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THE EXHIBIT AND THE SURROUNDINGS. DIALOGUE BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

EKSPONAT I OTOCZENIE. DIALOG TRADYCJI I NOWOCZESNOŚCI

Abstract

The Dulwich Gallery building, modern as for the beginning of the 19th century, is now one of the numerous examples of a traditional, historic exhibition space. Tradition may be manifested in the manner that architecture is shaped, but also in creating a relationship with an exhibit. In creating the experience of being in the presence of a work of art, the space plays a significant role; contemporary concepts of shaping such spaces provide a multitude of solutions derived from the experience found in tradition and the freedom of interpretation derived from modernity. Such a view of the interplay between the space and the exhibit allows the display of works of antique art in mine drifts or ultra-modern museum interiors. The relation between the object and the surroundings exists not only in museum forms.

In this case, can we say that we are also dealing with tradition or only with modernity? The aim of this article is to investigate, through preliminary research of literature on the subject, as well as examples of exhibition facilities, the phenomena that take place in shaping of the exhibition space, and to answer the question of whether we can talk about tradition in terms of shaping the relation between the exhibit and its surroundings. The result of this research is to characterise the concepts applied.

Keywords: exhibit, exhibition, plan, museum, relation

Streszczenie

Nowoczesny jak na początek XIX wieku budynek Dulwich Gallery jest obecnie jednym z licznych wzorów tradycyjnej, historycznej przestrzeni ekspozycyjnej. Tradycja może być w sposobie kształtowania architektury, ale również w tworzeniu relacji z eksponatem. W kreowaniu przeżycia, jakim jest obcowanie z dziełem sztuki, istotną rolę odgrywa miejsce; współczesne koncepcje kształtowania takich przestrzeni to wielość rozwiązań pozyskiwanych z doświadczeń odnajdywanych w tradycji i wolności interpretacji czerpanej z nowoczesności. Takie spojrzenie na duet miejsca i eksponatu, pozwala na spotkanie obiektów sztuki antycznej prezentowanych w górniczych sztolniach lub ultra nowoczesnych wnętrzach muzeów. Relacja obiekt i otoczenie to również inne niż muzealne formy.

Czy tu można mówić również o tradycji czy tylko o nowoczesności? Celem tego artykułu jest prześledzenie metodą kwerendy literatury i przykładów realizacji obiektów wystawienniczych zjawisk, jakie zachodzą w kształtowaniu przestrzeni ekspozycyjnej i odpowiedzi na pytanie czy możemy mówić o tradycji w kształtowaniu relacji eksponat i otoczenie. Wyniki tego badania to scharakteryzowanie koncepcji jakie mają zastosowanie.

Słowa kluczowe: eksponat, ekspozycja, plan, muzeum, relacja

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relation of an exhibit with its surroundings can be considered only in regard to the exhibition space, its form and concept behind the sequence of objects, as well as the stories that they mutually build. The surroundings are the form of the exhibition space. The architecture of the building, its scale, shape, building material, the way it leads light, neutrality or expressiveness can have a significant impact on the reception of the exhibit. Sensitivity to the quality of these relations and their conscious shaping, serve as the basic purposes of exhibition, and these that can be measured, such as informing “about” or creating opportunities for the visitor to acquire knowledge; an exhibition is a space of experience – participation, where its quality is an indispensable component.

The exhibition facility with the exhibition space is created in a relationship where the exhibit should be the subject, and the space the background, or as Andrzej Kiciński writes, calling the space a frame for presenting, it is also a meeting of multi-faceted issues rooted in cultural continuity. Scientific references, as well as historical and spatial context, both in the case of the subject and the background, are relevant. This overlap of these aspects affects the distribution of accents and determines the choice of solutions – it is an important component of the “story”, i.e. the exhibition.

The studies of exposition spaces prove a strong rooting in what tradition is in the experience of such spaces as well as breaking away from them and proposing new concepts. Treating the approach to the definition of tradition and modernity broadly, the continuation, evolution and cutting off from these concepts makes it possible to experience different types of spaces, and yesterday’s modernity becomes today’s experience and tomorrow’s tradition. The article deals with the issue of the relationship between the exhibit and the surroundings with reference only to exhibition spaces in museums or the like, in exhibition venues.

2. THE FIRST EXHIBITION SPACES

The first museum buildings and exhibition spaces primarily includes the wings of the Louvre Royal Palace in Paris or the adaptation of mainly palace buildings for museum purposes, such as the first seat of the British Museum, made available at the end of the eighteenth century. It is assumed in studies of the history of the formation of a new exhibition function, that it has its direct sources in cabinets of curiosities (16th to 18th centuries) and places in which works of art have been shown so far – in representative and residential interiors. The character of these spaces has left a strong mark on the aesthetic model of exhibition spaces. Exhibition rooms full of detail, decisive wall divisions, gilding, with surfaces covered with wood paneling, wallpapers or colour, formed the unambiguous character of elite interiors. Until the beginning of the 20th century, numerous museum and exhibition spaces were created, which reproduced this way of shaping the interiors of exhibition rooms. Designed by John Soan, the Dulwich Gallery, a facility created at the beginning of the 19th century, was one of the first which in assumptions was designed for exhibition purposes. This is evident in the proportions of the interiors with elongated axes, characteristically closed by the exposition plane (this composition became the exhibition canon). John Soane used only the roof skylight to provide top lighting, thanks to which he received the appropriate lighting of the interior, and by avoiding windows, he obtained the maximum wall space for the presentation

of painting. The solutions adopted in this facility became a model for subsequent buildings. The clearly assigned function, reflected in the architectural form, continued the character of the elite interiors.

Museum buildings on the Museum Island in Berlin, especially the Imperial Museum (currently the Old Museum) designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, as well as the Pinakothek in Munich designed by Leon Von Krenz², have become a model imitated in many, not just European, museums. The architectural form in a classic style, like the new building of the British Museum, has become a canon. The organisation of expositions on several storeys, spatial divisions, the placement of sculptures in the least lighted parts of the exhibition and painting expositions on the upper storeys, the peripheral guiding of the visitor was a solution copied in large.

This type of solution for the newly created institution of a museum (the foundation of the British Museum in 1753 is considered as its beginning³) draws from well-established traditions of representative buildings, referring to ancient models. The strength of these references for a long time was decisive in regard to the form of the building's shape and the exhibition space itself. The facilities mentioned are examples referring to the achievements of the first public museums. Early reconstruction of private or semi-private galleries, such as: from the Renaissance and Baroque – the Uffizi by Vasari for Lorenzo de' Medici, or the Vatican Museum, are examples of great adaptations for exhibition purposes; and definitely influenced the formula of the first exhibition buildings in the nineteenth century. The permanent plan they represent determined the resulting shape of the exhibition, the numerous but small rooms imposed divisions, and essentially limited the flexibility in shaping the exhibition.

The first changes in the formula of the building, as well as the exposition space, appear only in the 1930s, although exhibition facilities that are the most bold and innovative in their shape, and the concepts of shaping the exhibition space, were created in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly intensely in the 21st century.

Buildings from the 1930s represent a period when advocates of changes in the form of shaping the exhibition space came to the fore⁴, such as the Kunstmuseum in Basel, the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam or the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague.

The example from Rotterdam features exhibition rooms with decidedly simplified aesthetics. The design of subsequent spaces was to serve, not underline the grandiosity and elitism as in the buildings from the nineteenth century, but to introduce contemplation into the space⁵. This new concept definitely re-evaluated the approach to the space in which works of art were exhibited. The interiors of the new museum were more restrained, with a limited amount of decorations and details. Exhibits and works of art were the main element in the arrangement of the space, focusing the visitor's attention. Comparing this building to previous examples, we can see significant changes, although the division of the rooms and their joining does not indicate a radical revolution – their sources are clear, but also the application of new concepts is visible.

² Kiciński A., *Muzeum. Zagadnienie rozwoju i projektowania. Polska perspektywa*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, Warszawa 2011, p. 22.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁵ Noordegraaf J., *Strategies of Display, Museum Presentation in Nineteenth – and Twentieth-Century Visual Culture*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, nai010 publishers, Rotterdam 2012, p. 92.

A facility that can open a list of buildings that break with previous concepts and mark the path to a new interpretation of a museum building and exhibition space is the New York Guggenheim Museum by Frank Lloyd Wright from 1959⁶. The form of the building, especially the concept of guiding visitors through the entire building on a ramp, and open exhibition spaces, constitutes a modern concept of architecture for the times.

3. CHANGES IN THE CONCEPT OF SHAPING THE EXHIBITION

The relation between the building and the exhibit and the basing of the exhibition space on museum buildings, is also an important process of changes in the philosophy of exhibition and presentation. Works of art, works of applied art, collector and research items were collected for their material value, out of curiosity and for study. In the concept of newly established institutions, it became important to develop the objectives of action, and consequently, substantive rules according to which works are presented. In the first publicly available exhibitions, works of art were selected according to scholastic criteria, it can be said that access was what mattered, but even for educated visitors, the exhibitions were overwhelming by the number of exhibits, and most exhibitions were unintelligible without specialist knowledge. The end of the nineteenth century brings the first reflections on the functioning of institutions such as the museum, views come to the fore that education is to play an important role, and that a visit to the museum, a “temple” of art and knowledge, is to have a cognitive effect. This re-evaluation from an elite space to the space of sharing access to knowledge, has directly translated into the exhibition form and method.

Overload, illegible concepts of presenting collections, or the use of selection concepts that the visitor could not understand, were typical of early exhibitions. At the beginning of the 20th century, this led to one of the first important reforms in the exhibition method that Wilhelm von Bode first carried out in the exhibition of the Imperial Museum in Berlin, being its director. He reduced the number of exhibits in exhibition rooms, which meant a qualitative selection, as he believed that each work of art should have its own space, and to create context, he allowed for combining different types of art objects: painting, sculptures with furniture, for example, to better illustrate the spirit of the time. What’s most important in the change made by Bode, is the creation of an exhibition that is comprehensible and attractive for the visitor⁷.

This is an introduction to the new way of treating expositions and exposition space. The changes initiated by Bode did not concern the style of the interior itself, which was still in the palace style. The announcement of changes in the approach to the purpose of the operation of such an institution as a museum and a gallery were words spoken in 1903 by Alfred Lichtark at a conference in Munich. He believed that the façade and shape were not important in the design of exhibition facilities, as was commonly thought. He definitely preferred designing the lighting, but also the layout, to obtain a convenient number of walls as an exhibition platform and combine this with the concept of the space, making it easily accessible to the visitor⁸.

⁶ von Naredi-Rainer P., *A design Manual Museum Buildings*, Birkhäuser – Publisher for Architecture, Basel 2004, p. 28.

⁷ Noordegraaf J., *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

These postulates show changes in the approach to the exhibition space, where not only the possession of a collection and an impressive building matters, but there is a focus on the quality of presentation, comfort and readability for the visitor. These changes can be considered the beginning of a new, modern approach to exhibitions. Works of art accompanied the sacred interiors, decorated the walls of palaces and castles, were displayed in bourgeois houses, but the purpose of their existence in these spaces was decoration or conveying a message, rarely contemplation. These places were not created solely for exhibiting them; of course, there are cases where the work of art dominates the space, but it was rarely the original intention.

The aforementioned museum building in Rotterdam was created in this spirit. The 1930s bring a period of construction according to the Modern Movement Principle, which connected space with light and the technology of new materials, determining the modern approach to shaping the museum space⁹.

It can be considered that this moment is a period of transition from drawing on the tradition of previous architecture and the creation of new principles, which at that time, were the architecture of the future for the museums of that time.

4. CHANGES IN THE CONCEPT OF EXHIBITION

The breeze of the new shaping of the exhibition space and way of designing exhibitions came from outside the world of museum exhibitions. Since the mid-nineteenth century, large world exhibitions have been organised many times, bringing new architectural concepts. These exhibitions enjoyed great popularity at the time, the consequence of which was the need to create attractive forms of presentation. Objects to be exhibited were no longer only works of art, archaeological objects, or scientific preparations, but ordinary objects manufactured and constituting the everyday reality of the contemporary world. In addition, modern art came to the fore, breaking away from the previous concepts of painting and sculpture, with the appearance of graphic design and applied art. The need for a different type of space for exhibitions and another form of exhibiting appeared.

The exhibition at the Vienna Opera designed by Frederick Kiesler in 1924 is an example of the changes taking place. It was arranged in interiors with a well-known decorative character, but Kiesler designed an exhibition using his own, modern in form, “L and T” layout exhibitions, presenting photographs, instruments, freeing the exhibition from the interior walls, creating an independent structure. A year later, he designed the International Exhibition of Decorative Art in Paris, in 1925 in the Austrian Pavilion – an exhibition corresponding to the theme of a “city in space”. The architect created the exhibition without exhibits; what he presented was an original installation, interpreting the concept invoked¹⁰. The same author, a few years later designed the New York exhibition in 1942 for Peggy Guggenheim. The exhibition of contemporary surrealist art is an example of creating space inspired by the character of exhibited objects, including furniture designs that could serve as seats for visitors, which could also be used as pedestals or desks for presenting exhibits. The designer departed from the classic concept of hanging paintings on walls, which were also designed by him as con-

⁹ Kiciński A., *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Müller A., Möhlmann F., *New Exhibition design 1900–2000*, Avedition, Stuttgart 2014, p. 41.

cave surfaces, and the paintings were hung at a distance from the wall, giving the exhibition a very spatial form¹¹.

Changes in the concepts of exhibition were also influenced by trade exhibitions, exhibitions presenting currently manufactured products, projects by Mies van der Rohe with Lilly Reich, for example, in various commercial exhibitions¹².

Exhibitions by expressionists such as El Lissitzky's *Pressa* in Cologne in 1928 were important, but also by Italian expressionists, for example, Giuseppe Terragni¹³.

Industrial design and architecture, as well as subjects, not just objects, became the subject of exhibition. Exhibitions such as Hubert Bayer's "Deutscher Werkbund" in Paris in 1930, the Berlin exhibition of Construction Workers' Trade Unions by Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy¹⁴ was based mainly on the designed structure in which pictures and graphics were incorporated.

The aforementioned world exhibitions also join in, where exhibitions combining the projections of paintings and films, as well as sound, with the exhibition of objects, were presented for the first time, as in the main pavilion of the 1939 New York World's Fair.

Museum-type exhibitions, but, for example, concerning natural history and ethnography play an important role in the shaping of new exhibition forms. The matter of these exhibitions departs from the previous customs – the tradition of presenting works, allowing to depart from accepted conventions. An example of this is the presentation of American folk art from 1941¹⁵.

Bernard Schwarz Frey proposed the structure of historical changes that took place in the exhibition spaces. The author distinguished 6 major periods.

The first is the mystery-sensational period from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, represented by the cabinets of curiosities, the next period is represented by expositions shaped on the principles of systematics based on contemporary scientific knowledge, characteristic for the nineteenth century, the third contextual period has the most illustrative examples according to the author, in the form of diorama type exhibitions commonly used at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in exhibitions of natural history, but we can also include in them the elements introduced by Wilhelm von Bode, such as creating contexts between exhibited objects. The author believes that in the 1980s, the didactic principle dominated in museum exhibitions, and therefore the exhibitions strongly focused on the superiority of knowledge transfer to the visitor, in the 1990s, stenographic solutions come to the fore, while the 21st century is the period of developing exhibitions based on multimedia capabilities¹⁶. To the periods distinguished by Frey, we can now add numerous exhibitions created in the style of a narrative, that is, exhibitions that are not only the exhibits but also the narrative, whose medium is a mixture of exhibits, graphics, spatial installations, multimedia techniques and reconstructions, and the purpose of which is a presentation of facts and issues, not just objects.

¹¹ Staniszewski M.A., *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibiting Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, The MIT Press, New York 1998, p. 8.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 42–43.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 48–51.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

¹⁶ Berton A., Schwarz U., Frey C., *Designing exhibitions. A Compendium for Architects, Designer and Museum Professionals*, Birkhäuser – Publisher for Architecture, Basel 2006, p. 21.

This leads to another very important division, which has a decisive influence on the form of the space and relationships that occur in it. Contemporary exhibitions are divided into those object-oriented, i.e. basing on the exhibit, which is the most traditional form of exhibition, and those narrative-based. This division translates directly to the visitor, in the first type of exhibition this is the sum of “frames” per exhibit, which is proposed to the visitor. In narrative exhibitions, the continuity of telling its sequence is important, implemented in the linear shaping of the exhibition.

Newly collected experiences have enabled designers, but also those responsible for museum exhibitions, i.e. curators, conservators and historians, to accept new presentation spaces and modern arrangements, such as the 1961 arrangement of Rembrandt’s paintings on a wall finished with modernistic wooden panels at the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian¹⁷.

Development took place in many fields, the search for solutions for hanging images and works, avoiding interference with the wall are interesting; it is a technical element, but it determined the detail of the exhibition plane, and thus allowed the use of claddings that cannot be reconstructed.

5. REFERENCES TO TRADITION

The sources of changes in the museum spaces mentioned, relate to the aspect of relation between the exhibit and the place of exhibition. The first facilities strongly invoked known models and built the outline of a new function. Contemporary projects depart from the tradition of function, but often invoke the tradition and culture of the location or the exhibition subject; despite new experiences and the constant search for new modern architecture for museum buildings.

In modern buildings, we can find constant references to the first models, that is, interiors with a palace character, or perhaps more elitist, in which even in modern architecture we find a decisive skirting board, separation of the wall space from the ceiling, panelling around the door, decisive wall divisions, exhibition planes with texture or colour. The character of this model is reinterpreted, but the sources of this climate are still clear.

Louis Kahn had designed the Yale Centre for British Art since 1969, and it was completed after his death in 1974¹⁸. In this facility, Khan combined the experience from two previous exhibition projects and other projects. Analysing the character of the exhibition space, shaped by the architect of the background for works of art, the Centre for British Art is the most modern, but on the other hand, it has the most references to the first models. The interior of the main room is the quintessence of this juxtaposition, the concrete stairwell body and the wall behind it, with distinct divisions of beams that transform into the divisions of the side exhibition walls; here, concrete is the frame for wooden fillings, which are at the same time the surfaces used for a two-level exhibition, so characteristic of the exhibitions from the late nineteenth century. Divisions of walls with modern materials form classical proportions.

¹⁷ Brawne M., *Museum Interior. Temporary and Permanent Display Techniques*, Architectural Book, Stuttgart 1982, p. 42.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

An example of the permanence of the model can also be seen in the design by James Stirling and Michael Wilford in the Clore Gallery from 1980–87, where architects used the language of contemporary forms to introduce details of the palace interior to the exhibition rooms¹⁹. Typical Postmodernism references form the interior, refer to tradition, and additionally, the closing of the composition of the rooms with the painting displayed in the next room is a reference to the exhibition tradition.

The building of the Taubman Art Museum in Roanoke in the USA, designed by Randall Stout Architects²⁰, presents a very dynamic modern external form, whose composition, according to the architect, fits in with the ambient system, not only in term of the composition, but also ideologically. The interior is penetrated by its external character, but inside, we find rooms that refer to the historical traditions of museums. And so, from the modern museum lobby, the visitor moves into the world of museum traditions, not limited to the colour of the walls, details of the interior, proportions and shape of the ceiling.

The examples presented belong to different periods of architecture, and are divided by the distance of time. The Louis Kahn building was erected in 1974, James Stirling's and Michael Wilford's project in the 1980s, and the American museum in 2008. Each of them, in their architectural formula and spatial solutions, belongs to modern architecture, yet we can find in them elements referring to the traditions of historical buildings, and what's the most important – these examples are not the arrangement of the space, but the decisions resulting from the structure designed, it is a space created for a single room.

6. SUMMARY

The article presents research on the relations that occur between the exhibit and its surroundings, especially the changes that took place in the space of museum exhibitions. As an institution, museums are commonplace, play an important role in preserving tradition, culture, and are an inseparable element of national cultures. The museum is also an institution whose functioning is universal, regardless of the place's quality. In the value of the works, it offers visitors the opportunity to interact with works of art and the opportunity to learn about the presented issues. We find many forms of architectural references to the culture and traditions of the place in contemporary projects, and they are very interesting research material. This article, although, addressed the aspect of the exhibition space, the process of working out models and changes in thinking. Modernity offers a great deal of freedom in interpreting the exhibition space, but in situations where it is required, the exhibit refers to traditional examples. The first museums referred to architectural traditions and customs, and based on them, one of the first very permanent models was created; abandoning this convention and moving towards modernity required the re-evaluation of many views (e.g. tradition is also associated with the treatment of exhibited objects, as once unacceptable forms of exhibition, such as hanging pictures in space and not on a plane is currently an acceptable solution).

¹⁹ Montaner J.M., *Neue Museen. Räume für Kunst Und Kultur*, Krämer, Stuttgart – Zürich 1990, p. 96.

²⁰ *Museum Design. Architecture, Culture, Geographical Environment*, Sendpoints Publishing Co., Hong Kong 2015, p. 116.

Numerous museums have become competition for themselves, which forces them to react to changes that take place in the expectations of the visitor. However, this does not mean abandoning the values resulting from the tradition of this function, but creating a dialogue with modernity. What is modern today, tomorrow can be well known and over time become a tradition. The synthesis of the historical interior has become the strongest element of reference to the first traditions from which it was derived.

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