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SHOCK AND SHOW – ARCHITECTURE TODAY

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Abstract

The civilization machine of progress sets the pace of task implementation, generating the need to strengthen the incentives to effectively reach the recipient. Our perception is faster and shorter, focusing on the intensity of the signal and reception reaction. So, do we need the increasing power of the message? Are we living in the era of shock architecture, which is becoming ubiquitous, escalating in its expression and ideological extravagance? Does the Bilbao effect still play a role as a socio-economic and cultural phenomenon? The questions posed are to lead to finding the right way of identifying architectural space, and the methods used: observational, heuristic and case study facilitate today's understanding of the rule of utility, durability and beauty as a *sine qua non* condition, or rule out the legitimacy of its existence.

Keywords: measurable architecture, perception, sensory impressions

Streszczenie

Cywilizacyjna machina postępu wyznacza tempo realizacji zadań, generując potrzebę wzmacniania bodźców mających skutecznie docierać do odbiorcy. Percypujemy szybciej i krócej, nastawiając się na intensywność sygnału i reakcji odbioru. Czy zatem potrzebujemy rosnącej siły komunikatu? Czy żyjemy w epoce architektury szoku, która staje się wszechobecna, eskalując w swym wyrazie i ekstrawagancji ideowej? Czy efekt Bilbao nadal odgrywa rolę fenomenu społeczno-ekonomiczno-kulturowego? Postawione pytania prowadzić mają do znalezienia właściwej drogi identyfikacji przestrzeni architektonicznej. Zastosowane metody: obserwacyjna, heurystyczna oraz *case study* ułatwić mają dzisiejsze pojmowanie reguły użyteczności, trwałości i piękna, jako warunku *sine qua non*, bądź wykluczyć zasadność jej istnienia.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura mierzalna, percepcja, wrażenia zmysłowe

1. INTRODUCTION

Striving to search for new ways of architectural expression entails the need for a proper identification of the forms created. However, questions arise: what does the phrase “correct identification” mean? Is it even possible to objectively form opinions on architecture? How to set criteria? How to navigate the wealth of diversity? Freedom of expression encourages designers to make more and more creative articulations. This, in turn, generates the need to look for a new language to describe architecture and new tools for its recognition, classification and systematization. Technical, material and engineering possibilities allow for joining many, so distant areas in this field, giving the strength and the foundations for continuous development. Architects-craftsmen aspire to be called architects-creators. They cross boundaries so often considered sacred. The function of the building is relegated to the background, beauty ceases to be objective. The tendencies in designing architecture go back

to neo-modernism, refer to expressionism and futurism. They can express themselves in an organic manner in a courageous way. On the contrary, they are distinguished by a minimalist form and austerity. Importantly, they are noticeable and stand out from the background. In their ideological assumptions, architects more and more often abandon attachment to the context. Juliusz Żurawski's law of good continuation¹ gains more and more free interpretations, departing from the essence of assumptions. Materialized all over the world, personal visions gain admirers and haters at the same time. Architecture is getting "noisy" and it's getting loud about architecture as well. Tom Dyckhoff begins his book by asking the question: "What exactly made me lose my patience in the end?" and points to the entry: "The British-designed skyscraper looks like big pants"², the angry Chinese say. That's right: pants. Enormous pants. It is significant that the author, shocked by the comments and actual associations with underwear, begins his work with a mention of this building. Designers are gaining popularity, there is publicity and perhaps that is what the art of design is all about today. It is important that they speak, no matter how. The so-called "shock and show" omnipresent in the media manifests itself in the form of the effects of the work of design offices. Modern architectural realizations and icons of architecture are heading towards monumental sculptures, the differences between architecture and sculpture get blurred. Appearing on the arena of architectural entities, they want to use their 5 minutes to announce to the world: here I am! Tradition, local trends, and cultural treatment of identity are relegated to the background. But for how long do we have the capacity and patience in receiving and accepting avant-garde space? We certainly do not know our perceptual abilities and perhaps the flexibility to absorb the modern, crazy in expression architectural forms, will last with us for many years to come.

Of course, it is difficult to generalize, but it is impossible not to notice the ubiquitous expression of the articulation of architectural forms. There is a great danger that the rising level of this loudness and massiveness will turn into a scream, which will imply the need for silence. Perhaps we are witnessing an upheaval in thinking about architecture, perhaps we are tired and excited to indulge in non-flashy, simple forms, such as timeless modernism or peaceful neoclassicism?

The following article is an attempt to engage in a polemic with the subject of the image of contemporary architecture. The observational and comparative, heuristic and case study methods used for this purpose are to bring us closer to obtaining an answer to the question: is the architectural creations of contemporary artists a never-ending game of tensions, based on the sensitivity and imagination of recipients, constituting the background of eternal readiness for the next instalments of extravagant forms, is there a place in this game for the Vitruvian rules relating to durability, utility and beauty?

2. UTOPIAN FULFILLMENT OF DREAMS OR DREAMS ABOUT NORMALITY?

"We design our utopias according to what we know now. We exaggerate the attractiveness of what we support. We act, after all, and at best, as prisoners of our present reality who allow themselves to be dreamed"³.

¹ J. Żurawski, *O budowie formy architektonicznej*, Arkady, Warszawa 1962, pp. 120–140.

² T. Dyckhoff, *Epoka spektaklu. Perypetie architektury i miasta XXI wieku*, Karakter, Kraków 2018.

³ I. Wallerstein, *Culture as the Ideological battleground of the Modern World-System* [in:] M. Featherstone, *Global Culture. Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, Sage Publications, London 1990, p. 51.

Immanuel Wallerstein's words aptly illustrate the way in which not only do designers of architectural spaces think but also come close to defining actions taken by most people. Following fashion and contemporary trends are temporary fascinations that disappear when new indications or more popular directions appear. The search for the new becomes the goal, although it is known that new things also have their limited duration, their beginning and their twilight. As Ben van Berkel says, "the architectural image is always changing; there is no permanent reality"⁴. However, being here and now we play our roles in the epoch of the spectacle aptly called by Tom Dyckhoff, whether we like it or not, we become another mode of the emerging reality. This reality, called the architectural context, space, city, in turn, determines the framework in which we exist, adopting the applicable rules. Often these are habits that result from the status of a given community or culture⁵, and an objective assessment of newly created architectural projects may only concern a designated area or group. Forms that may be considered very modern in a given environment will be considered bold and extravagant in others. For some, they will be a challenge and a goal to be pursued, both in the sphere of design and material possessions, for others, a strongly overwhelming image of chaos, lack of respect for the legacy found in the space, or an unnecessary showcase of the architect who is hungry for publicity. Dreams of totally different colours determine different views on design circles, as well as the scope and impact of the design and implementation, the rank of the newly designed facility, financial and economic facilities and, of course, predominantly, the name of the architect.

It is assumed that architecture is to meet the expectations of its recipients, as it is an applied art (durability and usability). The architect and the recipient are, however, two extreme poles, which may coincide in terms of the beauty of architectural forms, but may also differ significantly. Bruno Taut wrote about the aesthetics of architecture that "the new direction constantly proves that the most reliable interpretation is the one that best harmonizes with the landscape in a natural way"⁶. It would seem that a natural instinct would be to fully accept the forms offered by Taut. However, can we assume that it was so? That the normative, rhythmical, predictable layouts of estates were able to please everyone? By focusing on technical issues, topical in the period of modernism, leaving the more artistic issues aside, we perceive architecture through the prism of comfort of use and ergonomics. However, there is a risk factor that is borne by the potential user of a given space, namely entrusting aesthetic views to the designer. It may happen, after all, that dreams and offer, even if very comfortable, will not be able to resonate with each other and while sitting on an armchair adapted to the dimensions, we will have to observe the clash of forms or the scream of colours that are personally indigestible. And here are the aspects of fashion, stylistic tendencies that "should" be respected. By breaking our beliefs then, we are able to accept everything or even be proud of it. Are we feeling insecure and afraid of being ignorant?

There is also the premise of time, which, first of all, often changes the position of perception, but also of time, also understood as an epoch with its trends and popularities oriented each time towards slightly different types of forms and the types of spaces one wants.

Another important element is nostalgia, which encourages comebacks, that is, the smooth repetition of the characteristic features of styles in architecture and art. Satisfaction creates a need for silence. Excessive calmness generates the need to strengthen the stimuli. In her

⁴ B. Berkel, C. Bos, *Niepoprawni wizjonerzy*, Wydawnictwo Murator, Warszawa 2000, p. 7.

⁵ E. Rewers, *Post-Polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta*, TAIWPN Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 257.

⁶ B. Berkel, C. Bos, *Niepoprawni wizjonerzy*, Wydawnictwo Murator, Warszawa 2000, pp. 98–99.

monograph, Agata Twardoch quotes an interesting statement by the architect Ewa Potapow, who draws attention to another important factor that usually appears unexpectedly: a grass-root social initiative. She says: “the problem of designing within the space of, for instance, Prague, is the temptation to cloak the reality and expect the inhabitants to suddenly change their lifestyle”⁷, and these words seem to confirm how often there is a contradiction between the idea of designers and the expectations of the community for which specific spaces are designed. Even if they satisfy architects’ tastes, they do not have to fulfil “dreams about one’s own space”. In the same study, Justyna Swoszowska’s statement that: “I have the impression that everything is now for show, and contemporary architecture is so de-socialized”⁸, inspires reflections on the place of the common man in the world of architectural creations. A place understood in two ways, as a behavioural phenomenon, but also as spiritual participation – space and emotions.

Table 1 presents a list that takes into account the relationships between the external factors mentioned and their possible translation into the perception of architectural space.

Table 1

No	Factors influencing the reception of forms and architectural spaces	Probable effects – recipient reactions in terms of the perception of architectural forms and spaces
1.	fashion / stylistic trends	mass acceptance of forms, regardless of their actual reception and comfort of use
2.	time – the passage of time	quality, amortization, traces of use, habituation, indifference, weariness
3.	nostalgia	boredom, excess – the need for difference
4.	historical period	top-down trend offering new design style
5.	grassroots changes	changes unpredictable for the designer – loss of value or profit, often caused by the lack of consistency between the offer and the comfort of the user
6.	need for appraisal	the loss of separate identities of architecture, blurring of differences and regionalisms, unification of forms

The first aspect, i.e. the issue of free choice or even changing the place to live, is often difficult due to origin, roots, family and, above all, connections with property that a person owns and has accumulated for years. However, reactions to emerging architectural creations can be stimulated. The level of external tension associated with the pace of technical development raises the level of perception of stimuli that change the way of one’s perception. Similarly to a speeding train, where the image outside the window blends into one continuous show, which is usually homogeneous and boring. In this belt of the recorded world, our attention is drawn to the extremity of form, colour and size. The same happens in the world of architecture. Differentiation is a recognizable sign and the goal is to “stand out”. There is no global migration requirement to participate in this show. The ticket is the Internet connection, a remote control and the digital world. As Jan Cudzik says, “thanks to new technologies, we can observe more and more free flow of thoughts and ideas, leading to both the continuous

⁷ A. Twardoch, *Architektki. Czy kobiety zaprojektują lepsze miasta?*, Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal Sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2022, p. 101.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 308.

development of trends and the formation of connections between them”⁹. The architecture that stands out, loses its local identity, giving the feeling that “being here I can be anywhere”, that in our small plot we get a scrap of a different, better world. Theatrical versions of artistic works catch up with us, often surprising us with their character and pace of creation. The awareness of designers is based on emotions, not only one’s own emotions, but most of all, the recipient, user and external observer. This “arms race” is shifting the limits of bioavailability, opening the gate to acceptance for more and more extravagant forms. Imagination, openness, a holistic way of creation are helpful in this process, and above all, the conviction supported by experience that thanks to advanced technologies, even the boldest realizations are possible. It is dreams that define the course of action.

3. IDEA, IMAGINATION, RATIONALISM

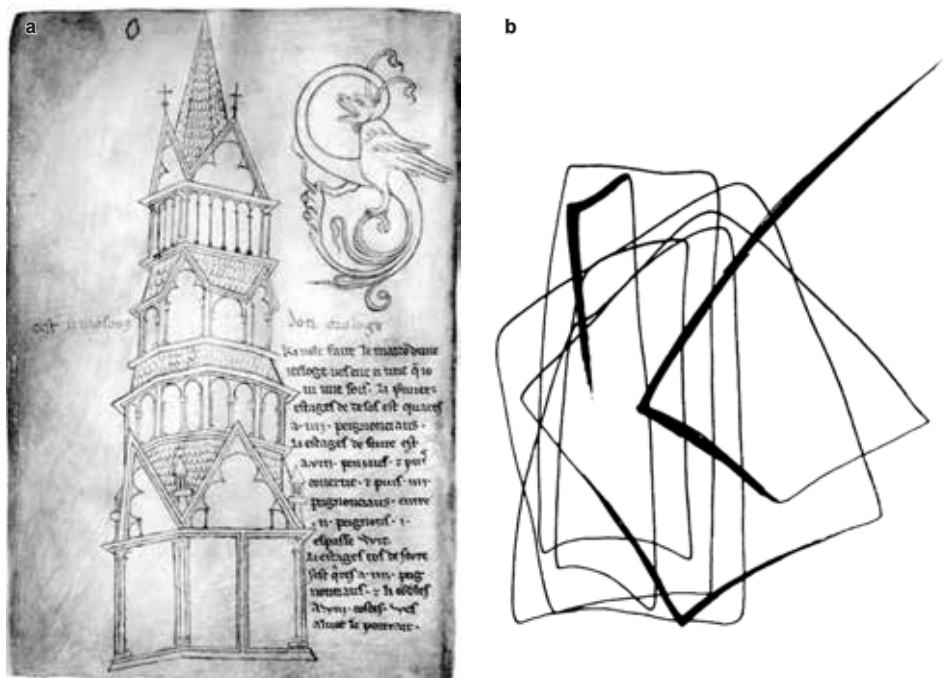
The over-identity and timelessness manifested itself in the assumptions of modernist thought. To this day, we admire simple, well-proportioned designs from the beginning of the 20th century. Architecture, which is weightless and amorphous in its design, freeing itself from the weight of the form – these visions are still valid. The words of Stefania Zahorska¹⁰, included in the review of the International Architecture Exhibition in Warsaw, are quoted by Bohdan Pniewski: “great spaces and large openings. Thin walls and thin supports. Decentralization. The partitions separating a person from free space become small and transparent (glass). The lungs and eyes of the house are wide open”¹¹. Architects, 100 years away, are constantly perfecting the ideas that were highly avant-garde at the time. But how much needs to be done to ensure that the avant-garde remains at the level of the avant-garde, so that the separate language of expression can still surprise, while fulfilling its basic functions? Immersion in the digital reality gives you an introduction to the unreal, gets you used to the impossible or inaccessible views, but also creates the need for something more, something more powerful. It is not easy to satisfy an excited imagination, eager for new impressions. On the basis of a comparative analysis of selected ideological sketches, we will try to assess the way of thinking and design consequences, referring to a consciously narrowed set of characteristic works.

Looking at the sketches presented in Ill. 1 and Ill. 2, which are so distant in time, we can see significant differences in terms of the quality of presenting design ideas. Early architectural notes from the 13th century for Villard de Honnecourt and for Sir Christopher Wren from 1632–1723 focused on dry design facts, paying attention to detail. They gave a general view of the nature of the newly designed object or its fragment. When analysing the drawings, it was expected that the effects would be similar to the presentation and would not go far beyond the standards, although they could certainly give evidence to an innovative approach to contemporary architecture. The design burden was then heavily concentrated on engineering and structural refinement. This does not mean that safety is not a concern in today’s design procedures. The differences lie in the fact that the technological leap now gives architects and constructors completely different tools that change the way building materials, prefabricated elements and extravagant details are produced, which allows for ways of implementing projects, unimaginable several centuries ago.

⁹ J. Cudzik, *Poszukiwanie nowej estetyki w dobie cyfrowych technologii*. “Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Gdańskiej. Inżynieria Lądowa i Wodna”, 2(630), Gdańsk 2013, pp. 17–23.

¹⁰ S. Zahorska, Międzynarodowa Wystawa Architektury w Warszawie, “Architekt” 1926, nr 5, p. 1.

¹¹ B. Pniewski, *Architekt salonu i władzy*, Wydawnictwo Filtry sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2021, p. 29.



Ill. 1. Sketches of architecture: a) Clock tower, Villard de Honnecourt – Sketchbook, source: https://www.wikiwand.com/pl/Villard_de_Honnecourt (access: 30.05.2022); b) Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art / Zaha Hadid Architects, source: <https://www.archdaily.com/786968/ad-classics-rosenthal-center-for-contemporary-art-zaha-hadid-architects-usa> (access: 30.05.2022).

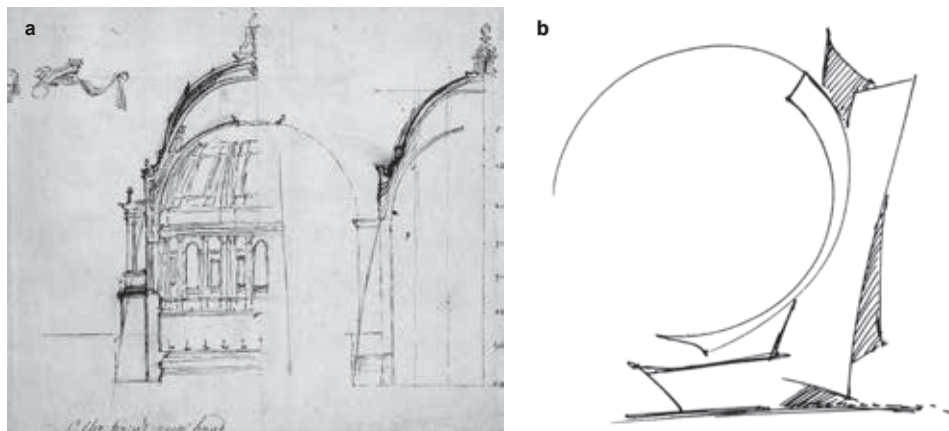
This foundation is like a strong pillar, grounding the awareness of creation and, by definition, putting the architect on a completely different level of action. A contemporary architect knows that he or she can do more, and the recipient of their works can expect to receive more and also expect more, although the consequences are not always fully satisfactory. The contemporary architect concisely outlines the visions of their buildings, giving the field for constructors and executives as well as interpreters of many fields to show off. It also leaves time to itself, because in such a shortened form (Ill. 1b, 2b, 3b, 3c), a lot can be added or captured to the designed and implemented form.

Looking at the sketches of earlier projects (13th-19th century), it was difficult to see the freedom of interpretation in the notation, which was reflected in the space filled with subdued complexes of objects, constituting compact, in a sense predictable, city quarters.

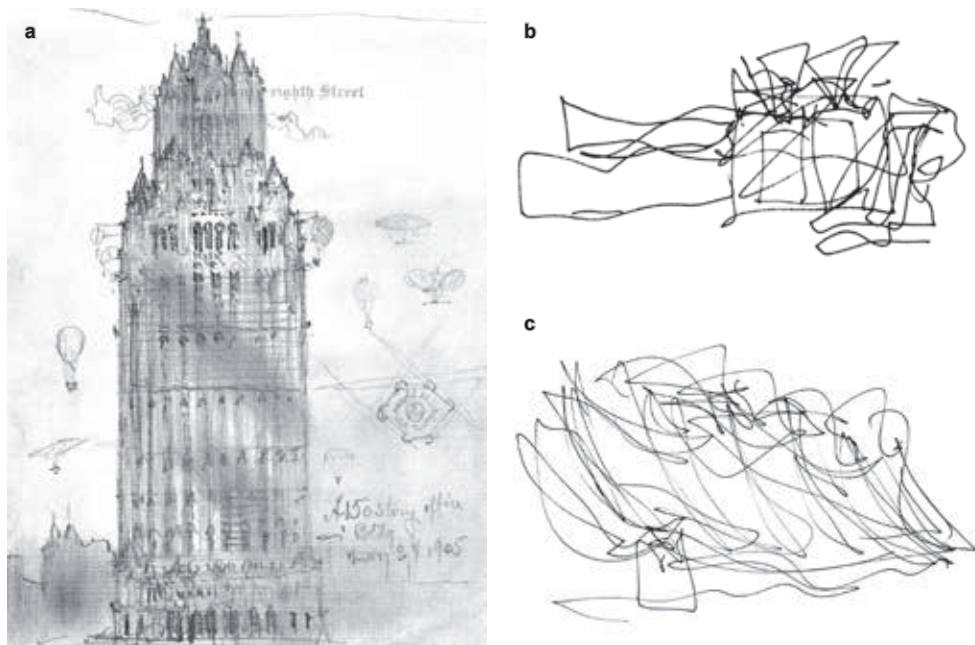
Contemporary ideological sketches, records of design ideas presented by many means of expression (pencil, ink, watercolour, acrylic, mixed techniques, digital recording) are a play with lines, composing the external characteristic of their author. It's a specific form of a business card¹². Daniel Libeskind wrote: "It is not the wealth of raw materials that is important, but the wealth of ideas"¹³, and his way of thinking is perfectly illustrated by sketches, similarly echoing also in the works of other contemporary artists.

¹² K. Słuchocka K., *Drawing – the autograph of spatial sensitivity*, Technical Transactions, "Architecture", No. 4, vol. 112, Kraków 2015, pp. 43–49.

¹³ D. Libeskind, *Przełom: przygody w życiu i architekturze*, Wydawnictwo naukowo Techniczne, Warszawa 2008, p. 173.



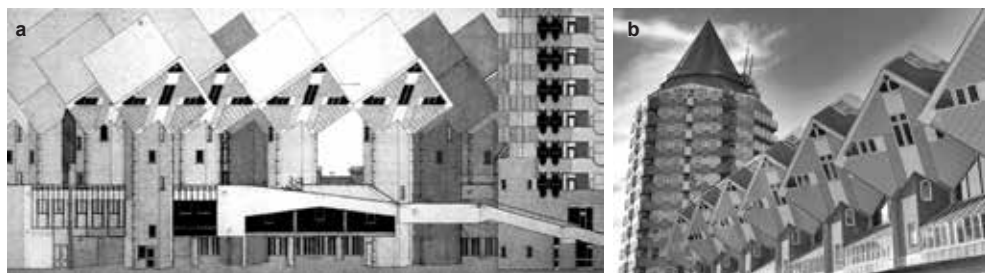
III. 2. Sketches of architecture: a) Design for the cupola of St Paul's Cathedral, London, Sir Christopher Wren, architectural drawing, Museum number 1881,0611.203, source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1881-0611-203 (access: 29.05.2022); b) sketch to the design of the building "Złota 44" in Warsaw, Daniel Libeskind, source: <https://www.architekci.pl/pl/aktualnosci/zajrzyj-do-swiata-mistrza-architektury--szkice-daniela-libeskinda-wystawione-w-warszawie> (access: 30.01.2022).



III. 3. Sketches of architecture: a) Cass Gilbert, 150-storey office building, sketch, 24.05.1905, source: N. Bingham, "100 lat rysunku architektonicznego", Laurence King Publishing Ltd. London 2013, p. 17; b) sketch to the design of Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Frank O. Gehry, source: <https://szkola.zalubowski.pl/2022/03/16/architekci-i-ich-rysunki-czesc-1/> (access: 31.05.2022); c) Frank Gehry, sketch for the design of LVMH Foundation, source: <https://publica.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Frank-Gehry-Fundacja-LVMH-szkic-architekta-%C2%A9-Fondation-Louis-Vuitton.png> (access: 31.05.2022).

The expressive preliminary sketches¹⁴ of Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Frank O. Gehry and many other exquisite creators are ascetic notes of often crazy visions, materialized in the arena of our lives at a pace as fast as its life force. One could ask a question: do contemporary sketches give a real image of architecture? Do we have a feeling that the newly designed architecture will be durable, useful and beautiful? Waiting in suspense for the implementation is also an element that raises the level of emotions, paving the way to spectacular impressions. After such exciting announcements, the disappointment would be simple, building with regular proportions and static composition. It can be said that contemporary design is like a dance in which the idea evolves, like a waving fabric. It happens that the dance ends with a fall, then a given form may pretend to the so-called awards of macabre of the year or simply an example of bad architecture (Ill. 4). Daniel Libeskind also said: “architecture starts with a sketch, many projects start with an idea that seems impossible, and yet it is built into a building. A building is made of a drawing, not building materials, which are brought to the site and trying to get some effect”¹⁵, and the recipient, taught by experience, each time believes that it will be fine or gets used to the fact that is not as expected.

As a consequence, moved by the admiration for beauty or the lack of comfort, and thus the uselessness of forms, we endure with the architecture designed and implemented for us (Ill. 4, 5). We organize trips, take photos in its vicinity, visit it, feeling famous like it. And it does not matter whether it has a good or bad reputation, it is important that it attracts, like the model “Bilbao effect”, successfully replicated almost all over the world. Are we still participating in the socio-economic and cultural phenomenon influenced by the appearance of the extravagant museum building or is it a kind of ecstatic kind of traveling? Seeing the best, the latest, in the farthest corners of the globe is a frequent goal. It is also worth asking the question: when (and not if?) we will fly into space to take a selfie with the representation of a project by a design celebrity?



Ill. 4. Sketches and photos of architecture: a) Ideological sketch, Kubuswoningen / Piet Blom, source: https://www.archdaily.com/482339/ad-classics-kubuswoningen-piet-blom/53163968c07a80fc-cb00003c-ad-classics-kubuswoningen-piet-blom-ramp-market-to-blaak-crossing?next_project=no (access: 1.06.2022); b) Cube Houses – Kubuswoningen, residential complex from the 80s of the 20th century, source: <https://www.obiezyswiatka.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Cubus-House-h-2500x900.jpg> (access: 31.05.2022).

¹⁴ M. Fikus, *Przestrzeń w zapisach architekta*, Politechnika Poznańska i Agencja Wydawnicza Zebra, Poznań 1999.

¹⁵ M. Szlazi, *Zajrzyj do świata mistrza architektury – szkice Daniela Libeskinda wystawione w Warszawie*, Architekci PL, 2017 <https://www.architekci.pl/pl/aktualnosci/zajrzyj-do-swiatla-mistrza-architektury--szkice-daniela-libeskinda-wystawione-w-warszawie> (access: 30.05.2022).

The exemplary Cube Houses are an interesting spatial composition in terms of visualisation. Their light yellow colour catches the eye, and the diagonal arrangement of the residential forms certainly impresses the recipients. However, does the procedure of tilting the cube of a conventional corner of the house upwards and leaning it on a hexagonal pylon give a sense of stability and comfort of use¹⁶.



III. 5. Sketches and photos of architecture: a) Santiago Calatrava, sketches, source: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/34/c9/d8/34c9d84c9c625b35753a89e5c7078432.png> (access: 31.05.2022); b) City of Arts and Sciences by Santiago Calatrava, Valencia, photo: K. Słuchocka.

A question which I often ask students designing architecture arises: “what for?” These two simple words contain the essence of the goal of action, directing us on the right track. Why use a given treatment? Do we want to shock you? Arouse your interest? Have we not forgotten a human being, so important in this complex process of space creation? Dreams about sculpture architecture, apart from striving to create original, exciting forms, must also include issues of function, considered in many aspects. We can close the thread of thoughts with the words of le Corbusier: “sense of order, coherent intention, sense of relationship: architecture operates with quantity. Passion forges dead stones into drama”¹⁷. The choice of the type should be consistent for both the designer and the user, so as not to end up in a tragedy full of spectacular, neo-feisty realizations in this epoch of performance.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Globalization, easy access and flow of information, more and more common, visual way of communication, escalation of transfer and an increasing level of the need for external stimuli lead to the unification of architecture and the loss of the need for a sense of identity. It provokes a constant pursuit of a new, different and distinctive one. Regionalisms are being marginalized, often even replaced with a “newer model”. The uniformity of global architecture or a similar way of implementing iconic architecture give an illusory sense of appreciation. However, we do not always find a balance in the functional and qualitative offer. The likely cause of the constant striving to excel may be a form of depreciation, emphasizing the traces of use at a fast pace and top-down fashions and design trends. Satisfaction and the need for new impressions implies weariness with what is around, and the desire for change pushes us

¹⁶ K. Słuchocka, *Przestrzeń toksyczna, przestrzeń transparentna, przestrzeń tożsama* [in:] M.D. Głowacka, R. Rasińska (red.), *Architektura a styl życia*, Polskie Towarzystwo Nauk o Zdrowiu, Poznań 2014, pp. 112–127.

¹⁷ Le Corbusier, *W stronę architektury*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2012, p. 185.

to lose ourselves in the search for optimal forms. However, what is optimal, since the need to be different changes the nature of the requirements and the direction of aspirations? Not finding an anchor in durability and usefulness, but reliance to a greater extent in the beautiful spaces offered to us, it may generate a reduction in quality, resulting in quick depreciation of objects and, what is worse, the necessity to create new ones. The temptation of novelty, fashion, gaining more and more popularity (until new creations appear) are factors that rejuvenate architecture. As in Adam Mickiewicz's demand to reach there where the sight does not reach and break what the mind does not break, it is difficult to stop indeed. After all, architecture is ruled by creative youth, reborn from one era to another, in new versions and styles, but the current pace of changes does not withstand the graceful period of even an entire era. We notice the worldwide trend of architectural transcendentalism, in which each type of architecture finds its amateur, thus giving it the right to exist. We are at the so-called diversity market, which, unfortunately, is expensive in terms of price of implementation as well as emotional satisfaction, and mental peace of recipients-users.

For some it has expired, for some too little popular or boring, Vitruvian triad should regain popularity, and durability, utility and beauty would then be able to equally represent architectural assumptions. Also, moderation in design and creation – one of the deadly sins of an architect, is a great danger, which translates into the state of our existence. Probably, for some, the already boring words of Le Corbusier: "We move from construction to architecture when we have some lofty goal. Vanity must be avoided. Vanity as a trait is the cause of the vanity of architecture"¹⁸, should again appear on the front pages of textbooks addressed to adepts of the art of creating architecture. It could also appear as "renewable oath", for each designer, to constitute for an individual reason for self-control and verification of the position in which he or she is, along with the design and output achievements.

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¹⁸ Le Corbusier, *W stronę architektury*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2012, p. 224.

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