

NON-NEW ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITEKTURA NIE-NOWA

Abstract

Art that dissociates itself from remembered patterns is slowly disappearing. The avant-garde is supplanted by commercialism. However, the pseudo-avant-garde of modern times cannot tear itself away from the architecture remembered from history. This may be its brightest point, though. This inability creates new-old signs, already decomposed and unreal, but still visible and recognizable. Contemporary “novelty” is that once despised by real creators post or neo. The words about the search for absolute novelty or the use of previously unknown building materials and techniques will not change the fact that real novelty no longer exists.

Keywords: architecture, novelty, avant-garde

Streszczenie

Sztuka odżegnująca się od zapamiętanych wzorców powoli odchodzi w zapomnienie. Awangarda zostaje wyparta przez komercję. Pseudo-awangarda współczesności jednak nie potrafi oderwać się od zapamiętanej z historii architektury. Może być to jednak jej najjaśniejszy punkt. Ta niemoc tworzy nowe-stare znaki, już zdekomponowane i nierealne jednak ciągle widoczne i rozpoznawalne. Współczesna „nowość” to pogardzane kiedyś przez prawdziwych twórców post lub neo. Na nic zdadzą się słowa o poszukiwaniu absolutnej nowości, czy zastosowaniu nieznanych wcześniej materiałów i technik budowlanych nie zmienia faktu, że prawdziwa nowość już dziś nie istnieje.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, nowość, awangarda

1. ABSOLUTE NOVELTY?

Luckily, architects try to listen to philosophers at times. We can start by quoting the words of a writer who is not connected with architecture: “The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything occurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify? Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing. We need take no more note of it (...).”² Thus, the statement that modern art is abandoning all imitation may sound like a truism today. We are already accustomed to any

¹Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Ph.D. Arch. Tomasz Kozłowski, Chair of Housing and Architectural Composition, Institute of Architectural Design, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology, tkozlow@pk.edu.pl; ORCID 0000-0002-4548-9490

²M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber and Faber, London 1984, p. 3.

novelty. The world today is changing, and so is the short-lived habituation to fads that fade away every year. Everything is temporary, uncertain. The advertising function of architecture is no longer a novelty either. Buildings no longer resemble buildings. Stylistic continuity or durability, once indispensable (also in poetry and literature) for a good reception of a work of art, is disappearing. Architecture follows the path of useless, in the literal sense, fields of art. It no longer builds houses or museums, but sculptures for the glory of investors. People got bored with beauty a long time ago, it was killed by avant-garde artists. In contrast to the latter, contemporary art no longer wants to emancipate anyone. The contemporary new “avant-garde” artists are closer to the rich sponsor than to the people who will use their creations or live in them. Durability and usability have also died – the former due to the commercial and momentary approach to building, the latter due to the obviousness of the correct function, which is no longer the goal. After all, the functionality of buildings, irrelevant to their shapes, is something obvious today. The strangest buildings, detached from memorized codes, must meet the utility needs imposed by investors. Having been so significant in the past and possible to describe in specific styles, beauty is now beyond the scope of interest of the creators and recipients. It was killed by the early 20th century avant-garde movements. The world is overflowing with commercialism, and, just like the passing trends in the fashion world, similar and very rapid changes occur in architecture. It is the (apparent) negation of tradition and the search for the path to absolute novelty that become the most important. The changes take place very quickly, but it sometimes seems that we have already seen the new buildings somewhere. However, it should be remembered that revivals may be perceived as a novelty and that “»to imitate the ancient means to be oneself, in one’s own time, in an active way, just like the ancient ones«». It is only in this way, knowingly remaining oneself, that is, sincerely in love with spiritually close ancestors, that one can genuinely get closer to them.”³ Absolute novelty is difficult and even an outstanding creator cannot easily forget the work of their predecessors. Bogna Obidzińska tries to explain it: “An ambitious contemporary student would not put himself and his teacher in the face of the awkward issue of masterly advantages. An ambitious student will probably want first and foremost to paint differently. This does not eliminate all comparisons, but it is a very difficult task to determine comparatively the degree of craftsmanship when we juxtapose, let us say, a postimpressionist painting and an op-art composition, any ruling will be subject to serious doubts.”⁴ However, such an image of new art does not force the student to completely abandon what he has learned from the master. He has been assigned to a certain art school and years must pass before he can be liberated.

Thus, he may seek novelty and not negate tradition completely. Such a search for the archetype can be called the pursuit of precedence. Let us quote Obidzińska again, who, writing about revivals in art, puts it this way: “Any authentic human activity, authentic, that is to say, not seeming to be something that it is not (not serving the goals external to it, but carrying in itself its ultimate right and value), is a conscious pursuit of that which precedes it. However, it is only in art that it is possible to reach the »precedence« of an act.”⁵ And further: “Søren Kierkegaard considers the abovementioned concept of *repetition* as a mechanism for *returning* to »precedence«. According to him, consciousness refers to time in three ways – the first is

³ B. J. Obidzińska, *Wenus w otoczeniu luster*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, Warszawa 2009, pp. 55–56, E. Garin, *Umanesimo e rinascimento: connessione o antitesi?* [in:] E. Garin, *La cultura del Rinascimento*, Editori Laterza, Roma 1973, p. 52.

⁴ M. Czerwiński, *Samotność sztuki*, PIW, Warszawa 1978, p. 56.

⁵ B. J. Obidzińska, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

memory, the second is hope, and the third is *repetition*.⁶ In order to detach the word “repetition” from the pejorative connotations, the terms “recollection”, “reminiscence” or “allusion” appear in art. The name is usually accompanied by various prefixes: neo, post or new. Again, it may sound like a truism that art is always changing, and nowadays, due to its abstraction, it no longer wants to be an image of the world and illustrate and present it.

2. DEPARTURE FROM FIGURATIVENESS

A departure from the representation of concrete shapes in architecture can be just as important as the appearance of abstraction in painting. What is most striking in the history of architecture is the assignment of specific functions of buildings to a particular style. The detachment from the tradition of building allowed the creators of architecture to shift towards non-representative art. This separation can be explained with the words of theoreticians who work outside of the field of architecture. Paul Valéry described similar problems in poetry: “That which we sing or preach in the most solemn, or most critical moments of life, which we hear in the liturgies, which we whisper or shout in the raptures of passion, which we reassure the child or unhappy with, which testifies to the authenticity of the oath – all these are words whose content cannot be expressed in clear terms or separated from a certain manner and tone of their expression, without depriving them of their meaning and effectiveness. In all these cases, the accent and sound of the voice are more important than that which evokes understanding: they speak more to that which is life in us than to our mind. What I mean by this is that these words are a much stronger stimulus for us to come into being than to understand.”⁷ We can interpret this as a departure from the understanding of architecture and a shift in the interests of the recipients towards feelings.

As the last of the arts, architecture becomes abstract, it breaks away with the memorized shapes of buildings and their representative form. Contemporary art is already accustomed to the search for novelty. Works by futurists and expressionists, mostly theoretical-drawn one, are already accepted. It may be a sign of the recipients’ education, as Maria Gołaszewska writes that “art is a function of the state of culture at a certain level of human development.”⁸ The emergence of abstraction in architecture was naturally a result of the influence of other fields of art. Abstract art has dissociated itself from the presentation of the original significance of an object; neither does it resemble nor suggest reality, regardless of whether this reality was or was not the starting point for the artist.⁹ Abstract architecture, which appeared first in the drawings and then as the already constructed one at the end of the 20th century, does not try to imitate anything. Yet, this is not entirely possible in building. The functions that buildings and their respective rooms have to perform are not suitable for complete negation. Windows and doors have not changed their shape in centuries. However, the contemporary followers of the expressionist avant-garde thought are striving to break away from the reality of memorized architecture at all costs. The abstraction of contemporary architecture is a continuation of the trends that have emerged in art. They are an expression of changing tendencies in all arts and

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ P. Valéry, *Estetyka słowa*, PIW, Warszawa 1971, p. 191.

⁸ M. Gołaszewska, *Zarys estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa 1984, p.190.

⁹ J. Leymarie, *Abstract Art* [in:] *Nouveau dictionnaire de la peinture moderne*, Paris 1963, p. 1, quoted after: A. Kotula, P. Krakowski, *Malarstwo rzeźba architektura*, PWN, Warszawa 1981, p. 144.

a continuation of Kandinsky's thought. It should be remembered that he is the one who "...did not recognize one of his vibrant landscapes, which had been turned upside down. Kandinsky realized then that a painting may be deprived of descriptiveness."¹⁰ Such epoch-making discoveries no longer shock anyone, they become commonplace, office buildings are no longer similar to the modernist ones. Churches and chapels are made of abstract blocks and are no longer similar to the perfect Gothic ones.

Art theoreticians see this new search of creators, and Marcin Czerwiński explains it this way: "Throughout the course of my previous considerations I perceived the decline of the mimetic art simply as a phenomenon given to us by history."¹¹ The abandonment of the representation of the world and the treatment of works as certain abstractions first appeared in literature: "in the works of representational arts, the representational elements overwhelm the ordinary sensual elements, which by themselves arouse joy. In a poetic work, especially one written in prose, words affect us above all with their semantic side: we do not always realize that they also affect us with their auditory side. Likewise, although perhaps not to the same extent, in a given painting, the lines and patches of colour are for us, above all, signs representing certain objects. It is only the connoisseur who delights in the clusters of lines and colours as such."¹² Such an escape from the literal and original meaning of objects becomes a path to searching for a new meaning also in architecture. A contemporary architectural work should be abstract and should convey a previously unknown expression through its shape and, of course, surprise the viewer with its unreality. Something new is also appearing – a complete departure from any composition.

Heinrich Wölfflin could not have foreseen the emergence of deconstructivist architecture while writing in 1915: "Painting can be tectonic, architecture must be. Painting only fully develops its own peculiar values when it takes leave of tectonics. For architecture, abolishing the tectonic framework would be tantamount to self-destruction."¹³ These words, however, did not become prophecies. The art of painting first, then the built architecture of Zaha Hadid, and later that of Frank Gehry or Daniel Libeskind, despite unshackling their architecture from the chains of tectonics, did not lead to self-destruction. On the contrary, their actions resulted in the creation of clear tendencies for some time and perhaps even a global style. Such abstraction has become a contemporary determinant of modernity and brings along with it the dream of a (temporarily) unsurpassed novelty.

Over time, a number of modern and abstract buildings have become icons of architecture. That is what Charles Jencks calls them in his book *Iconic Buildings*. Such icons of architecture gain the statute of contemporary cathedrals and enter slightly inadvertently the tradition of building. Unfamiliar with abstract art, residents and observers do not criticize them – what a sad fate for the architectural avant-garde. One example of such a way of striving to create architecture as an abstract composition of scattered elements that is universally accepted can be the project by Fritz Wotruba and Fritz Mayr *Kirche Zur Heiligsten Dreifaltigkeit – Wotrubakirche*. The building may become an illustration of the thesis proposed by Leon Chwistek, the main theoretician of the Polish avant-garde – formism: "There are genres completely independent from the notion of content, namely music, ornamental art,

¹⁰ J. Bell, *Lustro świata. Nowa historia sztuki*, Arkady, Warszawa 2009, pp. 377–378.

¹¹ M. Czerwiński, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹² M. Wallis, *Przeżycie i wartość*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1968, p. 92.

¹³ H. Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki, Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Ossolineum, Warszawa 1962, pp. 166–199, III. *Forma zamknięta i forma otwarta*, p. 194.

and architecture in a sense. While we are talking about the musical illustration, it is easy to realize that the relationship between the juxtaposition of tones and conceptual content can be achieved only by artificially added explanation, and in a number of ways. (...) A similar phenomenon occurs in architecture, which has long been rightly juxtaposed with music.”¹⁴ The architects of the church created their work, breaking away from the memorized codes and striving for absolute abstract novelty. The church cannot be compared to a traditional sacred building. Its form neither overwhelms the viewer nor informs about its sacred function. Such building can be a way of liberating oneself from the memorized prototypes. However, the total novelty of the building resulted in the fact that its perfect shape was not suitable for further imitation.

3. THE UNKNOWN FUTURE OF THE PRESENT

The novelty always pretends to be absolute. The search for the memorized origin is unknown to it. However, this is only an artistic illusion and an emphasis on detachment from tradition. The artists are afraid of undermining their work and accusations of copying. Unfortunately, the absolute and permanent novelty is unattainable, especially in architecture. The creator always has some unwanted afterimages and maybe ephemeral memories in his head. As a young man, I drew what I believed to be an innovative project, but then it turned out that I must have seen it already somewhere else. This was obviously not a deliberate plagiarism, but the unwanted, as it turned out, and blurred image was stuck somewhere. I found the original, it was not entirely similar, but the shape memorized in the afterimage remained. It is often said that architecture is evolving. Yet we must remember that evolution has no purpose and cannot be predicted. What is more important and necessary moves forward, what is unnecessary dies. The contemporary novelty was unpredictable for artists from the beginning of the 20th century. One can recall the words of Heinrich Wölfflin quoted by Ernst Gombrich in his reflections on psychology and the mystery of styles. These words may become a motto explaining the revival of a distant tradition: “not everything is possible at all times.”¹⁵ Contemporary art and architecture grew out of the avant-garde movements of expressionism, futurism and constructivism, transformed into one that was already possible to build, even more innovative and, after defeating modernism, it became the dominant trend. However, it is not a uniform art, it is made up of a multitude of styles.

However, the predilection of contemporary times for references to the avant-garde of the early 20th century, negated by the creators, is a different activity – perhaps more innovative one. Traditionally, if one may say so in relation to such movements, they aimed at social emancipation or at least social transformations. Grzegorz Gazda enumerates several features of avant-garde movements: “The »art-life-action« formula generates another set of features within itself: vitalism, activism, dynamism and spontaneous feverishness, creative momentum and joy of artistic creation. The offensive avant-garde movement in all fields dispelled the metaphysical darkness in which decadents and symbolists experienced their creative and existential dramas (...).”¹⁶ Contemporary architecture is not to be a science

¹⁴ L. Chwistek, *Formizm* [in:] L. Chwistek, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Universitas, Kraków 2004, p. 97.

¹⁵ E. H. Gombrich, *Pisma o sztuce i kulturze*, Universitas, Kraków 2011, p. 84.

¹⁶ G. Gazda, *Awangarda – nowoczesność i tradycja*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 1987, p. 124.

or technology, it is to be an expression of pure entertainment, we no longer want the Apollonian art. It is to be purely Dionysian, full of carefree joy. Recipients do not want to be taught anymore. The pursuit of absolute novelty kills the recipient's desire to observe works of art. In *A History of Six Ideas*, Władysław Tatarkiewicz quotes the pessimistic words of Abraham Moles: "There are no longer works of art, there are only artistic situations". It is therefore difficult to call something art if we cannot compare it with anything else. The professionalism of design studios and the commercial need to execute numerous projects in a short time leads to another sad conclusion by the French philosopher that "the art of rebellion has become a profession".

The dreams of rejecting traditional forms and freedom of creation have finally reached architecture. The emergence of non-representational forms of architecture was possible owing to the development of excellent counting machines, which gave freedom to creators. However, the possibility to break away from the tradition of building was the most important. Architecture, the most technical of all arts, has always had difficulty in doing so due to its functionality. The literal negation of the past in successive styles has never been complete. The changes in the shape of windows or the slenderness of columns were not a fight against tradition, but a timid defiance against the predecessors. Thanks to new building technologies and the aforementioned computer programmes, modernity can create something that its predecessors could only dream of. Contemporary architects can proudly join the group of artists from other fields of art. Abstract art is widely accepted today and we learn about it in schools. Recipients have become accustomed to the fact that projects of houses, stadiums or sacred buildings, traditional in their form, can be presented in museums and galleries alongside the avant-garde sculptures of futurists and expressionists. Their form is slowly becoming one with the sculptures, and they are only distinguished by a slightly larger scale. Yet this can be read in favour of architecture. After all, big is always beautiful.

References

- [1] Bell J., *Lustro świata. Nowa historia sztuki*, Arkady, Warszawa 2009.
- [2] Chwistek L., *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Universitas, Kraków 2004.
- [3] Czartoryska U., Kluczyński R. W., *Wybory i ryzyka awangardy. Studia z teorii awangardy*, PWN, Warszawa 1985.
- [4] Czerwiński M., *Samotność sztuki*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1978.
- [5] Garin E., *La cultura del Rinascimento*, Editori Laterza, Roma 1973, p. 52.
- [6] Gazda G., *Awangarda – nowoczesność i tradycja*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 1987.
- [7] Gołaszewska M., *Zarys estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa 1984.
- [8] Gombrich E. H., *Pisma o sztuce i kulturze*, Universitas, Kraków 2011.
- [9] Grabska-Wallis E., Morawska H., *Artyści o sztuce. Od Van Gogha do Picassa*, PWN, Warszawa 1969.
- [10] Kotula A., Krakowski P., *Malarstwo rzeźba architektura*, PWN, Warszawa 1981.
- [11] Kundera M., *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber and Faber, London 1984
- [12] Kuźma E., *Z problemów świadomości literackiej i artystycznej ekspresjonizmu w Polsce*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1976.
- [13] Obidzińska B. J., *Wenus w otoczeniu luster*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, Warszawa 2009.

- [14] Poprzęcka M., *Teoretycy, artyści i krytycy o sztuce 1700–1870*, PWN, Warszawa 1989.
- [15] Valéry, P., *Estetyka słowa*, PIW, Warszawa 1971.
- [16] Wallis, M., *Przeżycie i wartość*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1968.
- [17] Wölfflin, H., *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki, Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Ossolineum, Warszawa 1962.

Author's note:

The author of numerous articles on architecture and art theory. The author of the books: *Expressionist Tendencies in Contemporary Architecture* and *Przestrzeń ekspresjonistyczna w sztuce – Expressionist Space in Art*. The curator of the International Scientific Conference Defining the Architectural Space.