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IN SEARCH OF A BALANCE BETWEEN THE TRADITION AND THE AVANT-GARDE

W POSZUKIWANIU RÓWNOWAGI MIĘDZY TRADYCJĄ A AWANGARDĄ

Abstract

This article is a reflection on the contemporary meaning of the concept of the avant-garde in architecture, in particular in the context of the social perception of architecture. Based on the analysis of the literature on the subject, several basic areas have been presented that can be defined as avant-garde and, at the same time, are strongly rooted in the construction tradition. The alliance between these two paths can be considered very beneficial. It should also be stated that it is necessary to strengthen the common awareness of its benefits, both on an individual and social scale, and to consolidate the importance of the value of the building heritage.

Keywords: heritage, sustainability, revitalisation

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi rozważanie nad współczesnym znaczeniem pojęcia awangardy w architekturze, w szczególności w kontekście społecznego postrzegania architektury. Na podstawie analizy literatury przedmiotu przedstawiono kilka zasadniczych obszarów, które definiować można jako awangardowe, a które jednocześnie posiadają silne zakorzenienie w tradycji budownictwa. Uznać można alians między tymi dwoma drogami jako bardzo korzystny. Stwierdzić należy również, że konieczne jest wzmocnienie powszechnej świadomości korzyści z niego płynących, zarówno w skali indywidualnej, jak i społecznej, oraz ugruntowania znaczenia wartości dziedzictwa budowlanego.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo, rewitalizacja, rozwój zrównoważony

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting conclusions that can be reached when analyzing the contemporary expression of the concepts of tradition and avant-garde in architecture is the difficulty of their clear distinction. If we depart for a moment from the understanding of the avant-garde in the historical sense of art, it turns out that what today becomes avant-garde¹ solutions, setting trends in architecture, is in a way a return to the assumptions present in traditional architecture for centuries. Recognizing that many of today's innovative concepts relate to the issues of climate protection, the way of thinking is not at all distant from the conception

¹ Avant-garde – preferring or introducing new and very modern ideas and methods [in:] <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/avant-garde?q=avant-garde> (access: 26.06.2022).

of the old construction which for the utilitarian reasons had a similar approach. On the other hand, however, respect and recognition of the value of traditional construction, in the sense of ordinary objects, turn out to be something abstract. In the landscape of many Polish villages, compared to the one from a decade ago, there are practically no old buildings, especially residential ones. Unfortunately they have been replaced, in many cases, by catalogue projects that are in no way related to the traditional layout of buildings or construction solutions. As a result, it reduces the spatial value of these areas.

2. AVANT-GARDE DRAWN FROM TRADITION

2.1. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPEMENT

In the contemporary architecture the issues that made the building avant-garde were its original form, innovative solutions for the facade, building coatings, materials used or a unique type of structure. Among the ubiquitous domination of the sense of sight and the ever-growing production of images they still do not lose their importance. What we see in the photos or visualizations is meant to delight, impress and gain popularity in architectural magazines and even social media. However, the subject of broadly understood sustainable development in the sphere of construction and architecture has also been gaining attention for a long time. It concentrates on the energy consumption of the facility (in subsequent phases of the building's life cycle), resource savings during construction and exploitation or the type of building materials used. Innovative activities in these fields are more and more frequently the reason for the recognition of architecture work. Various solutions that could be used in both small and large, complex projects can be followed with pleasure and interest. This is a great source of inspiration, for example for students of architectural studies, but also a signal for them that these methods should be used in every project, become common and usual, and should not be treated as something exceptional.

An example of a facility where multiple sustainable solutions are applied is The Crystal building in London (Ill. 1, 2) by Wilkinson Eyre Architects². The building serves as an exhibition area, conference center and think-tank, and it also implies the international center of excellence for sustainable development founded by Siemens³. The collaboration of architects and Arup engineers has resulted in an innovative and daring architecture that uses the advantages of the latest "green" technologies, making The Crystal the first building to achieve the highest ratings in LEED and BREEM certifications. The building's form is inspired by crystal, has no typical facades or a traditionally defined roof, it consists of series of angular shapes that give a special impression regardless of the point of view. As it has an exposed, clearly visible location, it was designed as a "pavilion in the park", becoming the focal point of the area. The building's glass shell is made of various types of highly insulated and of a variable transparency glass. This enables natural lighting while controlling sunlight to minimize operating costs. The Crystal is a fully electric facility that does not use fossil

² *The Crystal / Wilkinson Eyre Architects*, [in:] <https://www.archdaily.com/275111/the-crystal-wilkinson-eyre-architects> (access: 26.06.2022).

³ In 2022, the building become the property of the city and is housing London City Hall, see: *Mayor and London Assembly set for City Hall move*, [in:] <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-59451799> (access: 26.06.2022).



Ill. 1. The Crystal, London (source: WilkinsonEyre).



Ill. 2. The Crystal, London (source: WilkinsonEyre).

fuels; it is heated and cooled by pumps that seasonally store energy in the ground via a 17 km network of underground pipes. Rainwater is collected and purified to the quality of drinking water, black water is also processed on the spot – the building is 90% self-sufficient in terms of water resources. The building is equipped with a wide range of sensors and control systems which provide users with an unprecedented level of control of the internal environment and they are also used to report the operation of the entire facility.

The current geopolitical events have dramatically recalled that abandoning activities aimed at, for example, increasing the share of energy obtained from renewable sources is a fundamental mistake. The problem of environmental burden, although widely recognized, has never been as motivating as the increasing economic difficulties. This is of great importance for investors for whom the financial aspect has always been particularly convincing. As always in architecture, challenging restrictions inspire creativity, and so is also the case of activities that reduce the burden on the environment and bring economic benefits at the same time, even if it is in the long-term perspective. These challenges are and will continue to be the driving force behind the search for both efficient and aesthetically satisfactory, innovative, perhaps avant-garde solutions. The economic factor will increasingly encourage investors to use alternative design solutions. It can be assumed that innovation in construction and architecture will gain acceptance and popularity in this respect.

2.2. REVITALIZATION, ADAPTATION

Talking about the innovativeness within the sustainable solutions in architecture in the avant-garde approach, one can refer to the fact that “the most effective buildings are those ones that have not been built”⁴. The next in line are the buildings that gained a second life. It concerns buildings under adaptation, renovation and revitalization – in general, the use of “existing resources”. This course of building activity, although never to be the only one, deserves much more attention. In the areas of cities, possessing built heritage of diverse character, the revitalization of entire fragments and refurbishment of individual objects, are disseminated and generally accepted phenomenon. These actions have particularly positive outcome when they do not depreciate any social group and have favorable features from the point of view of the local inhabitants. However, on this seemingly unequivocal topic, there was also a discrepancy on several levels.

Contrary to the current, in some sense innovative, approach of treating construction heritage – focusing on preserving it in its truest form – there are numerous actions by which property owners bring it to ruin. They are focused on future benefits due to the ownership of land in favorable locations. They avoid investing in the maintenance of existing facilities in a fair technical condition what may allow future renovation and adaptation, aiming to replace them with new investments when there is nothing left to save. The example of post-industrial areas in Łódź is a perfect example of this. While even a decade ago many downtown spaces threatened with emptiness after demolished factories, today the memory of them is blurred because in their place numerous development investments, mainly housing ones, were built. Public awareness of the value of these historic sites was not strong enough to save them. Although the situation is changing, it should be generally recognized that the attachment to historical objects that are not well-known and strongly rooted in Polish culture monuments, is

⁴ M. Gołębiewska, *Nowe życie budynków*, Zawód Architekt, 2022, no. 84, p. 22.

not strong⁵. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that preservation and re-use by adapting existing buildings to the current needs are not very popular. The dominant belief is that new (always) means better, or at least problem-free. Revitalization processes are accepted but most often after they are implemented. This is evidenced by the successes of such investments as Manufaktura in Łódź, EC1 or the Old Mine in Wałbrzych (Ill. 3, 4). Although, as always, also here, there were specialists' doubts and wants, they basically meet the assumptions of effective revitalization processes. It should be a comprehensive action aimed at leading a given area out of state of crisis, integrated within the participating entities, involving the local community⁶.

Although carrying out revitalization activities in accordance with the above-mentioned assumptions is always a challenge, it turns out that the last point is the most difficult one. Attempts to develop cooperation and encourage participation in the transformations of local communities, apart from individual cases, are not very successful⁷. Local authorities are obliged by the provisions of the act⁸ to introduce participatory measures to the revitalization process, however, social involvement in this type of innovative approach to shape the built environment is negligible. The analysis of the reasons for this state of affairs should be left to sociologists, but they can be seen as the legacy of the previous system where the "common" was treated as "nobody's". After the political system change, the domination of private property and the sense of its superiority led to numerous negative spatial phenomena. It is difficult to change the mindset if there are no large-scale activities that could represent a different point of view. Architectural education, education about space, heroically pushed by a group of committed members of the Chamber of Architects, has a rather limited range in the country. Both universal architectural education and the Polish Architectural Policy⁹ remain beyond the sphere of interest of public authorities to this day, and thus their dissemination is extremely difficult. An alternative approach to the issues of ownership, the influence of private, individual spatial activities not only on the appearance and aesthetics, but also on economic¹⁰ values and indicators, still remains almost avant-garde thinking in society.

⁵ Z. Maciejczak-Kwiatkowska, M. Retko-Bernatowicz, R. Wiśniewski, *W dialogu z otoczeniem? Społeczne postrzeganie przestrzeni publicznej i architektury w Polsce. Raport z badania ilościowego*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2018, pp. 12–19.

"The data described above allow for the formulation of the following conclusions regarding what architectural objects are perceived as important for the history of Polish architecture: – The respondents, when listing specific objects, mostly referred to buildings or urban systems that are part of the cultural heritage, which, as a few, represent objects from the basic repository used in historical education and constitute a tourist attraction on a mass scale. – The collected data shows that modernist architectural objects are sporadically perceived as important for the history of Polish architecture".

⁶ Wytyczne w zakresie rewitalizacji w programach operacyjnych na lata 2014–2020, [in:] <https://www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl/strony/o-funduszach/dokumenty/wytyczne-w-zakresie-rewitalizacji-w-programach-operacyjnych-na-lata-2014-2020/> (access: 26.06.2022).

⁷ J. Sepioł (ed.), *Przestrzeń życia Polaków*, SARP, Warszawa 2015, p. 30.

⁸ Ustawa z dnia 9 października 2015 r. o rewitalizacji. Rozdział 2., [in:] <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20150001777/U/D20151777Lj.pdf> (access: 26.06.2022).

⁹ The first establishment of the Polish Architectural Policy was created in 2009.

¹⁰ Z. Maciejczak-Kwiatkowska, M. Retko-Bernatowicz, R. Wiśniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 19, *most Poles understand this concept quite narrowly. Architecture is usually associated with construction, less often with shaping the surroundings and landscape for the needs of people, and even less often with culture, art and beauty.*



Ill. 3. The Old Mine in Wałbrzych (source: author's own photo).



Ill. 4. The Old Mine in Wałbrzych (source: author's own photo).

Even fewer activities related to the preservation of the building heritage can be observed in rural areas. As a result, they become particularly susceptible to the landscape distortion. These areas lose their special character, the specificity of the place, although not outstanding, but still being the memory of a given space. It is difficult to argue that all former rural residential buildings are in a technical condition that allows comfortable use, but they are not only a construction object. "Before demolishing any existing building, you should look at it as a material resource, but also a historical and cultural resource. Even if from the conservator's point of view, it is not of sufficient value, it sometimes happens that in a given place it is a testimony of a bygone era"¹¹.

The multitude of spatial problems affecting non-urban areas was indicated both in the Polish Architecture Policy and the report entitled *The Space of Life of Poles*. The diagnosis places the greatest responsibility on the defective legislation concerning spatial management. At the same time, the conclusions contained in the report *In dialogue with the environment? The social perception of public space and architecture in Poland* leave no doubt that the interest in the appearance of the surroundings is decreasing¹².

2.3. REGIONALISM

Taking a closer look at the types of solutions that make up, for example, the principles of passive buildings, it can be concluded that some of them have been successfully used in traditional buildings¹³. Local construction methods were a response to the location and climatic conditions, and over time they made up the knowledge base accumulated over generations, giving specific indications what elements should be included in residential or farm buildings. These methods were based on available building materials which influenced the type of construction, and resulted in the creation of a detail, mostly resulting from the kind of structure. The selection of the building material from among available materials was made in such a way as to ensure the most comfortable conditions for shelter – the use of wood with good insulating properties, as in traditional buildings in Podhale, or covering the roofs with a layer of soil covered with vegetation, as in the case of houses from Norway.

Referring to the aspects mentioned above: the dissemination of technological solutions in the field of sustainable development and the change in the general attitude to the construction heritage, a question arises about the way of combining these two – in the sense of social perception – avant-garde concepts – in order to create architecture that is sensitive to local conditions and respects landscape.

¹¹ R. Schruma, A. Witeczek, *Cykl życia architektury*, Zawód Architekt, 2022, no. 84, pp. 34–41.

¹² Z. Maciejczak-Kwiatkowska, M. Retko-Bernatowicz, R. Wiśniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 19, *According to the declaration, the vast majority of Poles perceive the impact of architecture on everyday life, but the interest in how their immediate neighborhood looks and is arranged is clearly less than in previous years and is related to age. Older respondents pay more attention to the aesthetics and the way of space management than the younger ones.*

¹³ W.J. Chmielewski, *Detal regionalny reakcją na procesy globalizacji*, Zawód Architekt, 2022, No. 83; *Nothing has changed in the concept of the continuity of the 'natural history of architecture' so far, the climate imperative is even more relevant than before.*

In search of opportunities for the development of contemporary architecture which will have the features of regionalism¹⁴, one should refer to the previous interpretations of this topic. We are talking about vernacular architecture, one that is locally rooted, implemented without architects. The neo-vernacular trend will be something else, in which objects are designed today by architects basing on traditional examples, with the use of specific materials or aesthetic treatments, but using current technologies.

The first one, however, is nothing more than a continuation of the activities of previous generations, that is, maintaining and using traditional solutions and materials, the second, however, assumes the adaptation of vernacular architecture to new functions and needs, and thus makes it a neo-vernacular architecture.¹⁵

The threat that may arise in the case of the latter trend is the effect of “disguising” the buildings. Another trend worth mentioning is critical regionalism and the architecture of resistance as defined by Kenneth Frampton in 1983.

The basic strategy of critical regionalism is to mediate the influence of a universal civilization through elements derived indirectly from the specificity of a given place. It follows from the above that critical regionalism depends on maintaining a high level of critical self-awareness. It can find its leading source of inspiration in such elements as the range and nature of local light, or in tectonics derived from a specific structural model, or in the topography of a given site.¹⁶

Abstract regionalism, on the other hand, derives from modernism:

houses designed according to this method are usually monolithic blocks, the walls of which flow smoothly into the roof plane, there are no eaves or other details that could disturb the purity of the minimalist form. On the one hand, such architecture can be perceived as an abstract composition of planes, on the other – it is a clear reference to the archetype, so it is characterized by postmodern allusionism and plays with convention.¹⁷

An example of a realization with the features of abstract regionalism is Villa made of shingle and concrete in Libertów (Ill. 5, 6) by Biuro Architektoniczne Barycz & Saramowicz¹⁸. The building consists of two perpendicular, interpenetrating blocks – one is a pavilion with a flat roof, another one has an archetypal shape with a gable roof. From the entrance side, the building has no windows, it opens onto the landscape from the garden side. The materials used are concrete and contrasting shingle, which is a characteristic material of the Małopolska

¹⁴ According to *Polish dictionary PWN*: 2. A socio-cultural movement aiming at preserving the specific features of the culture of a given area; 3. a set of ethnographic and cultural features specific to a given region [in:] <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/regionalizm.html> (access: 26.06.2022).

¹⁵ J.K. Knothe, *Architektura neowernakularna – geneza. Od Erdmannsdorf do Pensjonatu “Maryja”*, Budownictwo i Architektura, 2017, No. 16(4), pp. 141–142.

¹⁶ K. Frampton, *W stronę krytycznego regionalizmu. Sześć punktów architektury oporu*, Autoportret. Regionalizmy / modernizmy / postmodernizmy, 2017, Nr 2, [in:] <https://autoportret.pl/artykuly/w-strone-krytycznego-regionalizmu/> (access: 26.06.2022).

¹⁷ B. Ostrowska, *Zrównoważony dom jutra a lokalna tradycja*, Środowisko Mieszkaniowe, 2013, Vol. 12, p. 37.

¹⁸ Shingle and concrete villa in Libertów, see: D. Bies, *Willa z gontu i betonu w Libertowie. Nagroda Witkiewicza*, [in:] <https://www.architekturaibiznes.pl/willa-z-gontu-i-betonu-w-libertowie-nagroda-witkiewicza,4232.html> (access: 26.06.2022).



III. 5. Shingle and concrete villa in Libertów, view from the entrance. Biuro Architektoniczne Barycz i Saramowicz (source: Architektura i Biznes/ Biuro Architektoniczne Barycz i Saramowicz).



III. 6. Shingle and concrete villa in Libertów, view from the garden. Biuro Architektoniczne Barycz i Saramowicz (source: Architektura i Biznes/ Biuro Architektoniczne Barycz i Saramowicz).

region. The use of a traditional form and typical material are regional features, while the way of shaping the volume and functional layout of both the interior and the relationship to the street space is definitely contemporary.

It can be assumed that today's design solutions unifying architecture are global in nature. Examples from all over the world, fascinating students of architecture and cited by them as inspirations, rarely have specific elements related to the location. Therefore, paying attention to the potential hidden in regional patterns is a kind of a challenge for academic architectural education.

3. SUMMARY

Among the multitude of trends in contemporary architecture, avant-garde architecture can be defined in diverse ways. The theoretical classifications of trends are not clear-cut, with time the optics of perceiving the achievements of the 20th- and 21st-century architecture are becoming obsolete and changing. In the constant race "higher, further, faster" and in the face of accelerated technological progress, we are hesitantly faced with a dilemma whether this way of architecture is the right answer to the today's needs. Much has already been said and designed, and while our profession is based on the belief in the capacity of inexhaustible creativity, only the qualities of novelty and originality in architecture should no longer be the sole and most important parameter for judging its value.

It can be assumed that architecture with regional features, respectful to the landscape and the place, which tries to use design elements taken from building traditions and at the same time engaging environment-saving technologies, will be the avant-garde of the present times. "The creative continuation of the tradition of the place can therefore be the basis for the development of innovative, sustainable architecture of the house of the future"¹⁹.

Also, taking into account the 3Rs principle (reduce, reuse, recycle), which refers to environmental protection measures on many levels, it is necessary to look at design possibilities resulting from tradition, taking into account sustainable development. These include the use of existing building structures, the reduction of resource consumption and the use of renewable resources, and careful selection of building materials and technologies that reflect regional characteristics. Some of these activities are still perceived in social perception as a novelty, perhaps a fad, but the growing environmental awareness gives hope that changes in this direction will become real. At the same time, one must be aware that "Although in many European countries (regionalism) is not only a theoretical concept, there is also a greater social culture and the rank of architecture, as well as an attachment to traditional cultural codes"²⁰. This is an area where, in the Polish reality, there is still much to be done.

In 2022, the architect Francis Kéré received the Pritzker Prize for his work (Ill. 7, 8). As you can read in the justification of the jury, among others, "For cooperation with the community, regionalism of architecture"²¹. Let the indication of these features in the verdict of the most important architectural award testify to the upcoming shift of emphasis in architectural activities.

¹⁹ B. Ostrowska, *op. cit.*

²⁰ W.J. Chmielewski, *op. cit.*

²¹ The Pritzker Prize. Francis Kéré. <https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/diebedo-francis-kere> (access: 26.06.2022).



Ill. 7. Gando Primary School, Burkina Faso. Kéré Architecture (source: Kéré Architecture).



Ill. 8. Startup Lions Campus, Kenya. Kéré Architecture (source: Kéré Architecture).

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