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AMBIVALENCE OF CONTEMPORARY NORWEGIAN ARCHITECTURE – BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

AMBIWALENTNOŚĆ WSPÓŁCZESNEJ NORWESKIEJ ARCHITEKTURY – MIĘDZY TRADYCJĄ A NOWOCZESNOŚCIĄ

Abstract

Contemporary Norwegian architectural creative activity shows ambivalent features which determine its phenomenon and uniqueness. Tradition and modernity which seemingly exclude each other are tangled and tied together to varying degrees, each time creating a new quality of architecture. Tradition that creates the cultural identity of Norwegians is often referred to in contemporary realizations of native artists such as Sverre Fehn, and foreign ones like Steven Holl or Renzo Piano giving the effect of a new version of architecture or a surprising afterimage. The principle of continuation and complementation used by Norwegian architects reflects the idea of an organic city, where each new, added element “grows” from the original structure as its extension, whose architectural forms are transformed shapes of those from the past of the place or experiments – individual supernovae.

Key words: Norwegian architecture, organic city, revitalization

Streszczenie

Współczesna norweska twórczość architektoniczna wykazuje ambiwalentne cechy, które stanowią o jej fenomenie i niepowtarzalności. Z pozoru wykluczające się tradycja i nowoczesność są w różnym stopniu ze sobą splecione i powiązane, tworząc za każdym razem nową jakość architektury. Tradycja tworząca tożsamość kulturą Norwegów niejednokrotnie przywoływana jest we współczesnych realizacjach rodzimych twórców jak Sverre Fehn, i tych zagranicznych jak Steven Holl czy Renzo Piano, dając efekt nowej wersji architektury lub zaskakującego powidoku. Stosowana przez norweskich architektów zasada kontynuacji i dopełnienia oddaje ideę miasta organicznego, gdzie każdy nowy, dodany element „wyrasta” z pierwotnej struktury jako jej przedłużenie, którego formy architektoniczne są przetworzonymi kształtami tych z przeszłości miejsca lub eksperymentami – supernowocnościami jednostkowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura norweska, miasto organiczne, rewitalizacja

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world we live in appears to be a fabric of space and time dependencies, i.e. nothing can be separated so as not to capture a whole series of complex connections and all the nodes forming it. This reflection concerns matter, including architecture created in various periods of time as well as human nature, human corporeality, its imaginary sphere *nous* and thoughts constantly moving man's mind... Norwegian architectural creative activity seems to reflect this principle in the fullest way. A faith in the power of national heritage makes Norwegian architects often look back, listen to the history of places, recall old images of objects which are connected with them – their shapes, textures, colours and details as well as accompanying sounds and then derive experiences from this wealth and search for further creative interpretations for its potential. The works created by them result finally in the effect of a new version of old architecture or its surprising afterimage, either in a newly designed finite form or as a continuation and harmonious complement to the old known structure. To a large extent, this complement can also constitute a modern and unique form with innovative technological solutions as an extension or finalization of the traditional shape. Apart from objects shaped in that way, there are also layouts with experimental features, completely individual solutions, which are also referred to as super unit novelties. They often come from a borderline of architectural and artistic forms and are included in avant-garde and post-modern architecture which is created for the future.

2. TRADITION, CREATIVE CONTINUITY AND HARMONIOUS COMPLEMENT

Tradition that incessantly creates the cultural identity of the nation is present in contemporary architectural realizations of popular native artists such as Sverre Fehn, Pål Bjørnstad, Inge Ormhang, Espen Pedersen, Kjell Lund, Nils Slaatto, Jan Olaf Jensen and Børre Skodvin as well as foreign architects who design in Norway, e.g. Steven Holl and Renzo Piano. References to traditional Norwegian architecture are visible in many fields. They refer to not only structures or shapes of newly constructed architectural forms, details and construction materials used, but also to a desire to achieve the intended lighting and sound effects in their interiors. The latter actions are aimed at reconstructing the climate appropriate for the times in which the previous layout was constructed being an inspiration for contemporary designers. This makes it possible to create a kind of space and time continuum, where the surrounding light and sound interaction seem to complement and enrich an architectural shape designed.

In Sverre Fehn's works, who thanks to his individualism is defined as Per Gynt of Norwegian architecture, there is a tendency to connect a stone plinth of a building with its wooden-frame structure, which is a direct reference to solutions commonly used in the past. The massive plinth refers to *laft* system – log walls present in traditional Norwegian residential houses and farm buildings, which were constructed directly on a rocky ground and a stone foundation. The wooden-frame structure reflects lightness and openwork nature of the *stav* system pillar elements, which was most used in wooden churches *stavkirke* erected in Norway from the 11th to the 14th centuries. The most important Fehn's realizations reflecting the idea of combining the above-mentioned creatively processed systems include small residential forms such as Schreiner House in Kongsja near Oslo (implementation 1963) and villa Busk

in Bamble (implementation in 1990) as well as buildings – icons such as Nordic Pavilion in Venice (Norwegian: Nordens paviljong, implementation in 1962), Hedmark Archaeological Museum in Hamar (Norwegian: Hedmarksmuseet, implementation 1967–2005) and extension of the Museum of Architecture in Oslo (Norwegian: Arkitekturmuseet, implementation in 2008). In the Nordic Pavilion in Venice, the structure of the building, apart from the basic function of the layout structure reflecting the principle of combining the massiveness of the foundation with the lightness of the structure, additionally constituted its essence, i.e. it filtered light giving the effect of the so-called Nordic light, which was present in medieval *stavkirke* churches and permeated with the trees of a nearby park, thus becoming an integral part of the natural processes occurring in this place.²

The effect of Nordic light which was used in the object can be compared to the light effect occurring in the foliage of trees filtering light reaching the lower and deeper parts of the forest. It was eagerly used in Norwegian architecture both in the past and today. However, the complementarity of the created architectural form with the park's ecosystem gives this work the characteristics of the eco-structure.

In the next implementation of Fehn – the Hedmark Archaeological Museum in Hamar, relics of the past, ruins of the 13th-century bishop's court and 18th-century farm buildings became a foundation and building material, giving rise to a modern architectural form. The idea of the Museum was accentuated by the time factor and relations with nature that are visible in combining and mutual interpenetration of architectural materials and forms coming from various time periods with additional adjacent terrain which was sculpturally formed.³ A similar idea can be found in the neighbouring Museum of Glass Cathedral in Hamar designed by architects Pål Biørnstad, Inge Ormhang, Espen Pedersen and the Lund & Slaatto Arkitekter AS Studio (Norwegian: Domkirke ruinerna, implementation 1998). This layout in its current form is a fusion of two construction technologies, i.e. a stone one with massive forms, which was characteristic for the Middle Ages as well as steel and glass, light, characteristic for modern times (Ill. 1). The former and traditionally shaped space of the sacrum was re-established in the present by adding a modern glass-enclosing structure that creates a perfectly harmonized continuum with the ruins of the original building – the temple from the second half of the 10th century.⁴ The last one of the aforementioned implementations by Sverre Fehn – the extension of the Museum of Architecture in Oslo constitutes an example of continuation and sophisticated complementation of the existing building, which reflects the idea of an organic city where each new element added 'grows' from the original structure as its extension. The architectural form of the work thus created is a kind of modern version of the shape of an object from the past of a given place. And therefore, in Fehn's implementation, from the street side we can see the shape of the cubature designed, which in its form refers to the nearby Akershus fortress (erected in 1700) with huge walls and a geometrical plan. However, the detail and the construction material used – massive light concrete walls combined with glass elements seem to follow the ideas of modernity⁵ (Ill. 2). The exhibition pavilion created in this way with light, transparent, and minimalist aesthetics combined with the 19th-century Museum of Architecture evokes a well-known image from the past, but only in the form of its afterimage.

² K. Frampton, *The tectonic form of Sverre Fehn*, AREA, 2011, no. 116, pp. 4–11.

³ E. Cisek, *Norweska architektura i rzeźba wobec natury*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 2017, p. 225.

⁴ R. Cielątkowska, *Sacrum północy*, Architektura & Biznes, 2004, no. 11, pp. 44–45.

⁵ M. Lending, *Museum of architecture Oslo*, A10: New European Architecture, 2008, no. 20, pp. 22–25.

Among the realizations being a creative development and continuation of the existing architectural form there are also such layouts which result from the adaptation and extension of post-production buildings and revitalization of post-industrial areas. A representative example of such a building is the Rockheim building in the Brattøra harbour area of Trondheim. This layout was adapted to the Museum of Norwegian Rock and Pop Music (arch. Pir II, implementation in 2010). On the roof of the old granary from the 1920s, a new structure was erected, i.e. a huge glass cuboid whose walls were covered with a print presenting covers of the most popular Norwegian vocalists and music bands. This volume together with five stories of the former granary houses the exhibition space of temporary and permanent exhibitions as well as rooms for collecting souvenirs of famous musicians. At the meeting point of two technologically different structures, an observation deck was designed. The latest technological developments were applied in the implementation of this project. The new element – a glass cuboid on the roof of the granary received backlight of 13,000 LED lamps and the interior uses innovative multimedia solutions in the form of interactive installations, thanks to which it is possible to become immersed in the sound learning the history of Norwegian pop music and related musical personalities.⁶

Making references to Norwegian tradition by foreign architects results in surprising spatial solutions. Steven Holl when designing the Knut Hamsun Centre near the village of Presteid on the Norwegian island of Hamarøy (Norwegian: Hamsunsenteret, implementation 2009) created a modern austere and minimalist form, which dominates over the existing development, but refers to traditional solutions in many aspects. And thus, the façade in the form of wooden siding is painted black, similarly to the medieval *stavkirke*. Also the layout of panels on the point-protruding elements imitates characteristic textures present on the façades of wooden churches in the form of impulses. The method of introducing light into the interior of the object designed reminds us of the mysticism of temple interiors – bathed in darkness with lights high up. This is the already quoted effect of ‘Nordic light’ which was obtained in this modern realization due to the fact that light beams emanate from narrow openings situated under the ceiling or in corners of rooms. Sometimes reflections points are formed on the walls in the form of light spots smouldering brightly. The crowning of the building was designed in the form of a green garden. It consists of tall bamboo shoots. This solution refers to the traditional turf roofs present commonly in Norwegian architecture. The applied finishing materials of the object such as black polished concrete, wood fibre panels, perforated sheet metal and bronzed steel seem to follow the ideas of modernity.⁷

Renzo Piano, author of the Museum and Art Centre in Oslo (Norwegian: Astrup Fearnley Museet, implementation in 2012) created a complex of three objects (two with a museum function and one with an office function) connected with each other by means of a sophisticated roof and a system of bridges on an artificially shaped promontory within Oslofjord (Ill. 3). Locating objects, which are important for the identity of the nation, on these natural or artificially shaped forms that deeply cut into the sea, has a long tradition in Norway. Mentions about such activities already appear in the Norwegian sagas and in Laplanders’ messages. The market square of the first Oslo was also located on a promontory. At present, it is occupied by the building of the National Theatre, Opera and Ballet (Norwegian: Den Norske Opera & Ballet, arch. Snøhetta, implementation 2008) which constitutes a new forum and an attractive

⁶ E. Cisek, *op. cit.*, pp. 327–328.

⁷ www.stevenholl.com (access: 15.05.2016).



- III. 1. Glass Cathedral in Hamar (arch. Pål Bjørnstad, Inge Ormhang, Espen Pedersen and office Lund & Slaatto Arkitekter AS, implementation in 1998), photo by E. Cisek
- III. 2. Extension of the Museum of Architecture in w Oslo (arch. Sverre Fehn, implementation in 2008), photo by E. Cisek
- III. 3. Museum and Art. Centre in Oslo (arch. Renzo Piano, implementation in 2012), photo by E. Cisek
- III. 4. Student House Svartlamoen in Trondheim (arch. Geir Brendeland and Olav Kristoffersen, implementation in 2005), photo by E. Cisek

symbol of the city. The museum complex which was designed by Piano obtained a completely modern form. The roof made of laminated wood with a soft curved shape covers all three buildings resulting in a unique layout with a uniform architectural and functional structure. Supporting steel masts with cables complete the entire openwork structure, which reminds us of the elements of ship rigging – still-living tradition of the Viking sea voyages. This original roof is covered by a transparent coating made of glass, tempered panels and in two shades, which additionally provided interesting lighting effects in the interiors of buildings.⁸

3. MODERNITY, BEYOND TRADITION

To a large extent, modernity of Norwegian architecture signifies its existence beyond tradition and beyond the past. It is to a large extent because elements of tradition are sometimes

⁸ R. Piano, *Tjuvholmen Icon Complex*, AREA, 2011, no. 116, pp. 138–144.

perceptible, at least in the type of the construction and finishing material applied. Numerous implementations, which were created in recent years in Norway, seem to indicate originality, rationality and technological innovation of the solutions proposed. The shape, form and idea, in order to call it art, are added for free by an architect–artist. This group of objects can be described as not architecture of the future but architecture for the future. A model example of such layouts are implementations of two architects Geir Brendeland and Olav Kristoffersen. The first of them is Student House Svartlamoen in Trondheim (implementation 2005) which was constructed of prefabricated elements made of glued wood (Ill. 4). The whole layout consists of two buildings. The taller one with the original sculptural form gives the impression of being carved from one piece of wood. In fact, similar to children’s puzzles, it can be decomposed and recycled in the future. This feature gives the object the signs of passing of time and temporariness. Moreover, the load-bearing part of the building is constructed of external structural walls, thus ensuring complete freedom in shaping its internal space and providing openness of its arrangement. The façade is covered with an ecological lining of non-impregnated pine wood which even deepens the effect of the sculptural and artistic form. This is the first residential structure of this type which was constructed in Norway. In its form and implementation technology, this layout realizes a low budget and energy-saving strategy. The building was constructed in the former working-class district, which today constitutes a ‘partially autonomous, experimental, and ecological urban zone’.⁹ The other quoted implementation of Brendeland and Kristoffersen is a car showroom that was made into a kindergarten in the district of Svartlamoen in Trondheim (Norwegian: Strandveien Auto – transformasjon til barnehage, implementation 2006). A modern form was obtained thanks to the preservation of the external façade of the building which was made of steel, sheet metal and glass. Inside, however, a softly shaped artistic and perforated spatial object was designed, whose structure, floors, walls and ceilings were built of wood with a uniform shade and texture. Perforations of forms that resemble windows and doors in a typical building façade perform in fact functions of storage rooms, shelves and niches for having fun. In this way the second smaller form was obtained which was sculpturally modelled and situated in a larger one and visible through its huge glass façade like an internal landscape.¹⁰ A similar principle can be found in the already mentioned building of the National Theatre, Opera and Ballet in Oslo, which was designed by the Snøhetta office (implementation in 2008). The object was generated in order to resemble an artificial hill covered with a stone and marble coat where through a glass part of the façade it is possible to see a hidden heart in its interior, i.e. a wooden cocoon housing concert halls. Between this and the stone shell, a new quality of space was generated, which made it possible to introduce effective and bold solutions from the borderline of architecture and art. The roof of the building also represents an innovative solution – it is a sculpturally shaped pavement – a modern agora which has become a favourite meeting place for residents of Oslo.¹¹

4. POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE, EXPERIMENT

The emergence of postmodernist architecture and post-functionalist idea is connected with the rejection of rationalist ideas of modernity. Within this concept there are works from the

⁹ Karpińska M., *Norweskie drewno, Norwegian dream, Drewno we współczesnej architekturze norweskiej*, Architektura & Biznes, 2011, no. 3, p. 60; Brendeland G., Kristoffersen O., *Svartlamoen house*, Arkitektur i Norge, 2006, no. 1, p. 28.

¹⁰ Brendeland G., Kristoffersen O., *Svartlamoen nursery*, Arkitektur N, 2008, no. 8, pp. 58–43.

¹¹ www.operaen.no (access: 15.09.2014).

borderline of architectural and artistic forms. These include super unit novelties defined as experiments. The most representative example of such a layout, which constitutes a fusion of architecture and sculpture, is the House in Kikkut – *A House To Die In* situated in the western part of Oslo (arch. Bjarne Melgaard, arch. Snøhetta, under implementation). The form of the object is dominated by forms completely different from traditional geometric patterns, i.e. mainly triangles. The façade was finished with black burned oak wood, the colour of which will change over time undergoing natural processes. On its surface there are visible perforated ornaments which at night illuminate from the inside giving the effect of patterns and pictograms glowing with warm magic light. They bring to mind rock carvings from the distant past, but a bit deformed, different and far from the prototypes. Melgaard's house is carried by unknown creatures with zoomorphic shapes and maintained in climates of snow-white whiteness for contrast, which in the winter scenery creates the illusion of supporting the object by means of ice sculptures. This resulted in an irrational effect of a dark object that seems to levitate above the ground like an unknown object preparing for a take-off. This effect of slight floating of the form over the terrain surface was additionally strengthened by placing a water mirror underneath it – shiny and variable, reflecting light and shapes of the surroundings. This layout creates its own world which imitates neither reality, nor the present or the past, the world seeking super novelties. The architecture of *A House To Die In* caused a great shock and confusion in the media, which, in turn, provoked wide-ranging discussions on the validity of its form and location. In the immediate vicinity of the object designed there is an estate of remarkable artist painter Edward Munch, who is part of the tradition and national identity of the Norwegians. Several corrections of the initial project, which were made under the influence of external environmental pressure, indicate an experimental nature of the project and the search for a form based on – oblivion and a new idea.¹²

5. CONCLUSION

Modern Norwegian architecture is characterized by ambivalence visible in a strong attachment to tradition with a simultaneous strong inclination to creative searches for modern and future formal and technological solutions. The first one is about the sense of the nation's identity resulting directly from the cultural and environmental conditions of the country. The system of recognizable spatial codes, archetypal forms, shapes and colours, traditional structural systems and materials used as well as the appropriate articulation and scale of objects, which has been used in Norway for centuries, made it possible to emphasise the landscape character which constitutes the background for creative activities. Objects, which are created at present, are often a fusion of technologies coming from various time periods, where a newly created form is constructed on the basis of a previous one, becoming its continuation and a harmonious complement or a surprising afterimage. In this way, these implementations blend in with the idea of an organic city, they are often structurally created on the basis of older forms, those traditional ones. Modernity, which is combined with innovativeness, is present in modern Norwegian architecture and results on the one hand from a strong position of the creator – an individual creating the work according to his/her subjective vision, and on the other it results from the existence of companies with international staff (e.g. Snøhetta) stimulating openness

¹² Bucknell A., *Inside the Design of Norway's Most Controversial Building*, www.metropolismag.com/architecture/snohetta-house-die-design/ (access: 15.05.2016).

of concepts. Norway is largely based on the activities of freelancers and small architectural firms such as Sami Rintala or Brendeland & Kristoffersen. Among the visionary projects of recent years we can also distinguish objects from the borderline of architecture and art created for the future – experiments of supernatural character, which appear to detach from traditional solutions, entering into a series of spatial activities covered by a common denominator – acupuncture of the city, aimed at moving the recipients and having them search for often new and untouched creative routes.

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Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Science and Technology. Author of i.e. 40 publications and monograph entitled: “Norwegian architecture and sculpture in relation to nature” (Wrocław 2017), which shows the unique features of Norwegian architecture – today perceived as typically national, resulting from its sculptural nature and deep relationships with nature.