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THE EXPRESSION OF DECONSTRUCTION AS A FACTOR THAT CONVEYS AND TRIGGERS EMOTIONS – ON THE EXAMPLE OF MUSEUM MEMORIAL OBJECTS

EKSPRESJA DEKONSTRUKCJI JAKO CZYNNIK PRZEKAZUJĄCY I WYZWAŁAJĄCY EMOCJE – NA PRZYKŁADZIE OBIEKTÓW MUZEALNYCH SŁUŻĄCYCH UPAMIĘTNIANIU

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the aesthetic assumptions of deconstructivism as carriers of emotions, with particular emphasis on museum objects with a commemorative function. The research scope is limited to the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Jewish Museum in Copenhagen by Daniel Libeskind and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin by Peter Eisenman. The analyzed projects are classified by researchers as a continuation of the emotional trend of the first avant-garde.

Keywords: deconstructivism, avant-garde architecture, emotions in architecture, museums, monuments

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie założeń estetycznych dekonstruktywizmu jako nośników emocji, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem obiektów muzealnych o funkcji upamiętniającej. Zakres badawczy ogranicza się do Muzeum Żydowskiego w Berlinie i Muzeum Żydowskiego w Kopenhadze autorstwa Daniela Libeskinda oraz do Pomnika Holocaustu w Berlinie autorstwa Petera Eisenmana. Analizowane projekty zaliczane są przez badaczy jako kontynuacja nurtu emocjonalnego pierwszej awangardy.

Słowa kluczowe: dekonstruktywizm, architektura awangardowa, emocje w architekturze, muzea, pomniki

1. THE CONCEPT OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Avant-garde (from French l'avant-garde) is an ideological and artistic formation in the culture of the 20th century. The emergence of the avant-garde is related to the appearance of new artistic trends in Europe around 1910: cubism, expressionism, futurism, as well as dadaism, surrealism, and constructivism. The time limits of this artistic trend close

between 1905–1925 (1930)¹. The second wave of avant-garde trends referred to as neo-avant-garde (avant-avant-garde) occurs at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s in Europe. The position of researchers in this area of art in the context of the division into avant-garde and neo-avant-garde is not unambiguous. However, such a distinction is supported by, *inter alia*, the fact of the distinctiveness of “cold”, formalistic and aesthetic modernism and “hot” avant-garde art².

We can also consider avant-garde trends in architecture and art, which have a wider temporal scope. The Dictionary of the Polish Language provides a definition of the avant-garde as, among other things, a group of people whose work or activity in a certain field is innovative and unconventional. It also indicates as the avant-garde a set of diverse tendencies in the 20th-century art, characterised by radical innovation³. It is on this interpretation that I base the classification of the current of deconstructivism, to which this article refers, to the group of avant-garde trends.

The term vanguard is derived from the language of military tactics and literally means ‘advance guard’. As M. Porębski writes, “the vanguard is constantly on the move, on the offensive, moving forward and pulling others with it”⁴. The metaphor of the avant-garde means that artists are the front guard of the army to spread new social ideas and convince successive followers of them, in line with the belief that artists have a strong and effective weapon in reaching the hearts and minds of people⁵.

However, the mission of the vanguard can only succeed if shortcomings and limitations are recognised in the present and when the need for change is identified with the project of repair⁶. The avant-garde sees the way out of decadence and crisis not in a return to classical rules, but in starting from scratch. It is a decision to enter areas that are completely new and unknown, where everything will be possible again⁷.

2. NEW VALUING OF OTHERNESS

The changes that take place in the aesthetic preferences of recipients with the appearance of novelty can be explained, among others, on the basis of the concept of aesthetic evaluation of art by Stephen C. Pepper. Its main premise is based on the experience of beauty – what and at what time will be recognised in art as a valid standard. Pepper distinguishes 3 stages of change – change conditioning, habituation and sensory fatigue⁸. The first involves the enlargement of the field of liking by the provision of aesthetic satisfaction by objects replacing other objects of high aesthetic value. The second concerns changes in the aesthetic field that lead to habituation. It consists of a transition from initial rejection to the inclusion of an

¹ T. Pękala, *Awangarda i argierarda*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2000, p. 133.

² *Ibidem*, p. 135.

³ *Awangarda*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/awangarda> (access: 4.09.2022).

⁴ M. Porębski, *Tradycje awangardy* [in:] *idem, Sztuka a informacja*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1986.

⁵ T. Pękala, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

⁷ M. Porębski, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁸ T. Pękala, *op. cit.*, pp. 192–193.

object within the range of those that evoke aesthetic pleasure. What is interesting from the point of view of the psychological reception of art – “a new element transferred from the sphere of disliking to the sphere of liking quickly becomes the element that is liked most in the whole sequence”⁹. As T. Pękala rightly observes, this phenomenon explains “why in so many cases what was shocking and unthinkable in art not long ago becomes a desirable motif and why, unfortunately, avant-garde novelty ages so quickly”¹⁰. The third stage of the concept of the aesthetic appreciation of art is the sensory fatigue associated with the process of engaging the viewer’s attention. The phenomenon of monotony and boredom appears when “the reception process is too simple, and all the elements of the work under evaluation seem so obvious that they cease to be liked”¹¹.

3. THE AESTHETICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstructivism stands in stark opposition to the tradition of building and the tradition of aesthetics. It undermines the recognized principles of harmony and geometric clarity that create the impression of order. In the visual and constructional layer, it operates with a deliberate distortion of the form – fragmentation and manipulation of building parts. The aesthetic approval of deconstructivism is based primarily on the element of surprise. Beauty appears as a kind of discovery. Charles Baudelaire claimed that beauty should always be bizarre¹². The element of the puzzle, characteristic of deconstructivism, serves to keep the viewers interested and encourages them to observe more closely than in the case of classical architectural forms.

Visual perception (including of an architectural work) is based on several consecutive processes. The first is the isolation of elements and the analysis of their shapes and contrasts. This is followed by the identification of the role of the figure and the background, and finally the attribution of meaning to the forms experienced – mainly through associations occurring in memory¹³. When an object does not fit in with one’s knowledge, the next stage of aesthetic perception – the study of its formal qualities – begins, aiming to create a new category in the mind. Part of this process is to challenge known canons (architecture). Part of this process is the questioning of familiar canons (architecture). Deconstructivism exists in very conscious opposition to classical architecture, so its perception escapes the typical evaluation of an architectural work. Standard patterns of valuation when dealing with the avant-garde only lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, as M. Gołaszewska points out, works of this kind should be assessed primarily in terms of their originality¹⁴.

⁹ M. Porębski, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

¹⁰ T. Pękala, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

¹² M. Gyurkovich, *Nowe formy muzeów w tkance miejskiej*, “Czasopismo techniczne. Architektura” 2007, R. 104, Z. 13, 6-A, p. 258.

¹³ J. Matuszewska, *Pomiędzy malarstwem, rzeźbą i architekturą – twórczość Stefana Krygiera*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Łódzkiej, Łódź 2022, pp. 28–29.

¹⁴ M. Gołaszewska, *Estetyka i antyestetyka*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1984, p. 43. The criteria for evaluating avant-garde works in terms of originality are the most objective measure of them, especially in the times in which they are created.

4. THE EMOTIONAL SIDE OF DECONSTRUCTIVISM

The creators of deconstructivism strongly appeal to feelings. D. Libeskind claims: “even in design you need an emotional relationship. It must be entered in the building, just as it is in painting. Many people see architecture as abstraction, intellectual training, or just geometry. In reality, however, it is [...] an emotional experience”¹⁵. He emphasizes that architecture is more than a function and aesthetics, ascribing it to the “manipulator of memories”¹⁶ which under normal conditions appear spontaneously and subconsciously.

Deconstructivism brings to architecture the courage to search experimentally. A great role in the process of freeing design from the reproduction of established patterns was brought by the Situationist movement¹⁷. As M. Borowska points out, the situationists introduced to architecture and urban planning, the notion of an event: “their experiments deconstructed established and entrenched, time-honoured relationships, revealing the ‘subversive’ potential of this field of art and opening up a hitherto untrodden path of its development”¹⁸. This is the path that B. Tschumi, among others, has chosen to follow, treating events as ‘turning points’ and sources for the production of places. According to this designer, architecture should be created and considered in close connection with the activities and events that he is a co-editor and witness¹⁸. According to E. Rewers, deconstruction is a way of questioning the architectural model to increase the limits of architecture’s usability¹⁹. This expansion of the scope of architecture, especially in terms of its emotional impact, can be found in contemporary objects primarily associated with the theme of commemoration²⁰.

5. MEMORIAL OBJECTS

The perception of museum objects to commemorate tragic events is to knock audiences out of their routine perception and thinking about the past. By using innovative methods of shaping the form, designers devalorize the boundaries separating the architectural space from the individual mental space²¹. They trigger subconscious, automatic, even somatic feelings independently of the viewer’s knowledge, awareness and memory. I will refer to two deconstructivist designers – Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman and their works – respectively: the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Jewish Museum in Copenhagen and the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe as well in Berlin.

¹⁵ D. Libeskind [statement in:] M. Fujimura, *Building on experience*, “Third way” 2007, vol. 30/3, p. 17, cited by: A. Serafin, *Abstrakcja geometryczna a forma organiczna*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Łódzkiej, Łódź 2014, p. 124.

¹⁶ T. Dyckhoff, *Epoka spektaklu. Perypetie architektury i miasta XXI wieku*, Karakter, Kraków 2018, pp. 318–319.

¹⁷ M. Borowska, *Estetyka i poszukiwanie znaczeń w przestrzeniach architektonicznych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, Warszawa 2013, p. 144.

¹⁸ Examples of such architecture include Lerner Hall Student Center Columbia University, Bibliothèque de France in Paris, or Park La Villette in Paris by B. Tschumi; E. Rewers, *Post-polis: an introduction to the philosophy of the postmodern city*, Universitas, Kraków 1998, pp. 92–97.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

²⁰ M. Borowska, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

Museum designs by D. Libeskind, as well as the monument designed by P. Eisenman, can be described as a kind of spatial experiments, that aim to place the viewer in a situation that was experienced by the original witnesses of the events²². The objects do not pretend to be museum monuments to the testimonies of the extermination of the Jews. Both architects' concurrent aims were to arouse impressions that stimulated viewers to make an intellectual effort – to adopt their own position in relation to history and individual remembering²³.

5.1. THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN BERLIN (2001)

In order to liberate the emotions of recipients, Libeskind consciously used the power of deconstructed forms, but also light and acoustics, causing a sense of spatial imbalance, closure, disorientation and fear. The characteristic language of the designer's artistic expression is based on irregular geometric forms with sharp angles.

The spatial structure of the new part of the museum²⁴ consists of the underground part, the void and the exhibition. The entrance to the building is through the existing baroque building. The visitor's route begins with the underground storey forming a series of intersecting corridors. However, the designer did not create a central space, intentionally creating the impression of lack of space and crowding, putting the audience in a specific emotional state. From this part, visitors move to the 'Holocaust Tower' – a heavily shaded room reaching the full height of the building, accessed through massive steel gate that close each time visitors enter. Formal measures and acoustic (long reverberation time of the concrete surface) used by Libeskind evoke the emotion of fear and an impression of dread and intensify the effect of loneliness. The almost complete shading of the room (the inability of visitors to see their own feet) is accentuated by the only light entering the tower through a gap in the ceiling. The designer was inspired by a statement from a female Holocaust survivor for whom a beam of light was her only hope of survival²⁵. Due to its expressive character and the consequent multitude of stimuli provided by this underground area of the building, its emotional significance is strongest²⁶.

The second compositionally distinct part of the building is the void. The architect calls it the 'embodiment of absence'²⁷. It has the form of an atrium cutting through the building along the longer side. Formally, its function is to connect the underground part with the third zone – the conventional exhibition space.

The courtyard is also an important component of the Museum's composition in terms of generating and presenting emotions. It consists of a series of reinforced concrete pots-columns deflected from the vertical and overgrown with vegetation in the upper part. The symbolic overtones of the garden illustrate the loneliness of Jews finding themselves without anything, on a foreign land.

²² J.K. Lenartowicz, *Architektura trwogi* [in:] *Pamięć Shoah. Kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętniania*, T. Majewski, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (eds.), Oficyna, Łódź 2009, p. 609.

²³ M. Borowska, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

²⁴ D. Libeskind involved the expansion of a museum based in a historic building.

²⁵ D. Libeskind [in:] M. Fujimura, *Building on experience* [in:] *Third way*, April 2007, vol. 30/3, p. 17, cited by: A. Serafin, *Abstrakcja geometryczna a forma organiczna*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Łódzkiej, Łódź 2014, p. 124.

²⁶ A. Serafin, *op. cit.*, pp. 128–129.

²⁷ D. Libeskind, *Przełom przygody w życiu i architekturze*, Wydawnictwo Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2008, p. 94.



II. 1. The Jewish Museum in Berlin – view from inside, source: <https://www.archdaily.com/91273/ad-classics-jewish-museum-berlin-daniel-libeskind/5afa5472f197cc59f7000001-ad-classics-jewish-museum-berlin-daniel-libeskind-photo> (access 5.09.2022).

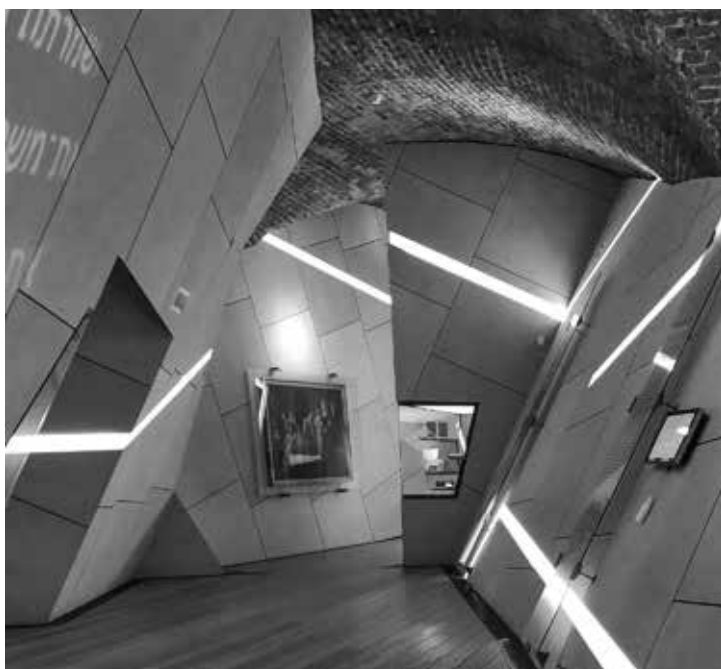


II. 2. The Jewish Museum in Berlin – view from inside, source: <https://www.archdaily.com/91273/ad-classics-jewish-museum-berlin-daniel-libeskind/5afa5472f197cc59f7000001-ad-classics-jewish-museum-berlin-daniel-libeskind-photo> (access 5.09.2022).

The formally expressive character of the building serves to bring out associations with the effect of destruction and annihilation. The architecture of the building is based on making room for a void, economically useless but serving to create a penetrating impression felt by visitors. The form of the building symbolises the difficult process of dealing with the Holocaust and the gap it created in German-Jewish history. This emptiness of the Jewish Museum exemplifies a certain paradox – “it speaks of destruction and at the same time triumphs over it, it points to an absence and at the same time is overwhelmingly present”²⁸.

5.2. THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN COPENHAGEN (2004)

The building continues the martyrological character of the Berlin Museum. Its creation is an example of the symbolically and emotionally saturated architecture characteristic of Libeskind. The design solutions used by the author tell the story of Danish Jews smuggled from their country to neutral Sweden in the middle of the night on fishing boats swaying on the waves²⁹. This explains the character of the building with its vertically sloping walls, sloping floors and acute angles, which at the same time interact with the arched brick vaults. The implementation of the designer’s idea was not the easiest one, especially as it concerned the interior of a historic building. As A. Serafin suggests, the object is a symbol of the balance between the emotional and the rational³⁰.



Il. 3. The Jewish Museum in Copenhagen – view from inside, source: <https://copenhagenarchitecture.dk/danish-jewish-museum/> (access: 5.09.2022).

²⁸ After: M. Borowska, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

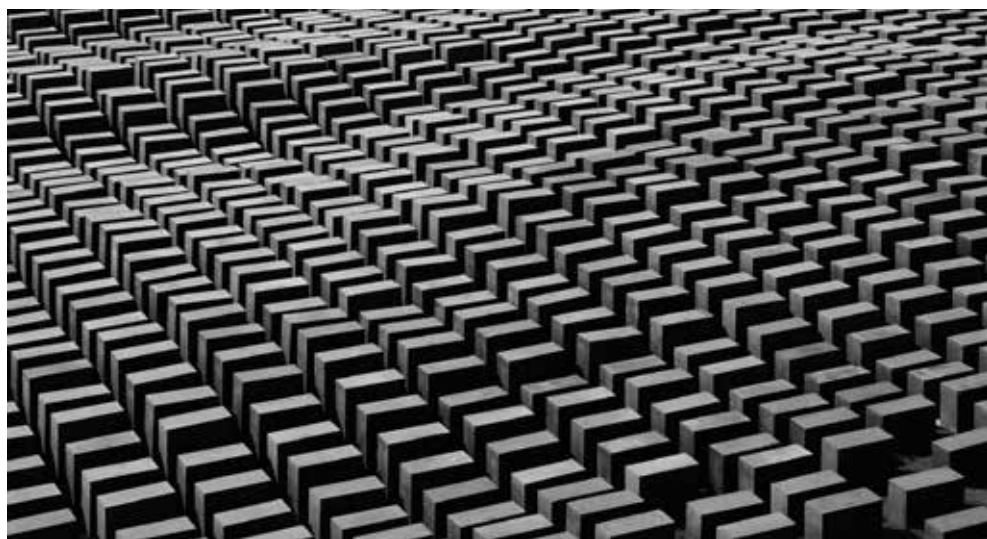
²⁹ D. Libeskind, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

³⁰ A. Serafin, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

5.3. THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL (MEMORIAL TO THE MURDERED JEWS OF EUROPE) IN BERLIN (2005)

Analysing P. Eisenman's work, one can see that over time the designer has turned away from deconstruction, directing his attention to the issue of the perception of architecture. As he recalled in one of his interviews: "my work is about making it [architecture] non-accidental"³¹. An example of the perceptual turn in Eisenman's work is the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe, designed in the centre of Berlin's public space.

The idea for the design of the monument is quite unusual. Usually, the monuments commemorate the nation's heroes. The Berlin Holocaust Memorial is the exact opposite. It is "the nation's first monument to commemorate its crimes"³². The concept is in contrast with the narrative overtones of the traditional monuments. It consists of 2711 rectangular slabs placed on a sloping stretch of land. Each stele has similar base dimensions, varying in height. The unique size is intended by the designer to symbolize the uniqueness of the people who were murdered during the Holocaust. The concrete blocks, slightly deviated from the vertical, are arranged in parallel rows with narrow passages. The rhythmic arrangement of the stone slabs creates an impression of undulation with the sloping terrain.



Il. 4. The Holocaust Memorial – view from above, source: <https://eisenmanarchitects.com/Berlin-Memorial-to-the-Murdered-Jews-of-Europe-2005> (access: 5.09.2022).

The reception of the whole is also influenced by the location of the monument. It triggers the element of surprise, taking the audience out of the bustling urban space and turning their attention towards a different atmosphere. This formal intervention directs people's reactions

³¹ After: P. Jodidio, *Nowe formy. Architektura lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku*, Muza, Warszawa 1998, p. 14.

³² This is a statement by the German writer Martin Walser in 2011 about the monument: R. Fulker, *Berlin Holocaust Memorial architect Peter Eisenman turns 85*, <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-holocaust-memorial-architect-peter-eisenman-turns-85/a-40044198> (access: 4.09.2022).

and makes the space non-accidental. Visitors to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe can follow a labyrinth of paths between the massive stone blocks. The architect wanted people to feel in this space the disorientation, the fear, and the loss that accompanied the victims of the Holocaust and their families.



Il. 5. The Holocaust Memorial – view from inside, source: <https://eisenmanarchitects.com/Berlin-Memorial-to-the-Murdered-Jews-of-Europe-2005> (access: 5.09.2022).

Namelessness is also intentional. Peter Eisenman designed the Berlin Holocaust Memorial without inscriptions or religious symbols. The expressive power of the design lies in the mass of anonymity. A commemoration of the individual victims including their names and biographies is provided in an information centre, also by Eisenman, located beneath the memorial.

6. SUMMARY

The presented creative approaches to martyrological objects by D. Libeskind and P. Eisenman belong to the emotional trend in architecture. They are based on the triggering of feelings by using means of artistic expression, such as the ratio of mass to void, deviation from the vertical, deviation from the horizontal or contrast of scale. In the cited Libeskind's realizations, one can additionally find interventions in acoustic effects and those concerning the manipulation of light intensity. They also carry symbolism and are more narrative in nature compared to Eisenman's project, which allows for ambiguity. Each of them is equally valuable for its individual expression and original means of artistic expression. Both architects use beauty to make the tragic events of the past more tame, but at the same time more expressive, to which we as recipients acquire a subjective, emotional attitude.

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