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THE TOWER OF BABEL – BETWEEN ARCHETYPE AND VISION

WIEŻA BABEL – POMIĘDZY ARCHETYPEM A WIZJĄ

Abstract

The subject of the study is the contemporary perception of the myth of the Tower of Babel in visual arts and architecture. The aim of the analysis was to show the relevance and vitality of this myth. The research involved the analysis of historical and contemporary iconography as well as bibliographic materials. The collected material made it possible to demonstrate the attractiveness of the myth of the Tower of Babel as a metaphor, archetype and theme of artistic and architectural visions.

Keywords: architectural drawing, Bible, modern architecture, painting, Tower of Babel

Streszczenie

Tematem opracowania jest współczesna percepcja mitu Wieży Babel w sztukach plastycznych i w architekturze. Celem przeprowadzonej analizy było wykazanie aktualności i żywości tego mitu. Badanie polegało na analizie ikonografii historycznej i współczesnej oraz materiałów bibliograficznych. Zgromadzony materiał pozwolił wykazać atrakcyjność mitu wieży Babel jako metafory, archetypu oraz tematu wizji plastycznych i architektonicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura współczesna, Biblia, malarstwo, rysunek architektoniczny, Wieża Babel

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most famous buildings in the history of civilization is the Tower of Babel. It is a mythical object which appears in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible). It is also associated with archaeological discoveries of the temple traces in the territory of Mesopotamia. It is obvious that it should be known to Christians and followers of Judaism for whom the Bible is a source of knowledge, however, the secularization of the modern Western world is not conducive to the popularization of biblical knowledge. Therefore, the phenomenon of the presence of the Tower of Babel in contemporary culture is puzzling. Moreover, this topic is also taken up by artists from outside the Jewish and Christian tradition, including artists from China, Japan or Africa. This might be explained by the process of globalization of culture, which causes the secularized elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition to find their way into pop culture.

Thus, the Tower of Babel exists in contemporary culture in two parallel forms. On the one hand, it is a biblical message with a whole baggage of symbolic meanings along with its pop

version (e.g. in computer games). On the other hand, researchers are trying to assign the tower a real existence as an archaeological trace in the excavated structures of ancient Babylon (with attempts at visualizing the reconstruction of the object).¹ However, these reconstructed images do not have the same power of influence and metaphorical attractiveness as products of artists' imagination from past centuries.

The Tower of Babel is an architectural object which exists in the collective cultural awareness and is primarily based on images. Therefore, the question arises: what makes it attractive as a symbol and as an archetypal form in today's world of visual culture?

It can be assumed that both the history and the form of the tower constitute a living cultural module which can be adapted to many real and fictional situations. On the one hand, as a myth, it offers a multitude of symbolic messages, constructed narratives, and understated interpretations. On the other hand, the archetypal form is open to new incarnations. This duality of the Tower of Babel phenomenon makes it attractive in various areas of creativity, including discourses on the city and architecture. In the 20th century, architects also became interested in the myth of the Tower of Babel, ascribing to it the strength of the archetype. It represents a monumental tower building which, as a megastructure, embodies construction ambitions of a human being.

In the next part of the study, we will discuss the iconography of the Tower of Babel, features of the archetype of an architectural form resulting from this iconography and the entanglement of the myth in the contemporary artistic and architectural creative activity.

2. THE TOWER OF BABEL – MYTH, SYMBOL, ARCHETYPE

The Book of Genesis (Chapter 11) tells the story of the rise and fall of the Tower of Babel. The biblical description constitutes the basic source in the Judeo-Christian tradition which gives information about such a structure or building.² Inhabitants of the land of Shinar decided to make bricks in order to build a city and a tower “whose top will reach the sky.” They wanted to make a sign for themselves so as not to get scattered. The audacious undertaking angered the Lord who confused their languages so that they would not understand each other and would not be able to finish the work. He also scattered them all over the earth.³

This scenario of biblical events has survived for centuries thanks to its unchanged record, reminding us of the failed confrontation between man and God. The need to visualize the biblical content resulted in the creation of paintings on the walls of churches, in manuscripts, and in the form of independent works of art. The imagination of people was influenced by the question of what the structure begun looked like or what the completed tower could look like, which is expressed in the rich historical and contemporary iconography relating to this part of the Bible.⁴

¹ *Is there archaeological evidence for the tower of babel?*, <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/patriarchal-era/2695-is-there-archaeological-evidence-for-the-tower-of-babel> (access: 22. 08.2021).

² An additional description is in the *Book of Jubilees* from the 2nd century BC.

³ *Biblia Tysiąclecia – Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu* [The Millennium Bible – Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments], <https://biblia.deon.pl/> (access: 18.07.2021).

⁴ The richness of iconography is evidenced by numerous publications, websites, and exhibitions, such as, inter alia, *Babylon. Myth and reality* in the British Museum in London (2008/09) or *Babel* in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Lille (2012/13).

The quoted story had its moral dimension (punished pride) and civilization consequences, i.e. the loss of national unity, the loss of a common language, dispersion all over the world. Therefore, also modern linguists refer to the Tower of Babel as a symbol. However, the project was also intriguing as a construction and logistic enterprise.⁵ Due to the assumed scale of the object, it has become a symbol of both the visionary potential of man and his unrealizable ambitions.⁶

Leaving aside the entire semantic layer in the religious and social dimensions, the Tower of Babel has also become an expressive architectural form – an archetype of a monumental structure *reaching the sky*. For centuries, technical and construction possibilities did not allow anybody to return to the myth – dreams of such a tall structure. This is the reason why the historical and symbolic message dominated in iconography. Only the 20th century opened new implementation perspectives. Hence, a significant part of contemporary tower images concerns architectural visions which strengthen such an archetype.

3. HISTORICAL ICONOGRAPHY

At the beginning of the iconography discussion of the Tower of Babel, it should be emphasized that its representations were entirely left to the imagination of artists for centuries. M. Scolari, discussing the formation of subsequent forms of the Tower of Babel in the Middle Ages and in modern times, draws attention to the fact that the authors of paintings did not have any reliable information about the appearance of the real tower.⁷ There was no tower and there were no sources of it other than a laconic description in the Bible. H. Minkowski draws attention to the description of the structure which was considered to be the Tower of Babel by the Greek historian Herodotus from his travels to Mesopotamia around 458 BC. It is to some extent consistent with the knowledge of the ziggurat in Babylon (*Etemenanki*) obtained thanks to archaeological excavations.⁸ But this description was not widely available and was not convincing enough. In the absence of credible sources, authors had to rely on their own imagination or watch other artists.

Since contemporary images of the Tower of Babel are dominated by historical iconography, it is worth trying to make a simplified typology of these images. It covers approximately 1000 years.

⁵ Engineers also saw the metaphorical potential of this myth. The TEBIM company recalled the history of the Tower of Babel to draw attention to the consequences of God's anger, which was the confusion of languages and the inability of the builders to communicate. In complex contemporary design and implementation processes involving a large number of entities, new BIM technologies constitute a solution enabling effective communication – overcoming biblical punishment; BIM and Babylon Tower [in:] TEBIM – International Engineering & Consultancy firm, <https://tebin.pro/news/bim-and-babylon-tower/> (access: 14.07.2021).

⁶ In this sense, J. Rabiej uses the Tower of Babel metaphor in reference to “the unsatisfied creative instinct of the Western man.” Compare: J. Rabiej, *Architecture – the art of transfiguration* [in:] *Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej. Trwanie i przemijanie architektury = Defining the architectural space. Durability and fleetingness of architecture*, vol. 14, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2011, p. 321.

⁷ M. Scolari, *Forma e rappresentazione della Torre di Babel*, Rassegna, 1983, no. 16, pp. 4–7.

⁸ Cf.: H. Minkowski, *Turris Babel. Mille anni di rappresentazioni*, Rassegna, 1983, no. 16, pp. 8–88. Helmut Minkowski, a German researcher of religious iconography, is an outstanding expert in the subject, the author of the work *Turm zu Babel* (1991), which extensively describes historical images of the Tower of Babel.

The first Byzantine images of buildings were created as mosaics and reliefs in churches, e.g. in Palermo, Monreale and Venice (12th/13th centuries). However, most medieval representations of the tower (11th–15th centuries) are illustrations in manuscripts. The first images present the structure as a rectangular solid on a square or polygonal plan on the scale of the surrounding architecture. The form resembles church or defense towers, which were a sign in space in the scale of the contemporary man. Also, Renaissance towers are usually “built” on a square plan, sometimes on a polygon or circular plan, and they do not resemble structures reaching the sky.

It was not until the 16th century that the images of the Tower of Babel took on the monumental character they deserved, according to the biblical promise of a sky-reaching structure. Over the next two centuries, numerous paintings were created, mainly by Flemish and Dutch artists. It should also be stressed that at the same time, printing and graphic techniques also began to spread. This fact caused the creation of new images of the Tower of Babel as illustrations (woodcuts, copperplate engravings) for subsequent editions of the Bible.

From the 16th century on, the form of a round tapering tower with a spiral ramp began to dominate (woodcut by H. Holbein, etching by C. Anthonisz).⁹ The number of storeys varied from one version to another and often far exceeded the eight stories as described by Herodotus. The most famous images of the Tower of Babel in this type of structure are two versions of the Tower by P. Bruegel the Elder (Ill. 1).¹⁰ The appearance of the Tower in his paintings was most likely inspired by the architecture of the Colosseum which the artist saw during his visit to Rome.



Ill. 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel* (1563), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_\(Vienna\)_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_(Vienna)_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg), access: 02.07.2021).

⁹ M. Scolari, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ A comparison of both versions of Bruegel's painting can be found in the article entitled *The Tower of Babel* by B. Humpelstetter from Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna; <https://www.bruegel2018.at/en/the-tower-of-babel/> (access: 12.07.2021).

In these considerations we can omit the influence of non-artistic factors on the ideas of the Tower of Babel connected with the correctness to the doctrine of the Church, especially in the times of the Counter-Reformation. But there were such factors. Another very popular image of the Tower is L. Cruyl's illustration in the book *Turris Babel* (Amsterdam 1679) by A. Kircher. The form of the structure is much loftier and more dynamic – in comparison to the earlier paintings – thanks to slender arcades forming the façade structure and zig-zag ascending ramps. Only slightly at the top of the structure can we see traces of unfinished work. The reason for this depiction of the Tower may be the fact that Kircher was a Jesuit and treated the subject of the Tower of Babel as a missionary tool for the ideological unification of people (*Jesuit Tower*).¹¹

Apart from the general configuration of the body of the Tower of Babel, more or less similar to the model described, its individual forms in the paintings differ on the level of detailed architectural solutions. They are evidence of the authors' formal and artistic invention. At the same time, Scolari emphasizes that authors of paintings were not architects and their construction knowledge was questionable. In the architectural structures of the vision of the Tower of Babel, elements of the architectural styles of the times when the paintings were created can be found. However, the perception of history and time in the transformations of architectural orders differed from modern knowledge. Hence, syncretic structures can illustrate contemporary ideas about both historical and fictional objects. Elements of the staffage in paintings confirm the free treatment and mixing of what is contemporary with what comes from the past or from a different cultural area.¹²

A separate group of images are reconstructions of the ziggurat in Babylon – *Etemenanki*, which was identified with the biblical Tower of Babel and which began to be created in the 2nd half of the 19th century. As knowledge was gained thanks to excavations and the discovery of clay tablets (*Smith tablet* or *Esagila tablet*, 1872) as well as after confrontation with Herodotus' report, scientists created new hypothetical models. The closest to the ziggurat's likely appearance and generally accepted by experts in Assyriology is the version created by T.A. Businka in 1938. The seven-storey structure on a square plan narrows towards the top with successive levels, where the temple is located. The main central staircase leads upstairs to the first floor and side stairs to the higher floors.¹³ This group of visualizations seems closed insofar as new research facts do not enliven the imagination of scientists.

When analyzing the rich iconography of the Tower of Babel, attention should be paid to the issue of duplicating or imitating certain models. It would be an interesting study to trace the relationships between various images of the Tower of Babel – who and to what extent was inspired by the predecessors or made an effort to create their own vision of the structure.

Over the centuries, different versions of the Tower of Babel were born, transformed, or duplicated. However, in times without photography and the Internet, the journey of the idea of the Tower of Babel depended on the activity of artists. Certain features were repeated in particular cultural environments due to the spatial and temporal proximity of the activities of various painters. This applies, for example, to Flemish painting.

¹¹ M. Scolari, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹² Minkowski emphasizes that the images of the construction of the Tower of Babel constitute an important source of knowledge about contemporary artists, including the techniques and workshop of builders, H. Minkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

Today, the most famous paintings are the aforementioned two versions of the Tower of Babel by Bruegel thanks to the availability in museums, numerous reproductions and possibilities of sending images on the Internet. But as unique works in historical times, they were known only to those who could see them in person in private collections.¹⁴

Another very popular image is also the previously mentioned illustration in Kircher's book. In this case, the spread of this image of the tower was possible by the use of printing techniques. Thanks to the possibility of printing the Bible, many other pictures of the Tower of Babel were distributed as well.

This situation seems to be, to some extent, analogous to the case which was studied and described by R. Krautheimer. He showed how in time – from early Christianity up to the 17th century – the idea of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre from Jerusalem, which served as an example in the construction of churches, moved in Europe. He drew attention to the processes of copying the form while maintaining certain features and deforming others.¹⁵ The idea of the Holy Sepulchre was expressed primarily in the semantic layer and in the spatial elements which represented it, and not in the general disposition of the body, plan, or facade. Oral tradition, unlike visual documentation, conveyed symbolic information more faithfully and more effectively than the exact geometry of the original. In the case of the Tower of Babel, there was no such tangible prototype as the structure in Jerusalem.

However, similarly to the model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the idea of the Tower of Babel “wandered” in European culture, which expressed more a symbolic layer (also supported by the text of the Bible) than the spatial disposition of the structure. And the monumentality of the tower was expressed in an architectural and construction structure which the painter was able to imagine.

4. MODERN IMAGES OF THE TOWER OF BABEL

4.1. MODERN ARTISTS

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the theme of the Tower of Babel is still taken up by many artists. The titles of works usually unequivocally relate the subject of the work to the mythological source. However, these works in most cases are of secular character, i.e. they do not directly refer to the biblical message and they at most take up symbolic-mystical themes expressed in original narrative structures. In this case, we can talk about the still vivid symbolic dimension of this form, which artists adopt to their individual sensitivity to the problems of art and modern civilization. This means that modern artistic works – from painting to spatial installations – are to a large extent autonomous works.

¹⁴ Breugel's first painting from 1673, which is now in Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum), originally hung in the suburban villa Ter Beke of wealthy Antwerp businessman Nicolaes Jonghelinck; B.A. Kaminska, “Come, let us make a city and a tower”: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's “Tower of Babel” and the Creation of a Harmonious Community in Antwerp, *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 2014, no. 6.2, <https://jhna.org/issues/vol-6-2-2014/> (access: 18.07.2021). Similarly, the second version of the Tower of Babel, which is now in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, travelled through various private collections until 1958.

¹⁵ Cf.: L. Maluga, *Autonomiczne rysunki architektoniczne*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 2006, p. 73.

At the beginning of the century, graphic works were created, inter alia, by M.J.A. Bauer, F. Durrenmatt, and M.C. Escher. Their images of the Tower of Babel differ from historical models and offer new formal solutions. In the 1930s, two works on the Tower of Babel were painted by English painter S. Spencer. In this case, however, the artist focused not on the shape of the tower, but on the construction process (*Building the Tower of Babel, Making Columns for the Tower of Babel*, 1933). In the 1960s, the theme of the tower was taken up, inter alia, by Surrealists such as S. Lepri (*La catastrophe. La tour de Babel*, 1964) and S. Dalí (*Turris Babel*, 1964).

In the last forty years of the 20th century, a particularly large number of pictures relating to the Tower of Babel in many ways were created. Their authors are professional artists as well as amateurs who use traditional art techniques (painting, drawing, graphics, photography) and new digital tools too. Many young artists (including amateurs) present their works on portals devoted to art, such as ArtStation or DeviantArt. These works are mostly illustrative, refer to surrealism, science fiction or fantasy, and are created with the use of digital tools (*Digital Art*). The Tower of Babel is also presented in various spatial interpretations. Small sculptures and large art installations are created.¹⁶

Polish artists also created a number of works related to the Tower of Babel. Probably the first work of this type in the 20th century is the linocut by St. Kubicki, *The Tower of Babel* from 1917. In 1940, Nikifor Krynicki painted a picture called *The Tower of Babel*. J. Duda-Gracz in 1977 painted the picture *The Tower of Babel* with a peculiar ironic scorn and in a grotesque convention, i.e. workers from socialist construction against the background of the Tower of Babel modeled on the painting by Breugel from 1563.

In the painting by Z. Beksiński, on the other hand, we can find the reminiscences of the Tower of Babel in the destroyed archaic structures, even though the author himself does not use such a name. Many paintings from the 1980s and 1990s show monumental vertical structures with signs of destruction or fire in the upper parts. Painting of the Krakow artist M. Jaśko has a similarly surreal and symbolic character. In the years 2011–2014, she made a series of paintings showing mysterious structures, some of which refer to the historical painting images of a tower. Representing magical realism, T. Sętkowski painted a picture entitled *The ceremonial opening of the Tower of Babel* in a fairy-tale atmosphere with an eclectic structure of the building.¹⁷ The theme of the Tower of Babel is also used by graphic artists, including W. Kotkowski, K. Skórczewski, and J. Zieliński.

Rich iconography of the Tower of Babel in the fine arts proves that the modern tower can have a very diverse form, i.e. from reminiscences of historical images to expressive structures verging on abstraction. Regardless of the artistic technique used by an artist, the artistic vision of the form directs the viewer's attention to the spatial object which forms the World Museum of Imagination.

4.2. APPLIED GRAPHICS AND THE INTERNET

Images of the Tower of Babel were also used in applied graphics in the 20th century and found their way to the Internet. As it was mentioned at the beginning of the present study,

¹⁶ M. Minujin, a spiral structure covered with books (Buenos Aires, 2011), T. Kawamata, two installations of chairs in church interiors – in Paris (1997) and in Reims (2007) and a vertical structure made of wooden planks in the La Villette Park in Paris (2013).

¹⁷ T. Sętkowski is also the author of one of the two murals created in Poland (*The Tower of Babel*, Częstochowa, 2014). The second mural was created in Łódź by Hong Kong artist Messy Desk (2015).

the symbolism of the tower is evoked in the context of various civilization phenomena (e.g., globalization) or issues connected with cultural studies, linguistics, sociology, economics, etc.

As a result, images of the Tower of Babel appeared on the covers of magazines and books, on posters and pictures. An example is the Centre Pompidou poster on the occasion of an exhibition dedicated to railway stations.¹⁸

Images of the Tower of Babel were also commercialized. They are included in advertisements and are used to produce computer games, puzzles and toy blocks for children.

The development of the Internet network resulted in the multiplication of tower images. We can find single paintings and entire collections on various websites. They are reproductions of original historical works, contemporary professional and amateur works, and various uses of the tower image in commercial or entertainment situations. The Tower of Babel appears here as a quotation, i.e. a literal reproduction of an old work, or as a kind of peculiar paraphrase – humorous, surreal, catastrophic, etc. Its architectural form does not have such significance in these applications as its aesthetic and plastic attractiveness.

4.3. MODERN ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

As mentioned earlier, until the 20th century, images of the Tower of Babel were created only by artists – drawers, graphic artists, and painters. In the 20th century, however, references to the tower and the city of Babylon began to appear in the works of architects.

It can be assumed that in this case the reason why artists reached for this topic or attributed such an analogy to their projects was the formal and constructional aspect, i.e., on the one hand, a pyramidal or conical form which resembled the painterly images of the Tower of Babel from the past, and on the other hand, the scale of the structure which was connected with overcoming heights.

According to Minkowski, projects by, inter alia, H. Poelzig Festspielhaus in Salzburg (two versions from 1921 and 1922), A. Loos for the “Babylon” hotel on the Riviera (1923), or a stepped structure by H. Sauvage on the Seine (1928), constitute such examples.¹⁹ The visions of skyscrapers in the city of the future created by H. Ferriss at that time can also be related to the expression of the Tower of Babel.

References to the monumental architectural form intensified in the 2nd half of the 20th century. Especially the wave of futurological visions and theoretical projects in the 1960s – huge structures stretching horizontally and vertically in various environments – could bring to mind associations with the Tower of Babel.²⁰

One of the first in this period was Constantin with his concept of *New Babylon* (1964–68) – a theoretical continuous urban structure which was located, inter alia, in the territory of the Netherlands. At the end of the 1960s, Paolo Soleri made a clear reference to the mythical building by means of a series of visionary designs for residential structures.

¹⁸ The poster for the exhibition *Le temps des gares* in the Centre Georges Pompidou (1978/79) features a painting by Swiss artist Dominique Appia showing the Tower of Babel with trains departing from it (graphic design: Hurrig and Roquet, 1978). The museum commentary stated that “the station is the Tower of Babel of modern times”; *Le temps des gares* [in:] Centre Pompidou, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/agenda/evenement/cxAoXeo> (access: 20.08.2021).

¹⁹ H. Minkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–142.

²⁰ Cf.: G. Feuerstein, *Urban Fiction*, Edition Axel Menges, Stuttgart 2008.

Also in recent decades, paintings entitled “The Tower of Babel” have appeared in many publications presenting contemporary architectural drawings. It can be suspected that creating such visions has become an interesting topic of compositional and artistic exercises by architects. Examples are the works by, *inter alia*, J. Karalkiewicz (1981), M. Nakamura (1995), A. Lorenz (1990) and I. McKay (1996).

Nevertheless, in some works, the cultural aspect of the myth of the Tower of Babel clearly appeared, which found its expression in the works of architects, e.g. the collage *The Tower of Babel* by N.O. Lund (after 1970) and the watercolor by M. Scolari *Turris Babel* (1981). M. Scolari in his visual artistic research into the origins of the cultural phenomenon of architecture and its historical and mythical sources also referred to the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel.²¹

4.4. STUDENT VISIONS OF THE TOWER OF BABEL

In 2000, the author of this article offered his students the subject of the Tower of Babel as an art exercise for the first time. The work consisted in making an original interpretation of the meaning of this term on A4 paper. The question was: “What does the Tower of Babel mean for me today – in a formal and symbolic sense?” In this case, the idea was to stimulate the imagination of young people in the context of culture and contemporaneity.

For several years (2000–2016) this student assignment was repeated every year.²² As a result, an extensive collection (nearly 500 works) was created, which was made in various art techniques and illustrated the subject in various ways (Ill. 2–4).

Some of the works, which were created by students, reproduced stereotypical images of the tower. In 2016, the experiment was stopped because it became noticeable that students were increasingly inspired by or even imitated images of the Tower of Babel which existed on the Internet. The aforementioned increase in the number of images on the web about the tower over the last dozen or so years is, on the one hand, proof of the vividness of this symbol, on the other hand, it limits the imagination by offering more and more ready-made hints. However, the years of the experiment with students proved that the artistic imagination and young sensitivity to current problems still makes it possible to revive the myth and archetype with new ties to the current world and look for bridges with tradition.

It can be assumed that regardless of how independent the searches of students were and how much they were inspired by hints in various sources, a wide range of proposals indicates multiple possibilities of using the Tower of Babel motif for an artistic expression with an additional message.

5. MODERN ARCHITECTURAL IMPLEMENTATIONS

Not only in the world of architectural visions, but also among modern architectural implementations, are there buildings which symbolically or formally refer to the Tower of Babel or which may be considered as fulfillment of the unrealized intentions of ancient builders.

²¹ Cf.: L. Maluga, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

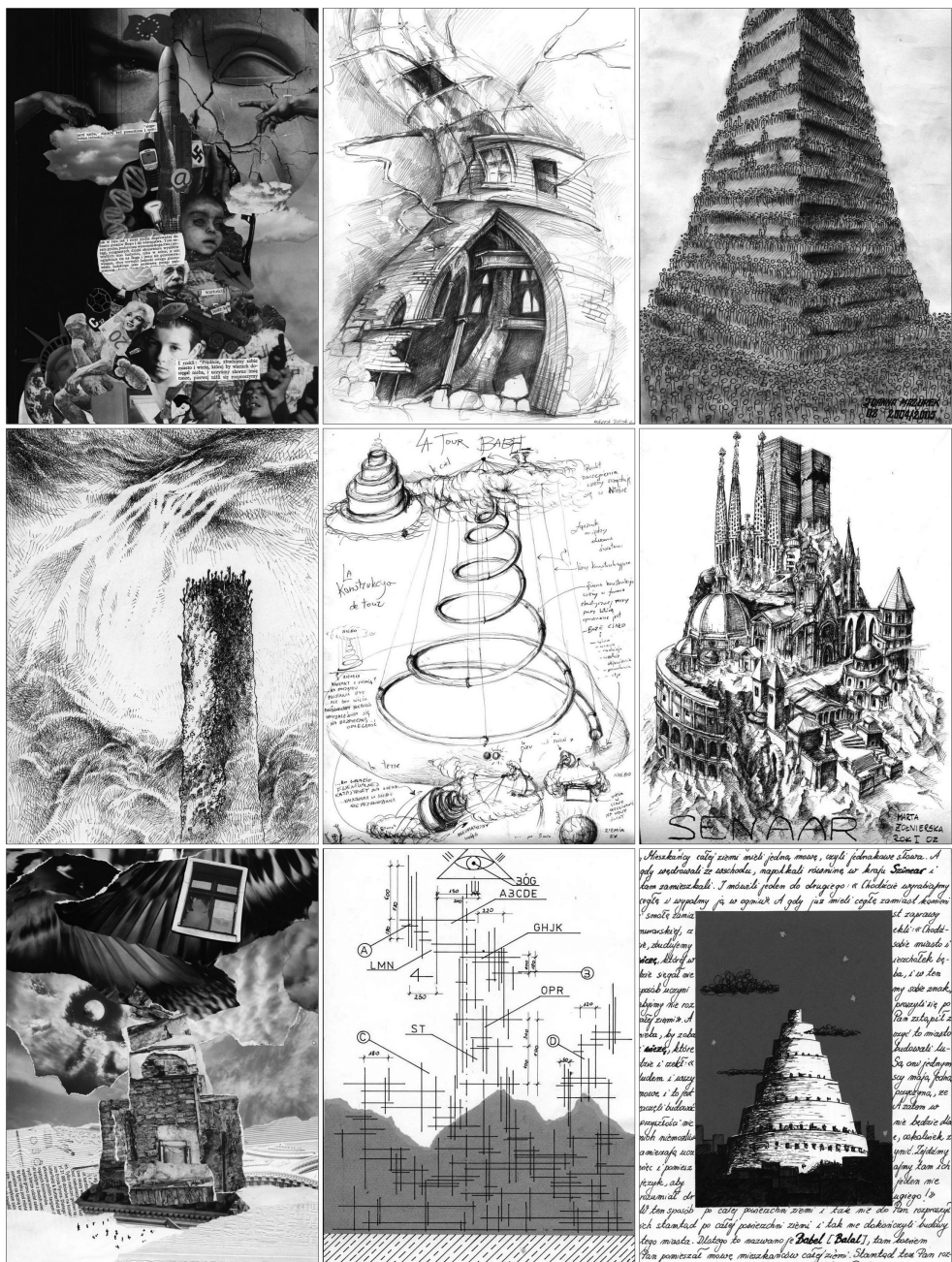
²² The works were created as part of the courses “Visual techniques in architectural drawing” at the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning (2000–2016) as well as “Introduction to architectural and urban design” at the Faculty of Monument Protection (2001–2007). The assignment was sometimes carried out in the form of an enclosure, but more often as homework.



III. 2. The Tower of Babel, student works: M. Biernat (2002), W. Omilianowski (2006), P. Słaby (2005), M. Broda (2006), K. Kołodziej (2001), A. Kawalec (2002), M. Olejniczak (2003), K. Balcerek (2000), W. Motylski (2004).



III. 3. The Tower of Babel, student works: H. Kurczyna (2002), P. Usinowicz (2001), I. Cichońska (2006), A. Konieczna (2006), K. Sadowska (2005), K. Ciszewska (2002), K. Dudycz (2007), E. Karkoszka (2007), W. Świerdzewski (2004).



III. 4. The Tower of Babel, student works: M. Cieślak (2002), M. Pięta (2002), J. Mazurek (2005), M. Kotliński (2003), M. Sławuski (2000), M. Żolnierska (2003), P. Michniak (2003), F. Winiewicz (2004), K. Wiatrzyk (2007).

One group consists of objects which participate in the race of overcoming the barrier of height – erecting “the tower whose top will reach the sky.” The emblematic challenge of the 20th century was the project by F.L. Wright Mile-High Illinois (1957). However, in fact, significant progress is being made by completed modern skyscrapers such as the sky-high Burj Khalifa in Dubai (2009).

The other group consists of objects which refer not to the height but to the shape of the Tower of Babel. In many cases such analogies are unintentional and the similarity to the Tower of Babel is only shown after implementation. One of the examples is Chapel of Thanksgiving in Dallas, USA, designed by Ph. Johnson in 1976. Another example is the building of the European Parliament in Strasbourg (1998). In this case, suggestions of formal inspirations resulting from the Tower of Babel appeared on social media. An additional argument for such an analogy was to be the slogan of the Council of Europe *Many languages, one dialogue*.²³

An interesting architectural object was also implemented in Poland – the new seat of TVP in Warsaw (2008), which was associated with the myth of the Tower of Babel. Chief designer C. Bielecki admitted that “we were consciously inspired by the Tower of Babel as a popular symbol of global media (...) and we drew from an unrealized project by Vladimir Tatlin from the beginning of the century.”²⁴

The latest architectural proposal referring to the Tower of Babel is a project aimed at the implementation of the new Amazon headquarters in Arlington (USA). In this case, analogies to the mythical building were imposed by the media commenting on the announced implementation.²⁵

6. THE TOWER OF BABEL AS AN ARCHITECTURAL OBJECT

As the previous subsections show, the Tower of Babel dominates modern culture – regardless of the reason for recalling this myth – in the form of images of architectural form. We are talking about an architectural object, no matter how fictional, artistically interpreted or historically documented it is and related to the material past.

Its symbolic rank therefore makes us look at the tower as an engineering work with a specific form and hypothetical usability.

6.1. FORM

The shape of the Tower of Babel can only be described very generally because the wealth of various façade structures, which was discussed in the iconography, does not allow us to create

²³ On the Internet, there appeared information about the photo manipulation of Russian portals aimed at discrediting the institution.

²⁴ G. Stiasny, *Nowa siedziba TVP w Warszawie*, Architektura-Murator, 2009, no. 6, p. 37. In the editorial comment, G. Stiasny questioned the legitimacy of such inspiration in a symbolic but not formal sense: “Also the symbolism of the Tower of Babel, the form of which is easy to find in the exposed glass corner, is not an appropriate symbol for media promotion. It is rather, horrifyingly, an ironic comment. After all, the Tower of Babel means an undertaking that is impossible to implement and that leads to confusion only”, *ibidem*, p. 36.

²⁵ *Amazon is building the Tower of Babel for the 21st century. The historic project impresses with its momentum* – *NeeWS*, 3.02.2021, <https://tekdeeps.com/amazon-is-building-the-tower-of-babel-for-the-21st-century-the-historic-project-impresses-with-its-momentum-neews/> (access: 23.04.2021).

one detailed model. However, when trying to get closer to a certain model, such a synthetic description can be made.

Thus, it is a central, multi-storey building, tapering towards the top. Stairs or ramps outside the building give it a dynamic form. The base of the building – a strong plinth – embeds it in the terrain.

The top of the building is mysterious. Only a few paintings show how the building was topped (the sanctuary was located in the ziggurats on the highest platform). According to the biblical story, the builders did not finish their work. Therefore, most often the pictures show the upper part of the tower during its construction (scaffolding, cranes, unfinished wall fragments, etc.). However, it can be accepted that due to the assumed height of the tower, the shape of its top was not of great importance in terms of the form in relation to its monumentality.

However, iconography is dominated by two types which were discussed in earlier chapters:

- a spirally rising structure with shadowed arcades (the most popular model in the flourishing period of Dutch and Flemish painting of the 16th and 17th centuries),
- massive multi-storey pyramidal form with stair ramps on the facades (references to the ziggurat model).

Apart from this general description of the model, there is an enormous wealth of forms varied in terms of material, architectural style of the facade, height or number of storeys, and finally proportions of the structure – from a relatively flat pyramid (H. Poelzig) to a slender lofty tower-obelisk (M. Scolari).

The tower as an architectural object also has an interior. Historical and modern paintings show the view of the tower from the outside only. Fragments of the internal building structure can be seen only in some of them in the upper part of the structure and in those showing the decay of the tower. However, it can be imagined that the structure had numerous rooms inside – corridors and halls (in the case of historical ziggurats, only a few had internal utility chambers).²⁶ An interesting work was done by Japanese artist K. Otomo, who processed P. Breugl's painting *The Tower of Babel* (second version from 1564). On its basis, he created a new painting *Inside Babel*, which showed its openwork interior by cutting out a part of the structure.²⁷

6.2. FUNCTION

The biblical description of the tower says nothing about its purpose other than that the Babylonians wanted to “make a sign for themselves.” It was in the tradition of the Mesopotamian area since Sumerian times to build artificial “mountains” to worship gods. But according to the biblical description, the Tower of Babel was not meant to be a temple. On the contrary, it was to show God the strength of man and his efficient independence – a symptom of pride for which people were punished.

However, the archetype of the tower, which was shaped by images of modern art, seems to perform some functions. The openwork structure of the interior encourages the imagination to develop the building. However, the lack of any clear indications may be explained

²⁶ H. Minkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁷ *Creator of cult Japanese manga Akira re-interprets legendary Tower of Babel*, 13.04.2017, <https://www.efc.com/efe/english/entertainment/creator-of-cult-japanese-manga-akira-re-interprets-legendary-tower-babel/50000264-3237224> (access: 9.06.2021).

by the fact that modern creators – artists and architects – apart from anonymous ruins, present the tower as a strictly utility facility (hotel, auditorium, residential or even multifunctional megastructure). Perhaps this unknown – except for its compositional values – makes the tower-archetype an open structure, receptive to various suggestions of its utilitarian adaptation, and therefore stimulates the imagination to “dwell in” it.

6.3. STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Bible talks about building a fired brick tower, bonded with tar instead of mortar. As a result of the applied technology of building ziggurats from dried bricks, which was confirmed by research, monolithic bodies were constructed. However, the historical images of the tower showing openings in the facades (arcades, windows, gates) suggested an interior (see the above-mentioned experiment by the Japanese artist). Thus, the interior structure could be composed of pillars, arches and vaults forming a dense openwork structure. This kind of structure can be seen in some of the pictures showing the state of the unfinished construction.

Another important feature of the biblical story must be taken into account when examining the timeliness and vividness of the myth of such an enormous structure. The construction of the Tower of Babel must have been a huge technical and logistical challenge. But the ruler and his subordinate services believed in the feasibility of this undertaking. Taking up such a venture showed imagination and the will to overcome problems. The biblical message does not say what the implementation looked like or how long it lasted. Only in the Book of Jubilees from the 2nd century BC it is mentioned that they were building it for forty-three years.²⁸

Spanish writer J. Benet, who was a construction engineer by profession, did an extraordinary job. In his essay entitled *The Construction of the Tower of Babel*, the writer analyzed the construction of the tower shown in the painting by P. Breugel from 1563 (first version, Ill. 1) in terms of construction art, describing the structure and its building elements (arches, pillars, windows, etc.).²⁹ Benet drew attention to the construction chaos inside the building, which was built for hundreds of years (?).

The history of architecture shows numerous examples of such ambitious implementations, starting with the seven wonders of antiquity. New techniques, technologies, and new materials being developed nowadays make it possible to make efforts to overcome the existing limitations. Hence, visions anticipating the current technical possibilities in the next decades become possible to implement.

Unrealistic architectural and urban projects from the 1960s are now possible to be implemented. The vision of a one-mile-tall building from 1957 is coming to fruition today. And ambitions as well as imagination pushes humanity constantly forward.

7. SUMMARY

The aim of our considerations was to look at the Tower of Babel as an archetype that arose out of a myth and is present in modern realizations as well as in architectural visions. The

²⁸ The Book of Jubilees belongs to the Apocrypha of the Old Testament.

²⁹ J. Benet, *The Construction of the Tower of Babel*, Wakefield Press, Cambridge 2017 (first edition: Madrid 1990).

question posed at the beginning about the reasons for the permanence and attractiveness of this topic finds an answer in various examples of creative activity.

The collected iconography proves that the Tower of Babel, as an element of the European cultural tradition, is still a current theme for artists on a global scale.

Two aspects of the biblical myth are most often cited, i.e. symbolism related to the human condition – man's language, along with his ability to communicate and cooperate, and a construction project related to the implementation of a monumental architectural form. In the presented analysis, the aim was to highlight the latter aspect.

The Tower of Babel as a myth, apart from its role in a strictly religious sense, is half mystical and half fairy-tale virtual. Turned into an archetype that feeds architectural visions, it shows its creative potential. In turn, the Tower of Babel as an archetype sets a certain spatial model which results from historical biblical, artistic and archaeological roots. At the same time, it is complemented by modern definitions and interpretations of a monumental structure or building. Ultimately, the Tower of Babel as a vision makes it possible to construct various ideas about architecture. Visions from the 1960s and the present ones do not usually arise directly from the myth of the Tower of Babel. But post factum we can see the Tower of Babel memes in them. Because the visionary present in the works by P. Cook or V. Callebaut bears the hallmarks of the ambitions of ancient builders updated with modern expectations, *inter alia*, pro-ecological.³⁰

We can agree with J. Rabiej that the history and modernity of architecture constitute a record of the struggle “with the inevitable process of passage of time” and the undertaken new creative challenges “after the collapse of successive Towers of Babel.”³¹ As evidenced by the presented examples, it is, among other things, the myth of the Tower of Babel, transformed into an archetype and visions, that maintains a constant and unmet need for creation.

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³¹ J. Rabiej, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

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