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ARCHITECTURAL WAYS OF TAMING MODERNITY, OR NOVELTY IN THE COSTUME OF TRADITION

ARCHITEKTONICZNE SPOSOBY OSWAJANIA NOWOCZESNOŚCI, CZYLI NOWOŚĆ W KOSTIUMIE TRADYCJI

Abstract

The paper addresses the question of the dual nature of what is considered modern in architecture. The question is why something that was considered a discovery at a certain point in history had to be dressed up in a traditional form, often even in a historical style costume. This paper proves that the disintegration of architecture is an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one, hence the notion of modernity is actually becoming a myth – we consider as modern those elements that we have already familiarised ourselves with, that is, those who have already passed into the past.

Keywords: architecture, department store, multi-storey garage, style costume, modernity

Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst podejmuje próbę udzielenia odpowiedzi na pytanie o dwoisty charakter tego, co jest w architekturze uznawane za nowoczesne. Dlaczego coś, co w danym momencie historii było uznawane za odkrycie, musiało być za każdym razem ubrane w tradycyjną formę, często wręcz historyczny kostium stylowy? Niniejszy tekst udowadnia, że rozwój architektury jest procesem ewolucyjnym, nie zaś rewolucyjnym, stąd pojęcie nowoczesności staje się faktycznie mitem – za nowoczesne uznajemy te elementy, które już oswoimy, a więc takie, które należą już do przeszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, dom towarowy, garaż wielopiętrowy, kostium stylowy, nowoczesność

1. INTRODUCTION

Modernity in architecture is fundamentally different from modernity as defined by sociologists, philosophers or cultural anthropologists.

The paper aims to prove that the formal modernity of architecture is in fact a myth because it derives from evolving forms. It does not arise under the influence of a revolution, because it derives from and draws on the broad context of an earlier building and artistic tradition, and is not a pure form that is merely an artistic expression of its creator.

The paradox of modernity in architecture is that people very quickly started talking about tradition in modern architecture, although by definition modernity is a break with tradition and creating new social forms, forms of behaviour, and in architecture – spatial forms. Charles Jenks defined seven basic traditions in modernist architecture, so far identified with

modernity. These are: idealism, self-consciousness, dolce vita, supersensualism, intuition, logic, subconsciousness and activism.

According to Harvey, modernity is “not only a break with any or all previous historical conditions,” but also “an endless process of internal rupture and fragmentation.”¹ The overall social, political and cultural context that was behind the dynamic development of modernism, as the first contemporary trend to be considered modern, resulted in the need of breaking with what had gone before and to start all over again, equally so in design art. This caused, at least in theory, the need to create new rules, new aesthetics, new functions, and finally new constructional and material solutions. Kuźniarz even wrote about the ahistoricism of modern architecture², searching for an archetype, referring directly to the idea of a building. Adolf Loos defined one of the determinants of this tendency in 1908 that is before the greatest “explosion” of new forms and functions in architecture. In an essay with the telling title “Ornament and Crime,”³ he defined the necessity of limiting decoration in architecture as a method of taming human passions. At this point, considering the modern man to be the one who can consider ornament to be “a symbol of the excess of previous epochs,” and modern ornament itself to be “hard-won and poor,” he should expect modern architecture to break with all forms of ornamentation so as to make even more visible what we consider to be the most new, and therefore creative and valuable, in the architecture of a given time.

Even slightly earlier, in 1896, in the text “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered”⁴ Louis H. Sullivan stated that “form follows function.” This was developed further by Frank Lloyd Wright and established what we will consider in modern architecture to be an ornament, an embellishment – any element of a building that is not closely and directly related to one of these three components in the simplest way that accomplishes a given architectural task.

However, if we go thoroughly, beyond the search in the field of the history of architecture, it may turn out that the foundations of modernity in architectural design lie much deeper. The search for the causes of modernity is based on the desire to learn about the social processes that were crystallizing at that time. Karl Marx looked for its foundations in the degeneration of capitalist economy mechanisms, and Max Weber – in the change in the worldview of society itself, summarized by him as rationalization.⁵

Contrary to the views of Loos, even the most progressive man will have a problem with radical separation from the context and culture in which he was brought up and lived. This is what could explain the process I wish to explore in the paper. The process of taming modernity, which does not take place through learning a radically new function in a previously unknown form, but through the gradual development of a new form on traditional

¹ D. Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity. An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, B. Blackwell, Cambridge–Oxford 1990, p. 12.

² B. Kuźniarz, *Architektura nowoczesności*, Idea, 2016, no. 28(2), p. 69.

³ A. Loos, *Ornament i zbrodnia. Eseje wybrane*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury–BWA, Warszawa–Tarnów 2019, pp. 133–143.

⁴ J. Craven, *The Meaning of ‘Form Follows Function’. The famous architectural phrase said design should reflect activities*, 1.09.2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/form-follows-function-177237> (access: 1.06.2021).

⁵ K. Suwada, *Jak nazwać współczesność? Problem konceptualizacji płynnej nowoczesności Zygmunta Baumana, drugiej nowoczesności Ulricha Becka i późnej nowoczesności Anthony’ego Giddensa*, Kultura i Edukacja, 2007, no. 3, p. 39.

foundations. This process took place gradually, bringing the viewer closer to the new form of architecture through successive iterations. However, it does not only have a historical dimension. Also today, we observe the phenomenon of implementing novelties in urban space by giving them a costume of a traditional form, known and acceptable in a given local community. So criticized by the great precursors and theoreticians of modernism, “costume,” “staffage” or finally “ornament” played no other role than methods of taming the unknown – also in urban space.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The presented research is mainly based on the method of literature research and review, and a case study analysis. Several examples of different functions and their implementations were selected for the analysis, which appeared as a novelty with the socio-economic development in Europe at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. These are department stores and multi-storey car parks.

3. TRADITIONAL FORM OF NEW FUNCTION

3.1. MULTI-STOREY CAR PARKS

A new type of building that emerged as an answer to the problem of keeping and parking in the city new means of transport – extremely valuable at the beginning and completely different from those previously known, were the first buildings of multi-storey parking garages.

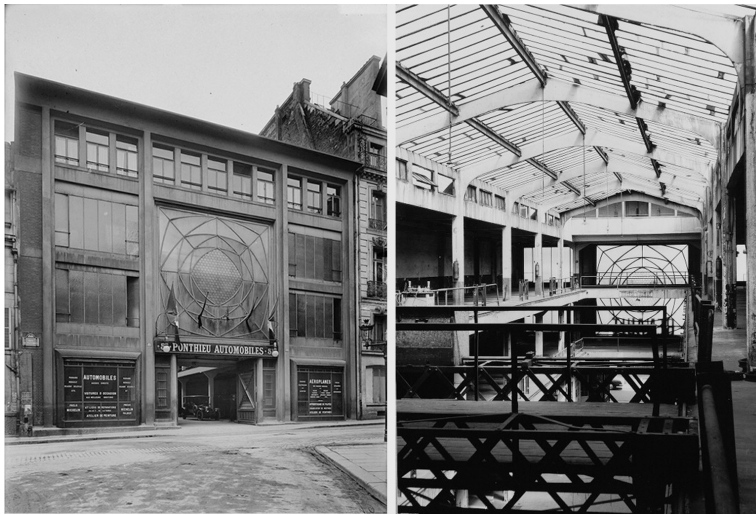
They appeared at the beginning of the 20th century due to the rapid development of the automotive industry. Buildings such as the multi-storey garage on Rue de Ponthieu in Paris designed by August Perret, built in 1905 and featuring an externally exposed reinforced concrete structure, demolished in 1970,⁶ originated from the so-called pioneering period.⁷

Situated on the street frontage, the building was not distinguished by its scale or the principle of composing the façade, although in fact a reinforced concrete structure was used, which clearly marked out the regular division of vertical and horizontal lines. The lines of individual storeys emphasised in the form of sill strips, the alignment of the ridge level in relation to the surrounding buildings, as well as the application of the triaxiality of the façade meant that despite the clearly contemporary form of the building, maintained in the Art Deco trend, the building itself did not stand out in terms of style within the historic frontage, co-creating a harmonious entirety with the neighbouring buildings. The central axis of the front elevation with the main entrance, wider and additionally accentuated with a stylised stained-glass window placed directly above it, was reminiscent of typical gateways or gently accentuated entrances to covered shopping arcades, typical for Parisian town houses.

⁶ J. Biedrońska et al., *Projektowanie obiektów motoryzacyjnych*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2008, pp. 53–57; J. Jackle, K. Sculle, *Lots of parking: land use in a car culture*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville–London 2004.

⁷ Ł. Wojciechowski, *Związki architektury modernistycznej i motoryzacji indywidualnej – wybrane realizacje europejskie 1903–1973*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 2019, pp. 12–13.

The overall form is very representative, elegant, and more appropriate for an office or retail function rather than just a garage (Ill. 1). The interior of the building was also designed in such a way that it resembles a building with a representative function – commercial or residential. The open plan, with column-supported ceilings, was given a multi-faceted effect by using openings between the storeys so that cars parked on all floors can be conveniently viewed at the same time. The building was designed as another urban showroom – a meeting place for the wealthy, where the exhibition function was just as important as the primary one – giving the opportunity to park the vehicle safely in the city centre. This is also evidenced by the very idea of daylighting the interior through a glazed façade and skylights occupying the entire space between the elements of the roof structure,⁸ which in the perspective of contemporary experience in the design of parking facilities seems to be a huge waste of space (Ill. 2).

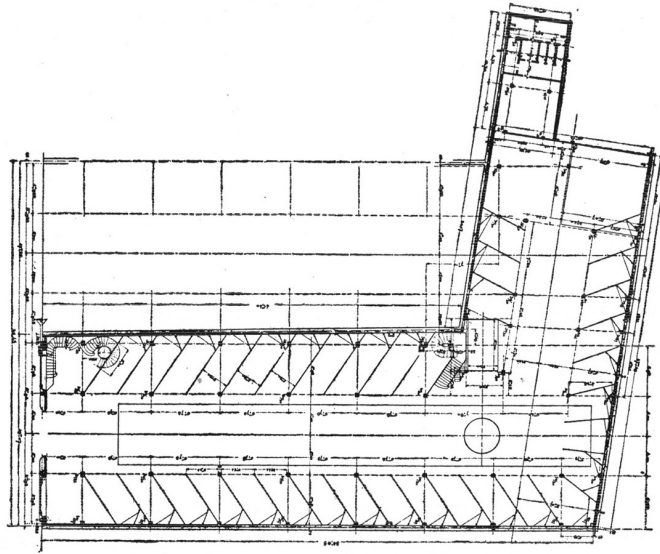


Ill. 1. Parking garage on Rue de Ponthieu in Paris by August Perret – view from the entrance in street perspective and interior view. Source: https://www.urbipedia.org/hoja/Garaje_Ponthieu (access: 23.06.2021).

It is not only in the case of this facility that the implementation did not fully meet the requirements of use. The reduced parking capacity in favour of representativeness meant that some of the buildings of this type survived, changing their function or giving way to other developments. Many buildings from this period represented art deco aesthetics,⁹ admittedly new, but also simplified in form, at the same time based on the patterns of aesthetics already known to the wider public.

⁸ A brutalism pioneer [in:] Najmas Oficina de Arquitectura, 21.04.2017, <https://www.n-o-a.net/en/a-brutalism-pioneer/> (access: 22.06.2021); Le garage Ponthieu (démoli) [in:] Paris Promeneurs, <http://www.paris-promeneurs.com/Architecture-moderne/article/le-garage-ponthieu-demoli> (access: 22.06.2021).

⁹ S.S. McDonald, *The parking garage as the undocumented search for modernism* [in:] D. Covo, G. Méri-go Basurto (eds.), *Encounters Encuentros Recontres. International Proceedings*, 2005, pp. 408–147, https://www.academia.edu/1224874/The_Parking_Garage_as_the_Undocumented_Search_for_Modernism (access: 22.06.2021).



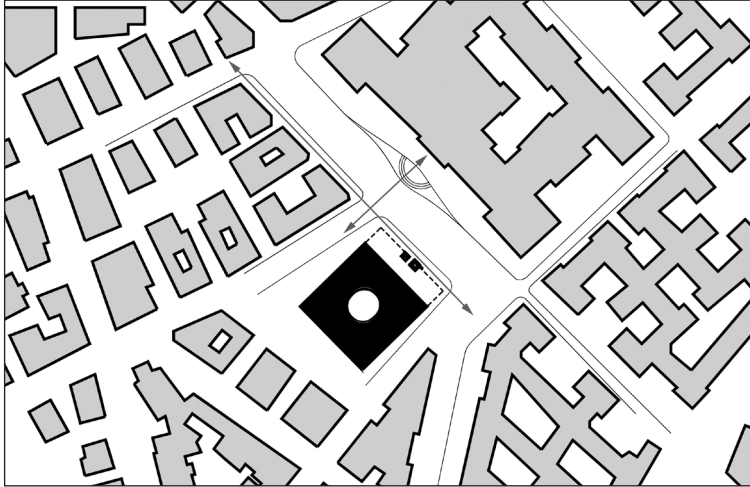
Ill. 2. Parking garage on Rue de Ponthieu in Paris by August Perret – ground floor plan. Source: https://www.urbipedia.org/hoja/Garaje_Ponthieu (access: 23.06.2021).

Often the historicising façade concealed a modern function, such as the Casa dell'Automobile in Rome from 1928, designed by Enrico Bacchetti. In the case of particular building, in addition to the highly historicised shape of the façade, which is reminiscent of public buildings, the choice of location also came into play. It was chosen in one of the representative residential areas, in Piazza Giuseppe Verdi, in the Pincian district, making the building even more similar to buildings already known to the general public. Significantly, this facility, like the previous one, had a reinforced concrete structure and an open plan, the most logical solutions for a garage building at the time, but it was equipped with a central spiral ramp and not, as before, with lift systems. The importance of the urban context in which the building was located is even more relevant to the analysis of the significance of its historical costume (Ill. 3).

Surviving photographs show a perspective of Piazza Verdi with the garage building located exactly opposite the Palazzo del Poligrafico dello Stato. The latter was built in 1914 as the headquarters first of the Corte dei Conti and then of the Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato.¹⁰ The two buildings corresponded well with each other creating a coherent setting for the square with a representative character. In the design of the garage, the formal treatments were repeated and the whole composed on the basis of the same set of elements. The symmetrical, nine-axis façade with a central risalit had three compositionally equivalent gate entrances in a clearly emphasised, rusticated plinth zone. The division of the façade indicated the presence of a piano nobile and a lower storey in the attic zone. In fact, the façade of the three-storey city palace had nine above-ground and one underground storeys, all of which were used as garages. The clearly historicising façade of the building contrasted strongly with the completely modern,

¹⁰ L. Fulci, *Il Poligrafico e la Casa dell'Automobile in quella piazza Verdi che non c'è più* [in:] Flaminio-Parioli, 11.09.2019, https://romah24.com/flaminio-parioli/articoli_blogger/il-poligrafico-e-la-casa-dellautomobile-in-quella-piazza-verdi-che-non-ce-piu/ (access: 22.06.2021).

ornament-free interior. The building was set back from the building line, as was the office building opposite, which was accentuated by a fence line and symmetrical pavilions forming a gate system. This arrangement, leaving space for orderly car traffic, was essentially the only indication of the new function. The building was demolished in 1963¹¹ (Ill. 4).



Ill. 3. Casa dell'Automobile – site plan of Piazza Verdi in Rome (own elaboration).



Ill. 4. Casa dell'Automobile in Rome by Enrico Bacchetti. Source: https://www.rerumromanarum.com/2016/09/la-casa-dellautomobile_9.html (access: 23.06.2021).

In the case of the Casa dell'Automobile, it is important to consider to what extent the form that the building took resulted from the urban context, the need to emphasise the importance of the building or, on the contrary, to hide its function under a historical costume. It remains

¹¹ *La Casa dell'Automobile* [in:] Rerum Romanarum, https://www.rerumromanarum.com/2016/09/la-casa-dellautomobile_9.html (access: 22.06.2021).

to consider the general socio-economic situation of Italy at the end of the 1920s and the rebuilding programme of Rome introduced by Mussolini's government, which, apart from developing the transport network and making the city more accessible, included the construction of public buildings, headquarters of organisations, schools, hospitals or stadiums.¹² The building in question is part of this context, so also here the stylistic costume used may have resulted, largely, from the top-down political assumptions that were made.

The order of the actions taken should be considered. Does such, and not a different form of the building, result from the expectations of the receiver or the architect as to the way of raising the prestige of the modern and unique function, emphasising its rank through procedures regarding style, or the other way round, the new – different architecture took on a mimetic form, resembling what was already known hoping that in this way it would be more easily accepted in the urban tissue.

The building in Udine, also no longer existing, was realised in a similar manner. Designed by Pietro Zanini in 1929, it was demolished in 1944.¹³ The Autorimessa della S.A.F. was a three-storey building with a facade composed in a classical manner, although already under clear influence of modernist work, simplified and built on the principle of contrast between the dark, massive plinth and the lighter storeys above. What draws attention here is the separate, accentuated entrance for people, which seems to be placed in the first place, before the less prominent entrance for the main function of the building – the garage.

Only later, after the 1930s, did the construction of multi-storey garages become more daring, stripped of their stylised costume as it were. Those with an enclosed façade, such as the Autorimessa Piazzale Roma in Venice by Eugenio Miozzi (1931), or Le Garage Marbeuf, which was also a Citroën showroom, by Léon-Emile Bazin and Albert Laprade (1928), had façades that were much more trend-led, functionalist, built on the principle of contrast, with a façade in strips and, as in the case of the Paris building, with a huge central transparent section of the facade, showing exactly the cars inside. However, this was already a stage when society had somehow become accustomed to the presence of a new function, and modernism itself had already become a style in its various forms. In the case of open-fronted garages, we can speak of the creation of a completely new aesthetic, where only reinforced concrete balustrades and a more delicate slab-and-column construction, as in the case of the American Cage Garage system, whose first realization took place in Boston in 1933, formed the facade bands.¹⁴

3.2. DEPARTMENT STORES

A similar phenomenon, although occurring somewhat earlier, took place with the appearance of the first department stores. Although they did not propose a fundamentally new function for the city, they completely changed the way of thinking about commerce as an urban function and the space dedicated to it. By enclosing a large number of stalls, different producers

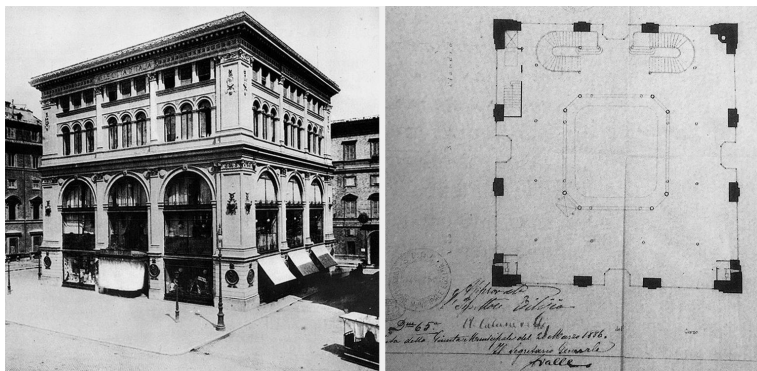
¹² F. Burno, *Opowieść o „Nowej Italii”. Modernizacja miast włoskich w latach 1925–1940* [in:] I. Kozina (ed.), *Narracje miejskie. Miasto jako obszar interwencji polityków, architektów i artystów*, vol. 1, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Katowicach, Katowice 2019, p. 143.

¹³ Udine – Autorimessa della S.A.F. (arch. P. Zanini), <http://www.ipac.regione.fvg.it/aspx/ViewPropIntermedia.aspx?idScheda=134553&tsk=F&tp=vRAP&idAmb=120&idstem=6&C1=AUT-N|AUT|Zanini%20Pietro&searchOn=0&order=4&START=1> (access: 22.06.2021).

¹⁴ S.S. McDonald, *The Parking Garage as the Arrival and Departure Experience in the American City* [in:] S. Poole, P. Sarpeneva (eds.), 91st ACSA International Conference, Helsinki 2003, p. 510.

and different kinds of goods under one roof in the form of multiple levels, commerce turned from a livelihood function into a visually attractive form of recreation. Leaving aside the whole history of building the first department stores, which were initially constructed using traditional technologies and at the same time in a historicised form, it is worth noting the next stage in the development of buildings of this type. At the end of the 19th century, the spread of cast-iron and steel structures in the construction industry, and their specific properties, which made it possible to create light, openwork forms, caused the designers of commercial buildings to turn to them. However, just as happened a little later with garages, at first the open, spacious interiors were dressed in a historical style costume.

The example of the department store La Rinascente (originally called Palazzo Grande Magazzini Bocconi) designed in 1885 by Giulio de Angelis and Sante Bucciarelli shows the devotion to historical forms. The three-axis symmetrical façades have a regular arcade articulation, hence the name of the building – the perfectly composed neo-Renaissance façade has become the determinant of the aesthetic quality of the structure as a whole. The entrances from the surrounding ground level, placed in the zone of the massive, rusticated plinth, together with the entire façade arrangement, result in the fact that despite the significantly larger glazing than in the case of the surrounding buildings, the structure can be read as very traditional in its form. Again, the division of the façade suggests a three-storey division of the interior, when in fact there are 5 storeys above ground. Despite the use of an all-steel structure in the interior, the external walls were built as masonry in order to take advantage of the property of the material to create the characteristic drawing of a multi-arched façade with a deep outline. Paolo Verducci considers this building one of the first and most important in Europe to have a curtain wall,¹⁵ which, apart from having to carry its own weight, was also an element of fire protection. The three-storey arcade extending from the ground floor caused, as in the case of Le Garage Marbeuf in Paris, the interpenetration of the interior and exterior, and in fact, a much better exposure of what was contained inside the building (Ill. 5).

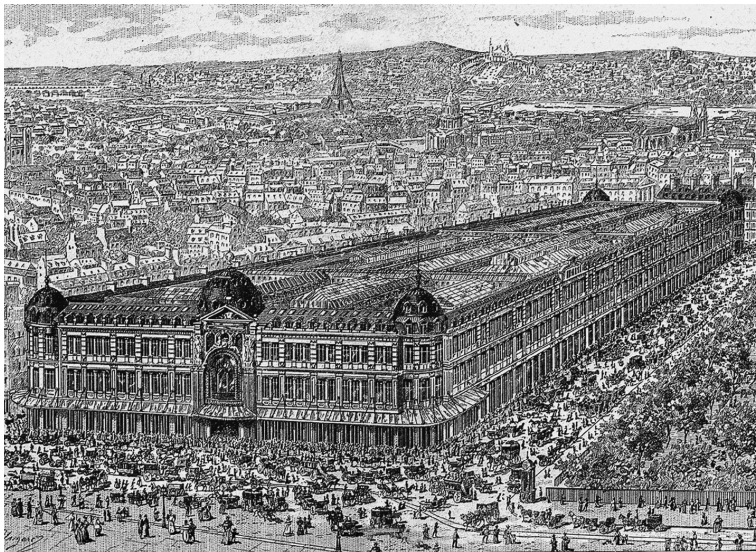


Ill. 5. La Rinascente department store by Giulio de Angelis and Sante Bucciarelli in Rome – general view and ground floor plan. Source: <https://archidiap.com/opera/palazzo-bocconi-ex-la-rinascente> (access: 23.06.2021).

¹⁵ P. Venducci, *Brick covered steel framework constructions Palazzo della Rinascente by Giulio de Angelis, Rome, Italy (1886–1887)* [in:] S. Huerta, *Proceedings of the First International Congress on Construction History, Madrid, 20th–24th January 2003*, Instituto Juan de Herrera, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Madrid 2003, p. 2076.

The change that took place in terms of the functionality of the building did not only involve a change in the type of construction. The effect of the interpenetration of the plans and the individual retail levels was deliberately achieved by linking the four storeys with a wide opening, creating a gallery in which the person entering the building becomes a living exhibit.

The same tendencies can be found in other department store developments of the time. The example of Au Bon Marché, designed in 1869 and built by the Boucicaut family in Paris on rue de Sèvres, by Louis-August Boileau (opened 1887) shows a similar tendency. The steel structure of the building was 'dressed' in a brick and plaster façade, three storeys high, using common features of Parisian architecture of the period, with mansard roofs and a façade composition that makes it similar to the surrounding buildings (Ill. 6).



Ill. 6. A late 19th-century engraving of the Bon Marché department store in Paris by Louis-August Boileau. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_history_of_France#/media/File:Au_Bon_March%C3%A9_\(vue_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9rale_-_gravure\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_history_of_France#/media/File:Au_Bon_March%C3%A9_(vue_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9rale_-_gravure).jpg) (access: 23.06.2021).

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is an architectural myth that modernity manifests itself mainly in the form of a building. This paper presents a number of examples of how modernity has been tamed over the years by dressing it up in forms that are already familiar and somehow rooted in tradition. The fact that over the centuries novelty has become the domain of the wealthy and a synonym for luxury has meant that the forms given to innovative functions have always taken on a historical costume at the outset, only to develop their own aesthetics in the final stage. New material solutions also in the early years of their existence took on forms that were already familiar and thus drew on the traditions of other building techniques. Ornaments and details typical of representative buildings were superimposed on functions now regarded as complementary. This giving of additional

rank to novelties by masking them in the structure of the city with an old costume was the first stage of the habituation of urban man to the change that was taking place before his eyes.

In this situation, it is indeed difficult to speak of novelty, as we understand it definitionally. The individual elements are introduced in a continuous manner, beginning with a change in the theoretical approach to design, giving architecture a new function, and finally, by way of evolution, working out a new, proper form.

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