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NON-AVANT-GARDE CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

NIE AWANGARDA – ARCHITEKTURY WSPÓŁCZESNEJ

Abstract

Architects try to pass for innovators. Novelty and the negation of memorised shapes have always been part of the artists' activities. But can architecture and art change eternally? There are moments in art when recalling familiar shapes, though in new scales and other colours, is considered a path to novelty. Duchamp showed the artists the possibility of using a new path to uniqueness. However, his games with objects were sometimes unsightly, which is a somewhat questionable path in architecture addressed to a mass audience. Thus, familiar shapes appear in contemporary architecture and the slightly earlier one presented in a different, more innovative way. Novelty does not necessarily arise through the negation of the 'old'. Architects want to create works that resemble nothing, yet are embraced by the public. This is a dilemma for the creators: they want to be avant-garde, but investors require them to build a form suitable for advertising. Perhaps this will be a rediscovered path for the emergence of other unknown architecture.

Keywords: architecture, avant-garde, novelty

Streszczenie

Architekci starają się uchodzić za nowatorów. Nowość i negowanie zapamiętanych kształtów jest wpisana w działania twórców od zawsze. Jednak czy architektura i sztuka może zmieniać się wiecznie? W sztuce są takie momenty, że przywoływanie znanych kształtów, lecz w nowych skalach i innej kolorystyce jest uznawane za drogę do nowości. Duchamp pokazał twórcom możliwość wykorzystania nowej drogi do niepowtarzalności. Jednak jego zabawy z przedmiotami bywały nieestetyczne, co w architekturze skierowanej do masowego odbiorcy jest drogą trochę wątpliwą. W architekturze współczesnej i tej trochę dawniejszej pojawiają się więc kształty znane, lecz przedstawione w inny, bardziej nowatorski sposób. Nowość czasem nie musi powstawać przez negację starego. Architekci chcą tworzyć dzieła, które nic nie przypominają, jednak są akceptowane przez odbiorców. To taki dylemat twórców, chcą być awangardowi, lecz inwestorzy wymagają od nich budowy formy nadającej się na reklamę. Może będzie to odkryta na nowo droga dla powstawania innej nieznanej architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, awangarda, nowość

1. INTRODUCTION

One might start by arguing that order runs counter to the spirit of the avant-garde. However, the history of architecture shows that even works which do not dissociate themselves from harmony and classical composition can come across as avant-garde, or at least they appear

as such. The novelty that is now welcomed with approval by business owners and cultural patrons was not taken for granted in the past. Fascinated by the great American cities, Antonio Sant'Elia shows architects the path to contemporary architecture. He exhorts them to forget everything they remember:

I combat and despise: 1. all the pseudo-architecture of the avant-garde, the Austrians, the Hungarians, the Germans and the Americans; 2. all architecture that is classical, solemn, hieratic, stagey, decorative, monumental, pretty and pleasant; 3. the embalming, reconstruction and reproduction of ancient monuments and palaces; 4. perpendicular and horizontal lines, cubic and pyramidal forms which are static, grave, oppressive and totally removed from our new sensibilities; 5. the use of bulky, voluminous, durable, antiquated and expensive materials...¹

However, this is a difficult path, even impossible at times, and sometimes something we have already seen can be considered a novelty. The design of the *Chicago Tribune Column* by Adolf Loos in 1922 can serve as a good illustration here. Arguably the most important project for future postmodernists, it proved unacceptable to the jury of the competition for the Chicago Tribune headquarters. While perhaps no longer classical, this giant column represented a new approach to memorised architecture. The project demonstrated a new somewhat playful approach to design. Contemporarily, Marcel Duchamp accustomed us to altering the memorised meanings of things and scaling them up. At that time, such decoration must have been shocking in itself, its monstrous scale and departure from the original structural function of the support seemed a novelty. Back then, the world followed a different path to the modernist form of unadorned buildings. Perhaps Loos' work would have changed architecture more than the achievements of the modernists. It would seem that all that is needed for the creation of a new architecture is a form unknown in recent times. This is related to the stylistic continuity found in the history of architecture and the negation of recently known forms in subsequent years. Stylistic changes have always been inherent in the history of art. Creators negated the works of their predecessors, but only the most recent ones. Was this, however, a path toward the avant-garde?

2. TRIFLING WITH THE RECIPIENT

Such aesthetics was gradually recognised and acknowledged as a path to novelty. Here, Sant'Elia would certainly be dissatisfied. It is possible to present a building that is a bit modernist, but somewhat strange ornamentation appears on its roof. The building in question is *Battersea Power Station* in London, built between 1939 and 1953–1955. This seemingly modern brick building nevertheless has a poetic historical appearance. The brick structure was adorned with white columns reminiscent of the Doric order. As can be seen, this was part of its avant-garde shape. Perhaps not quite modern, it nevertheless had to be an expression of classical beauty, or perhaps no longer classical one. But such aesthetics are something new in industrial buildings.

At some point, architects got bored with the even boxy masses of their buildings, which once seemed wildly avant-garde. *Venturi's column* exhibited such an already non-modernist

¹ A. Saint'Elia, *Architektura futurystyczna* [in:] Ch. Baumgarth, *Futuryzm*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1978, p. 310.

approach. It is a pillar from the *Allen Memorial Art Museum* in Oberlin from 1976. Here, the architect recalls a memorised classical form, but in an already innovative, perhaps avant-garde form. The playful shape of the column can be confirmed by Robert Venturi himself. The author describes that his work 'would look great as a vase on top of [his] building'². One does not know whether this is a joke or a harbinger of competition from the kettle created by Michael Graves in 1985.

The new use of familiar elements also provided a pretext for Hans Hollein's *Strada Novissima* project for the 1980 Venice Biennale. Large-scale models of the façades designed by the invited architects were built in the former rope factory of the Venetian arsenal. The façade designed by Hollein is a large order of six columns. However, this work does not resemble those described by Vitruvius. Here, two lateral – actual columns with Doric capitals – support the massive entablature. The space between them was filled with already non-classical four columns. Their height and dimensions are adapted to the rest of the design. However, there is a novelty here. There is a wooden column, either a pillar or a piece of a dead tree, a shaft with a capital. There also appears a well-known building, Adolf Loos' 'Doric column', his unbuilt Chicago Tribune project. As we are in the postmodern period, a fraction of a column also appears here. It hangs provocatively, familiar in form but already in a different non-structural purpose. Another 'column' is a trimmed green tree. This form does not look as if it could support anything either. One can discern a tentative abstraction in these new columns. As Picasso claimed: 'There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterwards, you can remove all traces of reality; there's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark'³. The composition is topped by a tympanum with a luminous arch and an opening in the middle. The whole, however, does not resemble the historical concept; it is a painting rather than a building.

The creators of postmodernism seek to decompose the memorised shapes of art and provoke games of memorised but different architecture. Paul Klee exhorted: 'The creation of a work of art – the growth of the crown of the tree – must of necessity, as a result of entering into the specific dimensions of pictorial art, be accompanied by distortion of the natural form'⁴. Such a description might match one of Charles Moor's best-known works. It is known not for its large size, but for the intellectual play that appears in it. We are referring here to a square created among the skyscrapers in New Orleans called *Piazza d'Italia*. This inconspicuous square became one of the most spectacular structures of the late 1970s. The Italian minority living in the city commissioned a commemorative project. The commissioners wanted the architectural form to reflect nostalgia for the former homeland. The fountain in the piazza is described in Latin: 'The citizens of New Orleans have given this fountain to all the people as a gift'. However, the architect, known for his exuberant approach to design, had a slightly different take on the theme of the work. Classical Roman architecture was playfully decomposed and presented in a new, somewhat unconventional manner. A good description of the Piazza d'Italia might be an excerpt from David Hume's essay:

² G. Świątek, *Gry sztuki z architekturą: Nowoczesne powinowactwa i współczesne integracje*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013, p. 291.

³ P. Picasso, *Rozmowa z Christianem Zervos* [in:] E. Grabowska, H. Morawska, *Artyści o sztuce. Od Van Gogha do Picassa*, PWN, Kraków 1963, pp. 553–554.

⁴ P. Klee, *O sztuce nowoczesnej* [in:] E. Grabowska, H. Morawska, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

Nothing requires greater nicety, in our enquiries concerning human affairs, than to distinguish exactly what is owing to chance [...]. To say, that any event is derived from chance, cuts short all further enquiry concerning it, and leaves the writer in the same state of ignorance as the rest of mankind. But when the event is supposed to proceed from certain and stable causes, he may then display his ingenuity, in assigning these causes; and as a man of any subtlety can never be at a loss in this particular, he has thereby an opportunity of swelling his volumes, and discovering his profound knowledge, in observing what escapes the vulgar and ignorant.⁵

The work challenges all norms in architecture and is not afraid of the term kitsch. Yet something so strange can only be seen as an expression of the artist's great intellectual irony. Charles Moore has created a circular plaza with a colonnade, with an 'Italian shoe', with Sicily highlighted, which emerges from a pond. Despite the classical expression, all the details have been decomposed in a contemporary way. It is not meant to be a classicist work, the kind we might see on a trip to Italy. Here, the capitals of the columns are no longer stone, the stone has been replaced by shiny metal. Le Corbusier's words that 'style' is a lie may come to mind. Obviously, in the case of this great architect, it referred to a new approach to architecture as art. In Moore's case, styles are also of little importance. Architectures with ancient shapes intertwine with Renaissance arches, Baroque fountains with Doric triglyphs, and capitals do not match the columns, perhaps seemingly. Everything here is meant to be perceived as a new work of art. After all, art memorised in the 20th century no longer interests anyone. Maybe such playfulness is meant to force the spectator to learn and critically evaluate it or maybe it is meant to be an ironic collage. Maybe a grandmotherly patchwork. However, if the recipients are well-educated, they can spot the architect's jokes. On the other hand, maybe someone will tell them about it and they will learn something.

Perhaps this apparent imitation can be explained with Umberto Eco's words. It is not a praise of copying, of course, but of the intellectual work the creators put into exploring perfect prototypes. Eco describes it this way:

When the author tells us he worked in a raptus of inspiration, he is lying. Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration. Talking about a famous poem of his, I forget which, Lamartine said that it had come to him in a single flash, on a stormy night, in a forest. When he died, the manuscripts were found, with revisions and variants; and the poem proved to be the most "worked out" in all of French literature. When the writer (or the artist in general) says he has worked without giving any thought to the rules of the process, he simply means he was working without realizing he knew the rules.⁶

The rules in the works of the postmodernists were obviously decomposed, or perhaps they decomposed their works rather than the rules. Perhaps Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola was right when he showed beauty in drawings and explained it using mathematical formulas that create unattainable canons in his book *Canon of the five orders of architecture* from 1562. However, we are no longer in the 20th but in the 21st century and beauty is no longer necessary and rather unfashionable. The advertising function and form of architecture, as Charles Jencks described it, is the most important thing nowadays after all. Once so attractive, postmodernism is forgotten. This can be borne out by the long battle fought over the non-demolition of

⁵ D. Hume, *Eseje z dziedziny moralności i literatury*, PWN, Warszawa 1955, p. 68.

⁶ U. Eco, *Dopiski na marginesie Imienia róży* [in:] *idem, Imię róży*, PIW, Warszawa 1991, p. 596.

the *Portland Building* – Michael Graves’ most famous project, which proved incompatible with the spirit and form of contemporary art.

The death of postmodern architecture and the birth of the contemporary decomposition trend is a fact. The latter, which pretends to be completely avant-garde, is also slowly becoming tedious. The lack of precision of its name was attractive to architects and recipients. However, the multitude of shapes that were attributed to it and were unsuitable for repetition also led to its inevitable death. Unfortunately, it failed to produce unambiguous coherent foundations. Its creators were architects defying clear-cut characterisation and building their art with a variety of means.

3. CONCLUSION

The utopia of the avant-garde dissociated itself from beauty. However, contemporary artists who distance themselves from the classical approach of the postmodernists cannot achieve avant-garde status either. Postmodernism, which negated the achievements of the modernists and tried to claim the place of such art, did not last long. It proved too sophisticated and too intellectual for its audience. And, saddest of all, it was best suited to the construction of large shopping centres, where, in turn, it proved admirably successful. Perhaps its problem was its inability to create great stylistic differences within itself. What seems important about the great avant-garde of the early 20th century is precisely its diversity. These ‘positive’ features of the aesthetics of postmodernism created its non-avant-garde character. This can be explained by Tadeusz Pawłowski’s words:

It was to a large extent [...] positive aesthetic values that gave the products of the pre-avant-garde art a feature of the product sought after on the market. Owing to these values, they played the role of sophisticated decoration, raising the social prestige of the owner. This made art dependent on financial and political patronage. The second factor is related to the sharp, critical attitude toward the existing artistic and social reality, present in many contemporary art trends. Strict criticism, however, is incompatible with the production of positive, harmonious aesthetic values.⁷

The avant-garde is not for everyone, it is meant to shock bourgeois society. It is meant to educate them and be a way of converting them to the true path of art.

Postmodernism accustomed audiences to the easy reception of architecture. Rob Krier exhorted at the time: ‘Architects [...] It is more useful to imitate something “old”, but proven, rather than to turn out something new which risks causing people suffering’⁸. He probably had aesthetic rather than functional suffering in mind. However, such an approach may explain the rationale behind the creation of such not entirely modern architectural works. Such were the works created by the architects of the postmodern era. They may not have been fully avant-garde despite the educational purpose the art may have had. Not only were they an expression of the artist’s subjective banter with the recipient, but they also demanded a certain

⁷ T. Pawłowski, *Awangarda i wartości estetyczne*, “Studia Filozoficzne” 1983, No. 11–12 (204–205), p. 89.

⁸ R. Krier, *Przestrzeń miejska* [in:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, GRUPA SZTUKA ARCHITEKTURY, Warszawa 2013, p. 88.

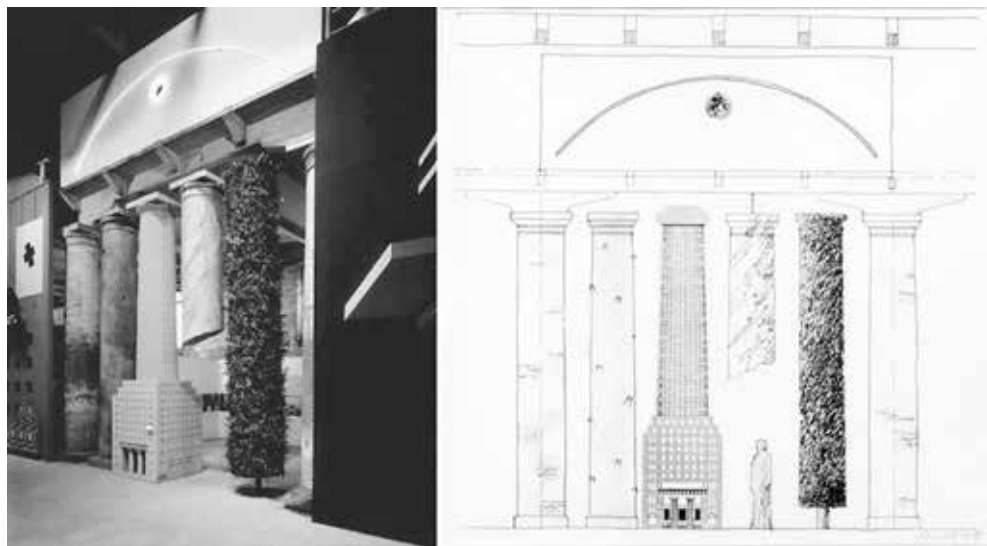
familiarity from the latter, which was also one of the postulates of the avant-garde. Using the Piazza d'Italia as an example, we can see that the initial admiration soon ended and the work was vandalised by local residents who did not seem to understand the art.

Despite its intellectual underpinnings and mocking nature, postmodern art did not achieve avant-garde status. As it seems, the ease with which it was accepted by customers, enthralled by the architectural forms of the great American shopping centres could not augur its recognition in the world of art criticism. While creating his *Ready-mades*, Marcel Duchamp was far from aiming for social praise. The 1980s architecture, therefore, lacked a critical approach from the public. As we can see, great architecture must reject all rules, logic and rationality in search of its originality. Small jokes or even great ones are not a guarantee of the creation of a great work, appreciated only by later generations. The interest of ordinary users and audiences is not conducive to recognising a work as avant-garde. David Hume emphasised that we need rules for better reception of a work and that art in which rules are perceived more clearly reaches its audience better. The philosopher wrote: 'It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another'⁹. However, what is good for philosophers is not necessarily good for constructed works. Demonstrating the rules that accompanied architecture, even those cleverly camouflaged, too simply has proved over time to be too obvious and simply boring. Such architecture has died somewhat forgotten. However, what surrounds us today, and what Antonio Monestirolí called architecture 'in a war bonnet', is also becoming ordinary and no longer pretends to be avant-garde after successive repetitions. Today's avant-garde is no longer necessary; the taste is determined by the lady from the television, and she knows best what people need.



Ill. 1. Battersea Power Station, G.G. Scott, London 1939, 1953–1955, photo: Alberto Pascual.

⁹ D. Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 193.



III. 2. H. Hollein, Strada Novissima, 1980, Venice, source: <http://www.hollein.com/eng/Exhibitions/Strada-Novissima> (access: 20.06.22).



III. 3. Ch. Moore, Piazza d'Italia, New Orleans, 1978, photo: Peter Albion.

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