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THE MYTH OF THE VITRUVIAN TRIAD IN TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

MIT WITRUWIAŃSKIEJ TRIADY W ARCHITEKTURZE TYMCZASOWEJ

Abstract

In recent years, temporary architecture has been gaining popularity. Once treated inferiorly, today an opportunity for architects to present their artistic manifesto and experiment with new solutions. Utility, durability and beauty – three main values that, according to Vitruvius, characterize an architectural mass, are related to timelessness in the perception of the essence of shaping the form and space of a building. Are they still valid in the context of temporary object, which by definition functions only in a short period of time and according to different principles than a classical building? The purpose of the paper was the interpretation of temporary architecture in relation to the Vitruvian triad.

Keywords: temporary architecture, Vitruvian triad

Streszczenie

W ostatnich latach architektura tymczasowa zyskuje na popularności. Kiedyś traktowana podrzędnie, dziś stała się okazją dla architekta do prezentacji swojego manifestu artystycznego i eksperymentowania z nowymi rozwiązaniami. Użyteczność, trwałość i piękno – trzy główne wartości, które według Witruwiusza charakteryzują architektoniczną bryłę z założenia dotyczą ponadczasowości w odbiorze istoty kształtowania formy i przestrzeni budowli. Czy pozostają aktualne w kontekście obiektu tymczasowego, który funkcjonuje jedynie w krótkim okresie i na innych zasadach niż klasyczny budynek? Przedmiotem badań była interpretacja architektury tymczasowej w odniesieniu do witruwiańskiej triady.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura tymczasowa, witruwiańska triada

1. THE MYTH OF VITRUVIUS IN THE MODERN WORLD

According to the idea of Vitruvius, architecture is based upon three key principles: durability, utility, and beauty. The tractate under the title *De architectura libri decem* (The Ten Books on Architecture), written by the Roman architect at the end of the 1st century B.C., has formulated the most crucial rules, that throughout the ages has served many generations as indications and important points of reference.

Nowadays, in the modern discourse regarding architecture, Vitruvius's masterpiece might seem devalued in numerous aspects, despite being indisputably crucial. One should consider the question of whether the impressive edifices from the past should have survived centuries? Especially, considering the fact that now a few years is enough for them to lose both their utility values as well as the general aesthetics?

The simplest way in which our times can be characterized is through the fact that everything undergoes constant changes. Sigmund Bauman, a well-known Polish sociologist, philosopher, creator in conventions of postmodernism and liquid modernity, introduced a vivid set of characteristics of consumer society, near the end of the 1980s.

One of the phenomena strongly emphasized by the philosopher in consumer society is the ever-present adoration of transiency and the contempt towards permanence. Bauman points out that the short-lived products are beneficial for the system because they are soon to be replaced and their exchange will enhance the market turnover and increase consumption.¹ This observation applies to electronics to a great extent, because due to the incredibly fast development in that area in a short period, many devices quickly become outdated. A similar phenomenon appears when it comes to architecture. Particularly, if we consider society's way of functioning, people's lifestyle, and work ethic.

The short-lived architecture is often the one found in big cities, where one can visibly notice the infrastructure getting old much quicker, without any new architecture being added to the picture. Currently, one of the cases being considered is the issue of the Solpol² department store, which might need to be demolished. This building stands as the icon of postmodernist Wrocław, which still evokes controversies with its bold aesthetics. The idea of demolition, however, is not a matter of beauty, its lack, or even durability. The technical state of the building is fully acceptable, yet due to the functional aspects and economic analysis of the owner, who has a chance to replace this building with a better functioning establishment, the possible demolition is being considered.

The key question that appears is whether the changes in architecture should be considered a rule and the buildings ought to be designed flexibly or meant to be temporary. Nowadays, architecture is mainly affected by economic factors, which in the times of Vitruvius were not an important matter. The investment should not only be durable or visibly outstanding but more importantly, it ought to be effective – it should bring the owner the expected benefits. At this point, Vitruvius' idea of beauty undergoes verification from the perspective of dynamically changing fashion, and as a result, might be considered troublesome and unnecessarily expensive.

The temporary architecture fits into this discussion intriguingly. According to its time of durability, which is estimated from the very beginning, one can look at the meaning of durability, utility, and beauty of architecture from a broader, more general perspective.

2. IN DISCUSSION WITH VITRUVIUS

By presenting his great masterpiece, Vitruvius touched on multiple issues regarding not only the attempt to describe how the designing process should look like or the general

¹ Ł. Iwański, *Spółeczeństwo konsumpcyjne w ujęciu Zygmunta Baumana*, Kultura i Społeczeństwo, no. 59(4), p. 11.

² Solpol Department Store – postmodern building designed by Studio Ar-5 arch. Wojciech Jarząbek, built in 1993 in Wrocław, originally used as a department store, nowadays mostly unused. The building was distinguished by its modernity as compared to other commercial buildings. Since its construction, it has been one of the most discussed and controversial Polish architectural projects due to the form and bright colors of the facade and its direct location next to a historic Gothic church. Source: Dom towarowy Solpol [in:] Wikipedia, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dom_towarowy_Solpol (access: 30.06.2020).

appearance of the building but also what is the role of an architect and what this profession is all about.

Vitruvius made a statement in that area, claiming that an architect ought to be a talented and eager-to-learn individual. Their knowledge should reach as far as possible; they should be just and honest in their work. An architect must not be conceited or greedy – emphasizes Vitruvius, connecting the role of an architect with an idea of a highly-respected profession, morality, and ethics.³

Analyzing the masterpiece of Vitruvius in the context of modern architecture, Przemysław Bigaj states that the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries resulted in multiple architectural masterpieces, free from the limitations of style, conventions, or any other common ideas deriving from one of the ruling theories. One should not expect a modern designer or architect not to seek new solutions and to remain in a frame of classical architecture that is now considered outdated. In his book regarding the proper architectural form, Vitruvius pays attention specifically to the matter of composition and the cohesion of a given solid, emphasizing the role of symmetry, which nowadays is not considered truly important. Many modern architects claim that asymmetry brings more freedom for designing. Along with those claims, Vitruvius stated that the ideas of durability, utility, and beauty should exist in cohesion to one another, creating a general idea of a piece of architecture. With time the idea of interdependence of those elements began to seem overvalued. The following styles approached the idea of beauty in numerous different ways, treating it more as a secondary matter. The difference also appeared when it comes to the idea of functionality.⁴

The art of architecture is a skill that relies on the knowledge of certain rules and cannot exist without them. That is why the Roman architect found mathematics, astrophysics, philosophy, history, and music exceptionally important for his work. To achieve a perfect symmetry, one should estimate specific proportions, resulting from the numerical ratio of the building's basic measurements and its elements. Vitruvius emphasized the objective idea of beauty, yet also claimed that derogations from it are necessary for the sake of subjective view on the given piece of architecture. If the symmetry does not give the impression of eurhythmia, it needs to be changed to give that result – notices Magdalena Koziń-Woźniak in her analysis of the meaning of eurhythmia.⁵

Analyzing the modern meaning of the Vitruvian triad in the context of new buildings, Marek Lisowski notices that beauty, considering the idea of ever-changing taste for aesthetics, cannot be judged in one specific way. The same phenomenon applies to utility and durability, which can be considered timeless. The opinion on durability is always positive. It derives from the necessity of having the building last for a certain period and it is crucial for the sake of users' safety – claims Lisowski. Utility and expediency are non-questionable as well. As the translation of the Latin *utilitas* suggests, it happens due to the fact that buildings are being created according to specific customer orders and their preferences must be a priority to the architect.

³ Vitruvius, *O architekturze ksiąg dziesięć*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1956, p. 12.

⁴ P. Bigaj, *Ponadczasowość teorii Witruwiusza w kontekście współczesnej architektury*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, pp. 176–177.

⁵ M. Koziń-Woźniak, *W poszukiwaniu eurytmii*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, p. 606.

A different matter appears when considering the extension of Vitruvius' idea of beauty. Its *oridnatio*, *dispositio*, *eurythmia*, *decor*, and *distributio* are considered a pattern that is too simplistic for modern architecture. Nowadays, the idea of beauty depends on one's approach to it, one's sensitivity, and the general taste of the creator. In modern architecture, the context of a building is especially important and the renouncement from it seems impossible. Particularly, when besides the obvious – the localization – there exist other factors, such as the tradition of a given place, the acoustics, inertia, or geology.⁶

According to Marek Początko, the durability of modern buildings is a myth. It happens due to ideological factors because many establishments are supposed to function only in a particular time frame. The constant changes in functioning contribute to the creation of buildings that can be easily reformed, modified, and adapt to the current needs of users. The aspect of durability itself is no longer a priority these days. It is possible that for Vitruvius the idea of durability was strongly connected to the monumentality of architecture. In his time, such an approach resulted from the concept of national and societal identity, making the durability of a building not only a technical aspect but a more significant matter.⁷

The fact that the discussion regarding the Vitruvian triad is still a significant matter, indicates that his ideas remain crucial for the next generations of architects and researchers. The constantly appearing buildings, whose designs are based on Vitruvius' rules are proof that supports that statement.

3. IN DISCUSSION WITH TEMPORALITY

The approach to temporary buildings has significantly changed in the last few years. Ranging from boxes – treated very pejoratively and often considered tacky – through neutrally aesthetic buildings mainly meant for the functioning of the given system, to intriguing and innovative constructions often resembling a piece of art.

Temporary architecture, being (as suggested) meant to last only for a given period, has a chance to be a solution for fulfilling the most recent human needs, and might work well in a given place and time.

Constructive issues are considered the most important when it comes to creating works of temporary architecture. They are based on the principles of fast montage and disassembly, or the possibility of transporting a given establishment. Having those features in mind, three groups of buildings have been characterized: mobile, movable, and removable. Moreover, the concepts of “pop-up” have been introduced in that area of architecture.

The biggest group among those mentioned above is the one that regards mobile objects. Their priority is the possibility of transporting them comfortably. A truly important issue in this aspect is the way, in which they can be transported. Those mobile buildings are mostly driving elements, that can move by themselves or be moved by other vehicles. In this concept,

⁶ M. Lisowski, *Teoria Witruwiusza – próba ocena dzieła architektonicznego w kontekście jej zapisów i niedoskonałości*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, pp. 368–369.

⁷ M. Początko, *Trwałość w architekturze współczesnej*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, p. 463.

the line between an architectural object and a vehicle is quite fluid. Another group considers movable objects that can be transported in parts. Apart from the possibility of comfortable transportation, how the construction can be undone is also crucial. The third group is the one that considers objects, that can be disassembled – those treated as the most flexible ones, that often are made as single constructions.⁸

The temporary objects, built on a small scale, are called “pop-ups.” The name derives from the function of WWW pages, which allows a new window to be automatically open in a browser. This function is associated with architectural objects that appear equally quickly in a given space. Very often those are objects characterized by bold and unique design, promoting new materials and technical solutions.

Another concept, besides construction, that is characteristic for temporary architecture is being “flexible.”

Flexibility is also a domain of modern architecture in general because it derives from the constant need for change mentioned before. Flexibility means being susceptible to changes. How society functions often changes our ways of living, working, eating, relaxing change. That is why architecture must adapt to society’s progress. In this area, architecture became a matter of consumption. Objects meant for daily usage are getting worn out much faster, yet, on the other hand, they are much easier to be replaced, without the need to demolish certain buildings. Flexibility is important not only in the aspect of functioning but also in terms of structure and form modification.⁹ This attribute can be specifically observed when it comes to a temporary building, that at the start fulfills all of the user’s needs. However, with time, when the particular function is no longer needed, the building is easy to be disassembled or modified.

4. VITRUVIUS AND TEMPORALITY

Temporary constructions offer a broad range of smaller and bigger buildings that, considering the moment of its emergence, appear as a memory record of a particular period for architecture. They display different styles, various approaches to the concepts of functionality and form, and in the end, they refer to the Vitruvian triad. Despite the impossibility to argue when comes to the functional aspect of temporary architecture, its expediency and utility are a discussable matter, with the possibility of creating a flexible project as their enormous advantage. Despite the lack of durability, very often those are solid and thoughtfully made constructions. Being temporary is something embedded into the concept of those projects, not a matter of the architect’s neglect.

Temporary architecture gives one a great range of possibilities to take their research and designs much further, along with a chance to evaluate the needs of the client and what the designer wants to achieve.

For a modern creator the idea of beauty is not as obvious as it used to be for Vitruvius, who could openly claim that: “for the eye is always in search of beauty, and if we do not

⁸ R. Kronenburg, *Architecture in Motion: The history and development of portable building*, Routledge, London 2013, pp. 7–8.

⁹ W. Gilewicz, *Poza użytecznością*. Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, p. 269.

gratify its desire for pleasure by a proportionate enlargement in these measures, and thus make compensation for ocular deception, a clumsy and awkward appearance will be presented to the beholder.”¹⁰

4.1. CINEROLEUM

Some of the most interesting works of temporary architecture are strongly connected to culture and arts. This association tends to give the designers a broad range of artistic possibilities. When it comes to the visual aspect only, utility is treated unconventionally. The approach to the spectacle and the aesthetics has changed tremendously throughout the years. In this area, the introduction of temporary objects is a great solution, because this type of architecture can offer individual, customized, and multifunctional solutions.

One of the most interesting design studios, experimenting in the areas of utility and form is the London-based collective “Assemble.” Their works are based on a complex creative process and an intense search for new inspiring ideas for architectural designs. One of the examples is their project from 2010 – the adaptation of a petrol station in Clerkenwell.



III. 1. Cineroleum, source: The Cineroleum 2010 [in:] Assemble, <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/the-cineroleum> (access: 30.06.2020).

“Cineroleum” is a combination of words “cinema” and “petroleum.” As the name suggests, the project is based on the idea of transforming the former petrol station into a performance hall meant for general entertainment. This project was a part of the discussion regarding the rising number of abandoned buildings in Great Britain. Before such establishments are demolished or built up, they can be given a new function thanks to the means of temporary architecture. The implementation of the entertainment function into the case of

¹⁰ Vitruvius, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

the abandoned petrol station was a chance to vividly and boldly introduce an alternative for such places, similar to the creation of shopping centers in similar areas.

In this concept of the Assembly Studio, the already existing cubature with a cash register has been used as a foyer, and the roof of the station became the roof over the place for the audience. One of the most characteristic elements of that idea has been the curtain wall, dividing the seats. The viewers were invited behind the curtain to later be set free into reality – theatre of everyday life after the show is over and the curtain rises.

During this transformation project, multiple recycle materials have been used, along with furniture from the rental office. All of the construction and finishing elements were made by the collective workers themselves. The designers wanted the interior design to look sophisticated, despite being created out of cheap materials. This approach is a vivid reinterpretation of the idea of beauty, which is usually associated with quality and general attractiveness.¹¹

The projects of the Assemble Studio are a great example of an interesting discourse with Vitruvian expediency – a claim that a great concept might positively influence the given space and the local society. Most of the Assembly Studio projects appear in the urban areas, aiming at neglected places that can be given a new function and meaning.

4.2. IMPLANT

Temporary architecture aiming at the use of containers quickly became popular due to the accessibility of the materials. The objects used in that area are no longer typical storage containers. One can easily find companies that adjust the containers to be used by designers, transforming and modifying them.

In Warsaw, near Chmielna Street, there is another temporary facility being built. It will offer space for gastronomy, commerce, and the organization of cultural and entertainment events. The concept appeared under the name “Implant,” being designed by Jakub Szczęsny, Karolina Potębska and Ryszard Szczęsny in 2018.

The entire project is being created around the idea of collecting 300 container modules and transforming them into a five-story town with a special social area with passages of boutiques. This way, the planned arrangement would fill in a quarter of the given area, still resembling the standard building in terms of size and space.

An important element of this project is the association with the principles of sustainable development. The consideration for the environment is no longer an addition to the new project, but a necessity. The area of temporary architecture is no exception. It has a chance to become a form of an ecological manifesto, bringing people’s attention to the fact that by building new facilities, we irreversibly affect the environment.

The designers of the “Implant” suggested that some of the container walls should be painted with smog-neutralizing paint, while others could be covered with vertically growing plants. The ecological approach to this project also included heat pumps, retention reservoirs, photovoltaic installations, and electro-mobility. Moreover, the project matches the idea of “city farms,” introducing vegetable gardens and “aquaponics” – a system for fish farming and planting vegetables.¹²

¹¹ The Cineroleum 2010 [in:] Assemble, <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/the-cineroleum> (access: 30.06.2020).

¹² Implant [in:] SZCZ, http://www.szcz.com.pl/portfolio_page/implant/ (access: 30.06.2020).



III. 2. *Implant*, source: Implant [in:] SZCZ, http://www.szcz.com.pl/portfolio_page/implant/ (access: 30.06.2020).

The long-term facility is planned to be built in that area because the building areas in the city are too valuable to stay empty. The “Implant,” as the name suggests, is supposed to fill the “gap” in the city for a given time. Therefore, it can be called a way of bringing the city to life, making the inhabited or unused areas active.

4.3. DEVEBERE

A great example of a reference to the Vitruvian idea of longevity is the “Devebere” project from 2012, presented by Maciej Siuda and Rodrigo García González during the thirteenth edition of Architecture Biennale in Venice – so-called Air Pavilion.



III. 3. *Devebere*, source: *Devebere – pawilon z powietrza na Biennale Architektury w Wenecji* [in:] Architektura-murator, <https://architektura.muratorplus.pl/innowacje-w-architekturze/projekt/163/> (access: 30.06.2020).

Its biomorphic form has been achieved thanks to the process of air suctioning. The air was sucked from a balloon full of bottles. As a result, there appeared a void-like space that gave a solid foundation to the object, increasing its load-bearing properties and making it more adjustable at the same time.

In Venice, the pavilion attracted many viewers and was often used for cultural purposes both for special occasions and on a daily basis. Gradually, it underwent a natural degradation process and, in the end, has been recycled.

We often blindly believe that architecture is supposed to last forever – claims Maciej Siuda. Even the buildings made out of long-lasting materials start to deteriorate after 30 or 40 years. Time is always somehow embedded into architecture.¹³

4.4. THE HILL HOUSE

One of the boldest examples of experiments with the idea of beauty in temporary architecture is the work of Carmody Groarke Studio, called The Hill House. It was made to order for the National Trust for Scotland. The project was built around the idea of creating a protective casing that would secure the renovation of the historical facility – the house of Walter Blackie, made by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the leading representative of the Arts and Crafts movement.



Ill. 4. *The Hill House*, source: Carmody Groarke, The Hill House Box [in:] Divisare, <https://divisare.com/projects/418365-carmody-groarke-johan-dehlin-the-hill-house-box> (access: 30.06.2020).

The conservation is supposed to last for about 15 years, while the museum established in the building would be functioning without changes. The studio has also offered to create a so-called “big box” made out of scaffoldings, in which the house would be enclosed.

¹³ *W architekturze najciekawsze są niuanse*, wywiad z Maciejem Siudą [in:] Strefa Designu Uniwersytetu SWPS, <https://www.swps.pl/strefa-designu/blog/19866-maciej-siuda-w-architekturze-na-jciekawsze-sa-niuanse> (access: 30.06.2020).

A perforated mesh lining would partially cover the elevation and protect it from atmospheric conditions, however, it would not allow the walls to dry naturally. The footbridges placed around the building would enhance the working process and could also be an additional attraction for those, visiting the building. The achieved effect can be associated with numerous modern projects of other museums, where using perforated linings is very often used by various architects.¹⁴

The original house stands as an undeniable example of architecture made following the Vitruvian idea of beauty. However, what the Carmody Groarke Studio has created is a kind of a dialogue between the present and the past, in which modern ways of expression are used. It's an act of covering an ornament with the means of minimalism. There is a place both for respecting the history and the attempt to create a new identity of what is new – what belongs to the modern days and numerous worldview, technological and economic changes.

5. DISCUSSION

Despite the centuries that have passed since the works of Vitruvius were created, the strength and clarity of the values that he presented are still valid. The fact that those qualities are often being questioned does not make the Vitruvian masterpieces less important. It is a sign of changing times and the quick pace, that makes every element of life transform rapidly.

The idea of durability expected by Vitruvius and understood as the timelessness of architecture is not a wrong statement. One can notice that one of the most significant advantages that most cities have is the presence of historical buildings. Numerous churches or institution facilities have undeniable aesthetic value and are still in use. On the other hand, the quality of architecture changes. Although it allows for keeping the general standards high, the approach of the investors has changed significantly.

A perfect example for that case are apartment blocks (limited to a life of 30 years) made of so-called “big prefabricated boards.” They are the effect of “prefabrication,” which was supposed to lower the architectural expenses in Poland in the 1970s. This solution was then considered to be temporary, yet in the end, the buildings remained and last to this day. There exists, however, a tendency for cost-saving construction, that represents a lower level of precision when it comes to contemporary housing architecture.

The durability and temporariness of architecture are also an element of discussion, concerning the ideas of sustainable development. When it comes to design, the fact that the product can be made in a way that allows it to last for a long time is strongly appreciated. Especially, when considering the process of overproduction as a result of disturbingly increasing consumption in society. Facing the challenge in architecture is much harder in practice than in theory. It brings one to the question of whether it is better to build solid and long-lasting objects or to create a flexible project that could be easily modified in the future.

It is hard to imagine Vitruvius considering aspects such as the second life of a material. However, for modern architects recycling is no longer a matter of fashion, but one of the most important elements of design. The usage of recyclable materials translates to the limiting of the negative impact architecture has on the environment. A similar result comes from

¹⁴ Carmody Groarke, The Hill House Box [in:] Divisare, <https://divisare.com/projects/418365-carmody-groarke-johan-dehlin-the-hill-house-box> (access: 30.06.2020).

building facilities out of materials that can be reused in the future. It allows for more thoughtful waste management and leads to long-term savings. Numerous temporary projects use the benefits of recycling, without hiding the fact that the materials come from reusable sources. The constructions often expose this side of the given project, showing defects or shortcomings. It is, again, another approach to the discussion regarding the Vitruvian vision of beauty.

The idea of “beauty” has become multi-dimensional throughout the centuries and it is now a much broader concept than the one represented by Vitruvius – the reference to the elements of composition, cohesion, or the emphasis of solid’s symmetry. An example of the modern approach to beauty could be the trend of exposing the technical side of a building or installation. This type of approach, which one can call industrial or brutalist, cannot be straightforwardly judged as inappropriate, wrong, or simply ugly.

Temporary architecture’s popularity and the expansion of its meaning come from its potential to surprise the audience and to introduce new solutions to the given area. This type of architecture seems like an antidote to the boredom that users feel after years of being surrounded by classical architecture, which unfortunately is rather characterized by its seriousness and strict form. In contrast, a temporary project can be a great solution for the modern audience, attracting people with its slightly unrealistic, futuristic visuals, together with a unique approach to its form. Such projects are often a great chance for the designer to test certain solutions and materials, that can be further improved and used in the future. For the recipient, temporary architecture can be an intriguing and unique experience.

One can easily observe that places such as urban gardens or small pavilions are getting more and more popular. They are much closer to the idea of open artistic space rather than to the traditional gastronomical spots. However, they still offer similar services, while doing it differently. The architect of such a temporary project has a great chance to experiment, knowing that there is already an estimated time, for which their building will last. In such cases, durability becomes a secondary value, with utility also being a matter of compromise. In the end, the project does not need to follow the principles of the classical idea of beauty either.

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