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ARCHITECTURE MUST BE A MYTH

ARCHITEKTURA MUSI BYĆ MITEM

Abstract

Myths have always seemed helpful to architects in their attempts to explain the form of buildings. They have also made it easier for the recipient to understand architecture. Imitating the early twentieth-century avant-garde creators, architects try to detach themselves from the memorised shapes of buildings, but they cannot forget about certain memorised shapes and meanings of their predecessors' buildings. The present tries to break down the memorised shapes but it struggles to do it definitively. A myth and what it carries is significant and probably will continue to be so in new styles and trends in the architecture of the future.

Keywords: architecture, avant-garde, novelty, myth, beauty

Streszczenie

Mity zawsze wydawały się pomocne architektom przy ich próbach wytłumaczenia formy budynków. Ułatwiały także odbiorcy zrozumienie architektury. Architekci, naśladując twórców awangardy z początku XX w., starają się oderwać od zapamiętanych kształtów budynków, jednak nie mogą zapomnieć o pewnych zapamiętanych kształtach i znaczeniach budynków poprzedników. Współczesność stara się rozbijać zapamiętane kształty, jednak nie może zrobić tego w sposób ostateczny. Mit i to, co niesie, jest ważny i chyba będzie jeszcze ważny w nowych stylach i tendencjach w architekturze przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, awangarda, nowość, mit, piękno

1. THE MYTHS OF ARCHITECTURE

Myths and games in architecture have always seemed significant. Some of the most well-known have been the ones of functionality, beauty, classicality and more recently novelty. One can also assume that they have become a pretext for the search for some memorised beauty. Władysław Tatarkiewicz wrote that

one of the motives of the creators and one of the reasons for the satisfaction of recipients is the similarity of a novel, landscape or a portrait to the real world, the ability to recognize familiar things and matters in them and tell yourself: these are my places, familiar places, my youth, this is my story.¹

¹ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Tworzenie i odkrywanie* [in:] W. Tatarkiewicz, *Parerga*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1978, p. 38.

Perhaps that is why nobody will deny when asked if a Greek temple is beautiful. Until 3:32 p.m. on July 15, 1972, modernist architecture seemed to be the way towards novelty. Designers tried to persuade users that they take on important challenges on their behalf. Architects pretended to be good and pro-social. Minoru Yamasaki learned this the hard way when it turned out that the users did not want box-shaped blocks of flats and his estate in St. Louis was reduced to a pile of rubble. That was not the literal end of modernism, but designers discovered that there were other creative paths possible and other myths to memorise.

2. THE MYTH OF MEMORISED BEAUTY

The *Dictionary of the Polish Language* offers the following definition of classicism: ‘a set of features characteristic of ancient Greek and Roman literature and art; ancient artistic creativity’ and ‘a movement in art, literature and music in the period from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, referring to ancient culture and models, imitating ancient Greek and Roman art’² Władysław Tatarkiewicz explained that

for far more than two thousand years, the European theory has been dominated by the view that the task and essence of art are to recreate reality or, as it has been expressed more clearly, to imitate it. The perseverance and ingenuity with which generation after generation have tried to save, justify and interpret this view are admirable.³

Architects like to bolster their designs with theoretical definitions. Perhaps such a search for a definition of architecture underpinned interest in ancient architecture. Perhaps it was the need to find a definition of beauty in the very memorised architecture, receded in illustrations in books and found in ruins. After all, those observations resulted in a different, more modern architecture. This myth of memorised beauty may find confirmation in the words of a non-classical artist. Picasso claimed that ‘we all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand.’⁴ One may be tempted to make a statement, which is difficult to prove, that people like that which they have already seen. We can observe this in fashion and copying the clothes of others, but also in architecture. Once the works of great masters had to be similar to each other, they had to create stylistic continuity for years. This ‘imitation’ has also lost its literal meaning in contemporary architecture. There no longer exists the myth of beauty. Everything must be new and even newer. Each work of an architect must be different and unique.

Perhaps that is why Ricardo Bofill sought to realize the desire of creators to transform the myth of the beauty of classical architecture into novelty at one point in his artistic career. Needless to say, that did not happen without remodelling the memorised art. Most importantly, the architect replaced the memorised beauty of stone, once a perfect material, with the new perfect material – concrete. The elements of classical buildings also lost their original functional purpose. Reminiscences or afterimages of shapes appear in other, hardly classical

² M. Szymczak (ed.), *Słownik języka polskiego*, vol. 1, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1982, p. 926.

³ W. Tatarkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴ M. Porębski, *Kubizm*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1980, p. 86.

material. Poetically broken elements of classical shapes are constructed from prefabricated elements here; we can perceive them as references to romantic ruins of Greek temples rather than whole buildings. We perceive them in a similar way to the state of temples preserved to this day. It is somewhat similar to Igor Mitoraj's works. He created contemporary sculptures, but his monuments look as if they were unearthed after many years and additionally after some great catastrophes. Thus, both artists share a similar stylistic approach to the preserved shapes and the state in which their prototypes could survive until our times.

Throughout the centuries, architects have not been ashamed to imitate the memorised past. The myth and what it carried and the search for a definition of beauty have helped to seek a new-old way for creation. The words of philosopher Roland Barthes who emphasized that 'myth operates with a *stolen language*', may help explain such an approach to creation.⁵ However, when we look at the sculptures created by the already mentioned Igor Mitoraj, we can notice that he does not 'steal' anything. His work is full of references to the beauty of proportions of classical sculptures. The author does not try to hide it, he confirms his search for art in the distant past. He strives to release the myth of the beauty of the memorised art. Yet he also strives for novelty and uses references to ancient sculptures in the state in which they have survived until modern times. Art theoretician Marcin Czerwiński explains the actions of the above artists: 'The contemporary world knows another function of mythical imagination [...] We are talking about art that refers to the ancient mechanisms of culture, but uses them in a specific way, departing from archaic patterns.'⁶ Contemporary art tries to decompose the prototypes. Heinrich Wölfflin had already offered a similar description in 1915:

[...] there is a picturesque beauty of the ruin. The rigour of the tectonic form is broken up, and while the wall crumbles and holes and fissures arise, a life quickens which quivers and shimmers over the surface. And as the edges become restless and the geometric lines and order disappear, the building can unite in a picturesque whole with the freely moving forms of nature, with trees and hills, which is impossible for non-ruinous architecture.⁷

Ricardo Bofill's concrete architecture becomes an expression of the myth of the poetic beauty of ruins like the ones from a romantic 19th-century park or garden.

Rob Krier explains such an approach to the creation of a work of art:

Architects... It is more useful to imitate something 'old', but proven, rather than to turn out something new which risks causing people suffering. The logical and attractive building types and spatial structure left to us by anonymous architects have been improved upon by countless succeeding generations. They have matured into masterpieces even in the absence of a single creator of genius because they were based on a perfectly refined awareness of building requirements using simple means; the result of an accurate understanding of tradition as the vehicle for passing on technical and artistic knowledge.⁸

⁵ M. Czerwiński, *Magia, mit i fikcja*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1975, p. 135, R. Barthes, *Mit i znak*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1970.

⁶ M. Czerwiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 149–150.

⁷ H. Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki. Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich-Wydawnictwo, Warszawa 1962, pp. 57–58.

⁸ R. Krier, *Przestrzeń miejska* [in:] C. Jencks, K. Kropf (eds.), *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013, p. 88.



III. 1. Colosseum, Rome, photo: Tomasz Kozłowski.



III. 2. *Colosseo Quadrato – Square Colosseum*, G. Guerrini, E. Bruno Lapadula, M. Romano, Rome 1938–1943, photo: Tomasz Kozłowski.

Perhaps that is why there are so many buildings whose shapes seem somewhat or quite familiar to us. Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Lapaduli and Mario Romano designed the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* in Rome. Despite its historical shape, it was a modern building. The simple square form is decorated with fifty-four arches that constitute the façade of the building. It is not a façade in the literal sense of the word, though. There is no main or most imposing façade. Instead, the building has four similar decorative façades. A wide alley and a monumental staircase show one the access to it and its front. The building is sometimes referred to poetically as the square Colosseum. The connotations are unambiguous and not accidental. The building was to be a continuation of the architecture of great Rome. It was to become an advertisement of the new fascist empire. Hence the multitude of Roman arches. Fortunately, today the work of art no longer carries political connotations, but only builds the myth of beauty. Such art dissociates itself from the now shameful history and we can admire it without thinking about its original purpose. So necessary for its creation, the utility of the architecture has passed with time, and only the perfect form remains, being half-classical, half-modern and probably mythical. That which results in the fact that

when we say: this is noble iron, refined by some special fabrication, we ascribe to this iron some special value, not moral of course, but some other value. But this occurs in this general scheme according to which what we ascribe as value to something here is simply its quality. Thus, the whole issue would come down to the question of which qualities constitute value, more precisely: which ones are and which ones are not values. This is an open question and I will look into it further.⁹

The myth of perfect form can be a pretext for the next generations of architects. This time the form is more modern, but it draws from the past, arousing the admiration of artists from around the world – the Palace of the Italian Civilization. 1969 saw the beginning of a similar work, this time smaller in scale – Xavier Corberó's project called *The Labyrinth Home*. It is a single-family house, but of unusual size for such a form. Located in Barcelona, the work is owned by a Spanish sculptor, and since he is the creator of the entire complex, we can easily perceive it as a literal huge architectural sculpture. The project evolved over the years and during forty years of its construction, the shape of the house changed all the time. It is an extremely complicated building in its form where individual elements intertwine, creating independent levels and parts. It is a sculpture, and neither can we guess where the beginning is, nor can we find the end of the whole. The arches are similar to those of Guerrini's, but they build a different form. It is modern and poetically broken. We can still call it classical, but more painterly, in form. It brings irresistible associations with Giorgio de Chirico's paintings. The author would certainly not take offence if we called it the built *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*. Even the title of Chirico's painting fits the description of this unusual architecture, after all, it is both mysterious and melancholic. The whole is completed by the atmosphere of a ruin, combining the building with the greenery that slowly consumes it. The creative process based on the creators' dream of building novelty while imitating something perfect is difficult to explain clearly. Perhaps Botton is right when he argues that

we may need to have made an indelible mark on our lives, to have married the wrong person, pursued an unfulfilling career into middle age or lost a loved one before architecture can

⁹ R. Ingarden, *Wykłady i dyskusje z estetyki*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1989, p. 129.

begin to have any perceptible impact on us, for when we speak of being *moved* by a building, we allude to a bitter-sweet feeling of contrast between the noble qualities written into a structure and the sadder wider reality within which we know them to exist. A lump rises in our throat at the sight of beauty from an implicit knowledge that the happiness it hints at is the exception.¹⁰

One can guess that this emotion of the architects did not come from unconscious knowledge, but great reflections.

Similar considerations must surely have accompanied the design of an 'ordinary' residential urban block created by Antonini Darmon Architectes. Erected in Boulogne-Billancourt, France, in 2016, the building is a reminiscence of the *Palace of the Italian Civilization* from Rome. The very name *Arches Boulogne* already evokes similarities with its predecessor. What we find here are elegant white façades, but like in the case of Guerrini's project, we do not know which is the most important one. The entire building with standard windows is shaded by wide balconies composed of simple geometric arches. The form suggests an apparent lack of ornamentation. The arches in the building serve as structural elements that support successive floors rather than being a mere idle decoration. However, without them, the aesthetic perception of the whole would be different. After all, it is a geometrised, multi-family residential building, which by definition is supposed to be inexpensive. The form is already different from its predecessor, decomposed. The successive floors are not exactly aligned with each other, they are peculiarly shifted. It looks as if the builders had made a mistake or had not understood the design. From the outside, we can see that the arches are the architects' game of form rather than a mere structural element. When required, they change their size, resting on the protruding ceiling. As Alain De Botton points out 'few Classical architects or their clients felt any impulse towards originality. Fidelity to the canon was what mattered; repetition was the norm.'¹¹ Contemporary architecture must, fortunately, follow a different path despite its longings for harmony in design. The modern world is in the post-modern period and other rules apply to art now. We are fascinated by Deconstructivism, despite its slow death, and even those buildings that are built as afterimages must be complex and deformed. Yet, the influence of modernism on contemporary non-modernist architecture is profound. Buildings can no longer have ornaments, they become ornaments themselves. 'Le Corbusier [himself] recommended that the houses of the future be ascetic and clean, disciplined and frugal. His hatred of any kind of decoration extended to a pity for the British Royal Family and the ornate, golden carriage in which they travelled to open Parliament every year.'¹² Here, the golden cage has been replaced with a white and stark one, yet dreaming of the beauty that is forgotten today.

3. THE MYTHS INDISPENSABLE FOR ARCHITECTURE

As we can see, even avant-garde artists, for some reason, tried to make their buildings resemble the once seen and memorised shapes. It might have been caused by laziness or

¹⁰ A. De Botton, *Architektura szczęścia*, Czuły Barbarzyńca Press, Warszawa 2010, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 54.

a subconscious need to search for beauty. Let us hope it is the latter. What we try to describe and value is difficult in art. Roman Ingarden wrote:

These are the major, very difficult issues regarding values. Yet, someone may say that this is a misguided take on the matter as there is nothing such as selflessness, truthfulness, honesty in an object. Nor is there anything in the object such as being 'good' in the moral sense, or being 'beautiful' in the sense of aesthetics or art theory. There is only something that is called 'evaluation'. That is, there is a certain behaviour of man who evaluates, values objects, and a certain reflection, a mirage, a phenomenal consequence of this particular attitude or this particular behaviour of evaluating is that which is called 'value' – but in reality, there is nothing of the kind. There is no beauty, only the liking of something, only the pleasure of the one who likes it. There is only a certain way, looking down or up to something, i.e. the judgment of other person's behaviour or admiration of it, but there is nothing that deserves this admiration or judgment.¹³

It should be remembered that people determine what is to be of interest to them. Maybe that is why the myths of art appear, namely, to explain one's interest in something. Bohdan Dziemidok, philosopher and art theoretician, emphasizes that

despite this incredible diversity and changeability of aesthetic preferences, in all cultures and epochs a liking for what is considered beautiful and the desire to beautify one's appearance, closest environment, objects of everyday use is noticeable. The American aesthetician Richard Shusterman is right in maintaining that, unlike art 'beauty, whatever it may be, is clearly so appealing to mankind that it is its own justification and does not require defenders.'¹⁴

Yet, throughout the centuries, recipients of architecture have needed something to validate or at least justify the shape of buildings.

As we can see, it is not only architects who value the myths of modernity, the ones related to functionality, the need for beauty and constant pursuit. We can observe that also artists need something to explain their art. It may be that myths are necessary for the very existence of art in general. Umberto Eco somewhat perversely explains such interest in the past:

... the reason is that in times of crisis there is a risk that we no longer know who we are. Well, not only does the classical author tell us how people thought in distant times, but he also allows us to discover that today we think in the same way and understand the reason behind it. Reading a classical author is like making a psychoanalysis of today's culture, finding traces, memories, patterns, *prymaeval* scenes... Well, we exclaim, now I understand why I am like this or why somebody insists that I should be like this: the whole thing started from the page I'm just reading. And we discover with great amazement that we are Aristotelians, or Platonists, or Augustinians in the way in which we create our experience – even in the mistakes we make on this occasion.¹⁵

Perhaps the crises that have surrounded us in recent years are easier to explain when viewed from the perspective of a few hundred years. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift in perception of the function of architecture may lead to the creation of more myths of

¹³ R. Ingarden, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–132.

¹⁴ B. Dziemidok, *Główne kontrowersje estetyki współczesnej*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 301–302.

¹⁵ U. Eco, *Trzecie zapiski na pudełku od zapalek 1994–96*, Poznań 1997, pp. 40–41.

architecture. Without knowing what the architecture of the future should look like, however, myths will continue to grow in appeal to creators from time to time. If not the ones of beauty and functionality then the one about novelty and the need for it.

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