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TRADITION AND MODERNITY – A DISAPPEARING BORDER

TRADYCJA I NOWOCZESNOŚĆ – ZANIKAJĄCA GRANICA

Abstract

Tradition and modernity can be an illusion arising when we need references justifying our location in relation to great architectural and urban movements and tendencies. This is proved by the border of time being constantly crossed by groups and individuals without seeking any justification. Perhaps, then, everything is both tradition and modernity, or maybe there is neither one nor the other and, released from this ballast, we should enjoy creative freedom.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, time, crossing the borders of time

Streszczenie

Tradycja i nowoczesność mogą być uludą powstającą wtedy, gdy potrzebujemy odniesień usprawiedliwiających nasze usytuowanie się względem wielkich ruchów i tendencji architektonicznych i urbanistycznych. Mówi o tym nieustannie przekraczanie granic czasowych przez grupy i jednostki nie szukające żadnych usprawiedliwień. Być może więc wszystko jest jednocześnie tradycją i nowoczesnością, albo być może nie ma ani jednego ani drugiego i uwolnieni do tego balastu powinniśmy cieszyć się twórczą wolnością.

Słowa kluczowe: tradycja, nowoczesność, czas, przekraczanie granic czasu

1.

Tradition, modernity – both of these terms, like many others, are not easy to define. The reason is that both can mean something completely different for different people, and that how it actually looks like. Without reference to the questions of worldview (although they are important in our profession), it is worth focusing on the problem of time, an inseparable factor differentiating what is traditional from what is modern. Nothing is so simple though, especially since science, our guide who guides us in the discipline of architecture and urban planning, requires more analysis than simply throwing tradition into the collection of things from the past and modernity into the collection of today. Of course, we all know the cases of architecture and urban planning, which is neither traditional (whatever it means) nor modern (again – whatever it means), but let us refrain from publicly discussing the intellectual vagueness of their creators for the moment.

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Modernity can be combined with contemporaneity, at least that is what the Polish Language Dictionary (PWN, 1979) suggests. The dictionary basically puts an equal sign between the meaning of the word “modern” and the word “contemporary”. As we read in the dictionary, “modern” means being right for modern, present times. “Tradition” means “passing on from generation to generation” or something that must have appeared some time ago. But when? How to set a limit in time?

These considerations can be continued on the example of a phenomenon that we call contemporary urban planning. It is right to believe that when talking about it you can not refer only to the dictionary meaning it has been granted in our time, as its essential originates in the past, even though it describes the today’s phenomena. The thing is that in urban planning, nothing starts immediately, like “it did not exist yesterday, it exists today”. Even when urban decisions are the result of decreeing, these decisions result, for example, from earlier non-spatial phenomena.

2.

We say that contemporary urban planning is urban planning in the 21st century or the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, while recently, in the 20th century, we used to say that contemporary urban planning was the urban planning of that century. The question then arises when had this age begun and when it ended, because calendar restrictions are not enough here. Well, it can be argued that the following centuries begin with important events, the appearance of which does not quite coincide with the calendar as such. And so the 19th century lasted from the Congress of Vienna to the First World War. In history, it was the age of domination of several European powers and their tyranny combined with several announcements of their twilight, along with the departure of feudal customs and the growing privilege of the bourgeoisie, which in cities resulted in the flourishing of the industrial city. This development was so rapid that it became clear that it was necessary to control it, and this is when the urban planning appeared, along with the plan of Barcelona by Ildefons Cerda (1815–1876) and his book “La teoria general da la urbanizacion”, which, as can be seen, has the word “urban planning” in title. The end of the 19th century was still far away, about 50 years ahead, but Barcelona was already a different city than hundreds of others. We say it was the first modern city and we use its experience in the rationality of space divisions, construction of public spaces, communication solutions, attitude to urban and extra-urban greenery.

The end of the 19th century saw several other inventions: the garden city of Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928), the functional city of Toni Garnier (1869–1948), the linear city of Arturo Soria (1844–1928), the city in the region by Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), the city planned according to the artistic principles of Camilla Sitte (1843–1903) and, in the United States, the City Beautiful Movement associated with Daniel Burnham (1846–1912). I give the dates of births and deaths of these people on purpose, almost all this large group of Fathers of Contemporary Urban Planning basically crossed the border of the end of the 19th century established by us and could have affected urban events of the early 20th century – the time associated with World War I. In other words, their works became the inspiration for reflection on the city in the 20th century and on the 20th century architecture.

3.

If we would like to analyze step by step each of the achievements of the Fathers of Contemporary Urban Planning, it would turn out that without the experience of a linear city and a functional city, the modernists of the 1920s and 1930s would have more trouble developing their ideas. Moreover, they owe a lot to the movement initiated by William Morris in the mid-19th century in England, which involved the struggle with the belt production of objects that was destroying culture. Morris recommended the use of craft methods in the production of the highest quality houses, furniture, rugs, fabrics, dishes, etc. This is how the New Art was born in Europe, and at the same time it was expected that the products of the work of craftsmen – artists (or vice versa) would be relatively cheap. When Germans after 1871 looked at the organization of artistic education in England, they got inspired by the ideas of Morris and began to set up similarly focused schools-workshops, among others in Weimar (1907). In the same year in Munich, the Deutscher Werkbund was founded, whose aim was to promote construction crafts. One of the leading figures in Werkbund was Walter Gropius, in his twenties, who believed, as his teacher Peter Behrens, that a building, including a residential building, made of industrial elements is the best form of architecture. Concrete, steel and glass have become iconic building materials. Gropius found a place for realizing his ideas in 1919. in Weimar, changing the local school into a university called Bauhaus. It furtherly led to the creation of CIAMU and everything that connects to it, including the Athens Charter, international style, large housing estates built in the whole Europe, and then to the fall of modernism and its return as neomodernism.

In turn, as far as the city-garden is concerned, we can say that this idea spread quickly all over the world, but also inspired other types of urban solutions. You can treat Howard as a pioneer of urban satellite systems. Another direction of urban exploration inspired by his work was the issue of unitizing urban areas. This necessity was universally recognized only in the 1930s, although as early as 1923 American Clarence Artur Perry presented his inquiries on the subject of New York. He emphasized the fact that unitizing the city brings the possibility of rebirth and shaping the social bond disappearing in the big city. It also turned out that garden cities can play an important role in alleviating in the US the economic crisis of 1928. The New Deal programm introduced by the U.S. president F.D. Roosevelt was intended to revive federal economic activity. The objectives of the New Deal were to be achieved through key tasks in the reform program: comprehensive development of the Tennessee river basin and the construction of Greenbelt Towns. Three such cities in the US were built, although the intentions were much more ambitious.

Perhaps Howard can also be considered the progenitor of ecological urban planning, especially if we take into account that in many countries activists called hygienists gathered around this idea and this lasted for years. And isn't the today's developer, when calling his estate a Green Corner or Oak Area, using the marketing experience of Howard and his companions?

4.

Together with the developer mentioned above, we moved to the 21st century, but for the sake of clarity, we still have to end the 20th century. Historians call it a short age, agreeing that it ends in the period of political, social and economic change in the early eighties. This

limit would be the period from the creation of Solidarity trade union in Poland to the collapse of the USSR, so the 20th century would have only about three quarters. In principle, this is consistent with urban time counting. We assume that modernism, this sign distinguishing the 20th century in the history of mankind, ended symbolically in 1971, along with blowing up parts of the Pruitt Igoe Towers estate in Sant Louis, USA. We should remember that already then postmodern projects were being created, starting from the Sea Ranch estate on the California coast from 1965, which did not bother that in other places large, modernist projects were just beginning, such as the construction of the *Za Żelazną Bramą* housing estate in Warsaw. So again, we encounter an urban-architectural transgression, again we cross the age limit to pass the modern times what used to be traditional. This case is even more complicated because postmodernism following modernism was more traditional in the formal sense than the passing modernism. In urban planning, we were to return to urban solutions of the 19th century, historicism shone triumph, along with ornamentalism and contextualism. The ornament ceased to be a crime and the international style was to fall apart in endless local styles. Using the help of a computer, we were supposed to create with our clients any taste styles that were supposed not to be subject to criticism. Nobody wanted to live in houses made of large concrete blocks, whose manufactures were going bankrupt one after the other.

5.

Today we can say that the rejection in architecture and urban planning of everything that was associated with the times of communist totalitarianism was more symbolic than pragmatic. The visible sign of this is the return of prefabricated elements for building houses. This is a different prefabrication than the one that provided us with millions of cubic meters of apartments, but it is still prefabrication. So we live in modernity, which for a short period was postmodern post-modernity based on historical patterns, to start looking again at modernist patterns. This strange mix of patterns raises the question of whether the classic, pure tradition does not become modernity and modernity is not what we have already experienced once (and maybe even more).

6.

In this semantic-stylistic confusion, the work of people who were completely separate in their activities should be taken as an example. A great example would be what Jozef Plecnik built (1872–1957). There is probably no need to introduce this person. He was mentioned by such authors as Jacek Purchla, Peter Krecic and Friedrich Achleitner in a great album released by the International Cultural Center in Kraków in 2006 on the occasion of the exhibition of Plecnik's works in Kraków. They called him: Slavic Gaudi, mystic artist, Slovenian bard, the greatest architect of Central Europe in the 20th century, architect and visionary. Every now and then the words: tradition and modernity appear in these descriptions. Yes, Plecnik used every tradition he learned, and yes, from the beginning of his fascination with fine arts, including studies and apprenticeship in the Viennese studio of Otto Wagner, he was thoroughly modern. He probably understood this modernity as looking with a fresh eye at every task he got to solve. Fresh which probably meant quite indifferent to opinions that may have appeared in the

professional circles. This can be confirmed by a trip from Vienna, which, according to Jacek Purchla, could have been a response to emerging trends in the uniforming creators of modernism. He was looking for his own identity and the identity for his works. He found it, which is confirmed by the journey in the footsteps of Plecnik from Vienna, through Prague to Ljubljana.

You can see that Jozef Plecnik's works are suspended between everything he encountered. The Italian journey (award for the best thesis) showed him the size of antique, renaissance and baroque. The skills of creating Art Nouveau detail remained from the Viennese times. From the Prague times (1911–1921) he kept memories of wonderful Slovak folk art and conviction to the idea of Pan-Slavism. In the best work of Plecnik you can see it all at once, phenomenally combined into a harmonious whole. But this is probably not their most important feature. As Friedrich Achleitner wrote, in the work of Plecnik one can see the future of architecture, for example the one that followed and which we called postmodern architecture. You can see how he applied both classical and mannerist forms and principles. For us who know the works of postmodernists, his works are both obvious and surprising. We would like to use the work of Plecnik as our predecessor, transferring what had once happened "from generation to generation", but now we are reflecting: after all, Plecnik was building what we just wanted to draw! We have nothing to invent! If we look at a small kiosk near the Three Bridges in Ljubljana, ending the longer Market Halls, then the question must arise, why in the classic large entrance portal is inserted the second one, only smaller? There is a game with entrances to buildings, so characteristic of postmodern architecture, except that its principles were formulated thirty years before postmodern masters did it. Or, let's have a look at the above-mentioned Three Bridges. Why three, one next to another? For fun, to emphasize the directions that cross in the square around the bridge? It's not really clear. In turn, the church of St. Francis looks from the west like it is made of blocks. Simple shapes, some windows are too small, others are too big and some are round. Everywhere you can see the rejection of the empty wall, on the contrary, wherever possible columns, pilasters, sculptures and reliefs appear, colorful inlays, combining materials with contrasting colors and textures. The buildings are inscribed in the surroundings, they blend in with the whole and obey the axes they create. This architecture is rich, because it is intended to enrich the space in which it is located.

With all this Plecnik doesn't seem to have extraordinary personal needs. The house he built in Ljubljana is small. His studio is both a bedroom and a wardrobe. Until today, his drawing utensils and favorite gadgets are scattered around the desks and drawing boards. In the house, other rooms were used to receive all those he liked and also those he did not like. In the large garden in the center there are vegetable and flower beds, as well as a buildings housing beehives. Many flowers on the veranda. Suburb. He entered the city through the bridge of his own design, passing on the ground floor road, to the rural Krakowska street. It is an area where time usually does not count, because everyone has it in excess. Perhaps that is why this unimportant time in Plecnik's work slowed down and accelerated as he wanted, and with it his work, ahead of the then understanding of architecture.

7.

This is how we come to the conclusion of the arguments presented: tradition and modernity can be an illusion arising when we need references justifying our location in relation to great architectural and urban movements and tendencies. This is proved by the border of time being

constantly crossed by groups and individuals without seeking any justification. Perhaps, then, everything is both tradition and modernity, or maybe there is neither one nor the other and, released from this ballast, we should enjoy creative freedom.

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