

ANNA MIELNIK

ORCID: 0000-0001-8702-6016

Cracow University of Technology, Poland

MYTHS AND ARCHITECTURAL TYPES

MITY A TYPY ARCHITEKTONICZNE

Abstract

The text is an attempt to examine what is meant by “myth” in the current architectural discourse. The author also tries to locate and identify the myth in the context of architectural typologies and types and to explore how different myths “of” architectural types and “in” architectural types form architectural experience.

Keywords: myth, typology, type

Streszczenie

Tekst jest próbą zbadania, co oznacza „mit” w obecnym dyskursie architektonicznym. Autorka stara się także zlokalizować i zidentyfikować mit w kontekście problematyki typologii i typów architektonicznych oraz zbadać, jak różne mity „dotyczące” typów architektonicznych i zawarte „w” typach architektonicznych kształtują doświadczenie architektoniczne.

Słowa kluczowe: mit, typologia, typ

*Myth is not a poem, nor science, nor philosophy, although it coincides
with poetry in its proceedings, with science in its logic and with philosophy
in its ambition to offer us an idea of the universe¹*

Octavio Paz

1. INTRODUCTION

Myths have never disappeared or been removed from the realm of culture. They only seem to be forgotten in the modern world. The sceptical approach to myth is related to the fact that as “non-theoretical in its meaning and essence”² it is difficult or even impossible to define. Myths are contrasted with the substantive description of things ascribed to scientific thinking. It was science that was supposed to replace myths in explaining the world. Attempts to define myth, its function, its meaning, and the need for it in modern times are therefore particularly challenging.

¹ I. Aravot, *Interpretations of Myth in Contemporary Architectural Writing*, Journal of Architectural and Planning Research, 1996, no. 13(4), pp. 271–290, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43029227> (access: 10.09.2021).

² M. Megged, *Introduction*, Social Research, 1985, no. 52(2), p. 211, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970368> (access: 15.06.2021).

In common popular perception today, myths are mainly false beliefs, stereotypes contrasted with the truth. Myths are also associated with irrational, poetic, religious experiences. “Ever since the advent of science in the seventeenth century, we have rejected mythology as a product of superstitious and primitive minds.”³ Yet, myths are not just false beliefs and religious cosmologies. Myths in their basic sense are interpretations of the world. They illustrate how certain aspects of reality appear to us. A myth should, as Wittgenstein suggests, “be thought of primarily not as an explanation of this physical world but as an expression of how reality seems to people, an illustration of how things are to them, in terms of their fears, wishes, and so on.”⁴ Myths derive from the constant need to search for roots and foundations in nature, history, and tradition, and they enable one to belong to a certain order of things and thus to feel a certain identity. Myths are inevitable. Both the culturally imposed ones and the ones that are “accumulated” in the course of life. Because they are a condensation of information, knowledge and impressions, they are always intense.

As Matti Megged points out in the introduction to the issue of the journal dedicated to myths: “but even taking into consideration the various, often opposing, opinions about the presence of myth, no one can deny that some basic human needs may be satisfied through and by myth.”⁵

2. MYTH IN ARCHITECTURE

*A meaning-giving illumination
of the world of things is the work of myth.*⁶

Leszek Kołakowski

The term myth is not commonly used in contemporary architectural theory and practice. In a technocratic world, the concept of myth is less and less researched and explored. It seems to remain mainly the focus of anthropologists.

And yet our thinking about architecture and experiencing it is not devoid of myths. Myths are also a set of images, texts, memories that haunt our imagination in connection with a particular architectural issue, movement, trend, style, a specific city, building. Such myths have become embedded in our language and the way we think about them. Some myths have taken root in mass culture and they circulate in the collective imagination. We have the myth of modernism⁷, the myth of beauty, the myth of Paris, the myth of home. These myths and narratives are sometimes shallow and sometimes complex. Some need to be deconstructed, others should be left alone. Myths in architecture consist of objective, experiential data – physical, technical, social, economic, political, as well as layered interpretative-subjective aspects.

In her text *Interpretations of Myth in Contemporary Architectural Writing*, Iris Avarot identifies three interpretations of myth in contemporary architectural theory: an error of

³ A. Wójtowicz, *Słowo wstępne do wydania polskiego* [in:] C. Lévi-Straus, *Mit i znaczenie*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2020, p. 11.

⁴ H. Ishiguro, *Myths and False Dichotomies*, Social Research, 1985, no. 52(2), p. 366, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970375> (access: 15.06.2021).

⁵ M. Megged, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

⁶ L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2003, p. 51.

⁷ See: *Mity modernizmu*, Autoportret, Pismo o Dobrej Przestrzeni, 2015, no. 3(50), p. 107.

belief; a cultural given, a cosmology or symbolic fable handed from primordial time; and a contemporary narrative which legitimately influences architectural design.⁸

The first two meanings are obviously not exclusively attributed to architecture. The first one – “myth” as a false belief is placed in opposition to “scientific truth” and is the result of inadequate or insufficient analysis of facts. For instance, it is a myth that ecological architecture is always more economical. The second interpretation of myth as a cultural commodity is primarily the subject of historical and anthropological research. It is not opposed to scientific truth. Myths and the mutual influences of mythology (ancient culturally shared narratives, stories of gods and heroes, creation, origins) and architecture are a fact here. The affinity between myths and architecture is that myths can serve as literal narratives inscribed into a structure – where the work becomes an intentional projection of a myth that is already present in the collective imagination, or structures can become carriers of myths (the Taj Mahal – the myth of romantic love). Aravot divides the second meaning of myth into 4 groups: architectural myths (according to Vitruvius, classical orders and myths are indivisible interweavings of form and content), general myths represented architecturally (Tower of Babel), general myths or cosmologies initiated by architectural artefacts (labyrinth), the mythical architect (Icarus).⁹

The third group of the meaning of myth in architecture concerns the narratives that guide and justify the architectural design process. Here one can list the myth of modernism, the myth of beauty, the myth of technology, the myth of modernity, the myth of individualism, the myth of ecology, among others. These seem to be the most complex, multidimensional, prolific and passionate ones.

In his article *Seven Myths of Architecture*, Bruno Zevi writes pessimistically: “Wandering around the labyrinth of mythological interpretations, of contradictions between myth and logos, of convergences and divergences between symbols, allegories and alibis, architecture is almost lost.”¹⁰ And yet it is this very diversity full of opposites and contradictions that constitutes the wonderful essence of architecture.

3. TYPOLOGIES, ARCHITECTURAL TYPES AND MYTHS

*It is, I think, absolutely impossible
to conceive of meaning without order.*¹¹

Claude Lévi-Straus

The notion of myth in architecture can draw attention to phenomena that have been marginalized or shed new light on established concepts. While enumerating the forms in which the need for myth appears in culture, Leszek Kołakowski distinguishes a common motif in his book *The Presence of Myth*¹²: the desire to immobilize physical time by superimposing

⁸ I. Aravot, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 275.

¹⁰ B. Zevi, *The Seven Myths of Architecture*, Social Research, 1985, no. 52(2), p. 411, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970378> (access: 15.06.2021).

¹¹ C. Lévi-Straus, *Spotkanie mitu i nauki* [in:] C. Lévi-Straus, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹² L. Kołakowski, *op. cit.*

a mythical form of time on it, i.e. one that makes it possible to see an accumulation rather than a mere transformation in the flow of reality. He explains that such overcoming of temporality is achieved through myths:

A belief in a purposeful order, hidden in the stream of experience, allows us to judge that in what passes there grows and is preserved something which does not pass away; that in the impermanence of events there is a growth of significance which is not directly perceived; that therefore decomposition and destruction affect only the visible layer of existence, without touching the other, which is resistant to decay.¹³

Thus, the philosopher indicates that the need for myth stems from the desire to avoid assenting to “the contingent world which expends itself on each occasion in its impermanent state, which is what it is now and bears no reference to anything else.”¹⁴

Typologies and types are such expressions of the search for a permanent organization of the world, the belief in permanent values and elements, and the desire for continuity in the field of architecture. Like myths, typologies are a way of approaching the world, a way of organizing and shaping facts, an expression of the need to perceive and understand issues more deeply and to seek the foundations and roots of a discipline. Like myths, types are meant to provide a sense of the constancy of the world. Like myths, types connect the here and now with the permanent, the continuous, and the universal. Typological thinking is an important theme of architectural theory. Typologies and types always refer to the past, and the past always carries mythological meanings. Type constitutes the essence of facts and images. Like in mythologies, there is a reduction of the world to general types and categories in typologies.

There are two reasons for creating typologies within architecture. The first derives from the need to analyse and discuss existing structures, the second serves the purpose of design. The former is an “analytical typology”, more useful for researchers, while the latter, following Philippe Panerai, can be called a “generative typology.”¹⁵ Here, types can be used by designers to create new projects. “Such types can be stored for later in a memory container, moved elsewhere and unpacked. Seen in this way, they can be defined as a carrier of design experiences that refer to similar issues, problems, or standard solutions.”¹⁶ The question of type is part of a discussion about the relationship between function and form, the transformation of function into form.

A historical presentation of the issues of typologies and types and their transformation can allow one to understand their complex aspects and precise nature, revealing that they are more than a taxonomy – a system of classification and elements of an examined set that aggregates those with similar characteristics. Typology is a discursive field, formed from multiple and evolving interpretations. The typological approach is not tied to a single style or period; however, there were moments in the history of architecture when interest in it grew. In his essay *The Third Typology*,¹⁷ Anthony Vidler defined three historical phases of the conceptual “activity” of the issue of type: in relation to nature – during the Enlightenment (1750–1860), in relation to production – during the modernist movement (1860–1950) and in relation to the

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ B. Leupen [et al.], *Projektowanie architektury w ujęciu analitycznym*, „Śląsk”, Katowice 2012, p. 132.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ A. Vidler, *The Third Typology* [in:] K. Nesbitt (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda For Architecture – an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965–1995*, Princeton Arch. Press, New York 1996, pp. 260–263.

city – during neo-nationalism 1960–). Like the above-mentioned Panerai, Vidler also indicates that the reasons for the emergence of typologies lay both in the need to categorize data as well as in the search for a justification for the creation of architectural forms.

Sam Jacoby¹⁸ proposes a different division of type. On the one hand, he proposes a lineage from Quatremère de Quincy through Aldo Rossi to Rem Koolhaas as “spokesmen” for a culturally driven type, where architecture is understood similarly to a linguistic process with critical content. On the other hand, there is a tradition, from J.N.L. Durand through Le Corbusier to Peter Eisenman, where type serves a practical design methodology (through models and prototypes).¹⁹

Antony Vidler identified the third typology, the Rationalists, as particularly different from the earlier ones. It looked for inspiration and forms within the discipline, in the physical patterns of the city, polemicizing against the reduction of type to *a posteriori* abstract form. Such a typology is what we might call generative. This notion of type in architecture, as a platform for understanding history and design methodology, was pursued in the 1960s by neo-rationalists. The idea resurfaced especially in Italy, where Saverio Muratori, Carlo Aymonino, and Aldo Rossi explored the interaction between building typology and the morphology of urban space as well as the role of typology in defining architectural form. Aldo Rossi played an important role in expanding the theoretical implications of typology. He defined typology as the study of elements of the city and architecture that cannot be further reduced. He wrote: “The process of reduction is necessary, logical operation, and it is impossible to talk about the problems of forms without this presupposition. In this sense, all architectural theories are also theories of typology.”²⁰ For Rossi, a specific type not only represents an abstraction of a certain structural configuration but is also a carrier of cultural meaning.

For many authors, typological thinking has been a means of ensuring historical and structural continuity in the development of architecture and urbanism. Leon Krier wrote that the history of architecture and urban culture is the history of typologies, types of habitation, types of spaces (public and private), types of buildings, types of constructions.²¹ In his writings and projects, he emphasized the need for a dialectical relationship between the typology of buildings and the morphology of urbanism.

Likewise, Antonio Monestiroli frequently returned in his texts to the theme of typology meant to help people read and identify architecture. Like Quatremère de Quincy, he evokes the concept of “types” opposed to “model”, which do not impose rigid rules and offer freedom to choose forms: “type [...] is not a model that can be uncritically repeated, it is the progressive definition of the characteristics responding – in a way more or less constant and durable – to what we build.”²² Monestiroli sees type as the result of the search for the essence

¹⁸ S. Jacoby, *What's your type* [in:] C.C.M. Lee, S. Jacoby (eds.), *Typological Formations: Renewable Building Types and the City*, AA Publications, London 2007, p. 149 [after:] <http://issuu.com/projective/docs/typoformations> (access: 2.01.2014).

¹⁹ See more: A. Mielnik, *Typological Thinking in Architecture* [in:] *5th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts, SGEM 2018, 26 August – 01 September, 2018, Albena, Bulgaria: conference proceedings. Vol. 5, Urban planning, architecture & design. Iss. 5.3, Architecture and design*, STEF92 Technology Ltd, Sofia 2018, pp. 725–731.

²⁰ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1982, p. 41.

²¹ Leon Krier – *Racjonalna architektura: rekonstrukcja miasta (1978)* [in:] teoria architektury i urbanistyki, 6.02.2011, <http://teoriaarchitektury.blogspot.com> (access: 12.11.2013).

²² A. Monestiroli, *Ciągłość doświadczenia klasycznego* [in:] A. Monestiroli, *Tryglif i metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2008, pp. 12–13.

of the structure being built and limits the infinity of potentially existing shapes. This thinking is also close to Aldo Rossi's definition, according to which: "type is the very idea of architecture, that which is closest to its essence".²³ According to Monestiroli, defining the type of a building is the first activity in which the general character of a structure is established. Types constitute patterns of intent. The next step is only the choice of language.

It is especially those architects who adhere to rationalistic thinking that search for "universal architectural truths" through "types". They see sources for architectural creation within the repertoire of architectural forms, "types" established in the past, and the ways they relate to each other. They look for the essence of architecture hidden in invariable, universal and recognisable forms, based on fixed and legible principles. They address the issue of typology and types: types of habitation, types of space, types of buildings, types of constructions. The reference to types that are the consequence of a close link between a purpose and a form allows one to reveal the identity of a structure and a place and may make it easier for the audience to read and identify them.

The myths connected with the issue of typology and types can be analysed based on the aforementioned division by Iris Aravot. We hold ingrained false and erroneous opinions about typology and types. One is that types are only used in strictly functionalist architecture. Another is that typological thinking limits freedom and eliminates creative and imaginative aspects. The discussion of typology is by no means a matter of simplification, standardisation or a reductive model of architectural invention. "In any case, introducing typology to design practice would not replace the creativity of the design process that would necessarily follow, but rather would merely set out more demanding conditions and premises."²⁴ The previously established types would become the basis for new configurations, combinations and unusual mixtures. New architectural "worlds" are being created. As G.C. Argan concludes his essay:

the typological and inventive aspects of the creative process are continuous and interlaced – the inventive aspect being merely that of dealing with the demands of the actual historical situation by criticizing and overcoming past solutions deposited and synthesized schematically in the "type".²⁵

Like in myths, the known and imagined facts of the universe are balanced.

In the second sense, there are myths encoded in types such as the myth of the Tower, the Lantern, the House, the Labyrinth, the Gate, the Bridge, the Courtyard, and the Square. Each type carries many associations, images, traditions, stories and facts. They accrue layers of emotions and facts.

In the third sense, there are narratives related to typologies and types. Myth is understood here as an explanatory-directive narrative of design. One of these is the narrative of order. Writing about myths and meaning, C. Lévi-Straus pointed out that "if we look at all the intellectual undertakings of mankind, as far as they have been recorded all over the world, the common denominator is always to introduce some kind of order".²⁶ Categorization, classification, identification, definition, and reduction are constructs that are ingrained in human nature and are essential to experiencing, understanding, and explaining the world, as well

²³ A. Rossi, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²⁴ W. Oechslin, *Premises for the resumption of the discussion of typology* (1986) [in:] A. Peckham (ed.), *The Rationalist Reader*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 246.

²⁵ G.C. Argan, *On the typology of architecture* (1962) [in:] *The Rationalist Reader, op. cit.*, p. 207.

²⁶ C. Lévi-Straus, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

as recognizing and defining the rules that govern it. These activities are means to deal with the multitude of objects and phenomena. Taxonomy involves determining the similarities and differences between various objects and phenomena and is fundamental to establishing the simplest order among them. Thus, clearly defined things placed in a taxonomic structure gain identity. Typology is associated with a certain order, restraint, emphasis on spatial and temporal continuity. It is meant to be the result of the search for the essence of the structure being built and to limit the endlessness of choices among the many shapes that potentially exist. Through type the reasons for the chosen form and composition become clear.

4. CONCLUSIONS

One of the most common features of modernity is the indication that the so-called grand narratives that once organized our vision of the world have irrevocably disintegrated. Religion, philosophy, science – at least in our times – do not provide us with certainties about the unity and meaningfulness of the world and man's existence.²⁷ Likewise, in the world of architecture, grand narratives and mythologies that attempted to tame the unknown, the fear of limitless choices, and made the world comprehensible and its rules relatively transparent have collapsed under the onslaught of various brutal economic, market and ecological rules and the omnipresent individualism. Our world, including that of architecture and urbanism, is chaotic, fragmented, impossible to grasp with a single perspective, a single narrative. Confusion is increasingly a part of our contemporary architectural experience, while the existing pluralism of design trends makes it even more difficult to understand. There are no recognizable points of reference, either physical or stylistic ones. Featureless, anonymous spaces devoid of identity are an expression of the architectural world today, exacerbating the sense of human uprootedness and alienation. Thus, especially today, types established in the past (like myths) can provide a sense of something familiar, fixed, safe. Something that will continue to explain the world to us. We need typologies (like myths) both to conceptualize reality and as a stimulator of creativity.

The question arises whether architecture responding to new needs must create new myths and new types, or whether it can use those created for the demands rooted in the past. One may say that types (like myths) do not represent a specific historical time but some "timeless fixed laws".²⁸ Passing on tradition allows one to combine contemporary creativity with an awareness of the formal richness of the past. "Myth is our human conceptualization invented to find the real or contrived spaces that we identify between subject and object, historical time and the eternal, between the specific and the general, or the individual and the collective."²⁹ The meaning of type as a level of relationship between form and use is also somewhere between the object and its representation. Type is a carrier of knowledge and the logical foundation of architecture but also associations, impressions and memories aroused around it. Thus, we can find the very idea of architecture, closest to its essence, in type. Like myths, types are the tangent of subjective inner space and objective external reality. Especially today, in a world of endangered or lost identities and

²⁷ M. Megged, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

²⁸ A. Rossi, *Scientific Autobiography*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 15.

²⁹ M. Megged, *op. cit.*

meanings, the use of type offers a chance to find oneself on the architectural timeline. Like myths, types combine here and now with the permanent, continuous and universal. Looking for values over time.

References:

- [1] Aravot I., *Interpretations of Myth in Contemporary Architectural Writing*, Journal of Architectural and Planning Research, 1996, no. 13(4), pp. 271–290, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43029227> (access: 10.09.2021).
- [2] Argan G.C., *On the typology of architecture* (1962) [in:] A. Peckham (ed.), *The Rationalist Reader*, Routledge, New York 2014.
- [3] Ishiguro H., *Myths and False Dichotomies*, Social Research, 1985, no. 52(2), p. 366, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970375> (access: 15.06.2021).
- [4] Jacoby S., *What's your type* [in:] Lee C.C.M., Jacoby S. (eds.), *Typological Formations: Renewable Building Types and the City*, AA Publications, London 2007.
- [5] Kołakowski L., *Obecność mitu*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2003.
- [6] Leon Krier – *Racjonalna architektura: rekonstrukcja miasta (1978)* [in:] teoria architektury i urbanistyki, 6.02.2011, <http://teoriaarchitektury.blogspot.com> (access: 12.11.2013).
- [7] Leupen B. [et al.], *Projektowanie architektury w ujęciu analitycznym*, „Śląsk”, Katowice 2012.
- [8] Lévi-Straus C., *Mit i znaczenie*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2020.
- [9] Megged M., *Introduction*, Social Research, 1985, no. 52(2), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970368> (access: 15.06.21).
- [10] Mielnik A., *Typological Thinking in Architecture* [in:] *5th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts, SGEM 2018, 26 August – 01 September, 2018, Albena, Bulgaria: conference proceedings. Vol. 5, Urban planning, architecture & design. Iss. 5.3, Architecture and design*, STEF92 Technology Ltd, Sofia 2018, pp. 725–731.
- [11] *Mity modernizmu*, Autoportret, Pismo o Dobrej Przestrzeni, 2015, no. 3(50), p. 107.
- [12] Monestiroli A., *Tryglif i metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2008.
- [13] Oechslin W., *Premises for the resumption of the discussion of typology* (1986) [in:] A. Peckham (ed.), *The Rationalist Reader*, Routledge, New York 2014.
- [14] Rossi A., *Scientific Autobiography*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1981.
- [15] Rossi A., *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1982.
- [16] Vidler A., *The Third Typology* [in:] Nesbitt K. (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda For Architecture – an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965–1995*, Princeton Arch. Press, New York 1996.
- [17] Zevi B., *The Seven Myths of Architecture*, Social Research, 1985, no. 52(2), pp. 411–422, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970378> (access: 15.06.2021).

Author's Note:

Assoc. Prof. Anna Mielnik, PhD, Arch.

Employed in the Chair of Architectural Design, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Architecture. Involved in lecturing within the scope of residential architecture. In scientific work, focused on issues of rationalist architecture.

amielnik@pk.edu.pl