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MYTH OF A SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSE IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

MIT DOMU JEDNORODZINNEGO WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

Architectural forms that have been created over the years have generated a kind of pattern that has become firmly rooted in the minds of people. However, we should ask ourselves what features determine the perception of architecture and its belonging to the seemingly represented function? Are the expectations set by human beings not merely copying modular patterns based on tradition? Development is inextricably linked to the need for constant change. The momentum of the modern world requires the constant implementation of new technologies and methods. This aspect, however, should also touch the psychological background, which has a great influence on the character of contemporary architecture. An individual who develops positively should also notice the necessity of changes on this level. The limitations set by those stuck in the matrix of architecture myths seem to block its development. Irrational orders block creative work. Is it finally time to reverse the way of thinking on a global scale?

Keywords: creative action, cultural pattern, myth, novelty, revolution, stagnation, truth

Streszczenie

Formy architektoniczne powstające na przestrzeni lat wytworzyły swego rodzaju schematy, które silnie zakorzeniły się w ludzkich umysłach. Należy jednak zadać sobie pytanie jakie cechy decydują o odbiorze architektury i jej przynależności do pozornie reprezentowanej funkcji? Czy oczekiwania stawiane przez człowieka nie są jedynie kopiowaniem modularnych wzorów bazujących na tradycji? Rozwój jest nieodłącznie związany z koniecznością wprowadzania ciągłych zmian. Pęd współczesnego świata wymaga stałego wdrażania nowych technologii oraz metod. Aspekt ten powinien jednak dotknąć również podłoża psychologicznego, które wywiera duży wpływ na charakter współczesnej architektury. Jednostka, która rozwija się pozytywnie powinna i na tej płaszczyźnie dostrzec konieczność zmian. Ograniczenia stawiane przez tkwiących w matni mitów architektury zdają się blokować jej rozwój. Irracjonalne nakazy blokują pracę twórczą. Czy w końcu nadszedł czas, by na skalę globalną odwrócić sposób myślenia?

Słowa kluczowe: mit, prawda, nowość, rewolucja, stagnacja, twórcze działanie, wzorzec kulturowy

Home² as the space closest to man, has been placed on an elite position in the catalog of human values. Most do not perceive it merely as a building, ascribing to it a wide and elaborate symbolism. Following the words of Zbigniew Herbert, “(...) home is the cube of childhood; home is the block of emotion (...)”³. The word home seems to carry a strong emotional charge. This is confirmed by the fact that the Polish language dictionary also gives it the meaning of “family.”

It is also identified with the human body, treated as a home for the soul. Exploring this topic, we can follow the psychoanalytic theory which develops the symbolism in a much broader way, saying that “(...) the external facade corresponds to the appearance: the roof – to the head, mind, or consciousness; the cellar – to the drives, while the kitchen – to physical transformation.”⁴ This context tends to give it a mystical meaning that does not necessarily have to do with a religious approach, but with spirituality in its broadest sense.

Undoubtedly, this concept is a key element of the psychological workshop, being a contribution to the development of ever-deeper levels. “Each of us has two houses/homes – one concrete, located in time and space; the other – infinite, without an address, without a chance to be immortalized in architectural plans.”⁵ An attempt to understand its meaning in the life of an individual can significantly bring us closer to a deeper understanding of human nature. It is not without a reason that the analysis begins with defining the environment in which the individual functioned at the beginning of his life path. The home, in material as well as spiritual terms, is the stage against which human destinies unfold. Its shape has a huge impact on human functioning.

The word “home” is therefore extremely complicated and invites much reflection. Without a doubt, it can be said that it is not assigned to one field or discipline. The multifaceted nature of the term means that the home as a product of architecture goes much deeper in its essence, and the way it has become ingrained in people’s minds has created many myths around it.

The question must then be asked, to what extent does the meaning remain dependent on the matter? Such strong links to the language of symbols and aesthetic values undoubtedly resonate strongly with the very essence of architecture. However, the meaning remains constant (or undergoes slow changes), while the matter is in constant evolution.

This is due to the fact that architecture is a constant search. As a result of these experiments, new motives and solutions are born, which sometimes turn out to be justified. Regardless of the social mood, individuals who develop positively see the need for change and put it into practice. This makes it possible to attempt to dispel myths in architecture. Manifestations of radical innovativeness understood as experimental actions lead to freeing oneself from the established

¹ J. Campbell, *Potęga mitu. Rozmowy Billa Moyersa z Josephem Campbellem*, Signum, Kraków 1994, p. 74.

² The reflections in this article are based on the Polish word “dom” which means both “house” and “home” since there is no distinction in Polish.

³ Z. Herbert’s poem „Dom”.

⁴ K. Bachniak, *Geopoetyka samotności. Twórczość Johna Maxwella Coetzeego w świetle interpretacji geokrytycznej*, PhD thesis, Akademia im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie, Częstochowa 2016, p. 107.

⁵ O. Tokarczuk, *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*, Ruta, Wałbrzych 1998, p. 193.

conventions and are almost an obligation of the creator. The development of ideas is connected with the conceptualization of thoughts that are applied in practice.

Due to the manifestations of novelty, the myth of the single-family house is combated by contemporary architecture in a number of ways. Trying to systematize them, we can distinguish a few of them: because of the way functions are arranged, the mass of the form which differs significantly from the one ascribed to it, or a number of activities that have not been previously associated with this type of building.

By definition, a house is primarily a shelter; it was meant to provide a barrier between the indoors and the environment. Today, however, this way of thinking is increasingly being abandoned, creating residential buildings that are almost literally open to the surrounding landscape. This aspect is slowly becoming the norm, but it deviates from the archetypal perception of a house-shelter.

A strong need for contact with nature, regardless of the prevailing conditions, is signaled in a very good way by the *Pink House*, by 23o5Studio. Surrounded by the urban landscape, it opens to it through the only possible level – the fifth elevation. Situated in the urban tissue, in a compact environment of other buildings, despite the adversities, it creates an intimate relationship with nature. In addition, the project places a very strong emphasis on building spaces with light and shadow, so that the spaces constantly evolve. On the one hand, it provides residents with a great deal of privacy, but on the other, it seems to open up completely to the outside, which is further emphasized by the use of lush vegetation. Invitation of the power of nature to the interior combined with the play of light makes any decoration here completely unnecessary. The modern body was enriched with long eaves, which are a reference to traditional houses, symbolizing the bond between generations and integrating history with modernity.

According to the designer's vision, the space here has been constructed with a specific function, however, it can be changed. It remains a neutral scene, depending only on the user. The homogeneous material completely blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, and the huge circular opening merging the sky with the object is meant to be a metaphor, revealing the connotation of the little man with the boundlessness of nature.

Penghu House located in the Penghu Archipelago, west of Taiwan, can be considered a reinterpretation of the wisdom enchanted in tradition. The local coral houses are characteristic of this area, a unique cultural heritage. They were built from natural coral blocks laid on a basalt wall. Their distinctive features include a nine-square plan and rolled ridges, evoking curved peaks.

XRANGE Architects attempted to take the building out of the myth of local architecture and give it a completely new look. The result is *Penghu House*, which from a distance, standing out above the tree line, resembles an indigenous village. The three parallel blocks of concrete create overlapping layers of curved ridges. The white stone roof planes stand out strikingly against the azure sky and green farmland surrounding the building.

The illusion of multiplicity created by a seemingly compact volume carries additional significance, since

(...) the city was also seen as a kind of the cultural core, the brain of civilization. The added value was seen in the multiplication of houses in a limited area, provided they were bound together by the coherence of *arts and orderly laws*.⁶

⁶ J. Szewczyk, *Rozważania o domu*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 2017, p. 117.

The tendency inherent in all cultures is to multiply houses and give them the form of cities. The city is a concept fundamental to civilization and culture.

Undoubtedly, the attempt to tear the historical view from the frames of myth can be considered successful in this case. The resulting architectural experiment is not obvious, and its complex symbolism encourages us to explore the motives behind it.

Himmel Trial House is yet another example of the demystification of single-family house architecture in terms of form. The basic assumption which it was supposed to fulfill was a volume remaining in good relation with the surrounding landscape. It is worth quoting here the considerations that perhaps the house is simply “(...) one of the substitutes of a garden understood as a caring space, a protecting space, an enclosed space.”⁷ *The Trial House* seems to be a smooth continuation of the place in which it is located.

Materials play an important role here – prefabricated metal construction and glass. It is thanks to them that the object intertwines with its surroundings. It breaks conventions, resembling an abstract installation or a simple scaffolding rather than a residential house. The choice of material was also due to logistical reasons, as the investment area, which is practically a mountain range, difficult to access. The structure was supported on three concrete walls that lift the block upwards, allowing it to be better exposed.

Every square meter of the house opens up to the landscape, allowing for the exploration of a striking view and the contemplation of nature. Following the words of Le Corbusier “(...) nature is order and law, unity and diversity, finesse, strength, and harmony. It is not difficult to see, therefore, that this relationship as a whole builds the aesthetic of the block.”⁸

Stiff Peaks, located in Los Angeles, seems to be balancing on the edge of myth. On the face of it, it may seem like a kitschy relic of the past. However, a moment's reflection allows us to see the true intentions of this object, which was built to evoke the past enclosed in the framework of modernity.

The space, apart from its residential function, is also meant to satisfy the client's need to have a creative studio. It is to allow him to feel both at home and in another world. Sur-realistic perception of the structure is enhanced by rounded walls and corners. Certainly, one can feel here another dimension of perception of contemporary architecture, balancing on the border of a daydream.

Cosmos House, designed by S-AR studio, is also worth mentioning. Although light in appearance, the highly geometric volume hides the complexity of elements in their form. Located near Puerto Escondido, on the Pacific coast, the house consists of three main elements. The first is a center built of concrete slabs and columns with a brutal finish. It conceals a living space with a reduced program. Each functional purpose occupies a quadrant with an almost perfect square plan.

The second element is an external frame made of concrete beams and columns. These are connected to the central part, which allows the functional program of the building to be extended outside. This completely changes the perception of the actual dimension of the building by experiencing the dwelling brought outside.

The final piece of the puzzle is a roof that serves as a vantage point for viewing the surrounding landscape. It has been enriched with a water mirror for observing the stars,

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

⁸ M. Pabich, *Mario Botta, Nikt nie rodzi się architektem*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Łódzkiej, Łódź 2013, p. 177.

constellations, and the cosmos. The construction of the foundations allows water to flow also at the first-floor level. Attention also focuses here on extensive environmental measures. The water is filtered through a cistern of sand and stones, and natural soaps and shampoos are used to keep it pollution-free. During the rainy season, it is captured from the roof and used to irrigate plants.

Localization, not only in terms of material resources but also in terms of human resources, was also given great attention. Local creativity was a constant part of the house-building process. The entire construction crew was made up of local residents. The carpentry was done by local craftsmen, who developed proprietary mechanical opening and movement of the wooden doors and shutters. The process of building the house thus contributed to the development of local craftsmanship.

The Earth House project, whose essence is centered below the surface of the earth, certainly changes the perception of the structure of a house. This object, called the earth house – the sky house, was built in honor of a Korean poet whose work oscillated around nature: the sky, the earth, and the stars.

The model of the spatial structure, in accordance with the idea of the creator, focuses here on the primary relationship between nature and man. The concrete box together with the inner courtyard to which it opens up is completely sunken into the ground. Yoon's poetry expresses hope for the future by referring to times of great peril. The panacea was restraint and self-reflection. The postulate of the project was therefore to create a space to feel the present and try to reflect on oneself.

An unprecedented model that allows one to literally hide under the surface, creates the best conditions for entering into oneself.

The socialized man, always seeming to find himself outside himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others and from their evaluation he draws the whole, one would like to say, sense of his existence... constantly asking others what we are, and never having the courage to ask ourselves.⁹

This house creates an ideal opportunity for reflection, completely free from external judgment.

The idea behind this design premise is an expression of broad innovation.

Thus, on the one hand, a private house is the most durable bastion of tradition; on the other hand, it is a testing ground for new architectural ideas growing from the criticism of the contemporary society and mass culture. Even for great, acknowledged architects, a private house still makes a fascinating challenge because its vision is (...) a transfer of opinions concerning the questions of privacy, homeliness and an attitude towards the natural and cultural context.¹⁰

Earth House shows that the field for experimentation is very large and seems to blur the boundaries of the impossible.

It also embodies an aspect that is extremely important in this type of building – durability. The house is directly connected to the idea of security and stability. There is a saying

⁹ J.J. Rousseau, *Trzy rozprawy z filozofii społecznej*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1956, p. 229.

¹⁰ G. Dąbrowska-Milewska, *Dom prywatny jako architektura oparta na ideach = A Private House as Architecture Based upon Ideas*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2010, no. 7-A/1, p. 59.

“My house is my fortress”. In the case of these assumptions, this project fulfills the “mythical” premises, however, it does it in an extremely unusual way.

As a kind of antagonist, we can present *Tower House*, by Gluck+. Although in terms of form, these houses remain in complete opposition, we can find numerous connotations in the message they convey.

The object was completely elevated above the tree line. The materials used and the choice of colors make the building almost dematerialize, absorbed by the surrounding trees. It completely reverses the way of thinking about an object that evokes a strong connection to the ground. However, as Wolfgang Welsh notes “(...) nothing in the human world is obvious, nothing is simply natural. Everything is shaped by culture”¹¹ The project shows what can be achieved by getting rid of habits rooted in the mind, evoking a whole range of feelings. We can certainly find delight in it. One can easily imagine how the user of the *Tower House* feels, practically living in the treetops. The project seems to be the embodiment of a childhood dream of owning a treehouse.

Due to the complexity of the notion of ‘home’, there is certainly a whole palette of perceptions associated with it, which can be described as myths. According to the statement that

(...) myth studied in its living form is (...) a narrative in which an ancient reality is resurrected
(...) In primitive culture, myth is indispensable: it expresses, enriches, and codifies beliefs; it protects and reinforces morality; it guarantees the effectiveness of ritual and contains practical rules for man to follow. Thus, myth is a vital component of human civilization (...).¹²

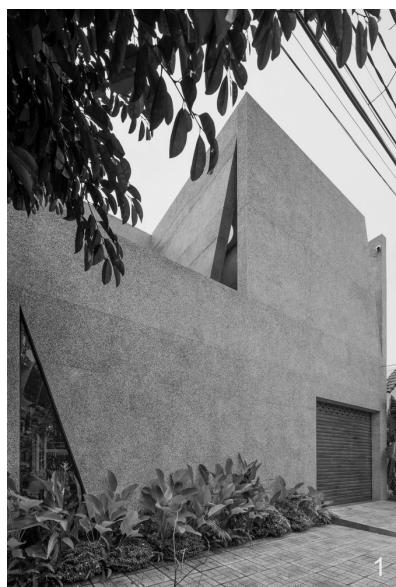
This component, although important to the functioning of society, is moving more and more away from practical action. It begins to function only as a theoretical factor.

Man, being a social individual, has a number of associations and notions with which he defines the concept of “home”. However, developing properly, he functions in a constant change, which aims to strive for continuous development. One of its factors is the attempt to change the perception of reality defined by narrow frames. Certainly not every individual is able to break away from deeply rooted, perpetuated for generations notions, but the fluid nature of the structure of perception of the world implied by the development contributes to the fulfillment of this condition.

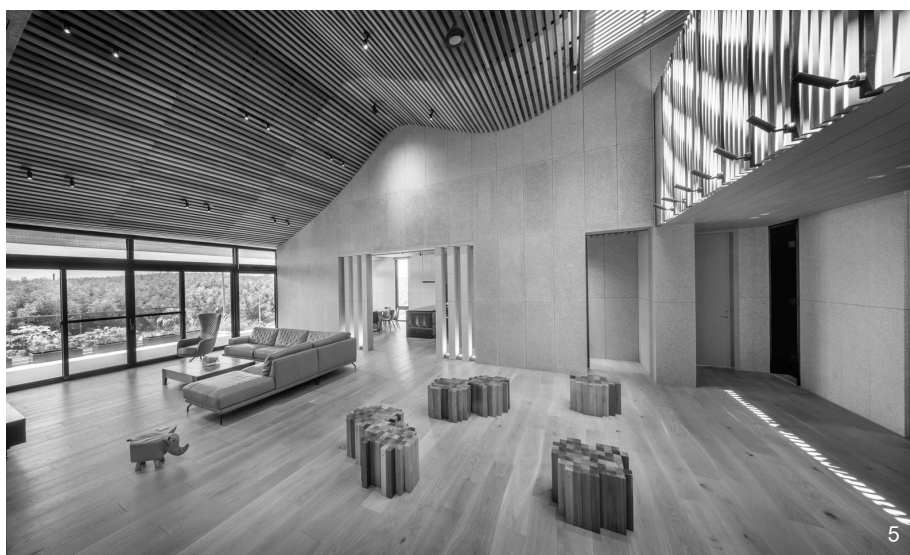
The cited examples make it possible to notice numerous attempts to widely demystify the architecture of single-family houses, which are becoming a factor shaping modern architecture.

¹¹ W. Welsh, *Przestrzeń dla ludzi?*, Kraków 2002, p. 163.

¹² B. Malinowski, *Mit w psychice człowieka pierwotnego*, 1926 [in:] G. Godlewski, A. Mencwel, R. Sulima (eds.), *Antropologia słowa*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2003, p. 230.



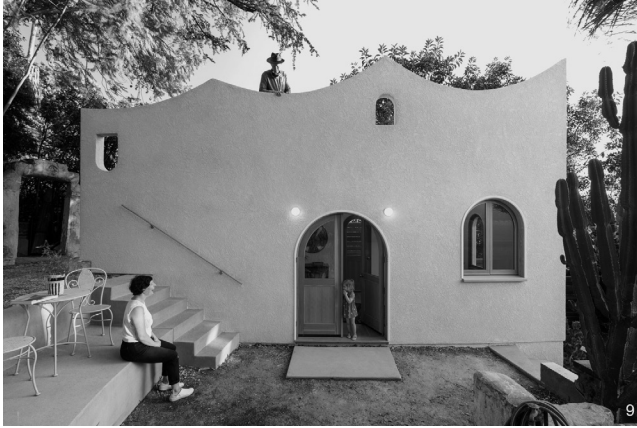
Ill. 1–3. Pink House, photo: Hiroyuki Oki, Hoang Le.



III. 4–5. Penghu House, photo: Kuo-Min Lee.



III. 6–8. Himmel Trial House, photo: Federico Cairolì.



Ill. 9. Stiff Peaks, photo: Taiyo Watanabe.



Ill. 10–11. Cosmos House, photo: Camila Cosio.



Ill. 12. Earth House, photo: Wooseop Hwang.



Ill. 13. Tower House, photo: Paul Warchol.

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