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TWO TRUTHS ABOUT FINNMARK ARCHITECTURE – FROM NORWEGIAN UTILITARIANISM TO SAAMI MOBILITY AND LOVE FOR NATURE

DWIE PRAWDY ARCHITEKTURY FINNMARKU – OD NORWESKIEJ UTYLITARNOŚCI DO SAAMSKIEJ MOBILNOŚCI I UMIŁOWANIA NATURY.

Abstract

The subject of the study is contemporary architecture of Finnmark, the northernmost region of Norway, where influences of two cultures, i.e. Norwegian and Sami clash. The purpose of the research is to show that both the internal truth of a work, resulting from a deep connection of the Saami culture with nature and their mobile lifestyle and the other truth – the truth of time, resulting from the utilitarian nature and simplicity of the preferred forms of Norwegians, which constitute a response to the difficult coexistence with natural elements as well as with dark circumstances that occurred in the past of this region, lie at the root of architecture of this region. They are complemented by the truth of art – cosmological and animalistic motifs reflecting the order of nature and own truths of authors of works which emphasize spectacular landscapes and phenomena of a place. Sometimes the fusion and intercultural transfer result in surprising as well as unique spatial solutions.

Keywords: Norwegian architecture, architecture of the Norwegian Saami people, architecture of Finnmark

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem opracowania jest współczesna architektura Finnmarku, najbardziej na północ wysuniętego regionu Norwegii, gdzie ścierają się wpływy dwóch kultur: norweskiej i saamskiej. Celem badań jest wskazanie, że u źródeł architektury tego regionu leży zarówno prawda wewnętrzna dzieła, wpływająca z głębokiego związku kultury Saamów z naturą i ich mobilnym trybem życia, jak i druga prawda – prawda czasu, wynikająca z utylitarności oraz prostoty form preferowanych przez Norwegów, będących odpowiedzią na niełatwą koegzystencję z naturalnymi żywiołami i mrocznymi okolicznościami zaistniałymi w przeszłości tego regionu. Dopełniają je prawda sztuki – kosmologiczne i animalistyczne motywy, oddające porządek natury – i prawdy własne autorów dzieł, akcentujące spektakularne krajobrazy i fenomeny miejsca. Niekiedy fuzja i transfer międzykulturowy skutkują zaskakującymi i oryginalnymi rozwiązaniami przestrzennymi.

Słowa kluczowe: norweska architektura, architektura norweskich Saamów, architektura Finnmarku

1. INTRODUCTION

Finnmark, which was known as Norwegian *Vardøhus amt* in the past, is the northernmost region of Norway, where influences of two cultures functioning side by side intersect, i.e. Saami people and Norwegians. The former is represented by the indigenous ethnic population in these areas, which was forced to follow the Norwegian style of life for years, which in turn resulted in its gradual marginalization. At present, although the situation of the Saami has improved significantly, they are still fighting for their rightful place in the Norwegian society to be perceived as full-fledged neighbours of Norwegians with a separate language, religion, traditions, customs, and a national identity.¹ This culture, firmly rooted in nature, was directly reflected in the traditional settlement forms constructed by the Saami, which to a large extent influenced the character of Finnmark's contemporary architecture. This architecture resulted from local natural environments, their rhythms, resources, and ways of use by nomadic communities and was closely related with them. This testifies to its veracity as to the created forms and shapes as well as the local materials used – their textures, colours, and that they are biodegradable. The mobile lifestyle which required a periodic movement of the Saami along with herds of reindeer strengthened this credibility, making architecture one of many forms of providing shelter, education, and orientation in vast and open tundra spaces. For a change, the Norwegians living in this distant, windy, and frosty land developed their own spatial codes resulting from a kind of practicality and their will to survive in extremely hostile conditions. A dramatic fact from the history of the region, which was a 'scorched earth strategy' used by the Wehrmacht troops retreating during World War II, turned out to be of great significance. Almost all buildings existing at that time were burnt down and their inhabitants were forced to evacuate to the south of the country. After the war, reconstruction of settlement structures and their remodelling started. The resulting architecture was characterized by minimalism and simplicity.² Utilitarianism of forms and limitations to the necessary minimum became a determiner for the architectural objects which have been erected in this region until today. It is worth emphasising that sometimes there is an unexpected fusion and intercultural transfer between the Saami and Norwegian cultures, which results in surprising and original spatial solutions.

2. THE INTERNAL TRUTH OF A WORK AND THE TRUTH OF TIME CONSIDERED IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL OBJECTS ERECTED IN FINNMARK

The internal truth of a work results from its correspondence. A work may correspond to a place, its natural environment, existing spatial codes, symbols, and local archetypes. For the Saami community, architectural structures they erect correspond to nature and they additionally contain a message about cosmological inclinations and animalistic motifs. For centuries, the Saami have been credited with the ability to establish deep relationships with forces of nature and control them, which resulted directly from their careful observation of

¹ I. Wiśniewska, *Hen. Na północy Norwegii*, Czarne, Wołowiec 2016, pp. 91–96.

² E. Seip, *Architecture in Norway*, http://www.reisenet.no/norway/facts/culture_science/architecture_in_norway.html (access: 11.09.2014).

changes of seasons, rhythms and cycles occurring in nature as well as a thorough insight into the character of its individual components. And so, in order to describe the ‘soul of snow and its current condition’, which marked the existence of nomadic communities for centuries, they used about 200 terms in their terminology. Excellent knowledge of reading signs hidden in nature conditioned an efficient journey and finding suitable pastures for reindeer, which constituted the main reference point in the life of nomadic communities. The whole contemporary Saami architecture is based on the motifs present in traditionally constructed houses, i.e. both seasonal and permanent. These houses differed from one another depending on whether they were inhabited by the mountain, forest, or sea Saami people, who had different natural construction materials available in their local environments.³ Basically, traditional permanent objects and those of an ephemeral nature erected along reindeer trails were divided into *lavvu* – a pointed tent form (Ill. 1) and *goahti* – a kind of dugout with a wooden roof structure covered with wood or peat (*turf hut*).⁴ These structures were biodegradable, according to the prevailing philosophy that earth does not belong to anyone, so you can only borrow its resources to return them to it later. In the 1980s, when a series of service, museum, educational and government facilities for Saami communities started to be built, it was impossible to resist the impression of a direct reflection of their forms and organization of space into known traditional solutions shaped in harmony with nature. The most spectacular is the building of the Saami Plenary Assembly in Karasjok (arch. Stein Halvorsen AS and Christian Sundby arkitekter MNAL, landscape architect – Grindaker, implementation in 2000) with a pointed roof structure of the Plenary Assembly Hall inspired by the shape of *lavvu* and a semi-circular arrangement of rooms in its complementary structure referring to the native arrangement of Saami tents forming seasonal settlements.⁵ This object is also an example of the fusion of two cultures, i.e. the Saami symbolism and the contemporary wooden Norwegian technologies (Ill. 2). A similar principle can be found in the shape of the Saami Culture Centre in Karasjok (architects Arne Bjerk and Eilif Bjørge, implementation in 1990). The motif of a pointed finial also reappears in the Saami Mountain Church in Lappoluobbal (arch. Nils Henrik Eggen, implementation in 1967) and in low-volume facilities such as shops, galleries, and gastronomic premises, e.g. in the architecture of restaurants in Skaidi situated in the far North of the region.⁶ A contemporary implementation, which was inspired by the Saami *turf hut* resembling a green hill, is Great Turf Hut with guest rooms at the Karasjok Inn Hotel (architects Kjell Borgen and Bing Lorentzem, implementation in 1990).⁷ Apart from traditional forms of living, another inspiration for Saami buildings was the landscape of Finnmark with open spaces extending to the horizon. Architectural forms, thanks to the ground floor horizontal shape, extend linearly in it, constituting its continuation and perfect complement. This effect is intensified in winter when roofs of objects are covered with snow, which makes buildings become part of the naturally shaped terrain. These implementations are closely connected with the Saami routes of seasonal reindeer migration. An example is the Saami Museum in Varangerbotn (architects Kjell Borgen and Bing Lorentzem,

³ M.A. Biernat, *Laponia. Wszystkie imiona śniegu*, Wyd. Poznańskie, Poznań 2018, pp. 76–78, 96–104.

⁴ Ø. Vorren, E. Manker, *Lapp Life and Customs: A Survey*, transl. Kathleen McFarlane, Oxford University Press, London 1962.

⁵ A. Helsing, *Motety Teater*, Byggekunst, 2000, no. 8, pp. 22–23.

⁶ E. Cisek, *Norweska architektura i rzeźba wobec natury*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 2017, pp. 128–130.

⁷ K. Borgen, B. Lorentzem, *Karasjok hotell med Storgammen*, Byggekunst, 1990, no. 7, pp. 390–391.



III. 1. *Lávvu* – traditional, pointed tent form, common in the region of Finnmark, photo by D. Tyczyńska



III. 2. Building of the Saami Plenary Assembly in Karasjok (architects Stein Halvorsen AS and Christian Sundby arkitekter MNAL, landscape architecture – Grindaker, implementation in 2000), photo by E. Cisek

implementation in 1995), where the routes from the north west, south east and south west of the region intersect, and the Lappoluobbal school in Kautokeino (architects Kjell Borgen and Bing Lorentzem, implementation in 1976), located in the central part of the area being usually a winter reindeer pasture, which makes it possible to educate the young Saami who are “on their way” along with animals.⁸

The truth of time refers to a historical moment in the life of the community in which the means of expression used by architects most accurately reflect the needs and expectations of users. The truth of time can be seen in Norwegian implementations of the reconstruction period, which followed immediately after the dark period of complete burning down of buildings by the Wehrmacht troops retreating from Finnmark in 1944. During that time, such vibrant centres as Honningsvåg, Berlevåg, Mehamn, Vardø, Vadsø, Harøysund, Gjesvær and Skarsvåg were totally destroyed. Finnkongkeila, which was never reconstructed, was also among the completely burnt down towns.⁹ The remaining towns, after the return of their inhabitants, were razed to the ground and constituted vast seas of ashes. In Honningsvåg, only a little white church was saved in the centre of the settlement, which was immortalized in archival photographs.¹⁰ Originally, all these towns constituted a cluster development layout, concentrating residential buildings around a little church or a port. These layouts often resulted from the existing landscape – the church was located at the highest point of the settlement, whereas houses cascaded down the slopes towards a bay or fjord. After the war, their remodelling took place which consisted in exact reconstruction of old spatial layouts but the buildings were given new features which reflected the spirit of the time.¹¹ The objects constructed at that time were characterized by simplicity and necessary minimalism of details. This is best expressed by the words of Elisabeth Seip: “Today we can look again at buildings from the period of reconstruction and study their thoughtful solutions. In the times of abundance, they are a good reminder of what we really need.”¹² As it turned out later, this architecture created a solid basis for later spatial solutions. The whole contemporary Norwegian architecture of Finnmark is the evidence to sophisticated simplicity and utilitarianism reflecting the hardships of living in the harsh cold climate of the North, requiring fortitude, perseverance and steadfastness from the inhabitants. This was perfectly presented in the movie *Heftig og begeistret* (2001). The most impressive is the scene showing a choir of older men from the fishing village of Berlevåg by the Barents Sea, who stand on the shores of the raging winter sea and sing a song about their homeland. Nina Witoszek writes about it in the following way: “They are not bothered by the wind or snow around them, they make nothing of the nagging frost. They sing vigorously, regardless of frosted eyebrows or heroic icicles hanging from their noses.”¹³ Hence, the economical means of expression visible in the reduction of architectural forms to a minimum as a manifestation of being contented with what is necessary for life, show the adaptation of their creators to nature and consent to the cosmic order that governs it and complementary dependencies. Due to the environmental and climatic conditions of the region taken into account in the choice of shape and building materials, residential houses usually receive a simple archetypal form with a gable roof – houses

⁸ K. Borgen, B. Lorentzem, *Lappoluobbal barneskole*, Byggekunst, 1977, no. 5, pp. 158–160.

⁹ E. Seip, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ K. Bergslid, *Honningsvåg kirke*, Honningsvåg 1999.

¹¹ I. Sætherø, *Vandringer i gjenreist landskap. Honningsvåg*. Fotefar mot nord, Vadsø 1996.

¹² E. Seip, *op. cit.*, p.10.

¹³ N. Witoszek, *Najlepszy kraj na świecie*, Czarne, Wołowiec 2017, p. 5.



III. 3. Houses in Skarsvåg, photo by E. Cisek



III. 4. Norwegian School of Fishermen in Honningsvåg (architects Erling Viksjø, Kjell Borgen, Bing Lorentzen, implementation in 1954, extension in 1988), photo by E. Cisek

in Skarsvåg (Ill. 3), whereas larger objects are characterized by minimalist shapes and aptly selected finishing materials of façades.¹⁴ For example, the Norwegian School of Fishermen in Honningsvåg (architects Erling Viksjø, Kjell Borgen, Bing Lorentzen, implementation in 1954, extension in 1988), constructed on Klubben hill and visible from every point of the city, was built of concrete and covered with frost-resistant clad metal sheet¹⁵ (Ill. 4). However, certain finesse and a genetically determined tendency of the Norwegians to sculptural forms can be seen in their summer houses. Some of them, e.g. those from the area of Skaidi, have decorative floristic and animalistic details. **The internal truth of a work** of contemporary Norwegian layouts results directly from the Finnmark inhabitants' attachment to land and sea as well as their respect and honour for the environmental conditions of a place in the construction forms and technologies used, in particular low winter temperatures, annoying strong winds (Orkan) and long polar nights.

3. THE TRUTH OF FINNMARK'S ART AND THE AUTHOR'S OWN TRUTH AS AN IMITATION OF THE TRUTH ABOUT THE ORDER OF NATURE

The truth of art in Finnmark is the truth about the order of nature, about the territory and related life forms, which are subject to cyclical rhythms and transformations. Through their art, the Saami people, mainly through cosmological and animalistic motifs present in architecture, emphasize a close relationship with the universe, a traditional way of life and the use of the area these people identify with as well as a unique relationship with animals and spirits of nature, which is a direct result of the original religion. This philosophy can be seen in all of the currently constructed Saami buildings starting from residential houses and ending with public facility buildings. Skilful selection of materials in terms of textures and colours is visible in all these implementations. The colours appearing on the façades are usually deep red, or architectural details referring to the colours found in traditional *gakti* dresses and the Saami flag. They express and symbolize components of the universe, i.e. red – earth, green – nature, blue – sky and yellow – sun.¹⁶ The Saami residential houses are usually painted red (symbolizing earth, the territory the community identifies with, Ill. 5), whereas the Norwegians use a different colour code reserving white colour for the residential function and red colour for the economic and community function.¹⁷ In the interiors and on the façades of the Saami buildings there are artistic accents in the form of animalistic motifs. In the Saami Museum in Varangerbotn, whose façades are covered with dark wood with vertical articulation, colourful accents in the Saami national colours of red, blue and yellow are visible in the entrance area and by the window joinery. Additionally, on one of the walls there is a painting by Aage Gaupa made of red paint on a white background. The image refers to the world of nature by means of a soft line and shows paths in the snow trod by reindeer on the Finnmarksvidda plateau. In another implementation – the school of Lappoluobbal in Kautokeino, the building's façades were covered with deep red wooden panels and white

¹⁴ E. Cisek, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–114.

¹⁵ E. Viksjø, *Fiskarfagsskolen i Honningsvåg*, Byggekunst, 1950, no. 2, pp. 35–40.

¹⁶ E. Cisek, *op. cit.*, pp. 150–151.

¹⁷ I. Hage, *Gjenreisingsarkitektur og autentisitet*, Årbok / Föreningen Norske Fortidsminnesmerkens Bevaring, 2002, no. 2, pp. 65–74.



Ill. 5. A Saami dwelling house with a simple archetypal form in the area of Larvik, Finnmark, photo by E. Cisek



Ill. 6. Cathedral of the Northern Light in Alta (architects Schmidt/Hammer/Lassen arkitekter, implementation in 2013), photo by E. Cisek

stones. It additionally obtained a paint decoration with stylized reindeer and fish motifs by the Saami artists, namely Synnøve Persen, Aage Gaup, and Jose Halse.¹⁸ Often, in architectural implementations, the façade is maintained in dark shades, whereas the interior is white and illuminated for contrast. Examples are the Saami Museum in Karasjok (architects Magda Eide Jessen & Vidar Corn Jessen, implementation in 1972) and the Museum of the Eastern Saami in Neiden (architects Mette Melandsø and Peter Paus, implementation in 2009).¹⁹

The building of the Saami Parliament in Karasjok is often referred to as a still image of the Saami seasonal settlement which is mobile and variable by nature as well as conditioned by natural cycles. The sculpturally shaped surface of the pointed roof form of the Saami Plenary Hall resembles the texture of the pattern found on the fabric embracing the traditional *lavvo* tent. The central wall of the building is decorated with a picture of the universe by Hilde Skancke Pedersen.

Norwegians, through art present in architecture, emphasize natural phenomena attributed to specific places which are characterized by a unique *genius loci*. In Finnmark the most spectacular example of this is the Cathedral of Northern Light in Alta (architects Schmidt/Hammer/Lassen, implementation in 2013) with a spirally twisted form and clad with titanium tiles (Ill. 6). This object is referred to as a lonely sculpture, reflecting rays of the sun during the day and the light of stars and the aurora borealis at night. Alta is a city known for frequent observations of the phenomenon called *aurora borealis*. The church body through the spiral form makes the place cosmic and emphasizes this peculiarity becoming for it a kind of giant mirror. The reflection of a spectacular phenomenon in it is intensified by the effect of colourful veils in the sky and architecture becomes a medium of information about the place. A similar message constitutes the basis of the artistic realizations which were created as part of the international artistic project Skulpturlandskap Nordland implemented in the years 1992–1998 and 2009–2015 in the northern regions of Norway. They were intended to emphasize the place, its spectacular character, beauty, natural environment, landscape, and related events from various times of the past. A similar message was conveyed by another international project, i.e. National Tourist Routes which covered architectural installations carried out in the years 1997–2015 at Norway's most-frequented tourist routes.²⁰ In many of these works we can see the author's own truth, which deviates from local and universal associations. In the Finnmark area, the most famous is architectural installation *Steileset* in Vardø, by the Varanger trail (architects Peter Zumthor & Partner, Louise Bourgeois, implementation in 2011), which commemorates the 17th-century events and people connected with them, i.e. 91 people burned at the stake who were victims charged with practicing black magic. The installation, which is situated on the cliff, is visible from the sea and its shining part burns like a lighthouse at night. It was built on the basis of the route which victims had to go through in the past to die in flames. Wooden paths lead through the architectural installation. It consists of a canvas, white 'cocoon' connected with a black shiny cube. The canvas cocoon has 91 built-in windows and brings to mind the House of Souls – here one can read stories of people sentenced to death, and next to each of them a lamp is burning in the window – in Norway it is a sign that the host is in his home. The black cube symbolizes the place of final extermination – in its interior, a chair surrounded by oval-shaped mirrors

¹⁸ K. Borgen, B. Lorentzen, *Lappoluobual...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 158–160.

¹⁹ M. Jessen, V. Jessen, *Samiske samlinger, Karasjok*, Byggekunst, 1972, no. 2, pp. 48–49.

²⁰ E. Cisek, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–135, 170–173, 191–195.

was placed in the recess. An 'eternal fire' burns on the seat of the chair. Thanks to these forms and the way they are perceived by visitors the authors showed the victims' way to the place of their annihilation. The intended message of the work is never to stigmatize otherness because the diversity of life forms existing next to each other is one of the basic principles that govern in nature.²¹

4. CONCLUSION

At the root of Finnmark's architecture lies the internal truth of a work, which stems both from a deep connection of the Saami culture with nature and their mobile lifestyle as well as from the utilitarian nature and simplicity of forms preferred by the Norwegians, which constitute a response to the difficult coexistence with natural elements. The truth of the art of architecture in this region includes cosmological and animalistic motifs reflecting the order and components of nature, its phenomena, and unique places in terms of the environment. The own truth of the authors of works emphasizing these spectacular spaces allows us to see them in a different and surprising light. Finally, it is worth mentioning lies about architecture. Truth rarely occurs without its opposite. Lies of architecture usually relate to a message that is not entirely true and which does not necessarily have to have a negative connotation. Sometimes it is about artificially supporting the myth. One of the Norwegian myths is the proverbial small wooden house at the fjord. For centuries traditional Norwegian architectural forms have been created using wood. Initially, they were log structures *laft*, then wooden-frame houses *stav*. Nowadays, houses are most often built in a wooden-frame system filled with hollow blocks or masonry, and then covered with wooden cladding. This gives them lightness and at the same time allows them to remain connected with the past and to continue the spatial code visible in the landscape. The architecture of Finnmark is unambiguously associated with wooden development painted in vivid colours. The further to the north, this myth is broken in the Arctic regions. Due to low temperatures, concrete is used and sometimes objects are covered with clad sheets, which in turn produces the opposite effect – one of monolithicity. This practice may at times contribute to a rather surreal impression of communing with something foreign that does not belong to the place.

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²¹ I. Wiśniewska, *op. cit.*, pp. 188–189.

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