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ON CONTEMPORARY MYTHS OF FUNCTIONALISM

O WSPÓŁCZESNYCH MITACH FUNKCJONALIZMU

Abstract

Following the example of the past, contemporary architecture seeks its language of form, theory and principles. This applies to the rules of beauty and proportions, but also the myths present in architectural practice that are often hidden in habits, established patterns and traditions. It also relates to functionalism which, while partially liberating artists from the responsibility for form, has not, with a few exceptions, brought the expected spectacular results. It did not avoid many utopias and myths, which in retrospect are easier to name and relate to contemporariness. The paper attempts to describe selected ideas of functionalism in contemporary terms through the prism of architectural doctrines and projects.

Keywords: functionalism, architectural myths, contemporariness

Streszczenie

Architektura współczesna na wzór przeszłości poszukuje swojego języka formy, teorii i zasad. Dotyczy to prawideł piękna, proporcji, ale i mitów obecnych w architektonicznej praktyce, często ukrytych w przyzwyczajeniach, schematach i tradycji. Tyczy się to również funkcjonalizmu, który częściowo uwalniając twórców z odpowiedzialności za formę, nie przyniósł (poza wyjątkami) oczekiwanych spektakularnych rezultatów. Nie uniknął wielu utopii i mitów, które z perspektywy czasu łatwiej nazwać i odnieść do współczesności. Artykuł jest próbą opisanie wybranych idei funkcjonalizmu we współczesnym ujęciu przez pryzmat doktryn i realizacji architektonicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: funkcjonalizm, mity architektury, współczesność

1. INTRODUCTION

It can be assumed that architecture is full of myths, which, when reproduced and passed on by successive generations of architects as truths, sometimes become legends and are considered real. When repeated in such a form, they sometimes depart from the truth and requirements of the present. Functionalism, which among other things shaped architectural form by making it follow function, encountered commonplace and poor practice, which resulted in misunderstanding and rejection of this direction. Arranging the city, its neighbourhoods, and its architecture through function has become utopian. This is a rather superficial view that also stems from the problem of an unambiguous definition of functionalism. Józef Tarnowski considers the issue in a broader context and does not limit the term to “a simple architectural form lacking traditional decoration.”¹ The question arises: “In what sense can a function be

¹ J. Tarnowski, *Funkcjonalizm w architekturze: od neolitu do wczesnego modernizmu*, Estetyka i Krytyka, 2009, no. 15/16(1), p. 192.

externalised in form? A function is after all an abstract category. Abstractions do not have such features that would be somehow homologous to concrete things.”² Therefore, it seems that narrowing down the architecture of the long modernist period to its functional aspects is flawed. Tarnowski explains: “Functionality is thus an incidental feature, not a universal one. Something is functional to the extent to which it meets the specific needs of a particular user.”³

The analysis of functionalism or modernism through the prism of the myths that surround it provides a reference of the past ideals to the recent times. The topic of the myth of modernist architecture is often discussed in many publications nowadays, and the main principles of functionalism are thoroughly criticised. Naturally, a distinction must be made between pre- and post-World War II architecture. It is important to note that there were few pre-war modernist projects, the movement was gaining ground and taking shape especially in terms of theory. After the war, the situation changed and the ideological and coherent functionalism evolved into the diverse late modernism, so strongly dependent on the region of the world. Yet in both periods the decisive actions of architects were liable to create the myths that we discover and describe today.

2. THE MYTHS OF FUNCTIONALISM

Just as functionalism is not a clear-cut term, a myth in architecture is complex in nature. Myth is not a scientific truth. Unfortunately, attempts are often made to explain it scientifically, so it is confused with knowledge – hence its power. On the other hand, myth can be a meaningful element with a tinge of legend – a vivid memory of the past. It is difficult and ambiguous to evaluate it. This applies to modernism, which Andrzej Szczerski defines as a term with a broad meaning that encompasses a range of artistic phenomena in the period before and after World War II. He also draws attention to its fundamental difference from contemporary art, so often confused with contemporariness and regarded as a synonym of modernism. Looking at modernism as modernization directs the study and perception of this period more towards a certain process and *modus operandi* underpinned by transformation⁴. After all, a radical culture change was to take place which, by crossing all boundaries, existing ideas and conventions, acting with incredible force, was to reach every place in the world. Thus, one might conclude that the functionalists succeeded, if only by spreading the international style.

Coming back to modernist architecture, it can be regarded as the most distinct example of action for change, and thus as a tool for modernization and construction of modernity. This means that we cannot treat this architecture as an expression of an avant-garde attitude, see in it a contestation of reality or an attempt to realize a utopian vision. At the same time, we cannot reduce it to a mere matter of construction, form, functionality and execution of specific commissions at a given time and within one or another financial or technical capacity. If we can appreciate this architecture today, it is only by seeing in it a phenomenon of civilization – that is, an instrument of a specific, modernizing change, leading towards a future based on modern ideals.⁵

² *Ibidem*, p. 193.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ A. Szczerski, *Architektura, modernizm, nowoczesność*, Autoportret. Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni, 2015, no. 3(50), p. 55.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

Being the foundation of the modernist revolution, functionalism was not the only form of creative attitude during this period; nevertheless, its importance is very significant. In Poland, its well-established ideas appear only in the post-1950 projects, but they are quite quickly subjected to harsh criticism, especially when they caused anonymity, often due to a shortage of building materials, but also emotional and value detachment from the context of the place and its history. Juhani Pallasmaa writes that

architecture withers into a meaningless formal game when it loses its echo in the timeless myths and traditions of building. Instead of portraying newness, true architecture makes us aware of the entire history of building and it re-structures our reading of the continuum of time.⁶

The myth of the artist, which had been shaped for centuries, had to change – the conviction about the artistic mission of architecture encountered social impoverishment which meant that the attitude of architects had to be rational, focused on solving basic problems and needs on the scale of the city, housing estate or house. Looking for the sources of modernist aesthetic and moral rebellion, Władysław Loranc goes back to the periods before modernity, thanks to which artists abandoned traditional notions of the artist and art.

It was the modernists who sanctioned in the consciousness of society the separation of art from crafts, from organized guild activity. They ultimately convinced the public of the falsity, or at least of the superficiality of thinking according to which the function of art is to confirm the prestige of a person in a portrait or to add significance to a mansion by sanctifying measures. In modernist thinking and practice art became above all a great force that organizes man's spiritual attitude.⁷

Among the myths, we should also note the myth of continuous progress, which is nowadays quite often considered a utopia. The price of progress and continuous development is the degradation of the natural environment and landscape, which has been particularly evident in recent years. Public awareness of this issue necessitates the creation of new solutions, which are constantly, but laboriously, being sought. Continuous progress should be replaced by development that can be better controlled. After all, functionalism has succumbed to this myth:

Belief in constant change and revolution draws us away from evolution and tradition. When a work of apparently extraordinary uniqueness is not accepted in this ever-expanding gallery of artistic tradition, it will be quickly forgotten as a mere momentary curiosity.⁸

This statement describes another objection to modernism's detachment from tradition, its break with cultural continuity in architecture. Hence, there is also the argument of lack of identity, connection with place and context, lack of continuation of what is valuable in a given place. One can thus outline here the myth of novelty to which functionalism, like any new revolutionary movement, has succumbed. Pallasmaa thus asks: "But, is newness a relevant aspiration and criteria for quality in art and architecture? Is a future without

⁶ J. Pallasmaa, *Tradycja i nowość. Ciągłość i znaczenie w architekturze i sztuce*, Autoportret. Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni, 2017, no. 2(57), p. 33.

⁷ W. Loranc, *Sztuka i społeczeństwo w programie artystycznym polskiego modernizmu*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1973, p. 9.

⁸ J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

its constitutive past even conceivable?”⁹ The answer is obvious, but difficult to articulate in the language of architectural form. The pursuit of novelty is the driving force behind development, regardless of whether the past is its visible component.

Nevertheless, the evaluation of the functionalist novelty from a contemporary perspective is positive because it was clearly directed towards solving immediate problems and tasks posed to architecture. Today the situation and its context are different:

Quality, nuance and expressive subtlety are replaced by such quantifiable properties as large scale, shock value, and strangeness. The uncritical interest in superficial uniqueness and newness is bound to shift the artistic encounter from a genuine and autonomous experience of the work into a comparative and quasi-rational judgement. Intellectual and commercial speculation replaces emotive sincerity, and genuine experiential quality is unnoticeably replaced by quantitative assessment.¹⁰

Another illusion of functionalism was the myth of social recovery – it was believed that architecture would save the world and give people freedom and release them from oppression and deprivation. Artistic aspirations and enthusiasm to improve the situation of millions of citizens soon proved illusory. They became easy targets for critical generations awaiting change. This creative fervour led to a consolidation of the environment succumbing to the myth of unity, which many times, through new developing trends in architecture, united the artists into strong groups.

In the period described above, CIAM congresses were a cyclical place of confrontation, discussion and establishing a common stance towards the problems of architecture and urban planning. In Poland a group called “Blok” actively stressed the importance of functionalism and the development of technology, translating it directly into architecture and art. Likewise, the “Praesens” group gathered young architects around the theory and practice of functionalism. These associations represented artists with their most progressive artistic views that attempted to respond to questions and current problems. Today there is no direction or idea bringing architects together with such force and intensity. All congresses and meetings have a local character. Therefore, the unity of the creative community is considered a myth today. The same is true about the cohesion of the visual arts with architecture – nowadays in many places there are attempts to combine various fields of art following the example of Bauhaus, but it seems that due to a high level of specialization it is not possible to unite all visual, artisan and architectural artists in one place and within one team. Perhaps it is the sense of individuality or the high fragmentation of action for locality and connection to place that makes such unification around an idea impossible.

The myth of the functionalist city was very quickly verified in reality – logically ordered and planned urban organisms did not fully work. Architects who wanted to deal with the poor condition of the centres of large cities did not hesitate to plan demolitions of historical fabric and far-reaching interference in the layout of urban structures. Although most plans remained on paper, the myth of great urban concepts is still invoked today as a warning. And yet, contemporary times have not freed themselves from problems. As Kenneth Frampton puts it:

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

The typical downtown, which up to twenty years ago still presented a mixture of residential stock with tertiary and secondary industry, has now become little more than a *burolandschaft* city-scape: the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture.¹¹

This bleak but accurate picture of the city allows one to conclude that the shortcomings of functionalist planning constituted its strength – after all, many of the solutions still work, and the clear layout of the urban structures enables planning its development. However, Jakub Wujek also warns: “Looking ahead a dozen or even several dozen years due to the nature of the craft, the urban visionary approach created a climate conducive to the repetition of similar practices in the design of buildings.”¹² Were his concerns valid?

Describing the principles in force in 1970, Izabella Wisłocka identified two directions: changeability and mobility,¹³ which actually also applies to recent times. Both of these tendencies are in some way at odds with the durability of architecture, not in the sense of the literal durability of the building but of its meaningful and functional existence. The same was true of functionalism – as there is also the myth of monumental architecture. Mighty edifices arousing admiration, mythical edifices shrouded in a sense of uniqueness and awe born of pride and a desire for greatness, which the international style seems to have rejected, did not fit into the rational and geometric world. Reflection came quite quickly and attempts were made at restoring the architecture of great edifices, liberating it from the functional regime and rationalism. They were recognized in manifestos and programs, as Leon Krier does nowadays, as city-forming components – the basic elements of the structure of a contemporary city.

Coming back to architecture itself – its oversimplification in the name of principles led to a great formal and aesthetic reduction. Hence the origin of the myth of simplicity. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe searched for the limits of this reduction almost throughout his entire work, seeing possibilities in new construction technologies. He materialized functionalist paradigms through a closed set of the language of forms that served to express simplicity and truth while limiting the constant pursuit of novelty and originality. It is modern architecture that appears as a sincere combination of function, structure, form and beauty of proportion. Mies van der Rohe should be considered as an artist representing an international style. Although not without criticism and negative judgments, he definitely represented the ideals of the movement. It was a movement that

was to be distinguished by placing particular emphasis on the issues of solid and space, which would involve the introduction of simple horizontal projections and light, uncomplicated architectural forms; ...finally, on the postulate of a complete departure from all ornamentation and ‘stylish’ decoration, which should be replaced by the selection of appropriate, aesthetically pleasing materials and refined proportions of individual elements of the building.¹⁴

Mies van der Rohe continued his work in the United States after World War II, and owing to technological possibilities, he had the opportunity to materialize and develop the ideas of functionalism with unprecedented intensity.

¹¹ K. Frampton, *W stronę krytycznego regionalizmu*, Autoportret. Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni, 2017, no. 2(57), p. 12.

¹² J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie architektury XX wieku*, Arkady, Warszawa 1986, p. 42.

¹³ I. Wisłocka, *Dom i miasto jutra*, Arkady, Warszawa 1971, p. 151.

¹⁴ A. Kotuła, P. Krakowski, *Malarstwo, rzeźba, architektura: wybrane zagadnienia plastyki współczesnej*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1978, p. 428.

This causes misunderstanding and rejection of the idea of this architecture. Such an approach leads to breaking the continuity of tradition and canons to a greater or lesser extent, which resulted in criticism of modernist solutions.

At the same time, it is hard to imagine that the pioneers of the avant-garde decided to separate modernist content and form, i.e., to abandon formal radicalism in favour of a more communicative message, a more traditional language. Such phenomena did obviously occur... but the starting point of these movements was first certain aesthetic attitudes and only later social attitudes.¹⁵

A contemporary accusation against the creators of functionalism is that they built the same forms in a different cultural and historical context. This could be regarded as a kind of contemporary colonization. On the other hand, a universal dimension of architecture is still desired, which should not be limited only to its functional aspect – and this is how functionalist architecture is often evaluated. Does its formalism, austerity and repetitiveness teach us anything? Is the contemporary quest for originality the right answer? As Juhani Pallasmaa writes:

In today's publicized and applauded avant-garde architecture, formal uniqueness is sought ad absurdum at the cost of functional, structural and technical logic, as well as of human perceptual and sensory realities. Architectural entities are conceived as a-historical, detached and disembodied objects, detached from their context, societal motivation, and dialogue with the past.¹⁶

The myth of proportions is also related to this issue. After all, handing them down through generations as intuitive rather than scientific rules is almost mythical – but undeniably still valid in architecture.

The proportions of architecture sometimes seem to be some kind of mysterious knowledge. After all, the appropriate proportions of elements and components obvious in chemistry, mathematics or music undoubtedly also apply to architecture, although no clear rules define them. Unlike in the past, the golden ratio and *modulor* did not arouse a sense of obligation among artists to use them ruthlessly. It is said without hesitation that architecture is made of proportions. And yet there is no single way of defining them, just as there is no imperative to use them. Perhaps the search for the most perfect ones is still going on. Or perhaps they are a mere myth and subject to the same criteria of evaluation as the concept of beauty.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The criticism of modernism as a soulless functionalist movement intensified the return to tradition and the past in the postmodern period and the subsequent turn to local values and the context of the region. There is no indication that these activities have created a significant or dominant direction in contemporary architecture. This criticism, sometimes too radical, was

¹⁵ D. Jędruch, *Bum, bum, bum. Śmierć modernizmu*, Autoportret, Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni, 2015, no. 3(50), p. 7.

¹⁶ J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

often aimed at highlighting errors and utopias, which, like any revolution, it did not avoid. It has also been burdened with repeated myths, with which, especially in the period of the decline and postmodernism, attempts were made to trivialize the impact that functionalism had on space, architecture, and life. In fact, a lot of the achievements of that time continue and are part of contemporary architecture. One can also see a trend of picking up European patterns in the newly built cities across China, where there is a departure from the rich indigenous history of art and architecture.

Separating the emotion from the raw facts is difficult, the temporal distance is still too short, especially as many of the themes from this period are continued and recycled. At the same time, it can be argued that the radical changes of functionalism were not completely detached from the continuity of architecture, art and culture. Yet we still find 'living' myths that function with reference to this particular and turbulent period of architecture.



Ill. 1. *Neue Nationalgalerie*, Mies van der Rohe, 1968, Berlin, photo: Marek Początko.

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