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THE DEATH OF AVANT-GARDE OR RETURN TO THE ROOTS?

ŚMIERĆ AWANGARDY CZY POWRÓT DO ŹRÓDEŁ?

Abstract

The aim of the research is to present the avant-garde realizations of recent years. Literature research and the analysis of implementation prove that social ideas, the negation of historicizing forms and traditional urbanism as an emanation of oppression were at the source of the avant-garde movements of the 20th century. Following the strangeness of the form, for a hundred years the social sensitivity was lost. An analysis of the recent architectural awards proves the rejection of the mainstream of star architecture. As a result, it cannot be proved whether this means the death of the avant-garde.

Keywords: architectural avant-garde, creative directions, architectural awards

Streszczenie

Celem badań jest przybliżenie awangardowych realizacji ostatnich lat. Badania literaturowe i analiza realizacji dowodzą, że u źródeł ruchów awangardowych XX wieku leżały idee społeczne, negacja form historyzujących i tradycyjnej urbanistyki, jako emanacji ucisku. Podążając za dziwnością formy, przez sto lat zagubiono społeczną wrażliwość. Analiza ostatnich nagród architektonicznych dowodzi odrzucenia mainstreamu star architektury. W rezultacie nie można dowiedzieć, czy oznacza to śmierć awangardy.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda architektoniczna, kierunki twórcze, nagrody architektoniczne

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book published for the first time almost half a century ago, in 1973, Charles Jencks expressed the assumption that in the architecture of the twentieth century there was never a single binding style, despite the popular belief that the international style (the so-called “first modernism”) was dominated¹. Many contemporary studies confirm these observations, and the multidirectional creative attitudes are also characteristic to contemporary architectural achievements². There were philosophical ideas and artistic manifestos, but also social,

¹ C. Jencks, *Ruch nowoczesny w architekturze*, WAiF, Warszawa 1987, pp. 17–125.

² It is worth mentioning, for example, the positions by: W. Bonenberg: *Architektura ostatnich dziesięcioleci XX wieku*, Stowarzyszenie Psychologia i Architektura, Poznań 2001, W. Bonenberg *Moda, marka, architektura*, Wydawnictwo Wydziału Architektury Politechniki Poznańskiej, Poznań 2014; E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich *Recent Architecture in the 21st Century – many Directions and Attitudes* [in:] Kałużczka A. (ed.) *History and Contemporariness in Architecture and Urbanism* vol. 2, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2014; T. Kozłowski *Tendencje ekspresjonistyczne w architekturze współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2013.

political and economic trends that reflected the changing world order, which laid at the roots of the avant-garde of the twentieth century. The changes in architecture were also considered revolutionary at the time³. All avant-garde movements were marked by the negation of historicizing forms and traditional urbanism as an emanation of social oppression. Architecture freed from their baggage was to become egalitarian, and the new technology was to favour the mass production of buildings and cities for a modern society.

The technological development that we have been observing over the last century meant that over time almost all dreams of architects could be built. The coexistence of virtual reality and the real world helped in the implementation of the next ones⁴. Following the strangeness, ignoring the costs of building and operating the facilities led to the fact, that the social sensitivity of architecture and its useful servitude were lost along the way. For couple of decades, expressionist deconstructive or biomorphic forms, alternating with minimalist, austere architecture, defined the main trends of architecture at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. These works were awarded by international bodies⁵, which also contributed to the ennoblement of a fairly small group of “the most” avant-garde architects. Two most important architectural awards (Pritzker Prize and EU Mies van der Rohe Architecture Award) awarded in the last few years show, however, the rejection of the mainstream of this kind of star-architecture by the elite. Does this mean the death of the avant-garde or a return to its sources?

2. THE ROLE OF ARCHITECTURAL AWARDS IN THE PROMOTION OF AVANT-GARDE ARCHITECTURE

Since the second half of the twentieth century, numerous architectural awards have been given to creators all over the world, resulting in more prestigious commissions and leading to the creation of global architectural offices, conducted by contemporary star-architects⁶. Their popularity, also in the mass-media, can be compared to that of cinema and stage stars⁷.

³ See: R. Banham, *Rewolucja w architekturze*, WAiF, Warszawa 1979.

⁴ This is just one of the features of hybridisation in architecture and urbanism, defined in Polish scientific literature by M. Gyurkovich, *Hybrydowe przestrzenie kultury we współczesnym mieście europejskim*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2013.

⁵ Among the many architectural prizes awarded by professional associations, critics of architecture and art, as well as private foundations, the most ennobling are: the Pritzker Prize, called the “architectural Nobel prize” (<https://www.pritzkerprize.com> – accessed on June 12, 2022), recognized by many researchers as conditioning the “star” status of an architect or office and the European Union Mies van der Rohe Architecture Award (<https://www.miesarch.com> – accessed on June 12, 2022).

⁶ Star-architect term was defined many times, among others also by D. McNeill, *The Global Architect: Firms, Fame and Urban Form*, Routledge, New York 2009.

⁷ Currently, perhaps the most recognizable are Bjarke Ingels, Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid, who died in 2016, who are real pop culture icons. The problem of stardom discussed in the publications of E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich or T. Kozłowski was very well defined in a synthetic way by A. Klimek in his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of M. Pabich from 2015 – see: A. Klimek, *Ewolucja problemu „gwiazdorstwa” w architekturze współczesnej – próba zdefiniowania zjawiska*, doctoral dissertation under the guidance of prof. M. Pabich, Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, Wydział Budownictwa, Architektury i Inżynierii Środowiska Politechniki Łódzkiej, Łódź 2015. See also: C. Jencks, K. Kropf (eds.), *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013, and T. Dyckoff, *Epoka spektaklu. Perypetie architektury i miasta XXI wieku*, Karakter, Kraków 2018.

Cities and private investors very often decide to employ famous artists-architects, hoping that their avant-garde creations will become urban catalysts that will accelerate the transformation or development of a given area⁸ or will become modern icons – symbols of companies that prove their innovation⁹. Many star-architects have created their own, recognizable style, using a similar set of formal and material solutions, regardless of the function and spatial context. As a result, their works built around the world are very similar to each other¹⁰.

However, the uncontextual “architecture of the performance” did not always fulfil its goals correctly and more and more often the employment of star-architects, contrary to the “Bilbao effect”, did not solve urban problems, but created new ones. This was the case with the flagship revitalization operation of City Life in Milan in the area of the former world exhibition in the northern part of the city centre. The projects by Hadid, Libeskind and Isozaki with extravagant architectural forms were jointly selected for implementation. In the opinion of jurors and city authorities, they were to become symbols of changes in this huge area, excluded for decades from common use. The rationalist concept by Renzo Piano, which perfectly developed and combined urban directions and fabrics existing in the neighbouring districts, was rejected. As a result, the new “district” is an introverted island and none of the urban problems existing in this place have been solved. In addition, they were intensified by fencing off individual parts of the complex and breaking the continuity of the public space, while the main goal of the competition was to rebuild the relationship between the previously eluded area and the surrounding urban tissue¹¹. There are many similar examples¹². Perhaps that is why nowadays in the countries of the global West, where sustainable development¹³ is promoted and social control over the shaping of urban spaces is associated with the reduction of unnecessary expenses and aversion to risky, avant-garde forms, there is a clear retreat from the most irrational, extravagant architectural works¹⁴.

⁸ For example, by attracting new investors and, consequently, an increase in land rent in the areas around the prestigious implementation. The development of the so-called “Architectural tourism”, discussed many times in numerous scientific studies.

⁹ One of the first to apply this strategy was the Swiss company Vitra, whose campus in Weil am Rhein is a kind of exhibition of avant-garde contemporary architecture. Another determinant is the cost of such a project and implementation – only the richest investors can afford them. As a result, most of the works of star architects are currently carried out in wealthy Asian cities (the Persian Gulf area, authoritarian regimes of Kazakhstan, China and several other former Soviet republics, including Russia)

¹⁰ A dreadful example is a small office building on Long Island near New York, designed by Richard Meier, originally as the headquarters of an aviation company, the body of which is a reduction of the MACBA facility in Barcelona, previously constructed by the same architect. The works of T. Ando, F. Gehry and Z. Hadid are also recognizable at first sight.

¹¹ This case was widely discussed by K. Dudzic-Gyurkovich, *Development of area of World Exhibitions. Search of urbanity. Case study of Milan*, [in:] Biere Arenas R., Gyurkovich M. (eds.), *Back to the sense of the city. II VCT monograph book*, CPSV-UPC, Barcelona 2016, pp. 344–355.

¹² For example, CKK Jordanki, designed by F. Menis in Toruń, disturbingly resembling, even in interior and material solutions, his earlier implementations from Tenerife Island – described more precisely in: M. Gyurkovich, *Polskie przestrzenie kultury. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2019.

¹³ Under changing names: sustainable growth, green city, smart city, resilient city, Green Deal, etc.

¹⁴ In extreme cases, the idea of returning to historical forms prevails, which is observed on a massive scale in Germany, where for over a decade portions of historic old towns, destroyed during the Second World War (e.g. Frankfurt), have been rebuilt in order to strengthen the “German national spirit” in a globalizing society.

3. MODESTY, SIMPLINESS, USEFULNESS AND ECONOMY, OR THE NEW AVANT-GARDE?

The signal of change, announcing the twilight of the avant-garde era of extravagant expressionist or minimalist forms, in favour of economical and socially sensitive architecture was the 2011 European Union Mies van der Rohe Architecture Award granted to David Chipperfield for the restored Neues Museum in Berlin. He also designed the underground so-called “Archaeological Promenade,” as the main part of the project of Museumsinsel renewal to connect all the facilities at the island¹⁵, together with the minimalistic, rhythmic new entrance pavilion – James Simon-Galerie. However, it was the conservative, sparing architectural intervention in the Neues Museum building that was appreciated the most by the international jury. The award and the media hype associated with it generated a lot of interest in the museum, which has been closed for 70 years, and houses mainly collections of Egyptian and Greek art. David Chipperfield, together with art conservator Julian Harrap, decided to show the entire 150-year history of the building, including the period when the museum was a ruin. All the preserved historic details have been cleaned and displayed, while the complementary elements have not been reconstructed, but rebuilt in a simple, economical, contemporary, minimalist aesthetic¹⁶. Instead of an avant-garde creation, the cracked, chipped off structure of the historic building was exposed, with worn and faded plaster, without any additions to the polychrome, retaining the bullet marks of Soviet soldiers from the last days of the Second World War. The existing relics of the museum bombed in 1945 (70% destroyed) have been preserved, not reconstructed. The implementation became an inspiration for many subsequent adaptations all over the world, especially of post-industrial facilities¹⁷.

However, the biggest change in the perception of the value and importance of an architectural piece was the awarding of the Pritzker Prize to Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena in 2016. This award is usually granted for lifetime achievements and so far it has been given to architects with enormous international recognition, including, since 1998, almost exclusively star architects. This time, however, attention was paid to the humanistic and social dimension of the achievements of Aravena, the founder of the Elemental office in Santiago,

¹⁵ “The individual buildings of the Museumsinsel district are compositionally oriented in different directions and were connected with various, sometimes no longer existing, elements of the urban structure of historic Berlin. Therefore, they do not form a coherent whole. Altes Museum, which was designed as a counterpoint to the non-existent (in 2011, but rebuilt in 2013–2020 on the wave of the aforementioned policy of restoring national identity) City Royal Palace, together with the Alte Nationalgalerie and the Neues Museum form a complex of objects facing south and are part of the never completed foundation of the Forum of Art and Science from 1841 by Friedrich August Stüler” (after: M. Gyurkovich, *Hybrydowe...*, *op. cit.*).

¹⁶ “Respecting the historical structure in various states of preservation, i.e. damaged in many places, is the guiding principle of restoration, because complete reconstruction, in accordance with the provisions of the Venice Charter of 1964 or the Nara Document of 1994, would be a form of destroying culture. UNESCO authorities more and more often draw attention to the criterion of authenticity in the adaptation of historic buildings to new functions and needs.” – *ibidem*.

¹⁷ I.e. the former Matadero slaughterhouses in Madrid – see: M. Gyurkovich, *Polskie Przestrzenie...*, *op. cit.*

and not to avant-garde architectural forms¹⁸. The social housing estate Quinta Monroy in Iquique was mainly presented as promoting the architect's work in the architectural press, and – perhaps above all – in the media around the world. In this housing complex, public participation played an important role in shaping the final appearance of the buildings. The architect created only the basic framework defining the dimensions of individual segments and the usable “minimum program”, while the scope and form of its supplement were left to future residents-users. Thus, in his approach to social problems, he is much closer to the ideas of the movement of the “first modernist” avant-garde than the rest of the 21st century avant-garde architects appreciated with global awards before him.

Successive international awards only confirm this trend. In 2019, the EU Mies van der Rohe Architecture Award¹⁹, the BDA Grand Prize²⁰ in 2020 and the Pritzker Prize in 2021 were awarded to French architects Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal. The studio specializes in interventions and transformations of the existing urban tissue, often including adaptations of buildings and housing complexes erected in industrialized technologies in the second half of the 20th century. They are also known for in-depth functional, social and economic analyses that they undertake before committing to an assignment. Taking into account the carbon footprint and other environmental aspects of any architectural implementation, it seems that such commissions, and not subsequent avant-garde objects, will determine the future of architecture, at least in the global West. The simplicity and elegant minimalism of Lacaton-Vassal architecture are as much the result of an aesthetic choice of the authors, as of the economic calculation and social responsibility that architects should be characterized by.

This year's (2022) Pritzker Prize for Diebedo Francis Kere from Burkina Faso confirms the trend of seeking contemporary avant-garde in “social architecture”, created largely for local needs and with the participation of local communities. As in the case of the achievements of the aforementioned artists: Aravena and Lacaton-Vassal, Kere's output, although formally very interesting, is clearly different from the main trends of world architecture that we have observed over the last few decades. It is a low-budget architecture in which environmental problems related to climate change and social issues come to the fore. Architecture possible to implement only in broad participation (not only at the design and administrative decision stage, but also during the construction process) with the local community it will serve.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The in situ research and literature studies carried out by the author have proven that the multidirectional creative attitudes observed almost half a century ago by Jencks and confirmed from time to time by other researchers, related to different philosophical, artistic

¹⁸ Aravena was also a finalist of the EU Mies van der Rohe Architecture Award in 2000, and in 2008 he received the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture, as well as the Silver Lion for the best young architect at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

¹⁹ Together with F. Druot and C. Hutin for the transformation of the large-panel housing complex in Bordeaux.

²⁰ Award of the German Association of Architects.

and social trends, is still a characteristic, immanent feature of contemporary architecture. Therefore, just like a hundred years ago, it is difficult to speak of a single, coherent architectural avant-garde. The existence of the avant-garde in contemporary art, including architecture, is not “obvious”²¹. The search for new forms is no longer the main occupation of architects in the 21st century, despite many visionary designs and implementations.

Particular directions and even creative attitudes of individual architects differ significantly from each other, and each of them can be considered as avant-garde by other opinion-forming circles. Anyone can find followers. It seems that architectural prizes awarded globally by international bodies ennoble the most influential artists and define what is and what is not the avant-garde. Is this really true? Sanctioned by them, and then commercialized avant-garde under the sign of star architecture died. No one is surprised anymore and does not bring new content with it. It seems that the social and environmental involvement of contemporary award-winning artists is closer to the spirit of the avant-garde movements from a hundred years ago, as well as to the contemporary middle-class society. Will their works, however, stand the test of time, as it happened in the case of the achievements of the “first modernism”? So far, there is no answer to this question.

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²¹ What is emphasized by, among others, T. Kozłowski, *Avant-garde and contemporary architecture = Awangarda a architektura współczesna*, [in:] *Przestrzeń i Forma = Space & Form*, 2020, No. 43.

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