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AVANT-GARDE FOR EVERYDAY

AWANGARDA NA CO DZIEŃ

Abstract

Avant-garde (in architecture and art), by its very definition, presupposes progress and going beyond the usual patterns. The 20th century seems unique in terms of its importance in art and architecture. The increasing weight attached to individualism in Western societies also supports trends emphasizing breaking away from tradition and what used to be. The common element here is the escape from the old – what is generally accepted and therefore less critical for the avant-garde and too common for individualism. The article presents considerations on the issues of avant-garde, architecture and contemporary society as elements that interact with each other.

Keywords: avant-garde, contemporary architecture, and society

Streszczenie

Awangarda (w architekturze i sztuce) z samej definicji zakłada postęp i wychodzenie poza utarte schematy. XX wiek wydaje się unikatowy pod względem zapatrywań na jej wagę zarówno w sztuce, jak i w szczególności w architekturze. Coraz większa waga przykładana w społeczeństwach zachodnich do indywidualizmu wspiera również trendy kładące nacisk na odcięcie się od tradycji i tego, co było dawniej. Elementem wspólnym jest tu ucieczka przed starym – tym co jest ogólnie akceptowane, a zatem dla awangardy mniej znaczące a dla indywidualizmu zbyt powszechne. Poniższy artykuł przedstawia rozważania na temat kwestii awangardy, architektury i współczesnego społeczeństwa, jako elementów wzajemnie na siebie oddziałujących.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, architektura współczesna, społeczeństwo

1. INTRODUCTION

The dictionary defines “avant-garde” as “a group of people whose creativity or activity in each field is innovative and unconventional” or “a range of different trends in the art of the 20th century, characterized by radical innovation”¹. Assessment of how much “avant-garde” a given concept or idea is, is based directly on the scale of alterations from the adopted norms. This article examines this aspect in a traditionally based field on recognizing the value of experience and adherence to canons and established patterns. The common denominator here is the pursuit of new, discovering new territories, and going beyond the well-known and accepted patterns. The above does not mean, of course, that no value is given at all to oddness. On the contrary, however, revolutionary changes were not the essential criterion for assessing the quality of architecture for centuries.

¹ *Awangarda* [in:] *Słownik języka polskiego*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/awangarda;2551384.html> (access: 13.06.2022).

Against this background, almost the entire 20th century, precisely its second half, stood out significantly and brought a considerable change in social expectations. At that time, the desire to introduce changes gained an entirely new value, and the desire to emphasize its otherness became crucial. Notably, the expected deviation from the tradition/norm should also be significant and significant enough not to be only a natural consequence of development but rather an attempt to define something unknown.

This article tries to indicate the main effects of the fascination with the “new” and the changes they caused in the perception of architecture. At the same time, the use and understanding of the word “avant-garde” in it are not limited to the name of intellectual currents of the beginning of the 20th century but rather to a confident attitude that makes us go beyond the usual patterns.

Of course, this is only an outline of the problem. Due to the volume of this paper, it does not exhaust the whole problem and only points to the main problems and allows for the possibility of some generalisations by analysing only some aspects of the avant-garde phenomenon in architecture.

2. WHAT IS AVANT-GARDE?

The question of what avant-garde is today does not seem simple or easy to grasp. As T. Kozłowski writes,

avant-garde art's existence in the contemporary world is not apparent. Researchers cannot fully agree on what it is and whether it has ended. The multitude of movements called avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements or attributed to them is significant. Such a state makes it difficult to classify and examine them unequivocally².

The question of a particular duty of the avant-garde artist seems less debatable. In the generally accepted definition, it must break out of the usual patterns. Discover and venture into new, unexplored territories. The known or generally accepted ones should, at best, be treated with much suspicion and preferably stated. In practice, many avant-garde movements were downright hostile to the existing status quo. They considered the necessity to overthrow the old regime as their primary goal.

The two movements listed below are excellent examples of the avant-garde in architecture. The best, even iconic, examples are modernists. Programmatically, it assumes a transformation of the entire system and society, from habits and traditions to language and symbols. Practically completely questioning its earlier functioning and foundations. Half a century later, a similar totalitarianism approach to change in the field of architecture represented the deconstructivist movement. Striving, through the implementation of philosophical considerations about the nature of language, to change the very spatial structure of objects. To challenge the basic scheme of creating and receiving architecture.

² T. Kozłowski, *Awangarda a architektura współczesna*, “Space & Form” 2020, 4, pp. 55–70, https://yadda.icm.edu.pl/baztech/element/bwmeta1.element.baztech-9e7a475e-db7c-4ea8-8d77-69851b619fb4/c/DOI_10_21005_pif_2020_43_B-03_T_Kozlowski.pdf (access: 3.06.2022).

A specific question for architecture remains: do the works of the avant-garde have to / can have implementation potential? Alternatively, perhaps the ideas they represent should be progressive enough to make their implementation at least difficult, if not impossible, with the available technologies. These concepts remain only in the sphere of more or less detailed sketches and records of ideas, significantly preceding the possibility of their existence in space. Hence, it can also be verified and disseminated.

In the case of art, the matter seems easier. Most often, the technical possibilities do not limit the creators. They are free to put their theories into practice. Furthermore, even if not, conceptual art provides a framework for theoretical considerations on an equal footing with other currents. Physical verification is, therefore, neither an obstacle nor, on the contrary, a necessary condition.

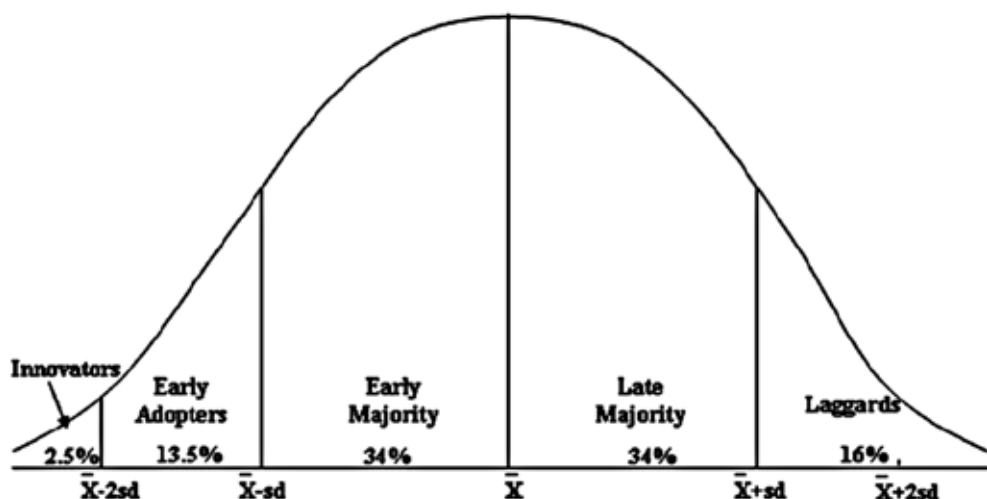
Traditionally recognising the primacy of physically existing objects over unrealised concepts, does architecture represent the same situation? On the other hand, does the possibility of realisation exclude belonging to the avant-garde movement?

It should be noted that often the avant-garde did not have the technical and social capacity to produce its works. Sant'Elia had to present them in sketches because there was no means of making them, and the young architect had no investors willing to implement them and no time to acquire them. Almost a century later, the works of Frank Gehry even “forced” the creation of new tools³ and certainly popularised them. Similarly, in the case of Zaha-Hadid, whose work could find its full potential only after quite a long period of functioning in the sphere of ideas. Without those willing to invest in the implementation, inspiring architects are not going beyond the theoretical framework. Generally, the biographies of authors from the deconstructivist trend, one of the last in the 20th century, which undoubtedly deserves to be called the avant-garde, seem attractive. Among the various avant-garde trends in architecture, it is deconstructivism that seems to attract the most attention. It also shows the model path of the avant-garde, from the fascination with the idea, attempts to translate it into the language of architecture, the struggle for recognition, to acceptance and at least partial absorption by the mainstream and social acceptance, to becoming a reference point for modified concepts, inclusive.

Regardless of the assessment, the movement and its “fidelity” to its assumptions significantly influenced our contemporary understanding of architecture. Moreover, despite the assumptions that are difficult to implement in architecture and considerable popularity, it is still interpreted as avant-garde.

One more significant difference between the avant-garde in art and architecture becomes apparent here. Closer ties of architecture with market mechanisms link its realisations with the expectations of the majority of society. The architectural avant-garde must find investors willing to risk funds for the construction of innovative facilities much more often. Naturally, causing that at the time of implementation, these ideas are much more accepted by the broadly understood recipient. By definition, this means that they are no longer avant-garde, at least in the very conventional sense of the word, and indeed much more difficult to consider them as such. On the other hand, purely theoretical assumptions, which do not ultimately affect the shape of the theory of architecture, run the risk of being insignificant and not avant-garde.

³ *The Software Behind Frank Gehry's Geometrically Complex Architecture* <https://priceconomics.com/the-software-behind-frank-gehrys-geometrically/> (access: 13.05.2022).



Ill. 1. Categorisation of the level of adaptability of the society based on innovation. Source: Diffusion of Innovations, fifth edition by Everett M. Rogers. Copyright (c) 2003 by The Free Press.

Thus, it can be stated, in general terms, that avant-garde architects do not have the means / social interest to implement their ideas at the time of their creation. Furthermore, when the situation changes, we often no longer deal with the avant-garde, although the level of acceptance is the key here, not the mere fact of implementation.

An exciting trail is provided by Jakub Szczesny, who limits himself to non-material aspects, remaining in the sphere of manifestos and ideas. Thus, rejecting the problem of their materialisation in general. Undoubtedly, in theoretical terms, this is the correct method. However, as the author notices himself, the transition from the avant-garde to the mainstream is also essential here. That is a verification of how significant the ideas were for the development of the field. After all, the avant-garde should set, at least to some extent, the direction of development. It is expected of both groups (and perhaps even the main factor of their activity). Moreover, it is a subconscious perception of roughly 70% of society. The group is not eager to change as long as they do not become a specific norm, which in architecture means the majority of investors.

However, such an approach is troublesome if we assume that contemporary “architecture has no problems with the unreal form of buildings. The form, not the function, has become the overriding goal, and anything that will shock the recipient is allowed”⁴.

Technology enables the implementation of any form, and the detachment of form from function allows any ideological background to be assigned to any form of expression. The need for such architecture and the creation of new theories remains an open question.

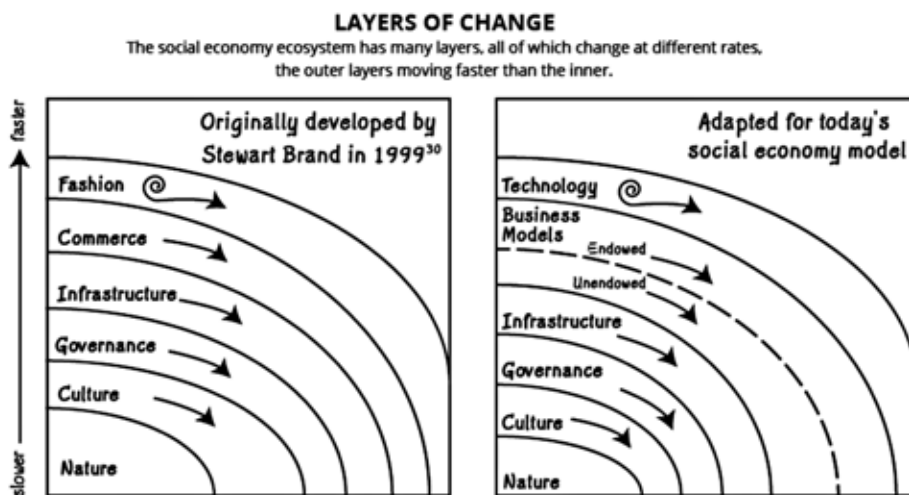
One issue arises from the above considerations – determining what is avant-garde is highly difficult from positions other than retrospective. Moreover, the only exception here is self-definition – which is essential for defining the group’s identification framework but remains burdened with the lack of objectivity and a certain “wishfulness” of this aspect. As J. Szczesny writes:

⁴ *Ibidem*.

As an architect, I have trouble with the avant-garde, and more specifically with the use of this word as a term for any manifestation of contemporary architecture. In the end, readers will find out who could once with all responsibility, thoughtfully, look at the striped, white checkered block seen in the Domus magazine, or at the walking city with suction cups at the Architectural Association exhibition, or even watch the sketches of Dagarama during the Wrocław Terra conference, say that this is how it will be built tomorrow. Besides, even if someone and something announced the ‘building of tomorrow’, to what extent, and for how long before someone or something developed this vision, destroyed it, denied it or appropriated it for a long time because the wind of history turned away, some French philosopher wrote something exciting, or she/he alluring adept of architecture had taken a sentimental acquaintance with an influential critic or respected editor?⁵

3. CAN ARCHITECTURE BE AVANT-GARDE?

Considering the avant-garde mentioned earlier, the question is: is it possible to be avant-garde in this relatively conservative field? Probably still in the nineteenth century, the answer would be ‘no’. Throughout history, habits and canons played the role of objective design premises. It seems, however, that we are now closer to questioning the objective meaning of tradition and the individualisation of the approach than it was possible in previous centuries. Of course, this is a particular emanation of changes taking place in society. The rise of concerns about the importance of the individual and its needs. The role it plays in the community and its creation, and the influence of the collective on the individual. At the same time, changes occur in the relationships of development processes. That is the de facto infiltration of new ideas from those seeking layers (whether in fashion or technology) to layers with greater cultural / civilisation inertia.



- III. 2. Layers of Change – Comparing the speed of change at different levels in the past and present. Source: L. Bernholz, *Philanthropy and social economy Blueprint* 2016; <https://learningforunders.candid.org/content/takeaways/layers-of-change/> (access: 15.06.22).

⁵ J. Szcześny, *Kłopot z awangardą*, “Autoportret: Architektura awangardy” 2017, 4(59), <https://autoportret.pl/artykuly/klopot-z-awangarda/> (access: 2.06.2022).

Historically, broadly understood architecture seems closer to the concept of evolution. The changes taking place over the centuries have been relatively slow, resulted rather from modifications of previous achievements. It is hard not to get the impression that in designing buildings there was much more dialogue with the past than attempts to break away from it in search of a new one. This is not a change – after all, the classic division into epochs is a fact, no matter if the sharp turning points are more or less valid in this case. Even these changes resulted from the absorption of changes in culture and civilisation – certainly more than from directing the architects themselves to avant-garde solutions. Art has always been a signpost in this matter. Ideas developing in it penetrated faster or slower into architecture. This system was not only understandable and natural because of its durability, but also unchanged.

Limitations in the approach to radical dissimilarity resulted from several sources, including purposefulness, functionality requirement or close connection with technology. The features of architecture perceived as objective and, in principle, inseparable, enabling its evaluation, naturally led to a certain conservatism. The adopted social norms and the resulting regulatory system were also fundamental aspects. The functioning of architecture in a social environment that chooses the emphasis on its implementers did not overly promote individual character or the search for differences. The margin of allowable changes was different at different times. The changing epochs would not have appeared without the social acceptance (at least partially) of solutions different from those used. This statement is especially true of formal and visual solutions. Design solutions, however, were subject to slightly different criteria. However, they constituted a significant element in setting the limits of the norm.

This conservatism, which even today requires the author to refer to the opinion of the author from the first century BC, was rarely broken. Of course, changes in aesthetic tastes caused changes in the architectural offer, but the process itself was pretty slow.

In this light, the 20th century looks pretty different, and its image consists of many ideas aimed at changing the existing reality. Although, according to E. Rannoch, architecture initially

took part in this carnival rather sparingly. One could say otherwise that architecture was a minor avant-garde art at the time. Nevertheless, going out to the street, destroying that glass pane separating art from reality, had a unique, most forward-looking and long-lasting form in the field of architecture, namely an ideological and aesthetic program aimed at improving the everyday life of ordinary people.⁶

Nevertheless, these changes, often of a revolutionary nature, remodeled the foundations of understanding architecture at least twice. More importantly, they also followed with an intensity never seen before. In effect, they also led to an ideological dispersion (consistent with the entire social development). They have resulted in various ideas represented almost individually, sometimes jointly or selectively combined for an almost individual project.

Moreover, here the way to explain the popularity of the belief in the value of change and progress visible in the architecture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries probably opens up. Without a doubt:

⁶ E. Ranocchi, *Wstępniak*, “Autoportret: Architektura awangardy” 2017, 4(59), <https://autoportret.pl/artykuly/wstepniak-18/> (access: 2.06.2022).

We live in a culture that is defined as – postmodernity. They have lost their power of persuasion, the myths of civilisation and art such as avant-garde, modernism, and beauty. Art gained mercantile significance, striving for the best commercial effect. Not only the works of one artist should be original, but preferably, each artist's work should be another novelty. The novelty and uniqueness of the creator have become more important than the concept of beauty in his work. The variety of ideas and forms is a feature of the postmodern era. The creator strives for the work's uniqueness, decomposing its original functions and meanings. Decomposition has become the best means for a contemporary architect.⁷

Interestingly, architectural conservatism, striving to confirm new ideas in well-worn patterns, paradoxically causes that even these new ideas often try to link their message with the past. Be it through marriage or renaming known patterns. This constant “flight forward” means that even the pillars of understanding architecture are subject to change. How else to read the attempts to combine the Vitruvian triad with the contemporary attitude, in which *Firmitas* becomes a literal carrier of the Heraclitan idea of *Panta Rhei*. Where durability is constant variation, this example shows that, on the one hand, modernity is highly valued in architecture – showing a different approach to the traditional version. At the same time, a strong semantic “anchor” that makes it possible to refer to tradition is also an aspect that is difficult to ignore.

Interestingly, even an attempt to restore classical principles in the form of new urbanism tries to convince the audience by emphasising ties with tradition on the one hand, and the other by being different from the current formula of the postmodern world. It comes down to a vote that puts the ariergarde in the role of the avant-garde. Furthermore, although the military nomenclature is the closest to a retreat, in the case of architecture, it is only natural to use conservative sentiments within this field.

Thus, the advantages of the avant-garde become tempting also for conservatives. Moreover, vice versa – revolutionists today, following the example of modernists, strive not so much to overthrow the old order but rather to incorporate tradition and give it new meanings. In a world where the value is a symbol rather than the object itself, a skillful collage of old and new sold as a forward-looking idea is the most attractive form of capitalizing ideas.

Another paradox is that this conservative bias concerns a field based on activity forcing, to some extent, a break with existing systems. Designing is, by its nature, an activity that modifies what is known.

However, multithreading does not exclude belief in the power of progress and breaking with the usual patterns, even in an area where dialogue with history is an essential aspect. On the contrary, with the complexity of the intellectual landscape, the desire to get attached to progressive ideas is quite alive and willingly used.

4. COMMERCIAL AVANT-GARDE

Nevertheless, a simple analysis of any (almost) description of the design of a well-known studio most often refers to its modern aspect. Apart from purely theoretical projects

⁷ T. Kozłowski, *No beauty in architecture?*, “Technical Transactions” 2007, 104, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343111757_No_beauty_in_architecture (access: 26.05.2022).

– which, after all, meet the requirements of the avant-garde – a large group are objects assigned the status of the avant-garde. Their innovation is partly the result of the marketing strategy that allows the studio to function in the market reality. Studios such as BIG, Snøhetta, and Adjaye Associates, to name only a few generally recognised, whose projects attract the attention of the entire architectural world, use the advantage of modernity both in terms of marketing and also as an element of their design philosophy. It is a kind of feedback in which the possibility of implementing bold ideas is ensured by emphasising otherness. This argument attracts investors willing to take a risk. This allows the creation of avant-garde projects with the feasibility of realisation.

Contrary to purely theoretical works, it also enables checking relatively quickly. At the same time, it shortens the time of “avant-garde” solutions to the moment of implementation. A product put on the market, which requires novelty and attractive solutions, practically immediately becomes a model copied in other projects – thus losing the central aspect of the avant-garde. However, this specific commercial paradox has been an effective marketing tool since the times of old architecture. Moreover, in a sense, a perfect example of transit from the avant-garde to the standard in a world where novelty/otherness is perceived as objectively positive.

Proof of this may also be the popularity of competitions such as the one organised annually by *Evo* magazine. Its formula even imposes a search for new, bold solutions to high-rise buildings without any requirements as to implementation possibilities, perceiving its mission instead as a conceptual design challenge.

This type of architectural avant-garde can also be found in exhibitions. The best example, for many years now, is the Venice Biennale, which in its general part, very often goes beyond the functioning of contemporary architecture and tries to show the directions of development and possible scenarios for the future through various installations.

Of course, fragmentation makes the direction of individual laboratories significantly different. In the world of atomised choices, finding more significant and constant social movements or a community of views is difficult, especially in art-related fields. Nevertheless, the very notion of the avant-garde was thus not forgotten. It has undoubtedly changed its subtext. It does not envisage changing the whole world but only promises a better future for its supporters. This is a natural consequence of the evolution of civilisation in the context of information bubbles. Therefore, comparing it to the avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century, it should be stated that it is different in scale and scope, not in a load of hope.

This leads to the interesting phenomenon in which, contrary to logic, what is progressive and essentially fits a small percentage of the audience is successfully targeted at the middle range of moderate users. The avant-garde becomes everyday life. It becomes an art to maintain the illusion of difference and the delusion of visionary solutions. The daily avant-garde must, on the one hand, stand out from the crowd of similar people and, on the other hand, keep a relatively short horizon of realising its promises, which in terms of feedback deprives it of the nimbus of the avant-garde. Therefore, it often turns into the sale of attractive names, meaning known solutions, which is a factor contributing to its functioning within acceptable solutions. We are dealing with one of the manifestations of the mechanisms that A. Chodubski writes about: “signs, such as ‘immediate’ achievement

of a high standard of economic life, openness to new signs of scientific and technical progress, and high standardisation in both work and social communication”⁸.

5. SUMMARY

Despite the mercantile, diverse and individualised world, the need to be different and modern – and therefore avant-garde – is still essential. The fragmentation that results from the differentiation becomes the cause of the lack of uniform attitudes and generally functional movements indicating a uniform direction of development. However, it is not the end of hope – an essential element of design, including architecture. Both in theoretical and practical aspects, being avant-garde in most cases is perceived positively, even if the avant-garde itself is a return to known patterns.

Thus, the avant-garde has not ended in theoretical or practical terms. The proportions and scale have changed, but this is still an essential aspect in constant relation to a fine architectural tradition. From the marketing perspective, the avant-garde has become one of the marketing tools. In theoretical (and sometimes practical) terms, it remains an essential element in architecture development. A component without which it would not be possible. Even if the present day has obscured the picture with excess and complexity.

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⁸ A. Chodubski, *Jednostka a przemiany cywilizacyjne w perspektywie XXI wieku*, “Civitas Homi-nibus. Rocznik filozoficzno-społeczny” 2015, 10, pp. 17–28, https://ch.ahe.lodz.pl/sites/default/files/CH10_e_book.pdf (access: 7.05.2022).

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