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THE GRAND DECEPTION? THE MODERNIST APPROPRIATION OF PROGRESS AND MODERNITY

WIELKIE OSZUSTWO? MODERNISTYCZNE ZAWŁASZCZENIE POJĘCIA POSTĘPU I NOWOCZESNOŚCI

Abstract

The primary goal of the article is to organize the notions of “modernity” and “progress” in relation to the theoretical assumptions, achievements and claims of modernism and other concepts stemming from it. Its methodology is based on the semantic analysis of terms commonly used in defining and evaluating architecture. The thesis of the article is the claim that the concepts of progress and modernity have been appropriated or distorted in the discourse on contemporary architecture.

Keywords: modernism, modernity, progress, tradition

Streszczenie

Nadrzędnym celem artykułu jest uporządkowanie pojęć „postęp” i „nowoczesność” w odniesieniu do założeń teoretycznych, osiągnięć oraz pretensji modernizmu i wyrosłych z niego koncepcji. Metodyka badawcza opiera się na analizie semantycznej określeń stosowanych powszechnie w definiowaniu i ocenie architektury. Tezą artykułu jest twierdzenie, że w dyskursie dotyczącym architektury współczesnej zawłaszczono lub wypaczono pojęcia postępu i nowoczesności.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, nowoczesność, postęp, tradycja

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is a contribution to the general research on the phenomena taking place in architecture since the revolutionary postulate of “breaking with the past” was proposed – and largely realized – by the pioneers of modernism. The issue of full recognition of this movement, especially its ideological premises, is still alive as it has key importance in understanding contemporary architecture.¹

The primary goal is to organize some of the concepts that exist in the discourse on contemporary architecture. A detailed analysis of this issue, unfortunately, goes beyond the

¹ This is all the more important as we are currently observing open attempts of a direct reference to modernist ideas, the best example of which is the concept of the so-called European Bauhaus (*New European Bauhaus*).

possibilities of a conference presentation, therefore the article focuses on the notions of “progress” and “modernity” in relation to the theoretical assumptions, achievements and claims of modernism and other concepts stemming from it.

The author’s intention is to draw attention to the popular, albeit erroneous, depiction of the twentieth-century revolutionary changes in architectural design as general and indisputable progress in architecture. Similarly, it is questionable to use the name “modern,” which means “nowadays,” because this is in fact the original meaning of the source word *modernus*, for the purposes of distinguishing just one particular style and intellectual attitude.

Therefore, the thesis of the article is the claim that – for various reasons – in the discourse on contemporary architecture the notions of progress and modernity have been appropriated or distorted. Originally, it was supposed to affirm a revolutionary break from the heritage of the past, but now it serves to uphold the belief in the uniqueness and non-alternative nature of the modernist attitude. But to correctly and objectively assess any phenomena in contemporary architecture, it is necessary to use precise and correct nomenclature, which requires a semantic reconstruction of the language of the discourse, as well. That’s why an important part of this article is the semantic analysis of terms commonly used in defining and evaluating architecture. It is not, however, the author’s intention to evaluate the achievements of modernism or the contemporary trends in architectural design that arose on its foundations.

The text is based on a re-interpretation of the available source materials and the results of research conducted in the second half of the 20th century. It also takes into account the increasing amount of knowledge and experience related to the functioning of modern buildings.

The issue of changes in architecture over the last 100 years features a very rich critical literature. Among the most important are the works of Ragon, Brolin, Banham, Ghirardo, Watkin, and recently Curl. Among the Polish publications, the studies of Bieganski, Olszewski, Krakowski, Lisowski, Wisłocka and Trzeciak stand out. The issues of progress, innovation, modernity and tradition in the context of architecture were addressed in their essays by Scruton and the Krier brothers, and lately in Poland by Tarnowski.

In the article, for the purposes of describing architecture created in opposition to classical principles and traditional stylistics, the phrases “modernist architecture” or “modernist style” are used. In a broader, ideological sense, however, I used expressions such as “modernism” or “modernist attitude.”

2. FEATURES OF A MODERNIST ATTITUDE

All trends of modernism share the same foundation, which is based on radicalism and a revolutionary rejection of tradition and the associated cult of novelty.² In practice, there is also a belief in a special, quasi-religious mission of the new architecture.³

² According to Gropius: “since we broke with the past, we can draw a new vision of architecture corresponding to the civilization of technology, (...) the morphology of the old styles has been destroyed.” Gropius W., *Pelnia Architektury*, Karaktery, Kraków 2014, p. 91

³ “Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future (...) which will one day rise heavenwards (...) as a clear symbol of a new belief to come.” [*Wollen, erdenken, erschaffen wir gemeinsam den neuen Bau der Zukunft, (...) einst gen Himmel steigen wird als kristallenes Sinnbild eines neuen kommenden Glaubens*], Das Bauhaus Manifest 1919, 3.12.2020, <https://www.bauhausberlin.com/news-blog/das-bauhaus-manifest-1919> (access: August

An analysis of many historical texts devoted to the theory of design shows that the 19th-century changes in architecture did not have to end with a sudden and radical break with the past.⁴ However, modernism was intended by its supporters to be both revolutionary and “anti-bourgeois.”⁵ If, as it was claimed, there was a revolution in construction (technology), the “concept of architecture” had to undergo a revolution as well.⁶ It was in perfect harmony with the then popular postulates of Marx and Engels and made modernism a de facto delegation of Marxism in the field of architecture.⁷

This abrupt break with the past, or rejection of tradition, was in fact a denial of the respect for the permanence and stability that characterized the pre-Enlightenment world. “Craving for new things” (*novarum rerum cupiditas*) characterizes the epoch of the so-called “Modernity.”⁸ Because “modern thinking” was to be a necessity, and the past became “a stuffy pile of aged garbage” to be ruthlessly discarded.⁹ The advocates of modernism tried to explain their constant search for “what is new” with the achievements of science. But, for example, the Gropius’ claim that “scientists have discovered that all human values are relative” is a mere notion that tells more about his ideology than about reality and truth.¹⁰

The modernist attitude also results in a special kind of negation of diversity. Weaver put it vividly, noting that “Indeed, modernism is in essence a provincialism, since it declines to look beyond the horizon of the moment” and thus does not see anything of value except the here-and-now.¹¹ In the past, at least until the mid-nineteenth century, the overlapping of styles and forms was common and uncontroversial. Moreover, the classical canon of rules was quite freely adapted to regional conditions, such as the Mudejar style, northern varieties of the Renaissance or the Baroque of Spanish colonies in the Americas.¹² Modernism arbitrarily denied this right of continuation, explicitly declaring its intolerance towards other attitudes.¹³

The justified to some extent belief in the uniqueness of modernist architecture was usually accompanied by the belief that its creators had intellectual special abilities to predict the future and their predispositions to learn the truth.¹⁴

2021). Vide: C.B. Brolin, *The Failure of Modern Architecture*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., New York 1976, p. 45.

⁴ L. Lefavire, A. Tzonis, *The Emergence of Modern Architecture. A Documentary History from 1000 to 1810*, Routledge, London–New York 2004, pp. 1–28.

⁵ T. Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Picador, New York 2009, pp. 12–20.

⁶ Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, G. Cres, Paris 1929, pp. 240–241.

⁷ “The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property-relations; (...) its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.” K. Marks, F. Engels, *Manifest komunistyczny*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1956; Wolfe T., *op. cit.*, pp. 7–9.

⁸ E. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Przeciwko duchowi czasu*, Wektory, Sądów 2008, p. 10.

⁹ “Un grand désaccord règne entre un état d’esprit moderne qui est une injonction, et un stock étouffant de détritiques séculaires.” Le Corbusier, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

¹⁰ W. Gropius, *Pełnia architektury*, Karakter, Kraków 2014, p. 58.

¹¹ M.R. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences: Expanded Edition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, p. 61.

¹² L. Lefavire, A. Tzonis, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–24.

¹³ “The re-use of past styles of building for new structures (...) should not be tolerated.” (*Karta Ateńska*, pkt. 60), Le Corbusier, *Karta ateńska*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2017, p. 189. If this demand were strictly obeyed, the contemporary imitation of the stylistics typical to modernism also should not be tolerated. Vide: Le Corbusier, *Vers...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 240–241.

¹⁴ Apart from the well-known deliberations of Le Corbusier, an example is the definition of modern

In the light of the presented facts, it should be emphasized that modernism is primarily an ideology, and not only an already historical style or design attitude. It is an ideology still present in the modern world, which has its consequences and which, like no other, has left its mark on contemporary architecture.¹⁵

3. PROGRESSION, MODERNITY, ARCHITECTURE

3.1. THE CONCEPTS OF PROGRESS AND TRADITION

Modernism has never been uniform, but regardless of a trend defined by Trzeciak, each of them shares two fundamental principles – the cult of novelty and a radical break with the past.¹⁶ Since the post-Enlightenment world equated all changes with progress, modernism, the essence of which was total change, was immediately recognized as “progressive.” The basic problem, however, is whether the changes forcefully introduced by modernists brought real progress in architecture and urban planning.

The concept of progress has now a clearly positive meaning and is understood primarily as an improvement: “a process of changes leading to an increasingly perfect state.”¹⁷ The original meaning of the Latin word *progressio* was more neutral because it referred to movement, the advancement into the next stage.¹⁸ Moreover, the term was used quite sporadically until the 19th century, mainly in the context of physical movement in space.¹⁹

The antinomy of progress vs. tradition is essentially false, for there is no real progress without tradition – and tradition without progress. Tradition is not the past *in corpore* that has elapsed and will never come back. It is only what prevails over time and no more and stands the test of time. As Bartyzel put it, “to progress” means to change something, and morally also to improve something. This “something” is contained in the inherited tradition. Without a subject for change, progress is impossible, while any “unchanging tradition” understood as just preserving the past, would be absurd. Properly understood, progress is therefore an expansion on, not a rejection of the acquired heritage.²⁰

architecture by Bohdan Lisowski, which is quoted by Olszewski. According to him, modern architecture is characterized by “original and innovative, at a given time, experimentation in the field of humanistic and technical approaches, which has the ability to *comprehend* these contemporary phenomena of life, which the general public always *becomes aware of with a delay*.” After: A.K. Olszewski, *Nowa forma w architekturze polskiej 1900–1925*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 1967, p. 20.

¹⁵ The modernist attitude has all the features of an ideology: it includes a set of beliefs to be profess and rules of conduct, as well as explains phenomena and processes in the contemporary world.

¹⁶ P. Trzeciak, *Historia, psychika, architektura*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1988, pp. 129–132.

¹⁷ *Słownik języka polskiego* [ed. J. Doroszewski], vol. 6, PWN, Warszawa 1964, pp. 1138–1139.

¹⁸ *progredi* – to go forward (*pro* – forward and *gradi* – to go).

¹⁹ Johnson’s dictionary from the mid-18th century gives four meanings of the word, and only one of them is not related to movement. Vide: S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English language in which the words are deduced from their originals, explained in their different meanings*, [Dublin] 1768.

²⁰ Interestingly, Gropius agrees with this concept of tradition, although he treats it, like Le Corbusier, selectively and inconsistently: “True tradition is the result of continuous development; its nature cannot be static, but dynamic.” W. Gropius, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

Modernism was rooted in the belief in the inevitability of progress, a belief that accompanies the Hegelian – and in fact much older, dating back to Plotinus and Joachim de Fiore – concept of history as a deliberate, rational and valid process of constant change. This view, which was questionable during Hegel's lifetime due to the experiences of the French Revolution (i.e.: the genocide in the Vendée), became one of the foundations of Marxism. It also worked well with Darwin's evolutionary concepts, which modernists readily embraced.²¹ However, the deterministic belief in continuous progress and the inevitability of “necessary historical processes” has no basis in reality, as confirmed by the tragic experiences of the 20th century.

Rather, the facts show that, as Gray put it, “there is no consistent link between the adoption of modern science and technology on the one hand and the progress of reason in human affairs on the other.”²² Nevertheless, literature on the architecture of the 1920s and 1930s usually contrasted the “progressive elements” of modernism with the “conservative environment” of traditionalists, and that's when the expression “progressive architectural thought” became particularly popular.²³

Although progressiveness is no longer verbalized as a total opposition to the past, the tradition accepted by the modern world deriving from modernism is merely a “culture of memories” – a collection of memories that can be contemplated, but not necessarily used as a resource.²⁴

As noted by Doboszynski, who once pondered on the concept of progress, progress can be manifested in two ways: as the development of reason, i.e. the de facto accumulation and use of the knowledge of ancestors, and as the development of man, i.e. improving the conditions of human life. The overriding goal, however, is moral progress, which should be accompanied by constant material progress, and thus, sine qua non, also the improvement of the accompanying architecture.

However, in order to prove the claim of the progressive nature of modernism, it would be necessary to confirm that the modernist revolution did in fact initiate “a process of changes leading to an increasingly perfect state,” or to specify what its allegedly made *improvements* were. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the way of building was undoubtedly significantly improved thanks to the introduction of new technologies and building materials, but this development was not directly related to the ideology of modernism.

First of all, technological progress, as a rule, is not owed to architects, but to engineers. The most important inventions that revolutionized construction appeared at least several decades before modernism entered the scene.²⁵ It is true that its followers made extensive use of these inventions and spread them, but by no means can they be credited with their achievements.

Secondly, technological progress does not determine architectural form per se. Technology is a means, or rather a set of tools, that an architect can use for his or her needs, or more precisely – for the purpose of achieving the ultimate goal of a beautiful, durable and useful building.

²¹ This is confirmed by the way of expression about the new style – “modern architecture” was described by its followers as a result of historical evolution. Vide: A.K. Olszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 106; C.B. Brolin, *op. cit.*, pp. 57–58.

²² J. Grey, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions*, Granta, London 2004, p. 18.

²³ I. Wisłocka, *Awangardowa architektura polska 1918–1939*, Arkady, Warszawa 1968, pp. 11–16.

²⁴ P. Grad, *O pojęciu tradycji*, Fundacja Augusta hr. Cieszkowskiego, Warszawa 2017, pp. 9–11.

²⁵ According to the hierarchy of importance for the development of construction, these were: safe passenger elevator (1852/1880), industrial steel manufacturing (1856/1864), industrial electricity production (1882), reinforced concrete (1867/1893).

3.2. ALLEGED NOVELTY AND FALSE PREMISES

One example of modernist appropriation of progress is the issue of housing architecture, therefore, it should be remembered that the quality of housing had been systematically increasing since at least the mid-nineteenth century. The analysis of residential space in the largest cities shows a gradual but constant improvement in housing conditions during this period.²⁶ The popularization of passenger elevators meant that the buildings could be taller, and the best apartments could be located on the top. The proliferation of central heating, on the other hand, influenced the plans of residential buildings, which resulted in e.g. a gradual abandonment of auxiliary staircases.²⁷ It is also difficult to talk about any special merits of modernism in the field of hygiene, ergonomics and living comfort, especially in the light of earlier achievements in this field recalled by Rybczynski.²⁸

It should also be remembered that the undoubted 19th-century progress in housing architecture was as much the result of technological progress as the evolution of building regulations.²⁹ The quality of life in cities increased gradually, keeping with the traditional urban development method and the traditional principles of urban and architectural composition. No modernist revolution was needed.

So in terms of the concept of an apartment, apart from both prefabrication and overall cost reduction, the modernists did not have much to add. Moreover, some of their ideas, such as the allegedly “rational” lowering of the height of habitable space, were a regression in relation to the achievements of residential architecture in the 19th century.

Regardless of how we define progress, doubts are raised both about the “novelty” of some modernist proposals and the truthfulness of the premises on which its theoretical assumptions were built.³⁰ On the one hand, modernism claimed the right to the only correct interpretation of the past, referring to a supposedly better architectural tradition because it was cleansed of the 19th century accretions. On the other hand, it proposed forms and solutions that it considered to be “modern,” that is, corresponding to the challenges of the then new times.

However, with a false premise, it is difficult to draw real conclusions. The purported beautiful and wonderful world of the seemingly unblemished architecture that modernists referred to never existed. It was at best a projection of their dreams or, unfortunately more likely, a theoretical false construct that justified revolutionary postulates. The cathedrals were never white and the facades were never completely smooth, contrary to what Le Corbusier

²⁶ M. Eleb, A. Debarre, *L'Invention de l'habitation moderne. Paris 1880-1914*, Hazan, [Paris] 1995, pp. 48–61, 381–428.

²⁷ M. Domińczak, A. Zagula, *Typologia łódzkiej kamienicy*, Biuro Architekta Miasta, Łódź 2016, pp. 46–49.

²⁸ One exception is the introduction of insulation issues to architectural design on a larger scale. However, it was not a completely new problem, but a result of medical discoveries (e.g. research on rickets), presented at least from the mid-nineteenth century.

²⁹ Around 1900, a number of new building regulations were introduced which significantly improved housing conditions in cities. Examples are i.e.: London (1894), Berlin (1897), New York (1901), Paris (1902), Saxony (1900), Russia (1900), and Bavaria (1901).

³⁰ J.S. Curl, *Making Dystopia. The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018, pp. 49–85.

argued.³¹ The Parthenon, Byzantine and Romanesque churches were polychromed and their interiors were richly decorated, which he did not know or refused to acknowledge.

The novelty of the modernist canon of design rules, based on the so-called five principles of architecture invented by Le Corbusier and accepted by other supporters of modernism is also highly debatable. These rules seem to be a rather random set of ideas clearly inspired by Le Corbusier's travels before World War I.³² Neither of them was new nor innovative, but in all its assertiveness, it seemed very different from the traditional European architecture of the early twentieth century. Moreover, the principles themselves did not bring about any "progress" – an improvement that could be applied universally.

Le Corbusier considered the vernacular, endemic architecture of the Middle East and the Mediterranean (incorrectly called "Arab") to be the embodiment of simplicity. He was inspired by the typical for these areas flat roofs, which, due to the climate, have always been used as terraces and places to spend free time, especially in the evening.³³

Ribbon windows, i.e. horizontally placed window openings in the form of horizontal rectangles, were present even in late medieval architecture.³⁴ Also, "free facades" and "free plans" were not unfamiliar to the architecture of the Middle Ages. The dense, narrow-front development of the cities of northern Europe, in which only the walls between the neighbors served as constructional functions, made it possible to freely dispose of both the interior and the façade.³⁵ It was used on a large scale in later centuries, when replacing self-supporting facades and giving them more fashionable, modern forms. Similarly, the idea of elevating the building above the ground on poles has been known in classical architecture at least since the 16th century, and in construction, probably from the beginnings of human settlement in the floodplains.

All these allegedly modern ideas were applied in the past without prejudice, where they made sense, where they were justified by the needs. But were they progressive? To state the obvious here, a horizontal window does not serve its purpose better than a vertical one, on the contrary – windows with a traditional vertical form provide incomparably greater possibilities of sunlight access control. Similarly, a flat roof terrace is not appropriate and necessary in every climate.

Finally, it is worth to recall that the Athens Charter also contains a number of declarations on the development of cities presented as "innovative," which were in fact a repeat of the formulated and implemented many years earlier postulates of Baumeister (1879) or Stübben (1890).

As it turned out, modernism, which wanted to liberate architects from the "cursed slavery to tradition,"³⁶ in turn, enslaved them to the present. And, as Baudelaire noted, for any true artist, the bondage of time and its circumstances is demeaning.

³¹ Le Corbusier, *Vers..., op. cit.*, p. 72.

³² In 1911, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret made a six-month trip to the Middle East, and visited, among others, Belgrade, Bucharest, Adrianople, Constantinople, Athens, Delphi, Patras, Naples, Pompeii and Rome. This journey is considered a breakthrough in his professional life.

³³ It is confirmed even in the Deuteronomy text from the 15th century BC: "When you build a new house, put a parapet around the roof; otherwise, if someone falls off, you will bring bloodguilt upon your house." (Deuteronomy 22:8) *New American Bible* 2002.

³⁴ J.S. Curl, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60.

³⁵ J. Piekalski, *Wczesne domy mieszczan w Europie Środkowej. Geneza – funkcja – forma*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2004.

³⁶ Le Corbusier, *Vers..., op. cit.*, p. 80.

3.3. FUNCTIONALISM AND RATIONALISM

Another example of modernist appropriation is the identification of modernism with functional architecture as if it were invented by it. This functionalism, in turn, is associated with the allegedly exceptionally rational attitude of modernists to architectural design.³⁷ This approach stems from, firstly, a mis-definition of the function of architecture, simplistically reducing it to the solution of purely utilitarian problems, and secondly, an understanding of rationalism in a strictly materialistic and utilitarian way.

Olszewski rightly points out that in the past, any good architecture always was a harmony between function and form. At the same time, however, he repeats the commonly used accusation, which is also the justification of the modernist revolution, about the divergence of function and form in the 19th-century architecture.³⁸ The reunification of form and function was supposed to be “progress,” but then it became understood only as change – a creation of something contrary to a present state. This indicates a strong aversion to the architecture of that period. So did it not fulfill its basic functions? Wasn’t it “working” and was it not functional? Was the building construction of that era rejected by the general public? There is no indication of that.

The phenomenon of surfeit was probably of importance here. What could also trigger resistance was the ease with which the decorative works of architecture were created in the 19th century, in face of the growing problems, for example, with availability of cheap apartments. Perhaps that is why Le Corbusier considered a complete rejection of ornaments as progress.³⁹ However, the cleansed-of-ornaments, simple architecture was not so much a “logical consequence compounded by technological progress,”⁴⁰ but rather a consequence of materialism and the gradual perception of man solely through the prism of his animal, biological and physiological needs.⁴¹ Therefore, “unnecessary” decorations were “irrational” for modernists, although Louis Sullivan would have a very different opinion on this subject. So, rationalism began to be falsely identified with maximum simplicity and extreme thrift (in practice: cheapness), as if other human needs were irrelevant.⁴² Hence the fascination with dehumanized industrial construction – production halls, warehouses, and grain elevators. Meanwhile, the simplicity of industrial construction was due not so much to savings, but rather, given early capitalist social relations, to extreme utilitarianism.⁴³ The “rationalism” of the architecture of the 18th- and 19th-century factories, which some consider to be the beginning of modernism, is the result of sheer greed of the factory owners.

³⁷ In the context of claims to rationalism, it is significant that the definitions of architecture created by modernists are usually poetic, abstract notions or declarations, such as: *Architecture is a wise, correct and wonderful play of volumes under the light* (Le Corbusier), or: *Architecture is structural clarity brought to its proper expression* (Mies van de Rohe).

³⁸ A.K. Olszewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23. Interestingly, model compatibility between form and function has never been defined.

³⁹ Le Corbusier, *Vers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁴⁰ I. Wisłocka, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ Le Corbusier, *Karta ateńska*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴² Gropius, although he considered the “rationalization” of architecture to be the most characteristic feature of modernism, opposed treating rationalism in purely materialistic terms. Vide: W. Gropius, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴³ C.B. Brolin, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–29.

Nowadays, modernism's claims to a monopoly on functionalism have been denied, but the belief in "historical necessity," that is rationalism, progressiveness and constant development of contemporary architecture still exists.

3.4. PROBLEMS WITH THE CONCEPT OF MODERNITY

In research on architecture, modernity is usually used in the sense of a reference to modernism and the contemporary trends derived from it, and thus in opposition to traditionalism. Whereas, the original meaning of the word refers to the present, and the word "modern" means "appropriate to new times." The source of this adjective in almost all European languages is the Latin word *modernus*, which expresses something "today" (analogous to *hodiernus* – yesterday, and *hesternus* – tomorrow).⁴⁴ Also in some Slavic languages, including Polish, modernity relates directly to the present (современный, сучасний, сучасны).

The concept of "modern" originally had a pejorative meaning, as a synonym of mediocrity, vulgarity and trite, which confirms the way it was used, for example, by Shakespeare.⁴⁵ However, at the turn of the century, at the beginning of the modernist revolution, it was used widely as a synonym for "todayness" referring both to contemporary issues, as well as the most recent.

In addition to the primary and common to most languages meaning of the adjective *modern* (*modern*, *moderne*, *moderno*) as a synonym for something "today," "new" and "recent," there are also similar, though slightly different meanings. Understanding modernity as addressing the problems of the present and the challenges of the future exists in German, while in Romance languages (French and Spanish) it is also linked to following modern habits and tastes (fashion).

Regardless of how the meaning of the word "modern" is understood, this concept is generally associated positively, probably due to the rapid development of all kinds of technology and its dominance in everyday life. Against this background, one of the meanings of the word in Polish is quite problematic. Presently, "modern" if used as an adjective in relation to people/humans (sic) can mean "progressive" or "not-backward."⁴⁶ The appearance of this meaning must have taken place not earlier than in the 1920s, since in the Warsaw Dictionary from 1902–1927, "modern" means simply "present" or "contemporary." On the one hand, it is the meaning of the original Latin source, on the other hand – a copy from the German language (*neuzeitlich* = new + time).⁴⁷ This obvious ideologization stemmed from the aforementioned identification of change (novelty/newness) with progress and was the result of the politicization of the Polish language after World War II. With such a modernist approach, someone who follows all changes, follows fashion, has newer and newer views and

⁴⁴ This applies not only to Romance, Germanic and Baltic languages, but also to Czech, Serbo-Croat, Bulgarian, Basque, Hungarian, Finnish and Turkish. The exceptions are some Slavic (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian) and Celtic languages (Irish, Scottish, Breton).

⁴⁵ "They say, miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless". (Shakespeare W., *All's Well That Ends Well*, 2.3.1–6). However, at the beginning of the 19th century, such a meaning of the adjective "modern" had been already considered obsolete, which is confirmed by Webster's first dictionary from 1828. Interestingly, the verb "modern" is still used in German as a synonym of spoilage and rotting.

⁴⁶ *Słownik języka polskiego* [ed. J. Doroszewski], vol. 5, PWN, Warszawa 1963, p. 377.

⁴⁷ *Słownik języka polskiego* [ed. J. Karłowicz, A. Kryński, W. Niedźwiedzki], vol. 3, Kasa im. Miąnowskiego, Warszawa 1904, p. 417.

methods of action, must also be progressive, ergo: is a better man. However, as it has already been stated, such a view has the character of an ordinary, illegitimate opinion and shall not determine the language of the architectural discourse.

The pioneers of modernism: Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies van de Rohe used the term “modern” as a synonym for “contemporary,” “present” and “novelty, which looks to the future.” Moreover, some of them verbally rejected the term “international style” on the grounds that architecture should be “modern,” that is based on the values of the “present” era.⁴⁸ However, as Ragon once rightly pointed out, in this sense, all styles were once “modern.”⁴⁹

In the historiography of architecture at the turn of the 20th century, Art Deco and architecture referring to regionalism or national heritage are mostly considered a “regression.”⁵⁰ Despite many critical studies, among which the works of Przemysław Trzeciak stand out, there is still a narrative that widely depicts modernism as the “end of history,” the culmination of the eternal process of the evolution of architecture.⁵¹ All the more, the notions of *modern architecture* and *modernist architecture* should be clearly and definitely separated.

While the currently common identification of modernization in technology, communication or production with modernity per se can be considered reasonable, it is not sufficient in fields of art and architecture. If *modern architecture* is supposed to mean “architecture appropriate to new times,” i.e. adapted to the needs of the present day, then it cannot be limited only to just one style or attitude derived from modernism.⁵² Even if *modernity* were to be synonymous with *progress*, which would be a logical, semantic and substantive error, this term is also not suitable for modernism. This is because its claims on a monopoly on progressiveness are unfounded or, at the very least, questionable.

However, most importantly, both the first and the second meaning of *modernity* can never be related to architectural form. For a circle does not meet the needs of the present day better than a triangle, and a cube is no more progressive than a sphere.

Architecture can be *modern* through the use of *modern* (latest) *technologies*, as long as they serve contemporary needs well. However, in this sense, a properly refurbished and equipped with cutting-edge technology historic building must be also considered “modern,” even if it comes from the 16th or 17th century.

If the concept of *modern architecture* is simply to mean *new* and *present architecture*, then such a term in relation to modernism was correct, but only at its inception. It is difficult to consider as “new and present” only the one style, ideologically derived from historical concepts from a century ago.⁵³ Today, new forms are also those that refer to a canon of architecture other than the modernist one. After all, it was Gropius himself who noticed that the rise of the “modernist style” (*Bauhaus Stil*) would be the admission of failure and the return to stagnation.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ W. Gropius, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ A.K. Olszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁵¹ In the same way, the communist revolution was to be the ultimate goal and culmination of the process of social development. Vide: J.S. Curl, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34.

⁵² L. Krier, *The Architecture of Community*, Island Press, Washington 2011, pp. 65–75.

⁵³ The problem of modernity in architecture earlier than modernism (e.g. eclecticism) has been lately analyzed by Tarnowski. Vide: J. Tarnowski, *Uwagi o stosunku do tradycji w architekturze i jej estetyce*, Sensus Historiae, 2018, no. 4, pp. 242–246.

⁵⁴ W. Gropius, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

To sum up, identifying modernist architecture or architecture ideologically derived from modernism with positively perceived modernity is both wrong and unfair. Firstly, because most of such architecture today is neither ideologically new nor innovative. Secondly, due to the fact that there is a contemporary architecture designed in opposition to modernism, the architecture which in a creative way continues the vernacular, regional and classical traditions. And thirdly, because the challenges of the new times can be met by any type of architecture, regardless of its form and method of reference to the past.

4. RECAPITULATION

Was modernism a deception then? Certainly not, but over time, its followers appropriated certain concepts, claiming the right to the representation of progress and a monopoly on modernity.

Modernism, as Andrzej Olszewski once rightly pointed out in the title of his dissertation, undoubtedly popularized completely new forms in architecture. At that time, these forms were also modern to some extent, just as, to a limited extent, some of modernist postulates were progressive, too. Nevertheless, identifying modernism with progress in architecture is unfounded. Although today the so-called “modern forms” largely displaced architecture based on the pre-modernist tradition, but they never completely eliminated it. New Classicism and vernacular architecture, which refers to the heritage of various cultures, are developing in parallel to the derived from modernism, mainstream contemporary architecture.

Returning to the main thesis of the article, one can venture a statement that the category of development / progress / regression should not be used in the discourse without defining what we expect from architecture. As a field of art, it has never been subject of development over time, because one cannot judge, for example, about the preponderance of classical or modernist forms over the Gothic ones. On the other hand, technological progress undoubtedly influenced its quality and ability to meet the goals it should serve. Simply put, architecture is changing, not necessarily developing.

In light of the presented arguments, it is also necessary to consider the use of the terms “modern” and “modernity” in describing contemporary architecture due to their different meanings. The first meaning refers to “nowadays”, the second to “novelty” but the third defines modernity *de facto* as the opposite of tradition (a synonym for progressiveness), which is the result of its ideological appropriation by Modernism. However, all meanings of modernity now have a positive tone as a synonym for something better, because it’s “new,” so their usage introduces a certain semantic chaos. Whereas, a precise and neutral language, not expressions *permeated* with ideological prejudices, should be used to describe architecture.

It seems that the best solution would be using the adjective *modern* in its original, neutral sense as a synonym for “the present times” and “responding to the challenges of the new times.” Alternatively, “modern architecture” can also pertain to “most recent,” i.e. the use of cutting-edge technologies. However, in this sense, architecture which refers to older forms than Modernism can also be considered a modern one. For the sake of clarity, it would be enough to distinguish between the concepts of “modernist” and “modern” architecture, or use the term “contemporary architecture” more broadly as a synonym of the architecture of nowadays.

Modernism’s claims to the monopoly on modernity, progressiveness and functionalism were undermined already in the mid-twentieth century, but the final arguments in

this dispute seem to be the ongoing climate changes and other challenges of the present day. The hard-to-adapt and unsustainable architecture, based solely on mass, centralized production and energy-consuming technologies, is not able to cope with these problems. Therefore, modern architecture, understood as the answer to the challenges of the changing times, should be durable, efficient and adaptable to the changing needs. So, it should use natural materials, be as independent as possible from energy supplies and, last but not least, be based on time-tested (i.e. truly traditional) formal and functional solutions. Contemporary architecture should finally free itself from the permanent anxiety, constant experimentation and “craving for new things,” which characterized the modernist attitude. Instead, it should focus on the pursuit of perfect fulfillment of its various functions. This fundamental endeavor should “justify the means”, so, beyond making free use of the latest technologies, should also reject the lingering prejudices including the very worst, that it is impossible/inappropriate to creatively continue and expand on traditional architectural forms in the contemporary world.



- III. 1. Newark (England), The Old White Hart Inn, ~ 1470. “Ribbon windows,” i.e. horizontally shaped window openings. Source: Lisa Kramer ©.
- III. 2. Gdansk (Poland), The Golden House, 1609-1618. (Author: Abraham van den Blocke). An example of the so-called “free facade”. The structure where ceilings are supported just on partition (border) walls enables glazing of almost 70-80% of the façade. Source: Michał Domińczak ©.



III. 3. Gdańsk (Poland), The Green Gate, 1564-1568. (Author: Hans Kramer). An example of a building erected on columns, where the ground floor space is “free” and available for external use. Source: Creative Commons.



III. 4. Buffalo NY (USA). Prudential Guaranty Building, 1895-1896. The crowning cornice. (Author: Louis H. Sullivan & Dankmar Adler). The example which confirms that the author of the statement “form follows function” perceived both functionalism and decoration in architecture differently than the modernists. Source: Michał Domińczak ©.



Ill. 5. Coral Gables FL (USA). University of Miami, School of Architecture: top picture – Jorge M. Perez Architecture Center, 2004-2005 (Autor: Leon Krier& Scott Merrill). Source: Michał Domińczak ©; bottom picture – Thomas P. Murphy Design Studio Building, 2014-2016 (Autor: Arquitectonica) Source: Robin Hill - Arquitectonica ©. Two contemporary, adjacent university buildings. Each of them, although representing a different style, is a modern building in all meanings of this notion. They were built in recent times, represent new forms, use the latest technologies and meet the needs of the nowadays.

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