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THE NEED FOR A MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY SACRED ARCHITECTURE

POTRZEBA MITU WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ARCHITEKTURZE SAKRALNEJ

Abstract

The subject and purpose of the article is to analyze the sources and the need for a mythological world view in contemporary sacred architecture. The rationalist minimization of the means of expression of contemporary temples has led to the simplification of the temple space, which has brought about signs of iconoclasm. The most difficult task of building a temple is to combine in the temple the degree of immutability of God's presence with the degree of fluidity of the human imagination. Sacred architecture has not yet developed the theological and artistic foundations of creativity, which are to say not *what*, but *which* a sacred object should be. The experience of modern sacred architecture of the Western tradition is important for the sacred architecture of the Eastern Christian tradition, primarily due to the universality and unity of solving problems of sacred creativity and art.

Keywords: post-modern temple, Orthodox church architecture, Christian architecture, post-Soviet society, faith and religion in post-Soviet countries

Streszczenie

Tematem i celem artykułu jest analiza źródeł i potrzeby mitologicznego światopoglądu we współczesnej architekturze sakralnej. Racjonalistyczna minimalizacja środków wyrazu współczesnych świątyń doprowadziła do uproszczenia przestrzeni świątynnej, co przyniosło oznaki ikonoklazmu. Najtrudniejszym zadaniem budowania świątyni jest połączenie w niej stopnia niezmienności Bożej obecności ze stopniem płynności ludzkiej wyobraźni. Architektura sakralna nie wykształciła jeszcze teologicznych i artystycznych podstaw twórczości, które mają powiedzieć nie czym, ale jaki powinien być obiekt sakralny. Doświadczenie nowoczesnej architektury sakralnej tradycji zachodniej jest ważne dla architektury sakralnej tradycji chrześcijaństwa wschodniego, przede wszystkim ze względu na powszechność i jedność rozwiązywania problemów twórczości sakralnej i sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: ponowoczesna świątynia, architektura cerkiewna, chrześcijańska architektura, społeczeństwo postsowieckie, wiara i religia w krajach postsowieckich

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, there have been discussions on sacred architecture between architects of Poland and Ukraine that reflected the broader horizons of the Western and Eastern

worldviews in this field. These discussions revealed not only the formal features of Western and Eastern branches of Christian architecture, but also led to an understanding of the source of creativity in the field of sacred architecture, regardless of the differences between Western and Eastern rites and rituals.

The historical difference between these two sides in the 20th century was the relative tolerance of the Polish Communist government towards faith and the violent atheisation during this period in Ukraine.

Although relatively few, a number of significant churches have been erected in Poland, especially in Krakow, since the 1970s. We remember that Pope John Paul II played a major role in the restoration of human spiritual freedom in the 20th century on a global scale. Polish architecture as a whole developed in line with the world's great trends – modernism, postmodernism, minimalism and further architecture tendencies. At the same time, the communist period in Ukraine meant not only the destruction of over 10,000 churches, but also the upbringing of several generations for whom the church and faith played no significant role in their lives. Also, secular Ukrainian architecture had been developed under the doctrine of Soviet architecture, with its domination of pragmatic and simplistic social objectives, where the category of sacred buildings simply did not exist. This means that the initial positions of Polish and Ukrainian ecclesiastical architecture differed significantly, especially if considered not only on a spiritual level, but also as objects of creativity and art.

The subject and purpose of this article is the analysis of sources and needs of the mythological world view in contemporary sacred architecture.

2. THE BODY / *CORPUS*

After regaining independence in Ukraine, there was an 'explosion' of temple construction. On 1st January, 2019, the number of denominations in Ukraine reached over 100, gathering 35,162 religious organisations or institutions (32,619 priests, 918 foreigners), 531 monasteries (6,794 monks and nuns), 368 missions, 83 brotherhoods, 136 universities and 68 secondary schools, including 7,939 full-time and 9,947 part-time students, 16 secondary schools and 13,195 Sunday schools and media: 341 printed, 122 audio-visual and 167 electronic. The dominant denominations there are Orthodoxy and Greek Catholicism. On 1st January, 2018, there were 29,533 religious buildings of various denominations in Ukraine, of which 3,969 are architectural monuments. 5,880 religious objects were returned to parishes of various denominations after 1991; also 8,178 buildings were erected. Another 11,682 are rooms that were adapted for prayer (places of worship). Even with such a scale of temple construction, the parishes provisioning in religious buildings and adapted premises is at level of 84%, while religious buildings, excluding adapted premises is only 51%.¹ This indicates that the process of churches construction in Ukraine is to be continued for many years.

¹ Релігійні організації в Україні (станом на 1 січня 2019 р.) [Religious organizations in Ukraine (as of January 1, 2019)] [in:] Релігійно-Інформаційна Служба України [Religious Information Service of Ukraine], 17.04.2019, https://risu.ua/religiyni-organizaciji-v-ukrajini-stanom-na-1-sichn-ya-2019-r_p97463 (access: 7.07.2021); Статистика [Statistics] [in:] Релігійно-Інформаційна Служба України [Religious Information Service of Ukraine], https://risu.ua/statistika-cerkov-i-religijnih-organizacij-ukrayini_t4242 (access: 7.07.2021).

What are the problems related to such an explosion of temple construction? First and foremost, the surprise for the designer-architect of the public demand for the design and construction of a huge number of new temples, the restoration to liturgical function of abandoned temples, or these still in use – mostly as warehouses. Also surprising is the growth and broadening of people's religious awareness, and the consequent return of the phenomenon of holiness as the highest value for human.

From an architectural point of view, it turned out that at the sites of destroyed temples new buildings were constructed and in Ukraine, as well as in Poland, the Soviet urban planning doctrine did not provide for temple sites, so there were no places to erect new churches. The isolation of architecture from theology, the historical interruption of the evolutionary development of Ukrainian religious architecture, the haste with which the church and the people needed and built churches, led to the fact that churches were designed and built, often without properly prepared blueprints, by local construction workforces, most of whom were parishioners.

Old, undamaged churches were used as models in designing process of new ones. Therefore, in the first years, the first hundreds of church constructions were actually built as folk architecture, repeating well-known examples. Architects often chose the simplest variants of architectural realisations, which could be constructed with simple, traditional technologies. After all, all this took place in the circumstances after the collapse of the Soviet economy.

It were the parishioners that turned out to be the dominant factor in the designing process, insisting on their vision and image of the temple. These were based on religious but very archaic content, if we take into consideration the appearance and architectural forms of Orthodox churches. The parishioners were hostile to any attempt to change the architecture, usually seeing it as a threat to the construction of the church. They just wanted to start praying in the temple, as it had stopped twice – in 1917 and in 1939 (in Western Ukraine). People, having learnt from the bitter experience of history, hurriedly wanted to build churches, fearing the possibility of the return of communist reality. Hence the origins of the mythology of the process itself, which in its spontaneity resembled the development of Christianity in the first centuries after Christ.

Here we can draw an important partial conclusion. As people perceive the world and understand it in a way that has clear mythological characteristics, this perceptual peculiarity of the viewer might have been exploited by the architect. Moreover, the architect's work itself, based on non-verbal images and irrational feelings inherent in his/her imagination and explorations, has significant mythological features. This plane of mythological world view and world-reconstruction is perhaps the most fundamental basis for agreement between the architect's client – the parish, and the designer – the creator of the image of the future temple.

The above may be confirmed by many examples. From the Ukrainian design experience – having designed three (!) red metal columns with slants, on which the dome of the Chapel of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary² was based, and answering the people's question: *Why the columns are bright red?* (the questioners immediately referred to the red colour, recognizing it as a communist symbol (sic), the author replied that it is the colour of Christ's blood. Immediately all questions and doubts disappeared and the attitude towards the author immediately changed from distrust to acceptance. Parishioners understood that

² Designed by Y. Kryvoruchko, Chapel of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ivano-Frankivsk, 2004.

the strength of an argument is not only information, but above all the power of imagination and the irresistible character of the argument (Ill. 1).

The well-known and controversial church Wotrubakirche, erected by the sculptor Fritz Wotruba on the outskirts of Vienna, was finally accepted by parishioners after more than 50 years. The great popularity among tourists convinced the parishioners of the existence of some ‘incomprehensible power’ in the architectural form of this church, which they accepted only after decades of disapproval and rejection.



- Ill. 1. Chapel of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ivano-Frankivsk, 2004, designed by Y. Kryvoruchko.
- Ill. 2. Chapel of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary at night, Ivano-Frankivsk, 2004, designed by Y. Kryvoruchko.

Christian mythology is usually reduced to medieval mythology. This in turn, according to Walter, *arose precisely on the basis of pagan beliefs that Christianity had to assimilate in order to control them*.³ Mythology has always been very close to folk art, so it naturally operates with simple forms, images and symbols that are easy to decipher and understand. From here it is very close to something that is not accepted by educated classes of society, namely kitsch. The motif of the *Bible pauperum* appearing in Christian churches refers to the medieval tradition of pictorial presentation of theological lectures in the most accessible way for the general public. This tradition has never disappeared – a modern example was the exhibition at the Lord's Ark church in Kraków-Bieńczyce, that consisted of a large painting composition situated at eye level and occupying the internal western wall at the

³ P. Walter, *Mitologia chrześcijańska. Święta. Rytuały i mity średniowiecza*, PAX Publishing House, Warszawa 2006, p. 7.

ground floor. The role of substance, wood and structural concrete in contemporary Catholic churches in Poland is equally important. Wood is this traditional, mythical building material which has been used in sacral architecture for centuries until today. Wood ‘warms up’ atmosphere of church interiors, while concrete gives them a character of power and seriousness of expression. Nonetheless, it is very difficult to convince parishioners to accept the pure forms of construction materials, so sometimes concrete is covered with paint, which changes its impact. Minimalist architectural forms and interiors are not appreciated by parishioners, who prefer more ornate styles.



Ill. 3. Mushroom-shaped concrete pillars supporting a flat ceiling in the church on Gotyk estate in Krakow, intended to expose the concrete, unfortunately finished with the same paint as the walls, designed by B. Podhalański.

From the experience of previous decades, it can be noticed that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was rather interested in the richness of the church image (usually by the widely used gilding of the domes), than the form and quality of its architecture. Although gold has a sacral content when used wherever it is needed and without exaggeration – in excess it strongly contrasts with the often poor surroundings, creating spatial and content dissonances. Thirty years of Ukrainian independence have shown that the Church is still not too concerned about the architecture of its temples. Apart from isolated cases, which concern mainly large cathedrals, no architectural competitions are organized, as the religious communities consider that public money should not be spent on the search for better design variants. Often, after the completion of construction, the parishioners ‘improve’ the completed project by various extensions, form decorations and interior embellishments, which finally results in acquiring distinctive characteristics of kitsch. Such situation is typical in countries where the work of architects is not considered as creative and their opinion is not always taken into account. Kitsch, on the other hand, is the first contribution to mythology, as it reflects the vivid imagination of contemporary people, as mythology has to live, and it has to live in the living heads of people here and now. Precisely the strength of kitsch is its ability to easily reach the depths of human imagination. The point is rather in the

necessity of different systems of mythological thinking to work together: people who order temples and a professional architect – who is responsible for reaching agreement through dialogue, finding common ground. This was the essence of Stanisław Niemczyk's personal conversations regarding the creation of his temples, one erected in Czechowice-Dziedzice and two in Tychy. Such a dialogue between the designer and the client, sometimes lasting for years, helps to educate the client, to develop his understanding of the architectural form to the level of understanding the essence of architectural and artistic creativity. The work of Jerzy Nowosielski and the dramatic history of his masterpieces may serve as a clear example on this topic.

Churches in Poland were also built in a kind of haste, especially in the years of the so-called 'transformation', when the major problem was unreasonable tendency to form opulence in relation to the real needs and economic conditions of parishioners. This caused the vivid contrast in the interiors of the churches, which remained relatively simple or even austere. In most cases one could risk a statement that they are very modest in comparison with Ukrainian churches, devoid of ornaments and art pieces. These situations raise many questions about the sense of art itself, about the limits of people's art needs, about the depth of its permeation and effect on their lives; about the role and place of 'high-end' architecture in the mediocre urban environment.

It is clear that such 'folk architecture' after 1991 was not admired by Ukrainian architects and even much less by western architects. The West successfully built temples in the latest architectural trends, often starting and marking new tendencies with sacral objects by renowned artists, starting with the first reinforced concrete temple by Auguste Perret, followed by projects by Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, Fritz Wotruba, Tadao Ando, Mario Botta, Peter Zumthor and many others; and in Poland by Jerzy Nowosielski, Stanisław Niemczyk or Wojciech Pietrzyk.



III. 4. Timber as construction material that also has aesthetic functions in the interior. Church Żabińiec district in Krakow, designed by B. Podhalański

Unfortunately, varying from conventional architecture, using untraditional construction techniques and technologies, these buildings are sometimes accepted only after a long time by ordinary people as an actual architectural piece, a real object. Such cultural artefacts need further education of the recipient himself, developing a certain level of understanding of the

process of artistic and architectural creation. This is most appropriate in the case of sacred architecture, which leaves no one indifferent – neither parishioners, nor citizens, nor tourists, not to mention architects, artists and creators of culture in general.

3. THE SPIRIT / *SPIRITUS*

The beginning of the revival of faith, followed up by construction of temples, clearly carries the life-giving will of the people, the simple man, to return to traditional values. These traditional values are a way of preserving both national and individual identity. Gaining of independence liberates people in general and man in particular, sets free his/her energy, will to act and faith. All this reduces the meaning of life to a short slogan, a metaphor, an image, and these actually form the basis for myth. It induces a state in which non-rational moods, ideas and actions prevail. All this together liberates the spirit – here is the place and need for poets, leaders, inspirers of spirit and faith. This is the recent reality that Poles have known since the 1980s, but Ukrainians only in the 21st century.

In times of national upsurge, myth is the most common category that concentrates all meanings and impulses. The church, as an instrument of the Spirit, is as correlated as much as possible with the spirit of such transitional time, playing a major role in keeping the spirit in its life-affirming power.

Science points out that the mythological world view as a way of constructing ideas about the world is characteristic not only of archaeological societies or archaic cultures. It is also immanent in the modern human world view and manifests itself as its deep level. Therefore, it is already an established principle that mythological and scientific thinking is considered not only diachronically but also synchronically, as two logical ‘types’ or ‘levels’. Moreover, it is the mythological consciousness that can simultaneously seize objects and ideas that are beyond the reach of rational cognition and scientific knowledge.⁴ The myth in one way confirms and reinforces tradition, and in another – stays in opposition to it. Tradition tends to perpetuate and reinforce world view concepts that are preserved in their tangible (architecture, material culture) and intangible (art, epic, music) forms.

Tradition is *the life* (of the Orthodox Church) *in which each of its members can participate according to his own capacity; to be in Tradition means to take part in the experience of the sacraments revealed to the Church.*⁵ This living tradition is inseparable from the prayer of the Church. That is why dogma and worship, inseparable in the consciousness of the Orthodox Church, are tightly connected.⁶ In the ecumenical Church, the true ‘tradition’ is the sum of traditions.⁷ Tradition (Latin *traditio* – transmission) – the transmission of established opinions, ideas, beliefs, ways of life, tangible and intangible forms of culture for a long time passed from generation to generation. The meaning of sacrum is contained in the tradition of immutability, connected with timelessness – eternity, the immanent transcendence. Tradition is associated with the immutability of certain ideas,

⁴ E.M. Meletinsky, *Поэтика мифа* [*The poetics of myth*], Nauka, Moscow 1976, p. 167.

⁵ V. Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, Aubier, Paris 1944, p. 235.

⁶ V. Lossky, *A l'image de la ressemblance de Dieu*, p. 193, after: T. Szpidlik, *Духовність християнського Сходу. Систематичний виклад* [*Spirituality of the Christian East. Systematic presentation*], LBA Publishing House, Lviv 1999, pp. 17–18.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

cyclical, repetitive development, action, content, forms; creating isolation, a sense of stability. Tradition is self-sufficient and complete, often consecrated and canonised, which makes it impossible to change. In the dynamic worldview of modernity, tradition is often associated with stiffness, obsolescence, old age, lack of progress. Traditional society relies more on a tried-and-tested system of values, being rather distrustful of everything new and unknown, as well as unpredictable threats.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The traditional worldview is characteristic for agricultural cultures with their cyclical way of life, subordinated to the cycles of nature. Immutability is the essence of the tradition of the Sacraments, the Liturgy in Christianity. The strength of tradition, due to the living content of faith, is the key to the growth of the role of the sacred even to fundamentalist tendencies. The solidifying of tradition and growth of formalistic tendencies stiffen the forms of faith, practically reducing sacrum. On the other hand, living faith, meditations, religious sensuality, communicativeness, pilgrimages to places of revelation, common prayers, Christian youth days, which are contemporary forms of expression of faith, contribute to the growth of the role of the sacred in human life. As the traditional character of a society grows, its religiosity may both increase (due to strength of the living, filled with feelings, traditions) and decrease (conservatism).

Myth, despite its canonicity and sanctification by the tradition itself, is always open to interpretation through subjective experience, through the identification of the imaginary and the real, through explanation of the complex by less complex, through grasping the reality in holistic image. If tradition tends towards ritual – a fixed and completed form, myth tends more towards seeing the world in this holistic vivid and living way.

Myth is a way of perceiving the world, and tradition is the form of that perception. So, myth is a concept deeper than tradition, it fills it with content. Therefore, to work in the sphere of the mythological worldview – is to work in the sphere of the Spirit, within Tradition – using the forms and shapes of Tradition, immeasurably interpreting, replicating, and finally – repeating them, bringing traditions to a pattern in the ossified forms.

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