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THE AVANT-GARDE IN TIME OF GLOBALIZATION

AWANGARDA W CZASIE GLOBALIZACJI

Abstract

The article deals with the issues of the avant-garde in architecture in the time of progressing globalization. The first wave of the avant-garde of the 1920s, expressed in the architecture of modernism, preceded by a solid philosophical foundation, based on new materials and technologies, had its stages of development. From radical manifestos, through the first realizations of model objects that ground them, to the entry into the mainstream of architecture. With the crisis of modernism in the second half of the last century, more and more different new trends aspiring to the avant-garde appeared over time. What seems interesting, then, is the process of communication between the carriers of avant-garde ideas and the broad current of architecture, as well as forecasting, if at all possible, new avant-garde trends.

Keywords: avant-garde, information flow, mainstream, social acceptance

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto problematykę awangardy w architekturze w czasie postępującej globalizacji. Pierwsza fala awangardy lat 20. XX wieku, wyrażająca się w architekturze modernizmu, poprzedzona solidną podbudową filozoficzną, bazując na nowych materiałach i technologiach, miała swoje etapy rozwoju. Od radykalnych manifestów, poprzez pierwsze realizacje modelowych obiektów je ugruntowujące, aż do wejścia do głównego nurtu architektury. Wraz z kryzysem modernizmu w drugiej połowie ubiegłego wieku z czasem pojawiło się coraz więcej różnych nowych nurtów aspirujących do awangardowych. Interesujący wydaje się zatem proces komunikacji pomiędzy nośnikami idei awangardowych a szerokim nurtem architektury, a także prognozowania, jeśli to w ogóle jest możliwe, nowych awangardowych nurtów.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, akceptacja społeczna, główny nurt, przepływ informacji

1. INTRODUCTION

The term avant-garde means the vanguard. The famous French diarist Claude Henri de Rouvroy was the first to use this term in 1825 in a meaning that went beyond the simple military scope. In his revolutionary work, *Literary, Philosophical and Industrial Opinions*, the artist says to the scientist: "It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde, the power of the artists is in fact most immediate and most rapid"¹. The concept of avant-garde was semantically adapted to culture and art at the beginning of the 20th century, referring to a set of tendencies and directions undertaking experimental activities ahead of their time. However, it is difficult not to resist the impression that we are dealing with it almost from the

¹ C.H. de Rouvroy, *Literary, Philosophical and Industrial Opinions*, Paris 1825.

beginning of human existence. After all, this concept also includes both the great projects of Etienne-Louis Boullée, Alberti's theoretical works, theories of building cathedrals, the Copernican revolution, the construction of the pyramids or even much earlier ... invention of the wheel. Władysław Tatarkiewicz notes that

There have been many overturns in the past, but – to this extent deliberate, consciously prepared. Sometimes they were unintentional, rather they took place under internal compulsion, often without the awareness that they were upheavals. The historian knows many precedents for the present moment, and it is difficult for him to predict by analogies what the next stages will be; there is in particular no experience as to whether a conscious and willful revolution ('let it be otherwise as it was') is a deeper and longer-lasting revolution.²

The so-called avant-garde art is characterized by uncompromisingness and radicalism in the fight against the existing state. It is related to the rejection of ideas anchored in the past and established by tradition, as well as earlier plays and any belonging to predecessors and contemporaries moving in the mainstream. It is associated with radicality, rebellion, denial, breaking with the past, inventiveness, and aesthetic innovations. He consciously seeks the confusion that inevitably leads to confrontation and crisis. The avant-garde is the driving force of social evolution, including in the field of architecture. Innovation is a driver of change for the balance of the three elements of the Vitruvian triad – durability (*firmitas*), utility (*utilitas*) and beauty (*venustas*) seen as the *status quo*.

2. FACES OF THE AVANT-GARDE – THE LAST CENTURY

The first wave of the avant-garde of the 1920s in architecture is associated with modernism, which established a new canon of aesthetic patterns and new values related to them. The current paradigm of shaping space, established by a centuries-old tradition, related to the functioning of society, has been exhausted. The philosophical foundation of the avant-garde was materialized much earlier and more radically than in architecture in literature, music, painting, sculpture, theater and the performing arts. Architecture, however, was relatively the least avant-garde among other arts. One of the important factors in the birth of modernism was the use of new materials and technologies, especially reinforced concrete. Thanks to this, after World War I, during the period of rapid social changes, it was possible to materialize fiery theoretical postulates and manifestos. Their content proclaimed the incompatibility of the earlier formulas of architecture in the face of new social challenges as well as new technical and material possibilities. However, we must not miss the fact that the avant-garde was building a new, classless society by destroying bourgeois culture. That is why the critique of transparent and open "new art" had such a strong social and political undertone.

The paradigm of modernist architecture was established in the following decades. The new art has shaped the imagination and tastes of the next generations, not only in the perception of architecture, but also permanently inscribed in the canon of design. The opening of the Bauhaus Museum Dessau in 2019, one of the main events of the century of modern arts and crafts universities celebrated in Germany, makes us realize the importance of the new

² W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2011, p. 403.

art of the first decades of the last century for future generations. Everyday objects designed a hundred years ago still remain avant-garde. However, with the crisis of modernism in the second half of the last century, more and more different new trends aspiring to the avant-garde appeared over time. In the 1970s, modernism was subject to criticism of postmodernism, which in the next decade was questioned by two opposing directions: first, deconstructivism, and then minimalism.

The contemporary version of new art is parametric modeling, which is the dominant manifestation of avant-garde practice in architectural design. Patrik S. Schumacher, now head of Zaha Hadid Architects, points to the inclination of parametricism to visual effect: “Aesthetically, it is the elegance of ordered complexity and the sense of seamless fluidity, akin to natural systems that constitute the hallmark of parametricism”³.

Thanks to information technology, the appropriate selection of algorithms that take into account many fixed and variable factors enables the design and implementation of objects in the most useful forms. Among the dozens of different, carefully selected parameters, one can mention, among others, temperature amplitudes, variable insolation, energy consumption, wind direction, atmospheric pressure or changes in the seasons. Many of the parametrically modeled objects may resemble the structures of animate and inanimate nature.

3. AVANT-GARDE PHASES

In the phenomenon of avant-garde, several stages of “development” can be distinguished. In a series of aesthetic implications, the avant-garde evolves from the initial revolutionary phase of radical manifestos to being grounded in model, “prototype” objects. After them, we observe wider social acceptance, followed by a shift to mainstream architecture and finally questioned by another new art. Nowadays, rapidly successive actions in space may shorten or eliminate individual sequences.

In 1962, Renato Poggioli described the avant-garde with four chronologically following features: activism, antagonism, nihilism and antagonism⁴. Activism meant adventure and dynamism, an impulse to act, not necessarily linked to a positive goal. Antagonism refers to militancy, that is, fighting primarily with tradition, established canons, the public or the establishment. The combination of activism and antagonism on the path to purity leads to dissolving into nothingness and finally entering the agonistic phase. The concept of the avant-garde from a century ago and Poggioli’s description point to the cycles of birth, development and passing of the directions of art over the centuries. An analogy here may be the model of Heinrich Wölfflin’s sinusoid⁵, reflecting the alternation of architectural styles and its modernized scheme by Wojciech Kosiński⁶. The source of the new stylish era is precisely the avant-garde, that is, the new perception of reality, which destroys the perception of reality

³ P.S. Schumacher, *Parametricism: A New Global Style for Architecture and Urban Design*, AD Architectural Design – Digital Cities, 2009, Vol 79, No 4, p. 16.

⁴ R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1968, pp. 61–77.

⁵ H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2015.

⁶ W. Kosiński, *Trwanie i przemijanie architektury – stymulacje twórczości*, “Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura”, 2011, Z. 14, 4-A1, pp. 196–207.

established by routine and experience. With time, however, it also becomes contested by another new play.

4. SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Social acceptance of new patterns, including architectural patterns, replacing the existing matrices, deeply fixed in the consciousness, always takes time. The lack of understanding of new art can be expressed in its deformations, adjusting the new to old patterns. An example is a housing estate designed and built in the 1920s by Le Corbusier in Pessac near Bordeaux, France. The 51 houses project, which is a kind of experimental field for new structural and aesthetic ideas, was commissioned by the French industrialist Henry Fruges. Over the years, the less affluent inhabitants who settled the estate adapted the existing structures to their own needs, creating picturesque slums. Currently, the estate in Pessac, as a symbol of early modernism, is under conservation protection, and new residents, aware of the value of the inhabited space, restore it to its original form. The Pessac case shows how long it took for the new standard to be accepted.

Sometimes an architect's work may not be approved by the public. The short expiry date may result, for example, from the limited field of influence or the birth of new cultural events. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the demolition of the modernist Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St. Louis. The estate, consisting of 33 eleven-story concrete blocks of large slab, was designed by Minoru Yamasaki in accordance with the ideals of the CIAM International Congress of Modern Architecture. Due to the low standard of flats, as well as problems related to crime and vandalism, the estate began to depopulate quickly. On July 15, 1972, just seventeen years after its construction, the Pruitt-Igoe estate was blown up, symbolizing the end of modern architecture.

An interesting hypothetical graph of the course of mental acceptance of an architectural innovation in the shape of a rising line similar to a parabola was presented by Zdzisław Pelczarski⁷. The shape of the curve shows the readiness of the general public to accept the avant-garde in architecture, which changes with the passage of time. First, the author assumes a slow increase in the acceptance of new art in the social consciousness at the moment of introducing innovations, which, after time, reaches the maximum which is full of acceptance. It is a theoretical model that optimistically assumes that the conservative part of society will eventually also accept architectural innovation.

The difficulties in accepting new art are evidenced by the views of recognized architects and art critics, for whom modernism in the history of art, as not deserving of much attention, is at best marginalized. Tadeusz Chrzanowski and Marian Kornecki in *The Art of Opole Silesia*, devoting only one paragraph to new art in architecture, write: "Moderna, which won eclecticism at the end of the 19th century, did not play any role in Opole Silesia"⁸. On the other hand, Szczęsny Rutkowski writes in *Human Estates*: "In this new style, a lot of private villas and houses for income are also built. (...) Extremely functional plans: special houses for consumption lovers, special houses for athletes, melancholies, blondes, bald men,

⁷ Z. Pelczarski, *Relacje pomiędzy psychologicznym i fizycznym ładem współczesnej przestrzeni architektonicznej*, "Architecturae et Artibus", 2014, No. 2, pp. 34–49.

⁸ T. Chrzanowski, M. Kornecki, *Sztuka Śląska Opolskiego. Od średniowiecza do końca w. XIX*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1974, p. 390.

brunettes” and further: “But the architects have overdone. Even a German will not withstand such restraint and uniformity for longer. There will be a reaction”⁹.

The avant-garde artists, who often act as “stars” of architecture, play an extraordinary role in understanding and accepting new art. Contemporary architectural demurists, on the one hand, remain isolated from down-to-earth construction procedures and the problems generated by the construction of buildings and structures, on the other hand, they are supported by specific financial resources. The avant-garde artist, freed from all social or aesthetic stereotypes, with his works, and often with an unprecedented personality, seems to be ahead of the time in which he works. Creates the art of the future. The radical experimenter does not imitate reality, but seeks a separate language of expression. It is free from the worries most architects struggle with investors and officials. It does not provide services, it does not have to please. It may or may not. It remains free from the pressures which almost the entire community of architects is subject to. His attitude determines a specific professional status in the environment.

5. BETWEEN AVANT-GARDE AND MAINSTREAM

The avant-garde is closely related to the mainstream of architecture. It does not exist in a vacuum. Patrik S. Schumacher, distinguishing between the avant-garde and the mainstream in architecture, notes that

The experiences and design communications of mainstream architects are integrated as a part of the unified culture of architecture through being continuously referenced back to the focal points provided by the avant-garde and its more widely circulating publications that feature avant-garde projects rather than theoretical texts. The two subsystems form an overall system as their discourses, references and publications overlap and cross-reference. The crises of the mainstream practice are registered within the avant-garde which in turn elaborates new approaches, discursive structures and recipes that (slowly) migrate into the mainstream.¹⁰

In this approach, the avant-garde is a separate entity from the mainstream of architecture and art. However, it cannot be located on its periphery, but definitely in the center that gives rise to changes not only in space, but also in the social and cultural environment. The avant-garde differs from the mainstream, anticipating the contemporary needs of society, setting new directions. It functions on the basis of experiment, research and risk, which do not necessarily guarantee implementation of an invention or innovation. The mainstream’s task is to satisfy the basic most important needs of society, while the avant-garde is ahead of the present, charting future paths of development.

Schumacher includes radical experimenters and renowned avant-garde designers as well as avant-garde architecture theorists and some academic teachers along with their chosen, most talented students. For example, the founders of the Bauhaus were early adepts of other prominent avant-garde artists. However, in the second mainstream group, he sees representatives of high architectural culture and commercial architects. The academic architects

⁹ S. Rutkowski, *Osiedla Ludzkie*, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze w Krakowie, Warszawa–Kraków 1932, p. 110.

¹⁰ P.S. Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture. A New Framework for Architecture*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 2011, p. 103.

mentioned in the first group are also often included in the group of avant-garde designers and theoreticians. Almost all outstanding avant-garde architects working in the avant-garde trend were or are associated with academic centers or research institutions. The establishment of many universities and research centers was, in turn, the initiative of eminent architects. Many of them, using their own names, created their own institutes and research centers. In addition to the flagship example of the Bauhaus, one can mention Otto Frei, who in 1958 founded a private research institute in Berlin – the Institute for the Development of Light Structures (Entwicklungsstätte für den Leichtbau). Thus, it is almost a rule that the feedback compression between theory and practice is. The theory represented by research institutions and the practice behind avant-garde companies, including architectural studios.

In the era of globalization, the flow of information becomes faster and easier. Today, in addition to scientific conferences and professional architectural magazines and book publications, its carriers are the Internet. Although the mainstream of architecture seems to be more noticeable, the avant-garde, paradoxically “traditionally”, will always remain a trigger for change. When avant-garde projects break through, the mainstream includes them in the main message. The adoption of new ideas is most conducive to the implementation of exemplary buildings. In the period of modernist architecture, this was possible thanks to the first works of Bauhaus creators, or the construction of model buildings and urban assumptions as part of housing exhibitions. Therefore, the process of communication between the carriers of avant-garde ideas and the broad trend of architecture and the environment seems interesting.

Understanding new art always faces a barrier of opposition and incomprehension. For a recipient who is used to seeing only content in traditional images and forms, comprehending it may be difficult or impossible. The mainstream meets the current, utilitarian needs of society. Jose Ortega y Gasset, one of the greatest intellectuals of the last century, writes in the title essay of the famous collection “Dehumanization of Art”:

‘From the sociological point of view’ the characteristic feature of new art is, in my judgment, that it divides the public into two classes of those who understand it and those who do not. This implies that one group possesses an organ of comprehension denied to the other – that they are two different varieties of the human species. The new art obviously addresses itself not to everybody, as did Romanticism, but to a specially gifted minority. Hence the indignation it arouses in the masses.¹¹

The Philosopher divided humanity into two types – the vulgar crowd he despised and inventors. For Ortega, as an advocate of a total transformation of society, understanding new content, referring to a pure aesthetic sense, requires an intellectual effort. It is a recipe for resisting the artistic tyranny of the mob. In dehumanization, he sees the content of new art moving away from human life represented by 19th-century realism and romanticism. Writing at the height of modernism, Ortega attempted to understand young artists. He tried to make abstract art, different from the representational one, more understandable to the uneducated, over-used to old patterns audience¹². He showed a penchant for new stylistic experiments, and perceived the avant-garde in terms of inevitable products in the history of art.

¹¹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art: And Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1968, p. 6.

¹² M.J. Neves, *The Dehumanization of Art. Ortega y Gasset's Vision of New Music*, “International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music”, 2012, Vol. 43, Issue 2, pp. 365–376.

6. SUMMARY

In a complex and heterogeneous contemporary society, subject to dynamic and unpredictable influences, the avant-garde may escape current classification. It is clear. A more complete and reliable assessment of each experiment, including an architectural one, will require a time distance. Nowadays, if it is possible at all, we can only try to forecast new versions of avant-garde trends. On the one hand, extremely sophisticated technologies, on the other hand, wars and cataclysms can write completely unpredictable scenarios. Can the dramatic shock, not only for Europe, which the war in Ukraine has become, constitute a shock that is strong enough to generate a new avant-garde? Possible, although after World War II the paradigm of the 1920s was still relevant. Or perhaps future reconstruction, in the face of limited energy resources, will require a new paradigm that takes into account the desired ecologically healthy architecture. Perhaps the right path would be to build simple structures using extreme technological advances. As Juhani Pallasmaa rightly points out, the astonishingly refined structures and complex architectural forms of the animal world “even fulfill strict criteria for economy and efficiency through minimizing the use of material and labour”¹³. The return to simple geometric forms can be seen in terms of the avant-garde (Ill. 1).



Ill. 1. Sketches Teatro Del Mo, Aldo Rossi, source: <https://www.archiweb.cz/b/divadlo-sveta-il-teatro-del-mondo> (access: 28.06.2022).

¹³ J. Pallasmaa, *The ecological functionalism of animal constructions* [in:] Tuukkanen P. (ed.), *Architecture of the Essential: Ecological Functionalism of Animal Constructions*, Vammalan Kirjapaino Oy, Helsinki 1995, p. 151.

It was also noticed by Władysław Tatarkiewicz:

We live in the period of looking for new things: Will there be no end to looking for new things? History teaches that everything changes; it can therefore be assumed that the need for changes, so vivid today, will also pass sooner or later (...). We found ourselves on uneven terrain, we do not know what awaits us. A comparison arises: A river that hits uneven terrain and boulders creates eddies, then changes the bed. But it also happens that it returns to its former direction and continues to flow evenly.¹⁴

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¹⁴ W. Tatarkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 62.