Dialogue with other artistic disciplines also plays a significant role, as do *paper architecture* projects, which, despite not being implemented, influence creative directions. The text concludes with a call for a new avant-garde – an architecture that is strong, expressive, and capable of evoking emotions rather than merely fulfilling utilitarian functions.

Keywords: architecture, decomposition, novelty, avant-garde, history

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje refleksję nad współczesną kondycją architektury i sztuki w epoce ponowoczesności. Autor stara się podkreślić, że dawne idee awangardy i modernizmu straciły swoją siłę, a w ich miejsce pojawiła się różnorodność form, brak spójnych manifestów i pogoń za nowością. Współczesna architektura łączy ze sobą sprzeczne style – od minimalizmu, przez dekonstrukcję, po ekologię – a jej wartość zweryfikuje dopiero czas. Ważną rolę odgrywa też dialog z innymi dziedzinami sztuki, a także projekty *paper architecture*, które mimo braku realizacji wpływają na kierunki twórczości. Tekst kończy się postulatem nowej awangardy – architektury silnej, ekspresyjnej i zdolnej wywoływać emocje, a nie tylko spełniać funkcje użytkowe.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, dekompozycja, nowość, awangarda, historia

Postmodernity is a state of culture in which we live today, or at least that is how we perceive it. What was once regarded by philosophers and creators as important postulates of art and architecture has died or is slowly dying. The slogans of the avant-garde and the tenets of modernism – understood as modernity or as faith in a single path for the world of culture – no longer apply. Trends have become more important than ideas, most people are preoccupied with themselves, there is no room for altruism, and the pursuit of a just world is of little interest to anyone. Yet, despite these turbulences, great architecture is still created.

For creators (we write in hope), it seems important to engage in discussions of the texts of philosophers and aestheticians from the most distant times, especially those that refer to architecture. After all;

In aesthetics, as in philosophy, history, or politics, one must have ideas. One must also be able to justify them. [...] Of course, beautiful ideas – new beautiful ideas – are very precious; they are as valuable as they are rare. There is no intellectual life without them. Yet is every idea life-giving? [...] let us also not believe those who think that one can create science by collecting minor facts, short-sighted experiments, observations organized by no general conception, not illuminated by any deeper intuition, not enlivened by any deeper human significance¹.

And this is a quotation which might encourage broad reflections concerning new architecture and history. We have known for some time that every contemporary “novelty” will be verified only by subsequent generations of architects, theoreticians and users. Sometimes it will be recorded in the history of architecture, and sometimes forgotten. It might be rediscovered as something interesting after many years, like the timid Polish postmodernism. The course of architecture, due to its evolutionary character, is difficult to predict, and what seems attractive today may turn out to be mere kitsch in years to come.

In reflections on art, the problem of the need to prove the theses one adopts may also arise, since “A statement has meaning either by virtue of asserting something about the world that can be verified, or by virtue of the meaning of the words it contains. There is no third possibility. Thus, any utterance that cannot be tested by referring either to reality or to the consequences of the definitions we have adopted is a meaningless utterance”². All theories of art, being physically immeasurable, may prove difficult to assess unambiguously in scientific terms. It seems that once the most important feature characterising art was style. Styles could offer creators a certain assurance in verifying their path towards beauty, or at least in attempting such a pursuit. Yet art and architecture have always reached a point at which boredom set in, and creators were compelled to search for further novelties. The author belongs to the (older) generation that still remembers how, in the twentieth century, our professors would ask students in which style they wished to design their building. Such a question may seem naïve today, yet once it might have had some meaning. Even now we can recall and identify a building as Baroque, Gothic, or Classical. The stylistic uniformity that once prevailed made it easier to build by following well-remembered principles. Today, unity in design is fading or has completely disappeared. For this reason, theoretical inquiries concerning architecture may turn out to be rather complicated. It is precisely why contemporary creators find it so difficult to explain unambiguously the form of their works. Perhaps it is also the result of their belief in their own avant-garde nature, or simply a reluctance to issue artistic manifestos – hard to write and out of fashion. For avant-garde art has always happened to appeal more to feeling than to reason or understanding. Contemporary architecture is filled with coexisting stylistic tendencies. Despite their functionalist foundations, the works of modernist creators were often poetically distant from one another in style. Postmodernism, with its fascination for the past, shattered memorised forms, while deconstructivist architecture decomposes all historical forms, deliberately disregarding the aesthetic habits of its audiences.

A crucial question is how architecture relates to the other arts. This relationship allows us to put forward a thesis – difficult to substantiate in the postmodern world – that architecture

¹ R. Francès, *Estetyka: problemy i metody* [in:] I. Wojnar (ed.), *Antologia współczesnej estetyki francuskiej*, PWN, Warszawa 1980, pp. 463–464.

² E. Gellner, *Słowa i rzeczy, czyli nie pozbawiona analizy krytyka filozofii lingwistycznej*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1984, p. 172.

may still be regarded as an autonomous field of art. Short-lived fashions and constant change also shape the way architectural works are perceived. We see that for some time now everything has been in flux: the world of art and architecture abounds in overlapping ideas and forms. The diversity is immense. Once, form was tied to a specific type of building. Today, creators are compelled each time to strive for absolute novelty, adapting their architectural solutions accordingly. Thus we find the new architectures of minimalism, deconstruction, decomposition, postmodernism, modernism, and ecology side by side. Everything is permitted, but it must be ever-changing – it may be either a virtue or simply the creators' indolence. The postulates of functionality are being replaced by the pursuit of forms that are unique and previously unknown. Everything must, of course, be executed flawlessly and functionally, yet it goes without saying, and would even be inappropriate to mention it. When we look at something as ordinary as a multi-storey car park, we no longer perceive flat rectangles with spaces for cars. Instead, we see a gigantic sculpture, which appears more the work of an engineer than of an architect. In 1899, the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde wrote: "The beauty achieved by the engineer arises from the fact that he is not aware of seeking beauty"³. Today, architects try to pretend that they are not in search of beauty.

Even modern computer renderings that accompany the creative process are perceived by the creators themselves as necessary, though no longer necessarily beautiful. History, too, has not always been synonymous with a pursuit of unconditional beauty. It is often said that tradition must not be questioned. Those unfamiliar with history are considered inferior creators. Yet architects have always had to struggle against the sacredness of historical building forms. All novelty and avant-garde movements rejected the superstitions of the past. Looking back, after all, cannot help us discover a better new path. Cultural identity is easily found in architectural open-air museums. Yet contemporaneity strips architecture of the magic that accompanied it throughout the entire history of humankind. The problem arises already at the level of defining architecture itself. The dictionary makes our task somewhat easier. Its definition of architecture is terse and dry, and reads: "The art of shaping space, expressed in the design, construction, and artistic formation of all kinds of buildings"⁴. Such a definition, however, is not easy to explain unambiguously, since in antiquity art was also associated with craft, and the word "artistic" alone would require pages of explanation. Yet in our reflections we are not concerned with architecture that can be regarded as mere craft. Hence one may ponder a number of questions about the form that true architecture should take and about its function – if it requires any. This, however, leads us to the conclusion of a *sine qua non* condition of contemporary architecture: the need to build.

It should be emphasised that an important part of the history of architecture consists of works created only on paper, which has not diminished their significance, and that such works have had a great impact on subsequent generations of architects. *Paper architecture* – as it is dismissively called by some – through its immaterial character and the ease of creation without the need for construction, could readily lay the foundations for new styles and tendencies. Such reflections may therefore also lead us to seek connections between building and art as a whole. We may thus ask a series of questions and try, as far

³ P. Francstel, *Sztuka a technika w XIX i XX w.*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1966, p. 153.

⁴ M. Szymczak (ed.), *Słownik języka polskiego*, vol. 1, A–K, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1982, p. 74.

as possible (and curiosity allows), to answer them. Some questions, however, will remain without a complete response. The issues concerning the kind of art that architecture ought to be cannot always be described mathematically. This is why it must be presented against the background of painting, sculpture, or poetry – for these, too, are often ambiguous in their theories – yet they can complement a broader view of modern art and contribute to a clearer understanding of the form of contemporary architecture. Yet, as Pierre Francastel wrote:

To understand the true situation of architecture in contemporary society, one must consider the techniques of builders within the context of other artistic techniques. It must be demonstrated that the appearance of the machine – or more precisely, of technology – had repercussions in all the arts, bearing witness to the same shock experienced by the cognitive faculties and by sensibility. Only then will it be possible to undertake serious studies of the changing forms of architecture and art in present-day society⁵.

These words were obviously written long ago and referred to a different kind of architecture, yet they fit perfectly with the world that surrounds us today.

Looking at the history and present of architecture, one may hope that the slogan for future generations could become the prophetic, though somewhat timeworn, words of the creators from Coop Himmelb(l)au: “We are tired of seeing Palladio and other historical



Ill. 1. Four Car Parks, Bahrain, Christian Kerez, photo by T. Kozłowski
Ill. 2. Four Car Parks, Bahrain, Christian Kerez, photo by T. Kozłowski

⁵ P. Francastel, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

masks. Because with architecture, we don't want to exclude everything that is disquieting. We want architecture that has more. Architecture that bleeds, that exhausts, that whirls, and even breaks. Architecture that lights up, stings, rips, and tears under stress"⁶. It is easy to say, yet much harder to create such architecture, or at least only a few are capable of building it. Still, as spectators, we may try to connect with the words of these great creators and cry out with them: WE WANT A NEW AVANT-GARDE! And once again, as so often in the history of art, perhaps only an echo will answer us, or perhaps silence will fall.

References

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⁶ Coop Himmelb(l)au: Architecture Must Blaze [in:] design manifestos, org,<https://designmanifestos.org/coop-himmelblau-architecture-must-blaze/> (access: 11.10.2025).