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ARCHITECTURAL DREAMS – MYTHS IN ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITEKTONICZNE SNY – MITY ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

The article presents a small fragment of research on architecture as part of the culture. It focuses on selected myths constituting the architectural community. It is a part of a broader research which, through the analysis of written sources and the study of artefacts of material culture, describes the place and connections of architecture with contemporary culture and civilization. Myths, a vital part of the culture, have many bindings to architecture – in which they serve both as inspirations and shared code of meaning; at the same time, architecture serves as a medium for the myths.

Keywords: architecture, myth, integration, community

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia fragment badań nad architekturą jako częścią kultury. Koncentruje się na wybranych mitach konstytuujących społeczność architektoniczną. Jest częścią szerszych badań, w których poprzez analizę źródeł pisanych oraz analizę artefaktów kultury materialnej opisane zostanie miejsce i powiązania architektury z innymi aspektami kultury i cywilizacji współczesnej. Mity, stanowiąc istotną część kultury, posiadają wiele związków z architekturą – w której służą zarówno jako inspiracje, wspólny kod znaczeniowy, ale również wykorzystując architekturę jako medium.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, mit, integracja, społeczność

1. INTRODUCTION

The existence and functioning of myths in culture can be viewed differently, both in history and present. They can be perceived merely as simple fables, passed down from generation to generation or as carriers of historical information and ideas about the surrounding world. Still, also one can recognize myths as an essential element integrating and regulating the functioning of the community itself.

In the latter context, myths seem to be a fascinating topic due to the culture-forming role. As W. Lippman puts it: “Our ideas about reality are largely composed of other people’s opinions, most rooted in our consciousness.”¹ And in fact, myths seem to be the most crucial element that distinguishes our social actions from other known species. Even more than language itself – a skill, until recently considered the essential feature, specific only to humans.

¹ W. Lippman, *Public opinion*, Macmillan, New York 1961, p. 50.

2. MYTH IN CULTURE

When analyzing the development of humankind, it seems true that it is the power of creating and disseminating images that stands behind many of humanity's achievements. And it is the ability to construct a community of abstract goals and dreams, not the communication itself, that is crucial for understanding the history of civilization. Not so much the possibility of understanding but, as N.Y. Harari puts it – “fictional language,” which allows for the flexible interaction of vast groups of people within one idea – that's what makes us different from the ant community – also capable of cooperation.²

According to N.Y. Harari and a large group of anthropologists, myths also shape our aspirations, behaviours and bind social groups within a unified framework defined by the stories and images contained in them. Harari himself describes the fundamental ideas of functioning social systems as commonly shared stories – therefore myths.

It should be remembered that the myth, defining verbal reality, consequently becomes the universe of culture,³ “it transforms history into nature,”⁴ thus shaping image, and through it both the perception of the community that creates a given culture, as well its internal relations and aspirations. To put it after J. Baudrillard: it constructs the reality in which it functions as a conglomerate of fiction and simulators created by public opinion. This phenomenon is even more vital today, adopting the thesis of the same author that now it is the matter of a hyper-reality in which the signs refer to nothing but themselves.⁵

Based on this assumption, it seems to be an exciting aspect to know the myths that shape specific social groups – in which they function as a distinguishing feature of this group.⁶ In the case of this article, of course, precisely issues related to the broad architectural community. On the one hand, those which are essential for the inner imagination and cognitive network of a given group, but also those exported to the outside – forming the idea of the community in public perception.

Due to the limitations resulting from the formula of this article, the author does not aspire to exhaust the subject at hand, but only to point out a few – it seems the most widely functioning myths. These relations and influence on the perceptions of reality and the shape of the culture created by architects are part of a broader issue of culture and architecture as its reflection. Some of them are well known or at least known, which should be considered the basis for the functioning of the myth as an element of the worldview of a specific group.

It should be added that although myths in the common understanding have a pejorative meaning – not more than fairy tales explaining phenomena often contrary to scientific logic – from a sociological perspective, they can be both true and false. It is not essential for their functioning. An important feature is a creative character from which the entire belief system and cognitive network are formed and the ability to transfer ideas underlying the functioning of a given community. The importance of the functioning of a myth – as

² N.Y. Harari, *Sapiens. Od zwierząt do bogów*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2021, p. 35.

³ F. Northop, *Mit, fikcja i przemieszczenie*, Pamiętnik Literacki, 1969, no. 60(2), p. 289.

⁴ R. Barthes, *Mitologie*, Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 2000, p. 262.

⁵ J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacje*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2005.

⁶ J. Berting, C. Villain-Gandossi, *Rola i znaczenie stereotypów narodowych w stosunkach międzynarodowych: podejście interdyscyplinarne* [in:] T. Walas (ed.), *Narody i stereotypy*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 1995, p. 14.

an image – does not depend on its truthfulness but on establishing common sacred beliefs and allowing it to recognize, evaluate, and describe different phenomena. It may also be subject to changes over time. It is not – as Barthes put it – eternal, nor is it defined by one medium. It cannot be contained in a word or an object. As a symbol, it goes beyond it, and its carrier can be any medium. This is a significant feature from the point of view of architecture and its relationship with myths.⁷

3. VITRUVIUS – A SOURCE OF MYTHS IN ARCHITECTURE

The work of Vitruvius is unique for many reasons. The apparent fact that this is the first (at least known to us) treatise on architecture gives this work a special rank. Its uniqueness also lies in the insight it offers today into the profession of architect in the 1st century A.D. Even if it is a highly one-sided look filtered through the author's beliefs and mind, it is still a unique source of knowledge. It provides insight into the technical and psychological issues of building objects, which today constitute the basis of the material culture of our civilization. It is a source of historical knowledge about styles, work techniques, etc. Without a shadow of a doubt, it enriches our understanding of the artefacts of a bygone era. Precisely as the work of Herodotus, significant because it symbolizes the transition from prehistory to history. The threshold between the zone of guesswork to the sphere described – and thus immeasurably more precise, giving the possibility of a fuller reconstruction and understanding. It is a milestone marking the dawn of both history and theory of architecture and, at the same time, the foundation on which many later texts are based. In this approach, the issue of the book of Vitruvius could be seen as equivalents of cosmogonic myths – founding myths, laying the foundations for the entire system of perceiving reality.

The *Ten Books on Architecture* – is also the source of perhaps the most deeply rooted myths underlying the perception of the role and tasks of an architect and architecture in general. Even if not for the entire period since it was written, undoubtedly, it is valid for roughly the last two hundred years. On the one hand, it transmitted the original image of the “architect” over the centuries, and on the other, it shaped the idea of this role – the duties and required skills. Due to the somewhat hermetic nature of the group, this mainly applies to architects themselves and perhaps art theorists, and only through them influences the broader community. Still, it does not defy the rules of sharing myths. Like all myths, this one is not dead. The Vitruvius scope of the profession's interests did not persist (who designs war machines today), specializations and technology development changed the approach. But the emphasis on the versatility of education remains relevant, manifesting itself in education combining artistic, social, and technical issues. One can also find similar threads regarding the emphasized need to understand the principles governing the well-being and health of those you design. The myth did not arise out of nothing. This range was significant when Vitruvius wrote his book and, to some extent, is still valid today. But the story kept this trait, reinforcing its importance and counterbalancing the narrowing down of fields with the advancement of technology – sacrificing breadth for the sake of depth.

⁷ R. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

The books had no less influence on the perception of the architecture itself – if not by anything else than introducing the three fundamental values of exemplary architecture. This means the immortal and everlasting: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas*. Once again, let us put aside whether the point of view contained in the book resulted from generally accepted principles, whether it is, therefore, a record of an existing scheme, or whether it was an innovative project of Vitruvius. The fact remains that the three words he wrote down have shaped the design approach for centuries. What's more, their power is so strong that even today, attempts are made to reinterpret them to adapt them to the conditions of the world twenty centuries after their creation. The power of references to the Vitruvian triad is multifaceted. In the simplest terms, it is a common idea to which everyone relates. However, at the same time, we touch the *sacrum* of the architectural community – an unquestionable truth that glorifies our community. Distinguishes it positively – according to the famous Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, a fundamental feature of every myth.⁸ We are talking about such a strong taboo that it seems challenging to think about it as an intellectual construct rather than a law of nature. At the same time, a reference to it gives firm support. It evokes the argument that is most difficult to refute in theoretical discussion – the importance of centuries. Therefore, it is easier to reinterpret than to deny the importance of these three properties.

An example of such an approach can be any attempts to link the Vitruvian triad with sustainable or pro-ecological design. They are intended to indicate that the contemporary understanding of specific categories reflects or continues traditional (and implicitly generally recognized) values. Similarly, the importance of this social construction is demonstrated by attempts to react to profound changes in social expectations in the context of sustainability, i.e., the implementation of the *firmitas* idea. Assuming that continuous change enables duration, on the one hand, the mental attitude is adjusted to the well-established formula of “persistence,” demonstrating its over-temporal importance. On the other hand, it responds to the precise current of expectations related to the constant adjustment of the environment to individual preferences. It addresses the growing need for the continuous change of the environment in the community. Without denying the truth contained in this assumption, or the necessity to adapt to current requirements, it should be noted that the reinterpretation of *firmitas* is to legitimize and emphasize its importance.

The quoted “seriousness of age” leads us to another myth. Perhaps less related to the work of the famous Roman, but undoubtedly often used in its context. The strength of Vitruvius's work is also in the time of the uprising. In fact, rather in the difference in time between its creation and its recall in any contemporary context. In this case, the aspect of time is added to the positive discriminant. It is partly related to another myth functioning for many centuries in human societies – visions of wisdom offered to us by past generations. The considerable distance in the time of the emergence of a given idea, to some extent, legitimizes the contemporary implications of the thesis. The same aspect may also explain the modern popularity of Vitruvius's works. It provides a solid foundation, rooting considerations at the very dawn of the history of architecture, thus through the generally recognized myth of “historical wisdom” and pointing to the importance of the issues considered through their persistence in culture, allowing for the strengthening of recent deliberations.

⁸ B. Malinowski, *Mit jako dramatyczna forma dogmatu* [in:] B. Malinowski, *Mit, magia, religia*, vol. 7, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1990.

4. HISTORY

Recalling the importance of deriving the theory from ancient history (at least as far as possible), it is impossible to ignore the fact that the interpretation of the past is a myth in itself. Moreover, it is a myth not only characteristic of architecture but especially here and in the history of art, visible and essential for the functioning of the community. Attempting to sort out past events is of great importance.⁹ Drawing general conclusions based on material traces left by ancestors is the basis for defining contemporaries. They allow for setting the perspective of functioning and determining the identity of the group and in a broader view of both internal and external layouts and comparisons in between. They are also a natural tendency shared by people through centuries and continents. It enables you to define sets and their values easily. They allow for the valorization of achievements. But at the same time, any assessment of quality or style in architecture is based – to some extent – on a subjective choice. Unique buildings are chosen as perfect examples representing a particular style. By convention that they show and represent style. They are rather exceptions – peak achievements in a flood of much less successful, less complex implementations. The entire history of styles, in this approach, will be a myth, a social contract, functioning as long as the group's beliefs support it. And although it seems iconoclastic and impossible, it is based mainly on the general agreement on interpreting facts, their selection, and ordering.

5. LE CORBUSIER – HERO (?) OF MYTHS

All communities create heroic myths. On the one hand, these are stories that satisfy the purely literary needs of the community. On the other, they enable the presentation of individual values, distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, on the example of the fate of the characters they tell about. When analyzing the history of architecture of the last two centuries, we find at least a few figures whose rich lives are described by writers and whose ideas have shaped generations of architects. But few characters were as much of the focus as Le Corbusier. His ideological legacy has shaped many immediate and more distant successors. Whether accepted as a whole or fully contested, the figure of the architect in minimalist black and round glasses marked out many design paths. They even left their mark on the image that an architectural designer should have. At the same time, one may be tempted to say that Le Corbusier became a semi-mythical figure in a very literal and literary sense, whose image began to live an independent life from the historical figure. His contribution to the formation of twentieth-century architecture is unquestionable. His ideas leave no one involved in design or architecture theory indifferent. It is an undeniable fact that his biography, creativity, and a certain self-creation support this approach. As Ch. Jencks states, despite Le Corbusier's enormous amount of material, he remains secretive – mainly due to his actions.¹⁰ Was it a deliberate strategy? A frequent redefinition of oneself, for example, by changing nicknames, could indicate it. The figure of Le Corbusier is hiding behind his theoretical works and realizations as if they were reflections in a mirror cabinet. For the most

⁹ This statement is also a myth.

¹⁰ C. Jencks, *Le Corbusier – tragizm współczesnej architektury*, Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i filmowe, Warszawa 1982, p. 9.

part, we see our own thoughts – which is why he is probably perceived in various ways, from the beloved prophet to the personification of all bad things in modernism.

Nevertheless, we owe him one of the most important myths of the architectural community (undoubtedly meaningful to him) – the conviction about the architect’s mission, his struggle against adversities in pursuing higher goals, often incomprehensible even to the people for whom he designs. We can also attribute to him the one about the individualism of the creator, which is manifested both in the style of being and in his projects. Finally, Le Corbusier made a significant contribution in promoting the vision of a designer-loner, paving new roads into a (better) future. To some extent, he is (again, among others) the cause that led to the formation of the star architects. A trend, one of the features of which was the belief in the strength of a genius individual, hiding the work of multi-person teams under the nameplate of the frontman. All this is for the sake of the myth of the “infallible demiurge” who struggles alone with matter only by the power of his thoughts.

This vision – it is hard to deny that it is tempting – was familiar to many architects, but undoubtedly one of the most influencing ones was Le Corbusier, whose work is strongly marked by self-creation. And although at present there is a visible shift away from the vision of an “architect-loner” towards a member of the design team – as can be seen, for example, on the example of change of Pritzker Prize winners over the last 10–20 years, at least the issue of self-creation in the era of social media does not fit only in the mythology of the architectural community, but even in the global human community. At least the one with internet access.

6. NAMELESS CREATORS

There is a myth about modest, unknown, but talented builders-architects of cathedrals at the other extreme. This pattern can be found just as often in the architectural community. And although it is difficult to say where its source comes from – after all, quite a large number of cathedral builders wrote their names in the parish books of the churches they erected. And in many buildings, we find inscriptions indicating who pitched them. However, in this, one can see the strong resistance in the 90s of the twentieth century, which was manifested by the community of architects against advertising their services. Here you can find the beginning of a discussion that was still alive in the 21st century.¹¹ It is not about the presently binding provisions of the Architect’s Code of Ethics concerning the false presentation of oneself (or one’s skills), but about the very fact of advertising one’s activity. The first approach is an understandable record resulting from the ideals promoted by associations and universities educating architects. The second is a far-reaching enlargement that has not resisted the changes taking place throughout society. In the first case – the ethical principle – this myth is an additional reinforcement of moral value. In the second, a relatively particular vision of the right path. Both cases indicate a system of weights and behaviours considered worth duplicating as the myths in antiquity. Express your artistry while maintaining modesty, the greatness of which is expressed through the perfection of the workshop.

At the same time, the vision of running a business based on clients coming from the recommendation, obviously very idealistic, basically in itself contradicts the myth under

¹¹ Wizerunek Architekta [in:] GoldenLine [forum internetowe], https://www.goldenline.pl/grupy/Przedsiębiorcy_biznesmeni/architekci/wizerunek-architekta,1806552/ (access: 20.05.2021).

discussion – how would they find a creator if he did not admit to his work. But their idea of modesty may well be taken as the root cause of this approach. Now, as already mentioned, changes in civilization have reduced the prevalence of this myth. Nevertheless, it still has its supporters.

Modesty as a virtue has been debated since ancient times. We are translating reflection on virtue into a practical approach, specifically in the architectural community. The myth of “cathedral makers” is, in this approach, a more specialized story intended to reach a specific audience. In this light, the tale is also an emanation of more human philosophical questions.

7. SUMMARY

The myths presented or mentioned above are an integral part of the architectural community. They are composed of both written works – scientific, popularizing, etc. – and a story told by members of this community. They constitute a small part of a rich and multi-threaded story that binds a not-at-all homogeneous group. Assuming that myth is a product of culture and its component is actual, one can see a mirror of architecture. Therefore, architecture is a carrier of tales. In such a case, it allows them to persist, reinterpret, refute and duplicate them. But like any cultural product, architecture is also based on myth. A myth enables its creation, its creators’ functioning, and their cooperation within and with the community from which they come. Some stories describe the sacred – becoming the basis for the assessment of the surrounding reality. And although telling these stories, analyzing them, and investigating their influences, roots of connections is instead a space reserved for anthropology and sociology, awareness – or rather self-awareness – should also accompany architects. It allows us to understand better the culture in which they live, time, and society. And this translates directly into the quality of the created architecture. Myths, true or false, constitute the world in which architectural objects are created and affect them and the architects who design them.

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