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THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE LIMITS OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE: NAVIGATING IDEOLOGY, TECHNOLOGY, AND POLITICS

AWANGARDA I GRANICE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ARCHITEKTURY: MIĘDZY IDEOLOGIĄ, TECHNOLOGIĄ A POLITYKĄ

Abstract

The article attempts to analyze the condition of contemporary, particularly avant-garde, Western architecture in the context of civilizational, technological, philosophical, and political challenges. It identifies spatial, economic, and ideological limitations that hinder the development of the avant-garde. As a point of reference, the text presents innovative and large-scale architectural realizations in Asia and the Middle East, highlighting their political context and social costs. In conclusion, the author challenges the theses of postmodern philosophy, emphasizing the need to return to creative and ideologically engaged architecture.

Keywords: architecture, avant-garde, postmodernism

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto próbę analizy kondycji współczesnej, a w szczególności awangardowej architektury zachodniej w kontekście wyzwań cywilizacyjnych, technologicznych, filozoficznych i politycznych. Wskazano na ograniczenia przestrzenne, ekonomiczne i ideologiczne hamujące rozwój awangardy. Jako tło do rozważań przedstawiono, stojące na przeciwległym biegunie, przykłady nowatorskich i imponujących skalą realizacji w Azji i na Bliskim Wschodzie, naświetlając ich kontekst polityczny i koszty społecznie. W konkluzji autorka polemizuje z tezami filozofii ponowoczesności, dostrzegając potrzebę powrotu do twórczej, ideowo zaangażowanej architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, awangarda, ponowoczesność

1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernity. The end of history. The end of grand narratives¹. In architecture, does this really mean that instead of further revolutions we are only facing a slow evolution, directed at

¹ A. Szachaj, *Co to jest postmodernizm?*, "Ethos" 1996, no. 33–34, pp. 63–78, <https://repozytorium.umk.pl/bitstream/handle/item/876/A.%20Szachaj%2C%20Co%20to%20jest%20postmodernizm.pdf> (access: 16.10.2025).

individual needs, and that the architect, once again, like his ancient or medieval anonymous predecessors, will become nothing more than a master craftsman?

As creators, we feel deep down that despite the many voices claiming that everything has already been done, we still have the potential, the energy, and the will to want more. The theses of postmodernity have not killed the spirit of creation within us. Engineering is a wonderful, useful, and satisfying profession, and yet we do not give up the title of architect, of creator, alongside it.

So why is it so difficult today to realize avant-garde visions on the scale of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh, Oscar Niemeyer's Brasília, or, from more recent works, Santiago Calatrava's *Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias*? Do we lack courage? Do we lack ability? Do we lack new revolutionary ideas? Or perhaps we lack space? Or, finally, do we lack the material resources necessary to bring great, technologically advanced works to life?

Each of these theses can be posed. Each of these theses can be proven. Each of these theses can likely be refuted. But it is worth asking, because despite the many voices proclaiming the end of history, deep in our hearts we feel that *we want the avant-garde again!*

2. IDEAS

Or perhaps the avant-garde is doing well, but our enthusiasm for it is burdened with a large dose of caution, because today we are much more aware of the dangers it carries? Perhaps it is not without reason that it is no longer the broadly understood West, but rather the near- or far-eastern agglomerations with exotic names, that have arisen from nothing in just a few years and now dazzle us with their scale, wealth, and advanced technical solutions. They astonish and overwhelm like once, at opposite extremes, the American city centers built of steel, glass, and vast capital, and their counterparts, equally uncompromising in form yet standing as ideological antitheses, the brutalist cities of eastern totalitarian systems. Today Shenzhen, Dubai, Singapore, The Line, and Xiong'an evoke similar emotions.

Can we find analogies here? Was modernism not, above all, revolutionary in its ideological layer? Was the rejection of ornament and classical orders not, first and foremost, a rejection of an old way of life? Behind truly groundbreaking and avant-garde works, was there not always, above all, a revolutionary idea? A desire to create not just buildings, but a new lifestyle? A negation of the old order?² What is it, in truth, that ties our hands as creators? Is the price of achieving true individual freedom, of placing human rights above the rights of the collective, the impossibility of implementing any revolutionary ideas, which, by definition, destroy the established order and seek to impose their own, supposedly rightful vision?

Although we primarily deal with architecture, I deliberately refer here not first to specific avant-garde works or styles, but to entire urban projects that were revolutionary in form, technology, and, above all, in ideology, where the power of resources and the creativity of their authors are revealed not in individual buildings, however striking, but in the ambition of creating entire districts or cities. It is only on such a scale that the underlying idea fully reveals itself.

Today we see echoes of those once-avant-garde concepts in the symbols of technological and economic progress that have emerged in just a few years in the Near East and, above

² R. Banham, *Rewolucja w architekturze. Teoria i projektowanie w „pierwszym wieku maszyny”*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1979.

all, the Far East. The impressive urban developments of the Asian Tigers are undoubtedly the manifestation of their power. These agglomerations, rising in just a few years, astonish not only with their size, but, above all, with the modernity of their urban and technological solutions. They are true machines for living on a macro scale. Modern transport systems, extensive subway networks, tram systems, and cities connected by high-speed rail. A saturation with technology and smart solutions, and, at the same time, a richness of forms and shapes in numbers unheard of in the cities of the Old World.

It seems, however, that we view all this with considerable caution and without enthusiasm. Although many of these works are designed by renowned Western architects, and many of these solutions are the embodiment of ideas familiar to us, alongside the undeniably attractive forms and spatial solutions, we also see centrally planned economies, the primacy of the collective over the individual. We admire the embodiment of the garden city and *15-minute* city ideas, as well as the advanced technologies in the new districts of Xiong'an designed by the Barcelona-based Guallart Architects, but, at the same time, we cannot turn away from the social control based on modern facial recognition technologies, the enormous contrasts between privileged groups and the rest of a supposedly classless society, the restrictions on human rights, and the limitations on property rights, where entire districts belong exclusively to the state. This is no longer even utopia, but dystopia, which understandably sends a shiver of unease down the spine of a Western observer.

We remember all the positives brought by De Stijl, Bauhaus, and modernism³, which, beyond new formal solutions, also introduced new spatial arrangements that were comfortable and accessible to all⁴. Yet we live in a part of the world that has experienced firsthand how such ideas can be distorted and misused to legitimize communist or totalitarian orders⁵. In our part of Europe, we can find numerous examples of otherwise excellent architecture that was nevertheless “ill-born”⁶. We are far more conscious designers than our predecessors. Today, undoubtedly, our Western civilization seeks to distance itself from any form of social engineering, emphasizing individualism both in the creation of forms and in the needs of their users. Is this what restrains us?

3. RESOURCES

Or perhaps we simply lack the resources. Today, in order to create avant-garde works, it is impossible to do without the involvement of the most advanced, often groundbreaking technologies. Undoubtedly, this is not an era of great private or state patrons and unlimited expenditures. Awareness of other needs and social responsibility no longer gives us a free hand in creating without asking about purpose and costs.

Is technology the new avant-garde? Technology today offers us almost unlimited formal possibilities. It also gives architecture a new dimension. Just as deconstructivism once shattered classical geometry, so too digital technologies in the realm of form modeling now bring architecture into a new dimension. Modern materials allow us to create dazzling effects.

³ Le Corbusier, *W stronę architektury*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2021.

⁴ Le Corbusier, *Karta ateńska*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2017.

⁵ N. Davies, *Boże igrzysko*, Znak, Kraków 2006.

⁶ F. Springer, *Źle urodzone. Reportaże o architekturze PRL*, Karakter, Kraków 2022

Supplemented with digital and audiovisual solutions, they generate countless, ever-changing scenography, limited only by the imagination of the creator.

Professor Tomasz Kozłowski and Zbigniew Pilch argue that: “Material limitations once imposed by traditional construction methods are now a distant memory. Computer technology, assisting with static calculations, visualizations and drafting, is propelling architectural thought into uncharted yet promising territory.”⁷

The multiple award-winning, neo-futuristic Jewel Changi Airport in Singapore is not only about beautiful forms but also about advanced technology that makes it possible to create under one roof a vast tropical forest with 200 plant species and a 40-meter waterfall, while also serving as an important transportation and commercial hub.

Burj Khalifa, the icon of the Middle East, will most likely remain the tallest building in the world for a long time. It undoubtedly required the use of the most advanced technologies, as did the entire city that has arisen in the desert, with its countless attractions, artificial islands such as the Palm Islands, parks, water features, marinas, public facilities such as the Museum of the Future, impressive sculptures, fountains, and waterfalls. The scale of this city knows no bounds, it even includes an artificial ski slope, Dubai Sky, allowing people to enjoy snow in the desert of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Self-Sufficient City of Xiong’an, comprising four quarters of development, is the embodiment of the *15-minute* city. It was realized on the basis of a competition-winning project by the Spanish studio Guallart Architects. It evokes the garden cities of Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, but in a modern, technologically advanced, and ecological version. The idea behind the project is to create self-sufficient units, something resembling Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’habitation*, but in a much more modern version and scale. Individual buildings recall historical development in their scale, and the building material seems traditional, but that is only an illusion. The structures are based on wood, chosen as the material with the best thermal insulation properties in local conditions. Its production today is also among the most ecological and least energy-intensive of all available materials. The roofs of all buildings are intended for growing vegetables and fruits and they will also serve as part of the water recovery system. Alongside residential houses and office buildings, the urban space will be filled with various systems for harvesting renewable energy, drone landing pads, vertical hydroponic farms (where edible plants are grown in multi-story systems that minimize energy and resource inputs while yielding multiple harvests of crops with ideal nutritional parameters), roads for autonomous vehicles, and self-driving robots. The buildings, as well as entire urban complexes, are to have a modular character. The structural elements consist of a relatively small number of blocks, beams, and connectors, from which one can “assemble” houses, farms, communal facilities, etc. Building complexes in turn form modules that fill street quarters, neighborhoods, and eventually entire cities. Each individual quarter, however, is expected to achieve a high degree of self-sufficiency. The ground floors of the buildings will serve as futuristic factories capable of providing such a unit with all essential products thanks to advanced 3D printers. The residential buildings themselves will be spacious and comfortable, with a strong emphasis on natural thermoregulation, large green terraces, and dedicated spaces for remote work.

⁷ T. Kozłowski, Z. Pilch, *Imperfection of architecture vs technology* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining the architectural. Architecture and technology*, vol. 1, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, Wrocław 2024, p. 68.

These are just three of the many examples we can find over the past two decades, both in Asia and the Middle East. China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, everywhere we can admire technically advanced and impressive urban developments, sophisticated transportation systems, often autonomous, ambitious engineering and ecological solutions, and splendid examples of contemporary architecture, often signed by renowned Western designers.

The three examples mentioned are highly characteristic. Singapore is not only an Asian Tiger, one of Asia's most important commercial and financial centers, but also a place of massive state intervention, a centrally managed economy, housing subsidies, and rationed access to certain goods, such as licensed access to private cars. Dubai is the capital of the United Arab Emirates, a monarchy whose power rests on the high prices of the region's sole natural wealth – oil. China is an industrial power once built on cheap labor and the ability to implement Western technologies, now among the leaders in the production and consumption of high technologies, with aspirations of soon becoming one of the world's major powers. Yet we must not forget that this country owes its extraordinary growth largely to a centrally controlled economy, while the communist system established after the 1949 revolution and the absolute rule of the Chinese Communist Party are marked by restrictions on individual rights, a lack of respect for human rights, massive social control, the absence of any opposition, and the system's extreme oppression. It is enough to say that realizing the beautiful vision of Gualart Architects required the displacement of hundreds of families and the demolition of all existing homes in the area.

China, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and Singapore are countries that, from our perspective, possess unimaginable financial resources. The need to compete with the countries of former empires and to build their own identity, combined with centrally managed economies, allows these states and their decision-makers to allocate enormous funds for the creation of works that serve as manifestations of their political and economic power.

4. SPACE

Or perhaps what we lack is the space to realize bold visions? Not the metaphysical kind, but real, physical space. Europe is a highly urbanized continent with a high population density. Likewise, the metropolitan areas of the East and West Coasts of the United States are today so densely built that it is impossible to find room there for another Central Park. European cities are characterized by compact, historically layered development. But European cities are marked by something else as well. Thanks to centuries of continuity and cultural growth, they are now extraordinarily saturated with many remarkable buildings, and the last few decades have seen a true flourishing of groundbreaking movements and directions in architecture. Their evidence lies in numerous European structures, both representative ones, such as museums, theaters, libraries, concert halls, sports facilities, as well as entire urban plans and districts, many of which have been built in recent decades.

One might even risk saying that we essentially lack nothing, whether in terms of living comfort or access to modern public facilities. In recent years, only individual buildings have been created, and where there is still some space left for the avant-garde, it is mostly in projects on a much smaller scale, for individual users.

In this regard, a comparison of the possibilities offered by the vast, unlimited spaces of Asia or the Global South with those of the highly urbanized countries of the Old Continent clearly favors the former.

5. IT HAS ALL BEEN DONE BEFORE

Rapidly changing fashions, instant access to information, the pace of life, the rise of social media, individualism, the emphasis on personal experience of the world, the lack of belief in universal truths and values, a crisis of values. Ideas, fashions, aesthetics, information; all of these today have a short lifespan, shifting quickly and easily, like scrolling through a screen.

Until recently, knowing the markers of a given style made it easy to determine the era in which a building was created⁸. Today, architecture is characterized by the coexistence of styles and forms. Their selection is dictated not so much by the function of the building or the context of its location, but by the individual preferences of the user. Drawing from both distant and recent history, architects freely manipulate style depending on their interests or a client's decision. Thus, in the same time and place, buildings can arise that are inspired by or stylized after any style from the past: modernism, minimalism, deconstruction, decomposition, postmodernism, ecological architecture, futurism.⁹ This often happens without deeper reflection or ideological grounding, making such works closer to eye-catching packaging than to true architectural creations.

Yet it is also true that all these inspirations or stylizations carry within them a certain charge or essence of contemporaneity. Despite clear and sometimes perfectly recreated references, a trained eye can easily recognize in the materials used, in proportions, and in functional solutions that one is dealing with contemporary architecture. All these buildings share a certain common rhythm, the definition of which may be the subject of separate reflection, but it is distinct enough that, instinctively, when trying to define their style, we add the prefix "neo." Thus, side by side, neo-modernist, neo-minimalist, and neo-brutalist works arise. An evolution that, over a sufficiently long span of time, can be quite easily measured. We can readily distinguish the works of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, or Günther Domenig from the buildings of their contemporary followers and correctly place them in time. Perhaps our descendants, several generations from now, will be able to easily define our era, so difficult for us to name today, as one of neo-eclecticism, dating it to the late 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century.

However, this apparent richness and freedom of forms carries with it, among other traps, the difficulty of finding truly creative, innovative, or groundbreaking works today. The ease of working in any form seems to absolve many architects – even well-known and recognized ones – from the need to expand horizons and push boundaries. Thus, although many examples of genuinely good architecture continue to be created around us, it is rare today to encounter truly groundbreaking and avant-garde works. The enormous variability and apparent diversity of buildings go hand in hand with a crisis of faith in universal progress or objective truths¹⁰. Side by side, we find buildings inspired by styles that once stood in ideological opposition to one another. The coexistence of styles reflects the coexistence in art and culture of different, often contradictory ideas and philosophies.

⁸ D. Jones (ed.), *Historia architektury*, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warszawa 2022.

⁹ C. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury*, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013.

¹⁰ A. Mamajek, *Status „prawdy” w postmodernizmie*, "Studia Elbląskie" 2009, no. 10, pp. 385–402.

In the words of Tomasz Kozłowski:

Architects try to pass for innovators. Novelty and the negation of memorised shapes have always been part of artists' activities. But can architecture and art change eternally? There are moments in art when recalling familiar shapes, though in new scales and other colours, is considered a path to novelty. Duchamp showed artists the possibility of using a new path to uniqueness. However, his games with objects were sometimes unsightly, which is a somewhat questionable path in architecture addressed to a mass audience. Thus, familiar shapes appear in contemporary architecture and the slightly earlier one presented in a different, more innovative way. Novelty does not necessarily arise through the negation of the 'old'. Architects want to create works that resemble nothing, yet are embraced by the public. This is a dilemma for the creators: they want to be avant-garde, but investors require them to build a form suitable for advertising.¹¹

6. THE WIND OF HISTORY CHANGES DIRECTION

Changeability, pursuit of fashion, and emphasis on individual experience are undoubtedly signs of our time, but certainly not the only ones.

In our part of the world, the wind of history today blows in a different direction than it did a decade ago. It is no longer the optimistic and hopeful *Wind of Change* of the late 1980s, but rather a wind of destruction, a threat of war, and a wind that has brought to Europe dangers we once believed belonged only to the pages of history books. Local and global conflicts have returned, and so has the polarization of the world. "It is no time to mourn roses when forests are burning."¹² Other urgent needs now demand a redirection of attention and resources.

In a situation of limited resources, further strained by the upheavals of the past few years, high art, avant-garde experiments, and spectacular realizations must wait for better times. We are still aware, of course, that our strength lies not only in the economy or the military, but also in the values at the foundation of Western democracies and Western culture. Nevertheless, the wind of history has changed direction: security, infrastructure development, energy independence, and border protection – this is where attention is now primarily focused and where resources are being directed.

7. SUMMARY

Each of these theses can be proven, but the world today is far more complex than it once was, and rarely does a single, easily defined cause lie at the foundation of a trend or phenomenon.

The 20th century was undoubtedly a century of enormous social and technological change. The dynamics of these changes did not bypass architecture, on the contrary, the ideas behind new architectural movements often lay at the very heart of changes in lifestyle and quality of life. Within a single generation, the centuries-old order collapsed into ruins. It was the time

¹¹ T. Kozłowski, *Non-Avant-Garde contemporary architecture* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining the architectural space. Avant-Garde architecture, vol. 2*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, Wrocław 2022, p. 75.

¹² J. Słowacki, *Lilla Weneda*, Paryż 1840.

of great ideas and great names. The changes in art and architecture were revolutionary and lasting. The bar was set very high. Moreover, Western civilization now faces challenges previously unknown. It is certainly not an easy time for art and uncompromising artists.

But should we succumb to excessive pessimism? Is it not one of the very features of the avant-garde the necessity of confronting great difficulties? And is it not precisely the uncompromising nature of art, though often paid for with misunderstanding and the personal suffering of the creator, that constitutes its greatest strength? Is it not the need for high art –for art that breaks boundaries and broadens the horizons of human thought – one of the strongest imperatives of our species?

Many of the most outstanding works of architectural avant-garde arose solely from the needs of their creators. Often, they were theoretical projects or private works of their own, like Steinhaus by Günther Domenig, whose groundbreaking nature or uniqueness was only recognized years later. For such creativity, there will always be space. Perhaps our contemporary perception of time fosters far-reaching impatience. Leafing through textbooks of contemporary architecture, turning page after page of landmark examples of modernism, cubism, brutalism, deconstructivism, we forget that their emergence required time, that their penetration into public consciousness, their consolidation in the world of art required time. These milestones were sometimes forged with great labor, through enormous sacrifice by their creators, often becoming icons of architecture only after their death.

Despite the voices proclaiming the end of history, deep down we feel: *We want the avant-garde again!* But perhaps we are simply too impatient?



Ill. 1. Palace of the Assembly, Chandigarh, project: Le Corbusier, photo: Sanyam Bahga [in:] Wikimedia Commons, 1.07.2006, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/Assembly_09.jpg (access: 15.09.2025)



Ill. 2. Eixo Monumental, Brasília, project: Oskar Niemeyer, photo: Governo do Brasil [in:] Wikimedia Commons, 17.03.2014, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/94/Brasilia_aerea_eixo_monumental.jpg (access: 15.09.2025).



Ill. 3. Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias, Valencia, project: Santiago Calatrava, photo: Anna-Maria Wilk



Ill. 4. Jewel Changi Airport, Singapore, project: Moshe Safdie, photo: Matteo Morando [in:] Wikimedia Commons, 20.04.2019, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e9/JewelSingaporeVortex1.jpg> (access: 15.09.2025)



Ill. 5. Burj Khalifa, Dubai, project: Skidmore, Owings and Merrill LLP, photo: Tom Sespene [in:] Wikipedia, 28.05.2013. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/pl/1/1b/Burj_Khalifa_in_Dubai_at_night%2C_2013.jpg (access: 15.09.2025)



Ill. 6. A part of Xiong'an new masterplan, project: Hapman Taylor, graphic: Hapman Taylor, source: Lanksbury C., *Chapman Taylor creates design concept for Xiong'an Intercity Station in China's Hebei Province* [in:] Chapman Taylor, 23.03.2021, <https://www.chapmantaylor.com/news/chapman-taylor-creates-concept-design-for-xiongan-intercity-station-in-chinas-hebei-province#&gid=1&pid=2> (access: 15.09.2025)



Ill. 7. Steinhaus, Steindorf, project: Günther Domenig, photo: Anna-Maria Wilk

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In her academic work, she focuses mainly on the analysis of compositional and functional aspects of residential architecture, which is reflected in the subject of her doctoral dissertation, *Towards the Perfect House. (W kierunku domu idealnego)* In her professional practice, she has for years co-created the architectural studio Janik & Wilk Architekci spółka jawna, participating in numerous residential projects, as well as service and office architecture.

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