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LIFE AND DEATH OF FORM IN THE ARCHITECTURAL UNIVERSE

ŻYCIE A ŚMIERĆ FORMY W ARCHITEKTONICZNYM UNIWERSUM

Abstract

The architectural form can be metaphorically described as a ‘vessel of time’. Depending on whether we are dealing with the concept of historical or mythical time, this vessel takes the shape of either a contextual form, which refers to a specific place in time and space, or a universal form, which refers to the abstract world of architectural ideas. The aim of the research is to determine how the concepts of time and ideological conflicts between historical contextualism and ahistorical modernism influence the definition of forms in the architectural universe. The research was based on an analysis of selected theories from historiography and on a critical analysis of the manifestos of architects of modernism and postmodernism. The discourse between historicism and modernism mainly concerns the acceptance or rejection of the transience and death of form, and architects’ dreams of finding an immortal form that functions beyond time – the Holy Grail of architecture.

Keywords: spatial context, historical time, mythical time, historicism, modernism

Streszczenie

Forma architektoniczna może być metaforycznie określana jako swoiste „naczynie czasu”. W zależności od tego, czy mamy do czynienia z koncepcją czasu historycznego czy mitycznego, naczynie to albo przybiera kształt formy kontekstualnej nawiązującej do konkretnego miejsca w czasie i przestrzeni, albo formy uniwersalnej odwołującej się do abstrakcyjnego świata idei architektonicznych. Celem badań było określenie, w jaki sposób koncepcje czasu oraz konfliktów światopoglądowych między historycznym kontekstualizmem i ahistorycznym modernizmem wpływają na definiowanie form w architektonicznym uniwersum. Badania były oparte na analizie wybranych teorii z historiozofii oraz na krytycznej analizie manifestów architektów modernizmu i postmodernizmu. Dyskurs między historycyzmem a modernizmem dotyczy w głównej mierze zgody lub jej braku na przemijanie i śmierć formy oraz marzeń architektów o znalezieniu formy nieśmiertelnej, będącej Świętym Graalem architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: kontekst przestrzenny, czas historyczny, czas mityczny, historycyzm, modernizm

1. INTRODUCTION

The spaces of contemporary cities are a canvas on which alternative historical events are depicted, layered, and interwoven, and which tell stories of life and death, construction and demolition, passing, and rebirth, reality and potential, as in Marco Polo’s stories from

Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*¹. In urban spaces, we are confronted with both a linear historical narrative in old residential centres, where successive layers of urban fabric from antiquity to the present day are superimposed to define the spirit of the place, and with spaces that rebel against this historical narrative. These spaces express the spirit of the times, disrupting the existing order in search of modern forms of expression and responding to the needs of tomorrow's cities.

The real world collides with potential, and the need for time-space continuity is confronted by the need for change in response to processes occurring in the natural and built environments. Over time, as civilisation and technology develop, entopian urban structures become dystopian². This situation requires specific corrective action to be taken, which can sometimes involve the destruction of existing historical heritage. Examples of this include the destruction of the City of London after the Great Fire of 1666, and the great reconstruction of Paris by G.E. Haussmann between 1853 and 1868³. Such events forced the introduction of radical legal and construction regulations, as well as the delineation of new urban axes in the form of wide city avenues and boulevards.

As we wander around the city, we get the impression that we are primarily moving in the spatial dimension, observing the variety of architectural forms. However, this journey actually takes place in the temporal dimension, because each place is linked to the moment when the architect decides which version of the form to materialise. This form may relate to the existing context, fitting into the historical sequence of transformations of the urban fabric. Alternatively, it may be an expression of an abstract idea, referring to an ideal world of archetypal forms or an imagined world of the future. In this way, it gives direction to the transformations and traces the path, like the arrow in Italo Calvino's story *If $t=0$* , leading to a potential new reality: "here it is about time, which keeps traversing a route already traversed. I would therefore define as time, and not as space, this void which I seemed to recognize while traversing."⁴

This dichotomy of the origins of form is embedded in the architectural discourse between the historical-contextual and ahistorical-modernist schools of design. In the contextual school, form should refer to the existing historical context, inscribing itself into the linear space-time continuity in the architectural universe. In this approach, the spirit of the place determines the form's shape. By contrast, in the modernist school, form is autonomous of the context. It follows the spirit of the times in search of a better future, destroying the time-space continuity of the place.

2. AIMS, SCOPE AND RESEARCH METHODS

The concept of time plays a key role in shaping the city's architectural landscape. On the one hand, the past determines the future course of events; on the other, future goals determine the direction in which history is heading. This involves a specific conflict between determinism and finalism in historical events. As Reinhart Koselleck wrote in his book *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, this conflict is an inherent and

¹ I. Calvino, *Niewidzialne miasta*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2023.

² C.A. Doxiadis, *Building entopia*, Athens Publishing Center, Athens 1975.

³ S. Giedion S., *Space, time and architecture. The growth of a new tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 740–754.

⁴ I. Calvino, *Jeżeli $t = 0$* , Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2021, p. 158.

transcendental feature of possible histories, associated with the interaction of opposing pairs such as birth and death (the generative category of history as the succession of generations), survival and killing (without annihilation, later histories cannot exist), friend and enemy (the category of ideological conflict, e.g. “Greeks and barbarians”), the tension between internal and external space (boundaries and mutual influences leading to change), and the conflict between the strong and the weak (social stratification influencing the course of history).⁵

The research aims to determine the influence of the concepts of time and ideological conflicts between historical contextualism and ahistorical modernism on the definition of forms in the architectural universe. It was based on an analysis of selected theories from historiography and cultural anthropology, and on a critical analysis of the manifestos of modernist and postmodernist. Two significant trends in the definition of time in culture were referenced: historical time⁶ and mythical time⁷. In addition, a typology described by Jacques Le Goff was adopted for historical time, distinguishing the following categories: church time (from Antiquity to the Middle Ages), merchant time (from the Renaissance to modern times), and clock time (from the Industrial Revolution to the present).⁸

The fundamental assumptions of the historical-contextualism and ahistorical-modernism trends concerning the significance of architectural form, in terms of its interdependence on the spirit of the place (*genius loci*) and the spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*), as well as its transformational potential in the time dimension, were defined as follows:

- contextual form: the life and death of form in the historical universe of architecture (historical time),
- universal form: the life and immortality of form in the mythical universe of architecture (mythical time),
- in search of the Holy Grail in architecture.

3. CONTEXTUAL FORM: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF FORM IN THE HISTORICAL UNIVERSE OF ARCHITECTURE (HISTORICAL TIME)

In the contextual school of architectural design, two key concepts emerge. These are phenotypic space and historical time. The concept of phenotypic space is closely linked to the idea of *genius loci*, whereby spatial structures are defined as complex living organisms determined by genotype (the conditions of the natural environment) and the phenotype of the place (the conditions of the cultural environment)⁹. The concept of historical time encompasses the entire period of human civilisation’s development, shaping the architectural heritage and cultural identity of cities. This linear concept of time gives direction to events and involves the succession of transformations and the birth and death of successive eras (church time, merchant time, and clock time), as well as the birth and death of successive generations

⁵ R. Koselleck, *Warstwy czasu. Studia z metahistorii*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2012, pp. 89–97.

⁶ J. Le Goff, *Czas kościoła i czas kupca* [in:] A. Zajączkowski (ed.), *Czas w kulturze*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 331–356.

⁷ M. Eliade, *The myth of the eternal return. Cosmos and history*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018.

⁸ J. Le Goff, *op. cit.*, pp. 331–356.

⁹ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture*, Rizzoli, New York 1980.

of architectural forms (Antiquity, Romanism, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, Historicism, and Modernism). In the age of church time, God is the origin of time and space. All human activity is associated with God, giving these activities meaning and purpose – especially in the expression of sacred architectural forms as an experience of spiritual values. In the age of merchant time, space and time become the property of humans, and are thus treated as elements of profit, speculation, and conquest. This makes the value of architectural objects measurable, leading to competitiveness between them in terms of their material, utilitarian, and aesthetic values. The age of clock time further reinforces this trend, laying the foundations for the industrialisation of spatial structures and the objectification, optimisation, and commercialisation of architectural value.¹⁰

In the contemporary world, these different concepts of time tend to overlap. The non-measurable spiritual values associated with the expression of forms in church time still play a significant role in the perception of architecture. These values provide a sense of continuity and unique meaning that transcends the measurable qualities of profit and economic efficiency in spatial structures (Ill. 1). As Reinhard Gieselmann and Oswald Mathias Ungers wrote in their manifesto: “Architecture loses its expression when technological, functional methods are employed [...] This lack of vitality gives rise to a spiritual vacuum.”¹¹



Ill. 1. Historical-contextual form – the expression of the spirit of the church time: Sagrada Família, Barcelona, arch. Antoni Gaudi (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska)

Ill. 2. Historical-contextual form – the expression of the merchant time: bourgeois tenement houses along Passeig de Gràcia, Barcelona (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska)

¹⁰ J. Le Goff, *op. cit.*, pp. 331–356.

¹¹ R. Gieselmann, O.M. Ungers, *Towards a new architecture* [in:] U. Conrads (ed.), *Programs and manifestoes on the 20th-century architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 165.

Although the aesthetic and utilitarian values of architecture from the merchant era differ significantly from the spatial patterns of the clock era, they can still inspire the search for new sources and means of architectural expression (Ill. 2). Building on Gieselmann and Ungers' manifesto: "Architecture is a vital penetration of a multi-layered, mysterious, evolved, and structured reality. [...] Again and again, it demands recognition of the *genius loci* out of which it grows."¹² The measurable values of clock time, which are related to the productivity and profitability of spatial structures, are essential elements of the contemporary architectural market (Ill. 3). Efficient housing construction is essential in an era of rapidly growing urban populations.

The demand to continue tradition, derived from existing architectural thought and history, is a fundamental imperative of the phenomenological-contextual school of architectural design. As Hannes Meyer wrote: "Architecture as 'a continuation of the traditions of building' means being carried along by the history of architecture."¹³ In this school, we are dealing with various trends that explore the architectural heritage of the place, including its historical and cultural significance. The conservative-traditional approach requires architects to respect the memory of a place. This means that, when designing a new building, they should draw inspiration from existing structures in the urban context.

In the postmodern movement, the focus is on the entire history of architecture. There are two different approaches to exploring historical threads. The first approach involves searching for and exploiting a specific canon or spatial pattern in architectural history, with the aim of improving or perfecting it, as seen in the neo-classicism of Michael Graves' and Ricardo Bofill's architecture. The second approach involves drawing on various elements from the history of architecture, regardless of stylistic diversity or period, to create new combinations, as seen in the work of Charles Moore and Stanley Tigerman. This is the so-called 'postmodern collage' method, which, despite referring to historical determinism, is in fact transhistorical. As Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter described in their manifesto, *From Collage City*: "a collage approach, an approach in which objects are conscripted or seduced from out of their context, is – at the present day – the only way of dealing with the ultimate problems of, either, of both, utopia and tradition."¹⁴

While the former approach in the postmodern movement forms part of the historical process of architectural forms continuing and passing on, the latter – the collage method – actually involves annihilating historical form by fragmenting it, stitching it back together, and then attempting to revive it. This process is a kind of "Frankensteinisation" of architecture.

4. UNIVERSAL FORM: THE LIFE AND IMMORTALITY OF FORM IN THE MYTHICAL UNIVERSE OF ARCHITECTURE (MYTHICAL TIME)

In the modernist school of architectural design, two concepts play the most important role: abstract space and mythical time. Modernist form does not derive from an existing context but has its roots in abstract space. This allows the mutual relations between points and objects

¹² R. Gieselmann, O.M. Ungers, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

¹³ H. Meyer, *Building* [in:] U. Conrads (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 119.

¹⁴ C. Rowe, F. Koetter, *From Collage City* [in:] M.K. Hays (ed.), *Architecture theory since 1968*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 106.



Ill. 4. Universal form – the expression of the spirit of potential time: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona, arch. Richard Meier (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska)

Ill. 3. Historical-contextual form – the expression of the spirit of clock time: two towers along the Passeig Marítim boulevard, Torre Mapfre, arch. Inigo Ortiz & Enrique León and Hotel Arts, arch. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Barcelona (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska)

to be defined, and structures to be modelled and analysed in topological space, regardless of their physical characteristics. The form created in abstract space is therefore an ideal form, not referring to any real context. Thus, it is a universal form, in the sense that it can exist in any arbitrary location (Ill. 4). The concept of mythical time refers to the idea of cyclical time in primitive cultures. This concept does not represent the past or the future, because it deals with the cyclical repetition of events. In this sense, mythical time exists in an infinite present, where transience has no place and constant rebirth is the norm. Immersed in the constantly resurgent present, the modernist school of architectural design breaks with the historical heritage of the place. As Mies van der Rohe wrote: “We reject all aesthetic speculation, all doctrine, and all formalism. Architecture is the will of the age conceived in spatial terms. Living. Changing. New.”¹⁵

Mythical time refers also to the concept of potential time that could have happened (as in myths and legends) or that might happen (as in utopias and predictions). It is this latter feature of mythical time that particularly fascinates modernist architects, for whom creating a vision of the future to influence present-day decisions is a key goal. As Antonio Sant’Elia wrote: “The problem of *Futurist* architecture is not a problem of linear rearrangement. [...] This architecture cannot be subject to any law of historical

¹⁵ L. Mies van der Rohe, *Working theses* [in:] U. Conrads (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 74.

continuity. It must be as new as our frame of mind is new.”¹⁶ The belief that the architectural form has its origins in a potential future involves a belief in its ability to transcend the barrier of time and exist eternally, which gives the futuristic-modernist movement a quasi-religious character.

The visions of the modernist school of design, based on the concept of potential time, are impossible to verify because we do not know what the future will look like. All we can do is satisfy our need to generate new ideas that challenge the past, disrupt the status quo, and pave the way for the future. As Manfredo Tafuri wrote: “the avant-gardes could easily accept being temporarily unpopular, knowing full well that their break with the past was the fundamental condition for their worth as models for action.”¹⁷

5. IN SEARCH OF THE HOLY GRAIL IN ARCHITECTURE

The debate between the historical-contextual and ahistorical-modernist design schools largely concerns the problem of defining the life and death of forms in the architectural world. It raises questions about whether successive generations of contextual forms passing away in historical time imply consent to their death and the emergence of new generations. It also asks whether a universal form embedded in mythical time, which is not subject to change, implies eternal life and immortality for such a form. Alternatively, perhaps it is the universal form that is closer to our understanding of death as a final state that ends all possible transformations, while the contextual form continues to live on and is reborn in successive generations of historical forms due to its susceptibility to change.

Here, we touch upon a significant aspect of the architect’s profession: the search for a pattern of beauty and the discovery of the most effective ways to express and materialise it in architecture. In a sense, this resembles the quest for the Holy Grail, which is symbolically presented as a vessel representing perfection and immortality. According to this approach, beauty is an eternal and universal concept, independent of time. This concept is similar to the principles of the modernist design school in its pursuit of ideal beauty. The historical-contextual school, on the other hand, would be more aligned with the concept of the so-called vessel of time, found in Hinduism. This vessel undergoes constant transformation in the reincarnation cycles of life, death and rebirth, and time acts as a creative force within it.

This symbolism, however, does not always correspond to the intentions of architects from the historical contextualism or ahistorical modernism movements. For instance, the postmodernist architect Ricardo Bofill believes that the role of architects should be to identify a universal canon of timeless, non-evolutionary spatial patterns in the history of architecture¹⁸. According to Bofill, such patterns are evident in classicist architecture. Using these patterns, an architect can create a universal world that transcends the passage of time. Although Ricardo Bofill’s neoclassical designs are aesthetically opposed to the modernist designs of Mies van der Rohe, one could argue that they both share the same approach to the pursuit of a universal form – the Holy Grail of architecture – albeit with different sources of inspiration:

¹⁶ A. Sant’Elia, *Futurist architecture*, [in:] U. Conrads (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁷ M. Tafuri, *Towards a critique of architectural ideology* [in:] M.K. Hays (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ D. Ghirardo, *Architektura po modernizmie*, Wydawnictwo VIA, Toruń 1999, p. 149.



Ill. 5. Neoclassical form as a universal form: Les Echelles du Baroque, Paris, arch. Ricaro Bofill (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska)

Bofill sees it in the history of architecture (Ill. 5), while Mies van der Rohe sees it in an ideal Platonic world of forms (Ill. 6).

The discussion between the historical-contextual and ahistorical-modernist approaches to design also addresses issues related to the concepts of order and chaos in architecture. According to the principle of entropy, all isolated systems tend to become more disordered and dissipate energy, ultimately leading to their destruction. In the historical development of our civilisation, complex and intricate urban and architectural structures have emerged, and, like other systems, they contribute to an increase in disorder in the human living environment. These structures evolve according to the entropic arrow of time, moving towards chaos and decay. Architectural visions, particularly those of the modernist avant-garde, are often promoted as defying the principles of entropy by imposing a universal order upon spatial chaos; an order to prevent the disintegration of these structures and sustain life-giving processes within them. However, one might agree with Manfredo Tafuri's critique of the modernist avant-garde's ideological attitude. In his essay *Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology*, he wrote: "Chaos, of course, is a given, while order is a goal. [...] And it is the Plan that the avant-gardes called upon to carry out this maieutic task, before discovering at once that they were incapable of giving it any concrete form."¹⁹

¹⁹ M. Tafuri, *op. cit.*, p. 20.



Ill. 6. Modernist form as a universal form: the Pavilion, Barcelona, arch. Mies van der Rohe (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska)

6. CONCLUSIONS

This irresolvable dispute between historical-contextual and ahistorical-modernist approaches to architectural design is of greatest value, as it confronts architects with important questions concerning continuity and discontinuity in space and time, order and chaos, and the influence of historical and mythical time on the shaping of architectural forms.

The contextual design school is based on local values related to a specific place and time. Contextual form is characterised by the narrative nature of the structure, which engages with elements of its surroundings at various levels of complexity. It forms part of an ongoing relay of architectural forms, referencing the traditions and cultural roots of a place while simultaneously continuing to write its history for future generations. The passing of generations can be seen as a sign of life because it enables evolutionary continuity by allowing changes to be made while maintaining the place's identity. However, it can also be viewed as a sign of death, as it condemns entire generations of forms to extinction.

The modernist design school refers to universal values related to the abstract concept of space-time. Universal form is autonomous in relation to historical and cultural contexts, and represents an attempt to impose a chrono-geometric order on the spatial chaos resulting from the growing complexity of systems. It is a revolutionary interference with existing reality that makes room for future events and enabling them to occur. Universal form is

an expression of a particular concept of immortality because, by definition, it should respond to the needs of the present and future. However, this could prove to be a fatal trap, as no one knows what the future will look like. Thus, the problem concerning the life and death of a form is also a question of which survival strategy is more effective: evolutionary or revolutionary?

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