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AVANT-GARDE: ILLUSION OR INDIVIDUALLY CONSTRUCTED TYPOGRAPHY?

AWANGARDA: ZŁUDZENIE CZY INDYWIDUALNIE BUDOWANA TYPOGRAFIA?

Abstract

A specific, contemporary stage in the evolution of art: it is easier to change the interpretation than to find the absent... The issue with the avant-garde in architecture is like the one with art... not everything that wants to be art is art. The general overabundance of everyday artefacts usurping an overvalued status, as well as regret and resentment over the hitherto interpretation of what temporarily is already Absent or merely Difficult-to-Access – give rise to the illusion of the existence of perhaps already past notions... Observational methodological studies, using an interpretive method, indicate relationships between the construction of architectural space and philosophical interpretations of concepts, accepted theories of perception and McLuhan's theory that the *medium* is the transmission of information.

Keywords: architecture, architectonics, avant-garde, fragmentation and compilation, illusion, individualisation, typography

Streszczenie

Swoiste, współczesne stadium ewolucji sztuki: łatwiej jest zmienić interpretację niż odnaleźć nieobecne... Z awangardą w architekturze – jest jak ze sztuką... nie wszystko, co chciało by nią być – nią jest. Powszechny nadmiar uzurpujących do nadwartościowania pospolitych artefaktów – a także żal za dotychczasową interpretacją współcześnie już Nieobecnego bądź tylko Trudnodostępnego – stanowią o złudzeniu istnienia przeszłych już, być może, pojęć... Badania metodologiczne obserwacyjne, przy zastosowaniu metody interpretacyjnej, wskazują na zależności między konstruowaniem przestrzeni architektonicznej a filozoficznymi interpretacjami pojęć, przyjętymi teoriami postrzegania oraz teorią McLuhana, że *medium* jest przekazem informacji.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, architektonika, awangarda, fragmentyzacja i kompilacja, złudzenie, indywidualizowanie, typografia

1. AVANT-GARDE PROSE OF MR JOURDAIN

Monsieur Jourdain: And when one speaks, what is that then?
Philosophy Master: Prose.

Monsieur Jourdain: What! When I say, 'Nicole, bring me my slippers, and give me my nightcap,' that's prose? Philosophy Master: Yes, Sir.

Monsieur Jourdain: By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it, and I am much obliged to you for having taught me that...

Molière, *The Middle-Class Gentleman*

We become aware that something has existed when this Something disappears... It is generally believed that the Avant-Garde emerges with the New – but looking at the *New*, resonating in the communication sometimes for decades – that is not obvious. Certainly, the *avant-garde* connotes *pointing the direction* to those who follow it, *guiding them towards*... It is often associated with a paradigm shift – but that is not obvious either. This pointing can also preserve existing states: in this case, to be in the vanguard of events means to lead the way along a long-established path through former Ideas that are today unnoticeably mundane or still commonly regarded as innovative.

What is the avant-garde in Architecture? Before asking the question, another would have to be formulated: can there be an avant-garde without a guiding Idea? The answer seems obvious. *Vera causa* usually precedes *causa causans*. The avant-garde in Architecture is a consequence of the emanation of a spatially implemented Idea – a new Thought, usually appearing outside of architecture, in a specific attempt to reorder the functioning of the world, in everything it can influence. That new Thought interferes with ontological security – it changes people's lives. By directing creative activity in many areas of culture, art, technology, and social sciences – it provokes and suggests a different approach to the details of the tasks to be solved, in various fields of creativity, including architecture. New thought is the inspiration to choose a new path, construct new behaviours and experience new values. It is expressed by a mathematical formula, a drawing, a painting, a musical or literary work or an architectural idea. Transferred to architecture, it is a supra-architectural inspiration: it initiates a new way of thinking that can contribute to changing an existing behavioural paradigm¹. The consequence of the Idea in Architecture is the *Concept* – a specific culmination of ideas, which is the author's depiction of the Idea in a concrete solution, capturing the object's content and the connections of various elements that can express it in a shaped spatial structure. The construction of the separation of space can be studied not only in terms of its reference to philosophical theories but also in terms of clarifying the concept of an architectural object or urban design in formal, aesthetic or utilitarian terms (compact vs dispersed object, essayistic vs mechanistic space, open vs closed, contextual vs acontextual, shaping suggesting the actions of users: chronological-linear vs compilation, etc.)². That makes sense for any meaningful action, assuming that the goal is to change the paradigm – even when the final outcome is unpredictable or counterproductive.

¹ G. Nawrot, *O współczesnych Formach Zamieszkiwania W mieście*. Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2015, p. 80.

² *Idem*, G. Nawrot, *EHTIC Zabrze. Inspiracyjne konstruowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej*, "Builder" 2022, 7 (300), pp. 35, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.8801.

For the avant-garde, like Stendhal's *beauty*, is a kind of promise – and promises are not always fulfilled. Due to the ubiquitous impact of information communication – that applies to virtually every area connected to social life. Hence, the conclusion is that without a new Idea outside architecture – there is no emanation of it in architecture. There is, of course, an exception when a novel Concept, initiated in architecture, can become a kind of model, illustrating the Idea, later implemented in other fields.

Referring to contemporary times, it can, of course, be argued that the specific material and metaphorical multiplicity inherent in the construction of space is an emanation of the post-modern Idea of *fragmentation* and *compilation*, omnipresent also in other fields, as opposed to the hitherto existing *compactness* – and Architecture is only one of the fields in which it is realised. Paradoxically, therefore, the shaping of contemporary architecture, expressed in the apparent diversity of objects and concepts, identifies at the same time the actual explicitness of the present Idea. The paradigm shift in the construction of space is determined by the directed Idea and not by the difference in the details it shapes. In the case of contemporary Architecture, in the realm of the Idea, it is diversity or metaphorical *fragmentation* and *compilation* in the expression of the object and in the realm of matter, it is *compactness* or *fragmentation* and *compilation*. Formal shapes, manufacturing techniques and materials, and details of the division of space – these are the details. They are as different as the contemporary models of various makes of cars or aircrafts are different in their details. With such an assumption – there is a reasonable presumption of permanent continuity in the multi-threaded current of the “avant-garde” that has been going on for years, even when one or more of the currents is dying out. It is now difficult to speak of a radical rejection of the achievements of the last few decades; it is rather their evolutionary transformation. The specific expression of the contemporary Avant-garde is, therefore, not a rejection of the existing output but its continuation.

2. THREE QUOTATIONS: ILLUSION, INDIVIDUALISATION, TYPOGRAPHY

2.1. ILLUSION

Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again...

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*.
Reality does not exist.

“To repeat – so as not to surpass the Master. The Master is great and almost perfect, so perfection is achieved by equalling him – one must paint in the same way because better is unattainable”³. Master architects already exist. Their ideas too. Hence, getting closer to perfection is not about finding new ideas, and the existing ones, replaced by the sign systems that format

³ J. Knothe, *Z żabiej perspektywy*, Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa, 1977, p. 28.

the space of architectural objects, resonate in an endless repetition – become imperceptible over time. And it is not a matter of imitation or even parody – as Jean Baudrillard wrote more than forty years ago about then-current reality; what we are dealing with here is rather the replacement of reality by signs, that is, the operation of restraining every real process by its operational copy: a metastable, descriptive, programmable and infallible machine that furnishes all the signs of reality and avoids all its vicissitudes⁴.

The architectural notation, expressed in the method of constructing the space and the means of separating it, referenced to functioning archetypes – expresses the specific *genome of architecture's identity* – namely, what determines the sense of the meaning of the separated architectural space and what is associated with it. Potential change to the Idea is an interference with the identity of the architecture. It is like changing the name of a street, interfering with what is written on the stamps of the companies registered in that street – and changing the paradigms of everything related to space will also construct a different behaviour of people.

A kind of cloning represents the final stage in the history of architectural modelling, in which its essence, having lost its originality, becomes the object of serial propagation⁵. The most advanced form of this development is one in which the original no longer even exists since things are designed and manufactured from the very beginning as a function of their unlimited reproduction⁶. Office buildings, petrol stations, hotels, and residential houses – like the reproduced jerseys of players from rival sports clubs, made by the same company, with the same advertisements placed on them – only represent, different for each corporation, interpretations of the same content. Buildings and urban concepts commonly replicate signs of the content of ideas that have long gone unnoticed. The illusion of the existence of the avant-garde is suggested by its appearances: new materials and their technological perfection, colours, and perfection of workmanship.

2.2. INDIVIDUALISATION

*Can a cat be taught to play the violin? It can but it's not worth it... Imagine a country where one can't move without encountering a cat wiggling a string. It would be awful...*⁷

Jan Knothe, *Z żabiej perspektywy*

According to Anthony Giddens, “lifestyle is a material dimension of how an individual defines their identity.” Architecture, shaped by man – reflects the identity of the times when it was created. The importance of interpretive permanence is essential for the continuity of the projected understanding of the essence of perceived space: its structure and the reading of the information conveyed. It is related to ontological security that makes us consider safe or dangerous, true or false, and beautiful or ugly, the things which, in the light of past transmissions and personal experience of structures and symbols, are “universally” recognised as familiar and adequately reflected⁸.

⁴ J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i Symulacja. Rzeczywistość nie istnieje*, Sic, Warszawa 2005, p. 7.

⁵ *Cloning is thus the last stage of the history and modelling of the body, the one at which, reduced to its abstract and genetic formula, the individual is destined to serial propagation* – according to: J. Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ J. Knothe, *op. cit.*

⁸ G. Nawrot, *Architecture – the myth of interpreting identity of images* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining the architectural space – the myths of architecture*, Oficyna Wydaw. ATUT, Wrocław 2021, p. 110.

The architectural object, emanating Vitruvius' *firmitas*, is more than a *material façade*, that is a materially built structure covering the changing useful content of the object, but also more than a *metaphorical façade*, i.e. successive fleeting shadows of the ideological meaning attributed to the phenomenon of that content. The subjective façade of references – is a non-material, metaphorical *shell*, which is a mental emanation of the record of events and related associations. An architectural object is a subjectively interpreted individual entity, categorised by name: house, railway station, shop, office...⁹.

In such a context, a building is an ambiguous separation from the space of the external world, which involves interpreting the methods of its construction, formation and perception¹⁰. The essence here is to interpret the concept as a multidimensional structure, a consciously combined system, a product of Kant's *architectonics* – organising in space the sensations and actions of observers and users^{11 12}. The paradigm shift in the construction of space is therefore determined by the Idea aimed at constructing a new *architectonics* of the facility, rather than the difference in the shaped details. The essence of perceiving the reality of the Architecture's world does not emerge only from the superficial perception of its external material dimensions, reflected in the message by a one-dimensional image, simplified by the often ambiguous word: *form*. The common perception of an object – is to interpret this *architectural skin*: covering its real, structural essence with external appearances of various "innovative" elements, including a specific veil of forming blocks – the façade. That *form*, as well as its colour and texture – identifying the object – calls it a flat or multidimensional, superficially perceived image of its "façade", concealing the actual, spatial structure of its content¹³.

The transformation of the object's skin and the addition of characteristic details of form do not change the architectural content and structure – and what is most important here: they do not become a new form of communication in architecture. However, when the contents of the objects, in their wrapping, become generally unnoticeable, what remains is to draw attention with extreme logical or aesthetic dissimilarity, which provokes the search for solutions that mark their place in space in an idiosyncratic way.

2.3. TYPOGRAPHY

Medium is message

Herbert Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*

Typography, always closely linked to writing as a visual form of intermediation between the content of a message and the reader, is usually associated with printing¹⁴. The world in which it plays a vital role remains invisible until its *reader* comes across an error¹⁵. Typographic activities in Architecture are reflected in the formatting of potential intentions, that is, the

⁹ *Idem*, *Interpretacyjne konstruowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej. Fasada a struktura. Obraz bądź system*, "Builder" 2021, 4 (285), p. 34, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.7925.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ According to Immanuel Kant: "Architectonics is the art of constructing a system, that is the unity of various cognitions under one Idea", see: I. Kant, *Krytyka czystego rozumu*, PWN, Warszawa 1957, p. 577.

¹² G. Nawrot, *Interpretacyjne konstruowanie...*

¹³ *Idem*, *EHTIC Zabrze...*

¹⁴ D. Jury, *Co to jest typografia*, Arkady, Warszawa 2022, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p.11.

conscious endowment of an object with characteristics according to accepted patterns. They are analogous to constructing the content of a book: words – with familiar letters, sentences – with familiar words, and the whole text – with the composition that expresses it.

When, as Rem Koolhaas wrote, “the replicated, cloned buildings become the currency of civic enlightenment”¹⁶, the construction of the identity genome of an architectural object, which involves designing distinctive, characteristic features resulting in a specific style of staying in the designed space, becomes an attempt to build typography that formats the behaviour of users.

Typographic architecture either reproduces or implies multiply replicated reproduction of Something we looked at before – and by observation – we understood and learned¹⁷. It reproduces *Something* we had to think about before and what we are thinking about now – searching. We would like it, on the basis of past experience and knowledge, to be perfect or vice versa: in a provocative twist of a consciously constructed *error* – to point out perversely the uselessness of utility or aesthetics... In the case of typography, too, the essence is to construct the concept as a multidimensional structure consciously assembled from the diverse elements of an *architectural* system¹⁸ – that organises the experiences and actions of observers and users in space¹⁹. An object *printed* in this way often characterises the constructed space as belonging to a corporation. We can see this in office buildings, supermarkets, hotels, and residential buildings. But also in non-corporate facilities: offices, schools, kindergartens, barracks, hospitals, and prisons.

3. SUMMARY

Is it possible to last in the vanguard of something that changes nothing? *Being in the vanguard of something that changes nothing*, despite the universality of this type of phenomenon, points to the specific antinomy of the formulation.

An avant-garde is something that emerges as *New* and – directing actions – seeks a paradigm shift. Creation activities are effective if the duration of the processes initiated, and their locations allow them to inspire further ones. The phenomenon of the Avant-garde draws the observer’s attention to how that *New* is different from the *existing*. Being primarily a *new articulation* of the message, it is not clearly related to the type of content of the directing Idea. Nor is it linked to its values. It is merely a *medium* – a specific, attention-grabbing present-day otherness, a *metaphorical frame*, to be filled with various content. It seems that if Architecture should contribute to the improvement of living conditions, then the Thought that creates It, shifting the paradigm, should also strive to do so – and its specific placement in the *metaphorical frame* of the avant-garde should mean participating in the initiating activities that begin such directed changes. It is no longer a political economy of production that directs us, as Jean Baudrillard wrote, but an economic politics of reproduction, of

¹⁶ R. Koolhaas, *Śmieciowa przestrzeń*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2017, p. 14.

¹⁷ Jan Knothe’s words about a drawing: “A drawing always reproduces something. Something that we had to look at before. We had to not only look, but also see – that is, to understand the object we were going to recreate, to learn it...”, see: J. Knothe, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

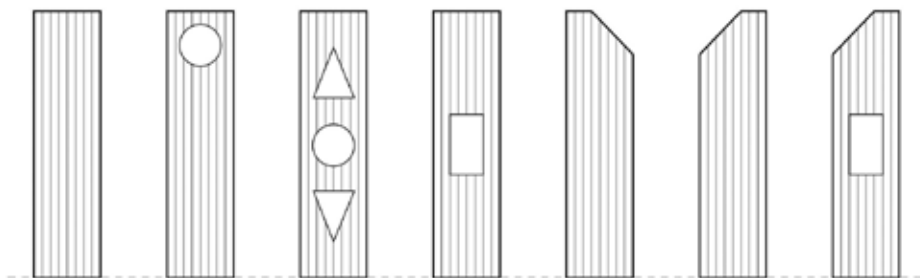
¹⁸ ... architectural system – i.e. a product of Kant’s *architectonics*

¹⁹ According to Immanuel Kant: “Architectonics is the art of constructing a system, that is the unity of various cognitions under one Idea”, I. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 577.

recycling – ecology and pollution – a political economy of the remainder²⁰. The avant-garde, as it is commonly understood, is not long-lasting. For it is difficult to remain in a permanent avant-garde for decades – one can, however, remain in a permanent process of resonating the Ideas of yore. After the first signs, which are the emanations of the avant-garde, its resonances or replicas appear.



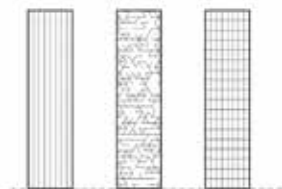
- III. 1. Avant-garde – the result of a synergy of content and matter, impacting a paradigm shift in the mapping model of object construction. A specific stage in the evolution of art: it is easier to change interpretation than to find the absent.



- III. 2. Illusion. The transformation of the skin of the building and added characteristic details of form – the details do not change the architectural content of the structure and do not become a new form of communication.



- III. 3. Individualisation. When the contents of the objects, in their wrapping, become indiscernible, what remains is to draw attention with an extreme logical or aesthetic dissimilarity.



- III. 4. Typography. Activities are reflected in the formatting of potential intentions – giving the object characteristics according to known patterns. They are analogous to constructing the content of a book: words – with known letters, sentences – with known words, and the whole text – with the composition that expresses it.

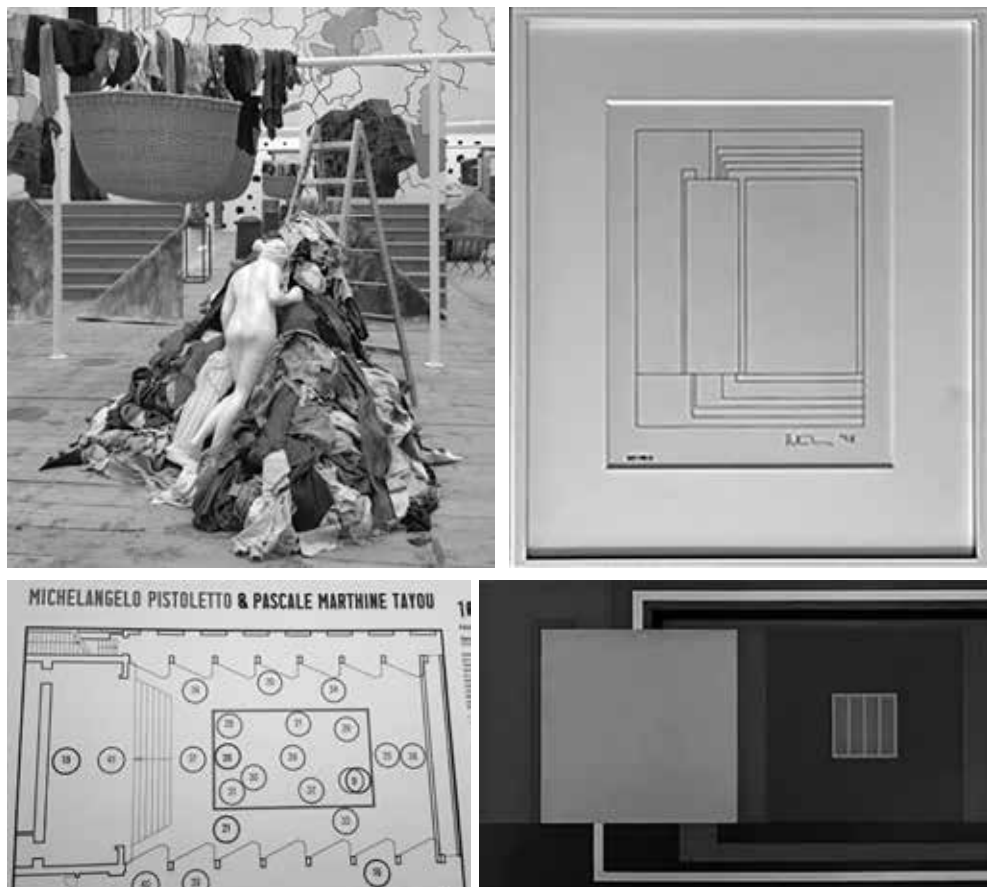
²⁰ J. Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, s. 176.



- Ill. 5. Typographic architecture reproduces or implies replication in the future. It seeks to make it perfect or to point out a utilitarian or aesthetic difference in a kind of perverse way. The essence is to build a premise, or a multidimensional structure, made up of various elements of an *architectural* system – organising the experiences and actions of observers and users. *Actelion Business Centre* in Basel (Herzog & de Meuron). Photos by the Author.



III. 6. Typographic architecture Herzog & de Meuron. Multidimensional structure made up of various elements of an *architectural* system – organising the experiences and actions of observers and users – Vitra House in Vitra Camp. Photos by the Author.



III. 7. *Vera causa* usually precedes *causa causans*. The avant-garde in Architecture is a consequence of an implemented Idea – usually appearing outside of architecture. Today it is no longer a political economy of production that directs us, as Jean Baudrillard wrote, but an economic politics of reproduction, of recycling – ecology and pollution a political economy of the remainder... Exhibition of Michelangelo Pistoletto & Pascale Marthine Tayou in San Gimignano, 2019 (photo by the Author on the left) vs Peter Halley's painting²¹.

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²¹ P. Halley, https://www.google.com/search?q=peter+halley&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj3zofu0rn4AhWE-ioKHf11AI8Q_AUoAXoECAIQAw&biw=1536&bih=755&dpr=1.25 (access: 19.06.2022).

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