

KRZYSZTOF BIZIO<sup>1</sup>

## VERNACULARISM IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE – IDEAS AND FORMS

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### WERNAKULARYZM W ARCHITEKTURZE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ – IDEE I FORMY

#### Abstract

Vernacularism, understood as an attitude referring to locality, rural tradition and place, is one of the important trends of contemporary culture. This idea was also embodied in architectural work. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, it became a concept co-creating modernity, in opposition to architecture based on eclectic patterns. In the period of modernism, which promoted abstract forms, vernacularism became a marginalized trend. Opposition to modernism, the emergence of postmodern architecture and regionalism, along with the beginning of the 21st century, the combination of vernacular motifs with the ideas of the new modernism, resulted in traditional vernacular forms gaining a new form. From a historical perspective, a changing ideological genesis and a multitude of appropriate formal solutions can be seen. This results in the conclusion that referring to vernacular motifs in contemporary architecture means a constant redefinition of concepts – tradition, continuity and modernity.

*Keywords: vernacularism, contemporary architecture, architectural form*

#### Streszczenie

Wernakularyzm, rozumiany jako postawa odwołująca się do lokalności, tradycji wsi i miejsca, stanowi jeden z ważnych nurtów współczesnej kultury. Idea ta znalazła odbicie także w twórczości architektonicznej. Na przełomie XIX i XX w. stała się ona konceptem współtworzącym nowoczesność, znajdującym się w opozycji wobec architektury opartej o wzory eklektyczne. W okresie modernizmu, promującym formy abstrakcyjne, wernakularyzm stał się w nurtem marginalnym. Sprzeciw wobec modernizmu, pojawienie się architektury postmodernistycznej i regionalizmu, a w początkach XXI w. także połączenie wątków wernakularnych z ideami nowego modernizmu, spowodowały, że tradycyjne formy wernakularne uzyskały nową postać. W perspektywie historycznej widoczną jest zmieniająca geneza ideowa i wielość stosowanych rozwiązań formalnych. Prowadzi to do konkluzji, że odwoływanie się do motywów wernakularnych w architekturze współczesnej jest ciągłym redefiniowaniem pojęć – tradycji, kontynuacji i nowoczesności.

*Słowa kluczowe: wernakularyzm, architektura współczesna, forma architektoniczna*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture inspired by the local culture of the countryside and region, especially in relation to the main avant-garde trends of contemporary times, may seem to be a seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Ph.D. Arch. Krzysztof Bizio, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, West Pomeranian University of Technology, Szczecin, krzysztof.bizio@zut.edu.pl; ORCID 0000-0002-8738-2448

anachronistic approach. However, the analysis of the attitudes of architects and theoreticians of the last 150 years indicates that at certain historical moments, the reference to this tradition was a marker of progress and even of the avant-garde. The origins of these inspirations should be traced back to the second half of the 19th century, when they opposed classical culture and eclecticism. A similar mechanism of opposition also occurred in the 1960s, with the emergence of postmodern architecture. In this context, the study of the relationship between architectural theory and architectural practice in relation to rural architecture and local culture allows to grasp a broader perspective and interpretation of two seemingly contradictory concepts: tradition and modernity in architecture.

The term „vernacularism” in relation to art and architecture was first used in the 1850s. Since then, it has been part of the theoretical discourse and design works. The first Congress of Vernacular Architecture, held in 1975 in Plovdiv, as well as the International Committee on Vernacular Architecture (CIAV), established in the following year by ICOMOS, were an attempt to create a platform for the exchange of ideas.<sup>2</sup> There is no clear definition of vernacularism in architecture, but the majority of considerations revolve around meanings: rural architecture, folklore, homeliness, nativeness, but also widely understood autonomous spontaneous architecture, created without the help of an architect. In this article the notion of vernacular architecture refers to the inspiration of rural and regional architecture, but omits its understanding as an independent creation (architecture without an architect). For the sake of simplification, the concepts of vernacularism and neo-vernacularism have also been accepted as equivalent.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of this study is the analysis of relations between contemporary architecture and vernacular architecture. The period from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century was assumed as the time frame of the research. The wide range of topics and the multitude of solutions made it necessary to select characteristic and representative examples of implementation. Moreover, the article presents solutions of Szczecin’s architecture, which are supposed to illustrate local forms of applying universal ideas. The outcome of the conducted research should be:

- distinguishing the main historical moments in which vernacularism inspired stylistic changes in contemporary architecture;
- identification of the main areas of relations between vernacular architecture and ideological changes in contemporary architecture.

## **2. VERNACULARISM IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES AS A SYMBOL OF MODERNITY**

Relations between the new trends in architecture and the architecture of the countryside and the region, which influenced the formation of early modernism and, as a consequence, the whole modern trend, began in the second half of the 19th century and reached their peak at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It should be noted that these influences have had a variety of origins, and have brought about a variety of ideological and formal effects. The

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<sup>2</sup> G. Rytel, *Wernakularna, czyli jaka? Uwagi semantyczne na marginesie konferencji*, Budownictwo i Architektura, 2015, no. 14(3), p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> E. Kal (ed.), *Wernakularyzm i neowernakularyzm w sztuce, literaturze i myśli o sztuce*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pomorskiej w Słupsku, Słupsk 2019.

main inspirations of these searches should be indicated: 1) searching for a new housing environment, 2) inspiration from crafts and local culture, 3) searching for national forms.

The first of the trends was the search for an alternative model of the city. Dynamic urbanization processes in European cities in the second half of the 19th century based on the separation of industrial development and intensive quarterly rental development. Attempts to further intensify the profits and density of buildings led to spatial pathologies, which in the German-speaking cultural circle have been given the notion of a „stone city” (Mietskasernen). The urban planners of the time began to look for alternative solutions to the new housing environment. From a historical perspective, the most important of the new trends turned out to be the Howard’s idea of a city-garden. Although Ebenezer Howard’s concepts significantly exceeded those of urban composition and were in fact an idea in terms of a broadly understood social city,<sup>4</sup> they needed to be architecturally materialized. In the architectural projects of the first solutions in Letchworth and Welwyn, the references to urban planning and architecture of English villages were visible. The idea of city-gardens was taken exceptionally favorably in Europe at that time, and in many countries it gained local forms. An example is the German version of the city-garden, which was propagated, among others, by Riemerschmid, Tessenov and Muthesius. Hermann Muthesius in his work *Das englische Haus* promoted an architectural idyll based on a variation on rural forms (Ill. 1).



Ill. 1. Residential house at 8 Ks. S. Stojalowskiego Street (Graßmannweg) in Szczecin  
Fragment of the Ackermann Hill complex (Ackermannshöhe) which was created immediately before the outbreak of World War I. The urban and architectural solutions of the complex were inspired by the concepts of the city-garden of Hermann Muthesius and used vernacular style.

<sup>4</sup> E. Howard, *Miasta-ogrody jutra*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2015, pp. 121–132.

The second trend were solutions inspired by craftsmanship and local culture. In these concepts, craftsmanship was to be an alternative to repetitive industrial production. The origins of this trend can be traced back to the ideas of John Ruskin, followed by the emergence of the Arts and Crafts movement led by William Morris. The continuation of these ideas can be found in the Vienna Secession, the Krakow Workshop Association and other organizations. Although the aspect of rural culture was not directly accentuated in these trends, the reference to the broadly understood folklore had a constitutional meaning for them. From the Polish perspective, Zakopane Style was a more important example of the region's traditions from the end of the 19th century. It is worth noting that the style created by Stanisław Witkiewicz still has an impact on Polish architecture.

The third trend was the search for national styles and forms. The idea of national styles, in which architecture was to express the „spirit of the nation”, began to develop in European architecture also in the second half of the 19th century. In the initial period, the creators focused on transforming the motifs of medieval architecture, as well as selected classical motifs. The search for neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic varieties, which were perceived as local, became particularly representative. The architects working independently from each other in different countries (including England, Germany, architects associated with Polish culture) searched for architectural forms based on the traditions of rural architecture. Paradoxically, the result of local searches was a relatively similar formal solutions, although an emphasis was put on individual elements. Thus, in the Polish architecture there was a specific combination of the tradition of the Polish royal court and the idea of the city-garden. The first attempts to combine these inspirations took place in the first decade of the 20th century, but they flourished after 1918. In the first years after regaining independence, the architecture inspired by the royal court forms became even promoted by the state in the Second Republic of Poland. The phenomenon of Polish architecture of the 20th century and the beginnings of the 21st century is the fact that the inspirations of the Polish court tradition are still valid.

### 3. MODERNISM AND REJECTION OF THE IDEA OF LOCALITY IN FAVOR OF INTERNATIONALISM

The term “internationalism” in relation to modernist architecture was first used in 1925<sup>5</sup> by Walter Gropius in the publication *Internationale Architektur*.<sup>6</sup> The culminating point was the creation of the concept of „international style” and related to it catalogue of the exhibition *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*,<sup>7</sup> which was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932 in New York City. The views presented there promoted the concept of an international style, in which the “new tradition” was to be universal, independent of the place of origin.

In this context, at the beginning of modernism we can even speak of a programmatic rejection of vernacularism. It should be noted, however, that the architecture of the modernism period included very different directions. It would allow, with reference to selected examples of expressionist architecture, late modernism architecture, or especially the architecture of

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<sup>5</sup> H.-U. Khan, *International Style. Modernist Architecture from 1925 to 1965*, Taschen, Köln 2001, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> W. Gropius, *Internationale Architektur* [in:] *Architectural Theory from the Renaissance to the Present*, Taschen, Köln 2003, pp. 722–731.

<sup>7</sup> H.-R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* [in:] *Architectural Theory from the Renaissance to the Present*, Taschen, Köln 2003,, pp. 714–721.

the so-called semi-modernism, to find threads referring to traditional or even rural forms. However, this does not change the general negative attitude towards historical continuity.

From the contemporary perspective, however, the process of “vernacularization” seems to be worth analyzing. This phenomenon involved the reconstruction of modernist buildings and giving them traditional forms. Typical in this type of solutions is the introduction of high roofs, and reconstruction of front elevations. In Polish architecture, an example of such a solution was the Castle of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła, which in 1929–1930 was designed by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz. Even before the outbreak of World War II, the building was rebuilt and sloping roofs were introduced. A similar fate was to happen to the Bauhaus in Dessau during the Third Reich. „Vernacularization” was used especially often in housing solutions. Users, by means of flat roof superstructures, usually want to achieve two elements: larger usable areas (function) and more “familiar” from their perspective formal solutions (Ill. 2).



Ill. 2. Kaliny Housing Estate in Szczecin with a single-family housing complex  
A housing estate of one-storey, repetitive residential houses established in the 1960s (house on the left). Since the beginning of the 1990s it has been undergoing systematic reconstruction – „vernacularization” (house on the right). The architectural form is being fundamentally changed, new roof volumes and decorations are being introduced.

#### 4. TOTALITARIAN VERNACULARISM

Among the many examples of 20th century architecture inspired by vernacular ideas, one should also notice the interest in them among totalitarian political systems. These movements, although few in number, show a different, pathological use of the idea of vernacularism. The solutions that emerged during the Third Reich can be considered representative in this respect. Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* postulated that the state should be based on the ideology of „Blut und Boden” (Blood and Soil). According to the ideas put forward, the peasants’ layer was to be the core of the Nordic race. The result of these ideas was the creation of the Nazi art direction „Die Blut-und-Boden-Kunst” (Blood and Soil Art), in which architecture and urban planning were also developed.



Ill. 3. Residential house at 64 Wyspiańskiego Street in Szczecin

S. Wyspiański Street (Niebuhrstraße) in Szczecin, which was mostly built in the 1930s after Hitler came to power, represents a wide range of formal solutions, including a single-storey rectangular building popular at the time, topped with a gable roof, with characteristic eaves and details of shutters.

Piotr Krakowski, describing the art of the Third Reich, divided the architecture of that period into three main strands: neoclassical, semi-modernist and peasant-crafts.<sup>8</sup> The peasants-crafts trend was connected with the so-called native style (Heimatstil), and its main propagator was the National Socialist architecture theoretician Paul Schultze-Naumburg. In his projects, which were mainly focused on residential architecture, he sought to express “Germanness and nativeness”. In its ideological assumptions, the trend referred to Howard’s ideas of a city-garden, introducing into them elements of the “German spirit”. Its principles were described in 1932 by Paul Schmitthenner in his manifesto *Das deutsche Wohnhaus*.<sup>9</sup> Residential buildings were designed using simple solid layouts, topped with a high roof (Ill. 3). Important compositional elements were the elevation details, including the use of a post and beam construction, wooden shutters, and the accentuation of entrances through bas-relief frames. Such solutions were already presented at the Deutsches Holz Kochenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart in 1933. The solutions proposed for the residential houses, which were to be exemplary, were an ideal and formal alternative to the international style architecture and the modernist exhibition Weißenhofsiedlung, which was also held in Stuttgart in 1927.

<sup>8</sup> P. Krakowski, *Sztuka Trzeciej Rzeszy*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2002, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> P. Schmitthenner, *Das deutsche Wohnhaus* [in:] *Architectural Theory from the Renaissance to the Present*, Taschen, Köln 2003, pp. 742–751.

## 5. POST-MODERN VERNACULARISM

The crisis of modernism and the birth of postmodern culture became another moment in the history of contemporary architecture, in which vernacular inspirations began to influence the main directions of the avant-garde. Opposition to the principles of hermeticness and rationalism, which began to spread in the 1960s with an ever-increasing wave, took on various forms, often contradicting each other. In the prospect of the return of inspiration from vernacularism, in the initial stage of the development of postmodernism two main currents were visible: the return to historical tradition (continuity), and the raising of the significance of spontaneous creativity (“ad hoc” architecture). Both of these trends were reflected in the theoretical writings of Robert Venturi, who in his manifesto *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*<sup>10</sup> – he wrote about the need to renew architecture through its complexity, and in *Learning from Las Vegas (...)* – raised the need to draw inspiration from „ordinary and ugly architecture.”<sup>11</sup> Charles Jencks, one of the most important theorists of postmodernism, even created the concept of „Adhocism”, in which he referred to tradition and its use: *Nostalgia. The old can be appreciated. Old associations are respected if they can be combined with a new application.*<sup>12</sup>



Ill. 4. Residential complex at Bukietowa Street in Szczecin

This complex is located in the center of the former village of Bezrzecze (Brunn) with a „pseudo-decoration” in the form of a drawing referring to a column and beam structure characteristic of the surrounding villages.

One of the main tendencies of postmodernism has become traditionalism, which in the case of vernacular architecture should be combined with regionalism. This trend began to develop

<sup>10</sup> R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1977.

<sup>11</sup> R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Uczyć się od Las Vegas*, Karakter, Kraków 2013. pp. 113–134.

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Jencks, N. Silver, *Adhocizm* [in:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013, p. 70.

in the 1980s and was promoted by Demetri Porphyrios, Leon Krier, Robert A.M. Stern, Robert A.M. Stern and Karol Prince of Wales. Nowadays, it has evolved into The New Urbanism. In this context, it is worth quoting an extract from a 1989 speech in which Prince of Wales formulated 10 principles of the *Vision of Britain* in which he defined the need for traditional materials as follows: *Britain must resurrect and cultivate the unique qualities of its villages and cities, which are based on local materials (...). We also need to support our traditional craftsmen – flint, thatched roof, blacksmiths – and engage them in building the future.*<sup>13</sup> The vision of traditionalist architecture finds many followers today. As far as Polish architecture is concerned, one can even risk claiming that it is one of the main trends, especially in relation to the newly emerging architecture of small towns and suburbs. Unfortunately, this also results in significant simplifications, and traditional forms are used as decorations, without a deeper („complex”) reference to history and context (Ill. 4).

## 6. “VERNACULAR FIGURES” IN THE AVANT-GARDE ARCHITECTURE OF THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

The presence of vernacular motifs in contemporary architecture, referring to regionalism and traditionalism, can be considered as an obvious attitude, resulting from the return to consistency and continuation in architecture. At the same time, however, since the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, a completely new use of traditional motifs can be observed in avant-garde architecture, which can be described as „vernacular figures”. This term should be understood as a solution in which the architects using the stylistics of the new modernism incorporate into their architectural vocabulary forms referring to the archetype of the house, condensing them and deliberately simplifying them.

These phenomena can be illustrated by examples of projects by the MVRDV group and the Herzog de Meuron office. The Dutch MVRDV project company has designed the Balancing Bar residential building in 2010, which is located on a lake in an English village. The authors describe this project as a *barn-shaped building with metal cladding*.<sup>14</sup> Above description is the essence of a new way of using vernacular inspirations. The authors propose a combination of seemingly contradictory formal conventions: the outline of a house-barn (vernacular motif) and metal cladding (modern motif). The „house-barn” form, as the authors have put it,<sup>15</sup> was also used by MVRDV in a building project in the small Dutch town of Schijndel. The outer shell of the building (facades and roof) of Glass Farm was made out of glass with printed photographic elements of traditional farms in the surrounding area. The authors’ goal was to „create a monument to a traditional building”. The obtained effect is ambiguous, intriguingly combining tradition and modernity. Another example of this trend is the House in Leymen, designed in France in 1996 by the Herzog de Meuron studio. Again, the authors used a simplified, archetypal form of the house, which they described in the following way: *The sloping roof, the high chimney and the large windows resemble a child’s drawing*.<sup>16</sup> References to these fundamental images of the home have been present in the work of the Swiss duo since

<sup>13</sup> Jego Wysokość Książę Walii, *Wizje Brytanii* [in:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013, pp. 226–227.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mvrdv.nl/projects/84/balancing-barn> (access: 24.06.2019).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mvrdv.nl/projects/119/glass-farm> (access: 24.06.2019).

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.herzogdemeuron.com/index/projects/complete-works/126–150/128-house-in-leymen.html> (access: 24.06.2019).

the beginning of their activity, which can already be seen in their first project of the Blue House in 1979 in Oberwil. The Vitra House Museum building, designed in 2006 in Weil am Rhein, is also representative in this respect. It was created by imposing several archetypical, simplified blocks of flats reminiscent of one-storey high roof houses. Such forms are not only used by the contemporary architectural avant-garde. They have also entered a wide range of solutions that are particularly popular in suburban areas (Ill. 5).



Ill. 5. Residential house in Dobra municipality near Szczecińska Street from the beginning of the 21st century

Example of contemporary residential architecture trying to combine traditional and modern elements. Intentionally simplified form, referring to the archetype of traditional rural architecture, introducing at the same time finishing of the roof and walls made of sheet metal and metal panels.

## 7. TRADITION AND MODERNITY – BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND SYMBOL. CONCLUSIONS

Comparing the discussed examples using vernacular motifs in European architecture from the mid-19th century to the early 21st century, it should be emphasized:

- differentiated ideological origins of particular trends, referring to the tradition of rural and regional architecture (ideologization and symbolism);
- drawing on selected fragments of this tradition, while neglecting other meanings (fragmentation of ideas).

What seems to be the key to the relationship between tradition and modernity, however, is its timeliness and the lifetime of its patterns. From the perspective of nearly one hundred

and fifty years of transformations of rural and regional architectural forms for the needs of urban architecture, one can even conclude the existence of a peculiar „architectural sample book of vernacular forms”. Nowadays, there is also a growing tendency to move away from the sources of vernacular tradition and to treat it in a simplified manner.

**To sum up** – in the author’s opinion, four characteristic areas of relations between vernacular and contemporary architecture can be distinguished from the historical perspective.

1. The first area is to use the vernacular tradition to search for an alternative to the downtown vision of the future housing estate. The breakthrough point for this search was the creation and popularization of the idea of a city-garden. The contemporary inheritors of these concepts include, among others, the New Urbanism movement and some of the solutions of housing complexes located in suburban areas. The use of motifs taken from the iconosphere of the countryside serves in this case to create an architectural impression of idyll, a sense of idyllicism and homeliness.
2. The second area is the use of vernacular motifs to promote the traditions of the region. The objective of such activities is to give the impression of incorporating the designed architecture into the local cultural context. It should be emphasized that nowadays, these activities often have a superficial form, which does not refer to the spirit of traditional buildings, but rather exhibits them only in the symbolic layer.
3. The third area of use of vernacular motifs were attempts to express national ideas. This attitude is based on the conviction that the people and use folk forms is the core of the nation. The consequence of this stance are attempts to use folk forms in various areas of art, including architecture. The concept of „national art” was born at the end of the 19th century and since then attempts at its architectural transformation have been made as well. Examples of English, German or Polish architecture show that state propaganda could also be combined with vernacular motifs.
4. The fourth area of inspiration of the vernacular tradition, referring to the latest architecture, is the archetypal reference to the house and its symbolism. Vernacular references are often treated here as a combination of tradition and playfulness, based on children’s ideas of an ideal home. Once again, it is an attempt to use vernacularism as a symbol of idyll, to create a world of childish harmony, a scenery of a happy life.

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**Author's note:**

Works in faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, West Pomeranian University of Technology of Szczecin, Department of Contemporary Architecture and Design Methodology. His scientific works focus on the theory of contemporary architecture and the problems of activation of modern cities.