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## CONCRETE AND GLASS – MATERIALS SHAPING THE IMAGE OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN ALAN DUNN’S CARTOONS

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### BETON I SZKŁO – MATERIAŁY KSZTAŁTUJĄCE OBRAZ ARCHITEKTURY MODERNISTYCZNEJ W UJĘCIU ALANA DUNNA

#### Abstract

This text presents concepts of mapping modernist architecture with satirical drawings authored by the eminent American cartoonist Alan Dunn. Modernism, as captured in his works, appears as an endless series of problems and misunderstandings between the designer-architect and the client. Modernity, shown in a comical way, is a nod to modernism and its international impact, in this case on the American architecture. The reflections contained in the text are based on the drawings from Alan Dunn’s book entitled *The Last Lath*, published in 1947.

*Key words: architecture, modern architecture, cartoons, mapping*

#### Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst przedstawia koncepcje mapowania architektury modernistycznej za pomocą rysunków satyrycznych, których autorem był znakomity amerykański karykaturzysta Alan Dunn. Modernizm uchwycony przez kreskę rysownika jawi się jako niekończące się pasmo problemów i niedomówień pomiędzy architektem twórcą a zamawiającym. W prześmiewczy sposób ukazana nowoczesność, to pewnego rodzaju ukłon w stronę modernizmu i jego międzynarodowego oddziaływania w tym przypadku na architekturę amerykańską. Zamieszczone w niniejszym tekście rozważania zostały oparte o rysunki pochodzą z wydanej w roku 1947 książki Alana Dunna pt „The Last Lath”.

*Key words: architecture, modern architecture, cartoons, mapping*

### 1. MODERNIST MODERNITY IN ALAN DUNN’S CARICATURE

Modernism, as we are well aware, may be defined in many ways. There have been numerous projections of that trend of modern architecture. The considerations presented in this text will be connected with mapping<sup>2</sup> the modernity phenomenon as seen through the drawings of the well-known American illustrator Alan Dunn<sup>3</sup> [1907–1974].

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In the years 1929–1974, Dunn was the chief graphic designer for the opinion-forming magazine *The New Yorker*. In his prolific output published in that magazine he addressed the issues connected with everyday American life<sup>4</sup>, with architecture as the subject of his numerous drawings. Dunn treated architecture as a field for discussion about the condition of human life and the shaping of modern architecture with the use of such materials as concrete and glass. In many cases, modernism described through the drawings by Dunn was shown as a certain problematic modern invention with which clients of architectural studios had to cope. Modernism in the cartoonist’s eye is often a direction pursued by artists for whom it is both a design challenge and an ideological challenge. The spatial reality in which they create their works is often very far from the ideal location and therefore the natural surroundings, including the landscape and the weather, become merely a nuisance for the new trend. The flat roof becomes problematic when it is snowing, while the glazing – so beloved by modernists – causes draughts and makes interiors under-heated.

Another issue worth noting is the lack of understanding of the new architecture among clients (recipients). Many of them, as portrayed in the book, have very little experience with modernity. On the one hand they try to accept modernism as a fashionable new trend, on the other they expect solutions they have been familiar with all their lives. They keep asking their architects questions such as: why can’t we have a traditional coal stove in a modern house, it’s functional and gives heat and who cares if it doesn’t match? That one, as well as many other similar questions are directed to modernist architects in Alan Dunn’s drawings.

## 2. THE PAST – THE FUTURE

The past and the future appear very often in Alan Dunn’s drawings. In the first picture opening the 1947 edition of *The Last Lath* we can see a modernist single-family building made to follow the new trends (Ill. 1): a flat roof, large glazings and, in this case, lack of privacy. Dunn addressed the issue of privacy in modernist architecture by showing a scene in which the main roles are played by modernism, house owners, and a tramp. The notion of modernity was shown by the author a bit ironically. If you are modern-minded enough to afford large glazings, you should be aware of certain restrictions put upon you by that modernist costume. In this case, a tramp is going to visit you in your bedroom.

Large glazings, one of the favourite design motifs of modernist architects, are used on the one hand as a symbol of the entire modernist trend and on the other become a synonym for loss of privacy. It should be in place to remark here that from today’s point of view we may find it hard to understand the perplexions of users from the late 1940s. We need to take into account the social and sociological aspect of modernism’s worldwide career. Within a very short time, such characteristic components of human life as the concept of the house or the form of the city underwent drastic changes. The modernity shown in the cartoon is heart-warming on the one side, but on the other it keeps questioning whether it is possible to reconcile this mythological world of modernity with human needs and expectations.

A combination of simple geometric forms with the human factor becomes the search for a new approach to modern architecture. The tramp pictured standing in front of the wall

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<sup>4</sup> He defined himself as a “social cartoonist”, whose pen is no sword but a titillating feather that reminds us that we do not act as we speak or think.

of glass may be interpreted as a question mark related to the future of architecture that lost its power of camouflage, revealing everything and hiding nothing. From the contemporary point of view, modernism has won on many fronts, and we keep drawing from its experience and achievements until this day. Perhaps a question worth pondering is how that glass-and-concrete modernity has become part of our perception and experience of architecture of that period. Alan Dunn managed to capture that time of indecisions and dilemmas of users of modernist house users in just a few lines, but are not those dilemmas still valid, but in a wider context?

### 3. TRADITION

The caption under the second cartoon presented in this text (Ill. 2) goes: *Perhaps I should explain that my architect believes in exploiting the natural characteristic of the material.*<sup>5</sup> As we can see, this very famous quote from the modernist architecture manifesto concerning the sincerity of material in buildings can also be interpreted in another, less conventional manner. The presented residential interior was stripped of all the attributes known from previous epochs; instead, downpipes and electric wiring serve as the background for an eclectic sofa. That line of presentation was meant to show the viewer the type of changes that had occurred in residential interiors. A certain aversion, visible in the first half of the twentieth century, towards traditional architecture shaped over many centuries resulted from attempts to find a new formal and spatial expression for the achievements of modernism in that respect.

The fascination of architects of those times with technique and technology, deriving from futurist movements, was in opposition to the traditional perception of the phenomenon of residence. New space was intended to reject the earlier needs of architecture users. As we remember, the ambition of modernism was to create both a new society and a new recipient ready to follow the expectations and postulates of avant-garde artists. Obviously, one must bear in mind that that the dubious modernity as portrayed by A. Dunn could become the grounds for the perception of space in a new way by ordinary people. It is a natural human tendency to try to accept new trends and creative directions. Still, as we remember from history, modernist architecture first became accepted among people for whom modernity was associated with a somewhat non-standard perception of reality.

For modernism, tradition and modernity became a game that allowed for the development of new standards and directions of the creative activity. In contemporary architecture we are still drawing from the experience of that period. When creating new architecture, we again try to create a non-conformist space in which we intend to provoke others by confronting them with a cultural and visual shock.

Coming back to the discussed cartoon, one should ask about the limits of such far-fetched creative exhibitionism. Perhaps Alan Dunn wanted to show us how not to succumb blindly to fashions and trends. Accepting the architect's vision without reservations should not be the case if that vision is derived from wrongly or falsely perceived modernity. Coming back to the caption under the cartoon, we should remember that sincerity of material in architecture not only relates to its appearance, but also to the message it carries.

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<sup>5</sup> Quotation after: Dunn A., *The Last Lath*, An Architectural Record Book, New York 1947, p. 32.

## 4. MODERNITY

We tend to associate modernism as a trend with soft flowing lines in rural or urban landscape. Alan Dunn referred to that flagship quality of modernism, the said ‘flowing lines’, in his drawing, showing that phenomenon on the example of a modern school in which happy students frolic on the flowing lines of handrails. The caption (Ill. 3) leaves no room for doubt: *Now see here, that’s not what the architect meant by „line of flow”*<sup>6</sup>. Soft lines in modernist architecture became one of its most visible and recognizable features. In the drawing referred to above, Dunn addressed – in the manner so typical of him – yet another iconic image of modernism. In his eyes, what seemed innovative and far-sighted in the opinion of architects and critics was simply borrowed from a children’s playground. Obviously, we need to treat the cartoonist’s vision of reality as a kind of joke about the generally assumed manner of perceiving modernity. Nonetheless, in the case of children and teens, the surprise comes from the use of architectural features in the manner that was not foreseen by the designer. After all, young people perceive space differently than the world of adults.

That somewhat free interpretation by Dunn of the iconic mark of modernism allows one to view it in quite a different dimension. Interpreting that satirical drawing from today’s perspective may be perceived as mapping the past with the use of different tools than before. The modernist modernity, mocked in a sense by the cartoonist, becomes the record of the past time when seen from our contemporary perspective. Encountering that different perception of a symbol of modernity in caricature is an interesting experience. Thanks to such an approach we can still interpret modernism in various ways, not necessarily following the line of studies on the modernist era that we conduct today. Treating modernism differently will allow us to rediscover it with the aid of the cartoon caricatures of the phenomenon.

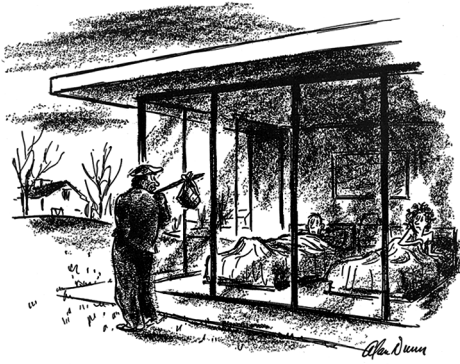
## 5. MEMORY AND NON-MEMORY

Modernism as memory may be defined on many planes. In case of Alan Dunn’s cartoons, it may be interpreted as an attempt to record the times when architects were striving to build new foundations for modern residential architecture. Here I would like to refer to another drawing, in which we can see a modernist house whose spatial form was not only meant to

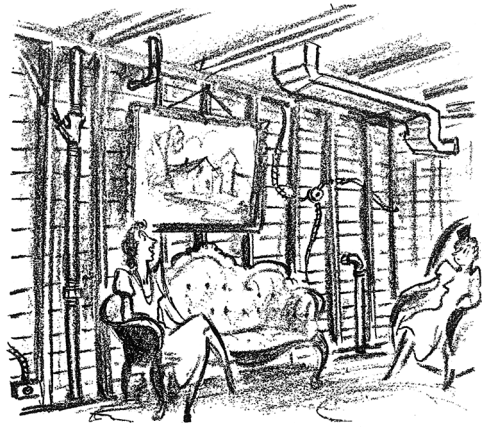
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<sup>6</sup> Quotation after: *ibidem*, p. 70.

- Ill. 1. View of a modern single-family house with a glazed wall in the interpretation of Alan Dunn. Source: Alan Dunn, *The Last Lath*, An Architectural Record Book, New York 1947
- Ill. 2. View of a modern non-glass interior in the interpretation of Alan Dunn. Source: Alan Dunn, *The Last Lath*, An Architectural Record Book, New York 1947
- Ill. 3. View of the interior of a modern school in the interpretation of Alan Dunn. Source: Alan Dunn, *The Last Lath*, An Architectural Record Book, New York 1947
- Ill. 4. The charms of modernist single-family house architecture in which form has been put over function, as seen by Alan Dunn. Source: Alan Dunn, *The Last Lath*, An Architectural Record Book, New York 1947
- Ill. 5. Modernist architecture as an object in space and time, in the interpretation of Alan Dunn. Source: Alan Dunn, *The Last Lath*, An Architectural Record Book, New York 1947



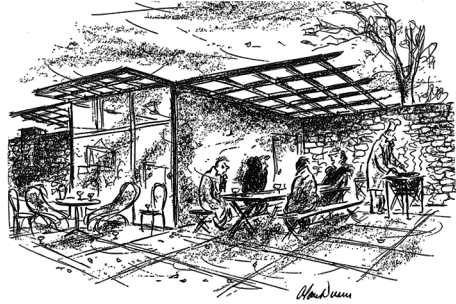
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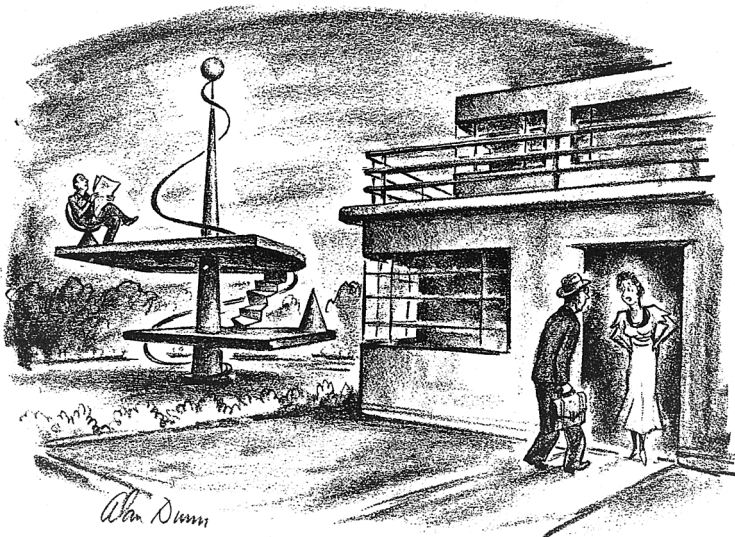
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follow utility requirements but was also supposed to be a certain spatial sculpture. A characteristic openwork concrete structure hanging over the patio was supposed to be a continuation of the living room, yet the comment leaves no doubt that the intentions of the designer and the users failed. Form did not ‘follow function’, or utilitarian aspects of the building: *And the emphasis, as we decided last July, was to be on outdoor living*<sup>7</sup> (Ill. 4).

That certain trickiness in the cartoonist’s drawing presents us with the opportunity to start a discussion on utilitarian issues in modernist architecture. It needs to be reiterated that many of iconic realizations, including early ones by Le Corbusier, featured numerous imperfections, both in workmanship and in utility aspects. The presented cartoon may serve as the confirmation of that rule. Of course it should not serve as the basis for negating the importance of modernism for global architecture. Instead, we should accept the presented phenomenon as a point on the discussion on the question of combining utilitarianism with usability. The already-mentioned architectural memory makes it possible to look for the attempts to strike a dialogue or quote from the architecture of the earlier epochs. If not for the concrete Roman architecture, we could not be talking about the fascination with that material in later epochs, including modernism.

One cannot define the creative explorations of that epoch in the history of architecture as the ‘architecture of non-memory’. On the contrary; contemplated from the contemporary point of view, modernism is very much the architecture of memory. We live in the times when we neither want to stop nor can stop remembering. The architectural memory is inscribed in the history of architecture, and thanks to discussions on the cartoons by Alan Dunn we may shift to another line of creative search. To conclude, the shortages of modernist architecture shown in a 1940s cartoon joke are undoubtedly the value added, not lost, for the popularization of that trend.

## 6. CONTINUATIONS, SPACE TIME

We also associate modernism with the excellent book by S. Giedion *Space, Time and Architecture* published in 1941. We can find reference to its title in one of Alan Dunn’s drawings from his 1947 book. The caption: *Well, we are dated – that abstractionist next door build his house in space time*<sup>8</sup> (Ill. 5) under the cartoon showing two modern houses of which one is very futuristic evidently proves that its author was familiar with Giedion’s book. As we are well aware, time and architecture match, giving both elements a new semantic and metaphysical value.

Over the years, modernist architecture has become a significant device for expressing the expectations of the new society, the society that not only consumes new trends but also inspires the propagation of modernism. Inclination to flat roofs and cubist-style solids was very well received and favourably commented upon in many circles. However, the concept of a house in space-time has been evolving ever since its origins to the present day. The message present in the cartoon, relating to a somewhat virtual house, has become reality. Modern digital tools enable us to create reality as we want it to be; they also allow us to virtually map destroyed modernist objects from the past. We no longer need to rebuild them to see what they were like.

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<sup>7</sup> Quotation after: *ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Quotation after: *ibidem*, p. 47.

Avant-garde thinking about architecture that becomes space without spatial or temporal limits has become reality. A house in time-space imagined by Alan Dunn has materialized thanks to virtual reality and modern technology.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The satirical drawings of Alan Dunn presented in this text, collected in the publication entitled *The Last Lath*, offer a very interesting view on how the achievements of modernism were perceived in the late 1940s. On the one hand, the author diagnoses very aptly the main characteristics of the trend, showing their significance for the architecture users of the day; on the other hand, he presents it with a bit of a sting, allowing himself some irony in the presentation of the architectural trend that has so fundamentally altered the perception and understanding of architecture from the early 1920s until today.

Modernism captured in Dunn's cartoons is ridiculed for its design shortcomings, overblown ideology and vision, but without total criticism or negation. The image of modernism shows simple geometric shapes, soft lines of handrails, modernity suited to its times, i.e. all those elements that have enabled the trend to take root in people's minds. We should also remember that the cartoons depict the American perspective, not the European one.

Another thing that should be noted is the author's drawing skills: a simple line creates a very distinct space, expresses very well the climate and character of the period. Despite many years that have passed from the date when those drawings were made, each of them is a separate being. The awareness of the cartoonist makes it possible to find common ground between practice, theory and reality of modernism. In the eyes of A. Dunn, that trend acquires new qualities, becoming the record of the cultural code of his era. An interesting aspect of that part of Dunn's output is the possibility of watching it on various fields of evolution of the artist himself, who at first was modestly expressing his views on modernity and then gradually moved on to criticizing it.

Thanks to his satirical drawings, Alan Dunn became the chronicler of modernity expressed through steel and glass structures meandering in the landscape of the city and its suburbs. However, the images he created also inspire reflections about the time that is past and gone, when modernism appeared as a breeze of fresh air on the combat field of the war with eclecticism. The avant-garde nature of that style allows us to draw from it even today, by copying, quoting or making a pastiche which, just like a cartoon, records the reality of a certain epoch and the people living in it.

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