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ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY AS A “PROJECT OF CRISIS” IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE THEORIES OF MANFREDO TAFURI

HISTORIA ARCHITEKTURY JAKO „PROJEKT KRYZYSOWY” W INTERPRETACJI TEORII MANFREDO TAFURIEGO

Abstract

From today's point of view, the history of architecture is viewed as a kind of “project”. Over the years, defined phenomena and the significance of architectural works in a “project” can be perceived as a false interpretation – that is, a lie of architecture! This article will aim to diagnose how we can interpret the history of architecture as a “project” searching for the truth in the times of a crisis in the interpretation of Manfredo Tafuri theories.

Keywords: architecture, truth, crisis, mapping

Streszczenie

Z dzisiejszego punktu widzenia historia architektury jest traktowana jako pewnego rodzaju „projekt”. Z biegiem lat określone zjawiska i znaczenie prac architektonicznych w „projekcie” można postrzegać jako fałszywą interpretację – to znaczy kłamstwo architektury! Rozważania zawarte w niniejszej pracy będą miały na celu zdiagnozowanie, jak możemy interpretować historię architektury jako „projekt” szukający prawdy w czasach kryzysu w odniesieniu do teorii Manfredo Tafuriego.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, prawda, kryzys, mapowanie

1. ARCHITECTURE AS A FACTOR UNDERLYING THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

Accounting for contemporary times, we need to review the meaning of the history of architecture in the context of the changes taking place in the world around us. The phrase cited after the philosophical concepts of Manfredo Tafuri (1935–1994) – a “project of crisis” – widens our interpretative perspective of an architectural work. The way we look at and perceive architecture will always be susceptible to the question whether it is a true or just false interpretation thereof, in other words – can architecture lie?¹ When can

¹ This article constitutes the studies the author carried out at the Faculty of Architecture at Poznan University of Technology within the framework of the research project entitled “Mapping of architectural space, history, theory, practice, modernity.”

architecture become a landmark in space as a complete work and when as a partial work that is sufficiently recognisable to justify its pursuit in the context of the philosophical discourse.

Contemporary architecture we encounter on daily basis, with the lapse of time, can become a witness of the times of its origin. Looking at architecture through the prism of elapsing time we can come up with a number of interpretations. Not once has the history of architecture seen one fashionable trend stepping down to give way to a new one. Each leaving footprints, memories and signs. Each may become a specific artefact, a witness of the past and the inevitability of passing time, defined through the architectural guise. The signs of the past can be interpreted within the framework of contemporary architecture through collecting, e.g. architectural details – the process has been developing for several hundreds of years in a variety of forms. Faced with the contemporary crisis of values, it shall be worth verifying how the fragments of the past exhibited in the museum exhibition halls and stored in store rooms redefine their roles.

In view of the aforementioned, it seems particularly vital to visually inspect the architectural artefacts exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The objects in the museum collection, exhibited in the building at 5th Ave, seem to make up a set of peculiarities, a bit like a cabinet of curiosities. Forcefully separated from their habitat (the building), they now live their second life, like Ancient Greek sculptures. Can we call these elements a deceitful interpretation of modern times awaiting a reinterpretation? As already mentioned herein, we view the history as a “project”, which, on the one hand, shows the contemporaneity or the visionary force of a fragment of work and its weakness, on the other hand, in comparison to the work as a whole.

Referring to the theories of M. Tafuri, who so wrote about the search for the interrelations between fragments of a given work and their context: “But for architecture in particular, it often turns out to be more productive to start with fragments and unrealized intension, with the purpose of tracking back to their context, which are inscribed works that otherwise remain mute.”² For the needs of the research studies conducted within this article, the following architectural objects have been selected as the research material from the collections of the Department Architecture and Design, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in NY; Façade from the United Nations Secretariat Building, New York, 1952,³ Facade Panel from the Ricola Europe Factory and Storage Building, Mulhouse-Brunnstatt, France 1992–93, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron with Karl Blossfeldt,⁴ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Column Cover for the German Pavilion, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain 1928–29,⁵ and the last object Façade Panels from Best Products Showroom, Langhorne, Pennsylvania 1973–79, Venturi and Rauch.⁶

² M. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 13.

³ United Nations Headquarters Board of Design, Wallace K. Harrison, Max Abramovitz, Oscar Niemeyer, Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret). Museum of Modern Art. (MoMA) in NY; Object number 1064.2015.1–5, Department Architecture and Design.

⁴ Herzog & de Meuron, Basel, Museum of Modern Art. (MoMA) in NY; Object number 412.1996, Department Architecture and Design.

⁵ Museum of Modern Art. (MoMA) in NY; Object number 262.1986, Department Architecture and Design.

⁶ Robert Venturi, John Rauch, Denise Scott Brown, Museum of Modern Art. (MoMA) in NY.

2. TRUTH CONTAINED IN STEEL AND GLASS

People have always been collecting objects of the past, looking at the process from the present-day perspective, we do realise that what we create at present will inevitably belong to the past in due time. This is exactly what happened with the first object under our discussion here, namely, the fragment of the glazed curtain wall of the United Nations Secretariat Building, New York of 1952 (Ill. 1). It may seem that the building listed as a landmark in the history of architecture cannot be defined or perceived as a museum exhibit for the reason of its modernity and spatial assets. It is hard to imagine a fragment of the smooth green glazed wall fixed in a steel frame, hung against the background of the white museum wall. We are used to perceive architecture as a whole form composed of individual fragments. Here, however, we are facing a reverse situation.



Ill. 1. Façade of the United Nations Secretariat Building, New York, Source: Autor's archive

At this moment, we should ask the question which aspect of modernity, that dazzled the viewers several dozen of years ago, can be deemed as a fragment testifying to the architectural truth. Without doubt, modernism as an epoch in architecture has made its imprint in the modern buildings created today. It is like a search for the truth that was passed down, the aspiration to grasp the architectural genuineness again, this time in another form.

The analysed elevation fragment of the building, once deemed an architectural icon, can be redefined. The fast-changing reality has made us realise that the existing spatial reality is not the only factor that shapes the awareness of the users. The architectural truth enclosed within its form is, in this case, reduced to just one detail, a specific determinant underlying the search for the interrelations between such criteria of the architectural truth as the form, meaning, material and other. This steel and glass fragment of the elevation brings to mind a collection of Ancient sculptures in the Pergamon Museum in Athens, where the stone sculptures are encased in glass boxes. The New York example features the box in the box principle, namely in the glass box of MoMA another box is contained, which in turn encompasses the history of modernism.

We shall, though, be aware that the above described sensations and searches for the truth in architecture may be largely interpreted by the architects as a symbol of the omnipresent modernism. In many cases we can view architecture as a type of spatial arrangement conception, which underlies a false belief that the architecture contained therein is to carry out some important mission. Referring to the theory of M. Tafuri, we can define the discussed fragment of the elevation of the United Nations Secretariat Building as a 3D fragment of a “project” to visualise poor attempts of a multidirectional multiplication of modernism in many countries worldwide. In many cases the belief in modernity and the concept of enclosing people in glass spaces failed to render any success. Therefore, we can view the aforementioned fragment displayed in the lapidarium of MoMA, as the implementation of the ideology, in which the truth of the material is accompanied with the lie of the creative intention (mission). Summing up my reasoning so far, I would like to quote the following words of M. Tafuri:

Architecture itself, in as much as it is an institution, is anything but a unitary ideological block: as with other linguistic systems, its ideologies act in a highly nonlinear fashion. So much so that it is legitimate to suspect that the very criticism of architectural ideology as it has been conducted up to now-has only reckoned with the most obvious and immediate aspects of that ideology: the refusals, repressions, and introspections, which run through the body of architectural writing.⁷

3. TRUTH CONTAINED IN AN ACRYLIC SCREEN PRINT

Searching for the truth in architecture entails the creation of new ways of defining the already known materials with the use of new techniques and technologies. Another architectural object displayed in MoMA NY only supports the statement made above. An acrylic screen print, which presents a leaf in an aluminium frame, is a fragment of a repetitive pattern on the elevation panel of Ricola Europe Factory and Storage Building, Mulhouse-Brunnstatt, France, 1992–93.⁸ The

⁷ M. Tafuri, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸ Silkscreen on acrylic, framed in aluminium, Leafprint by Karl Blossfeldt. Dimensions (200 x 204.5 x 4.2 cm).

characteristic leaf shape was inspired with the artistic output of Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932),⁹ a German artist creating in Berlin at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In case of this detail, we can venture to state that we are dealing with a specific contradiction. On the one hand, the architect used a plant form as an ornament, referring to the old architectural truth – inspiration with nature. On the other hand, we are faced with the acrylic elevation of the building,¹⁰ where the acrylic material as such contradicts the natural values propagated by Herzog & de Meuron (Ill. 2).



Ill. 2. The interior of the Ricola-Europe SA, Production and Storage Building Mulhouse-Brunstatt, France, Project 1992, realization 1993. Source: Margherita Spiluttini photographer

This specific infidelity makes the building being perceived less favourably from today's perspective. It must be admitted that the spatial form of the acrylic detail, with its proportions, colour selection, print texture and the material itself, is charming. Such approach on the part of the creators let them feel that they truly devoted the time spent on collecting to work up a comprehensive design of the entire facility. To a certain extent, we may perceive this detail form as a strong reference to Ancient models. The form as such was obviously transformed by Karl Blossfeldt, nevertheless, the piece demonstrates a specific comeback to the already mentioned truth of the architecture. Transposition of a leaf photograph into a spatial form is another step forward towards a 3D spatial composition. Such an approach contradicts the natural form of

⁹ He was a German photographer, sculptor, teacher, and artist, who worked in Berlin. He is best known for his close-up photographs of plants, published in 1929 as a book. He believed that "the plant must be valued as a totally artistic and architectural structure."

¹⁰ The building's form recalls a cardboard box lying on the floor with open flaps.

the actual leaf. A repeated leaf motif on an acrylic panel creates the impression of true nature rather than that of its substitute in the form of an acrylic screen print.

Pondering over contemporary architecture, one may wonder to what extent the imitation of nature is convergent with the intention of the designer and to what extent it is just a by-product of a creative act. Let us imagine a hypothetical situation when the building ceases to serve its functions and the concrete frames supporting the “acrylic leaves” are no longer needed. The building becomes void, the imitation of the leaf ceases to be an obvious sign of modernity and sincerity of the material, which it was at the moment when the building was opened to the users. The question arises on the direction which the architectural truth shall pursue. At present we are facing architectural dilemmas that seem more difficult than we may have earlier expected. “The value of history seen as collective memory, as the relationship of the collective to its place, is that it helps us to grasp the significance of the urban structure, its individuality, and its architecture which is the form of this individuality.”¹¹

Several dozen years ago, exhibiting an acrylic detail of a building elevation in a museum of modern art was something hard to imagine. Changes of the models have allowed many to step off the beaten track of conduct. Nevertheless, coming back to the divagations of M. Tafuri, who maintained that “Nature now appears stripped of its metaphysical attributes, in the guise of the supreme legislator of bourgeois freedom,”¹² we could reflect on its relations with contemporary times. The metaphysical attributes, mentioned in the above citation, have always accompanied the works of architectural designers. How can the leaf pattern in an acrylic screen print be perceived as the demonstration of the metaphysics? Irrespectively of how its innovative and multidirectional aspects have been described, in my opinion, it will just remain a nice pattern made in an acrylic screen print. Referring to the above cited bourgeois freedom, contrary to the appearances, the leaf pattern is not the symptom of such freedom. It may be perceived as the product of the bourgeois views on architecture. We can clarify our pondering by addressing the issue of truth in architecture expressed by means of references to the narration language and by addressing the issue of the search for new customs of the users of an architectural piece, be it just part thereof. “But that this same aspiration made itself felt so deeply, and precisely as a consequence of the discovery of the relativity of languages and custom.”¹³

4. TRUTH CONTAINED IN CHROMATIC ART

Encountering an architectural work, which, in the course of time, has been elevated to the rank of an icon, will always trigger certain expectations that involve certain sublime aesthetic or metaphysical feelings being evoked. Architecture designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) has been assumed to cross the prior set barriers. In his case, crossing the barriers involved structural, formal and material issues as well as the issues related to architectural details. MoMa collection in New York displays an object – at least one may interpret it as an object – I would like to focus on in the further part hereof. This is a column cover for the German Pavilion at the International Exposition in Barcelona from 1929.¹⁴

¹¹ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 131.

¹² M. Tafuri, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

¹⁴ Chrome-plated steel, dimensions (301 x 16.5 x 16.5 cm).

The Pavilion at the International Exposition in Barcelona is a structure composed of a number of columns and planes, forming one display space. Manfredo Tafuri so wrote about this space:

In 1929 in the Barcelona Pavilion, Mies van der Rohe constructed a scenic space whose neutrality shares profound similarities with that of the rhythmical geometries (...). In that space, a place of absence, empty, conscious of the impossibility of restoring “synthesis” once the “negative” of the metropolis has been understood, (...). In the absoluteness of silence, the audience of the Barcelona Pavilion can thus be “reintegrated” with that absence. No more attempts at synthesis between the “grease paint and the soul.”¹⁵

What’s noticeable in his divagations is his reference to the issue of “a place of absence.” The so-coined definition can be construed as a conception of the truth about architecture that is absent. It is, however, reflected in the form of a particular architectural work (Ill. 3). It may be a specific way of breaking the stereotypical thinking about form as a true determinant of architecture. The display space arranged by means of stone planes, predetermined with width, can be also perceived as the sign of truthful achievements of an architect.



Ill. 3. The interior of the Mies van der Rohre, Barcelona Pavilion: Source: Autor’s archive, Adam Nadolny photography

¹⁵ M. Tafuri, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

Mies van der Rohe brought to life space which drowsily becomes a theatre stage of sensations. It is the very place where the users would search for the meaning of such words as sincerity, transparency, visibility and invisibility. All these components like pieces of a puzzle make up an unusual, universal architectural work. Referring one more time to the words of M. Tafuri, I would like to cite his interesting definition of the Pavilion in Barcelona as the space evoking sensations and emotions:

In a place that refuses to present itself as space and that is destined to vanish like a circus tent, Mies gives life to a language composed of empty and isolated signifiers, in which things are portrayed as mute events. The sorcery of the theatre of the avant-garde dies out in the wandering without exits of the spectator of Mies's pavilion, within the forest of pure "data." The liberating laugh freezes at the perception of a new "duty." The utopia no longer resides in the city, nor does its spectacular metaphor, except as a game or a productive structure disguised as the imaginary."¹⁶

The Pavilion in Barcelona, that we can see today, is a reconstruction of the original structure, which dates back to the 1980s. As one can notice, the reconstruction posed a challenge for many architects who wanted to recreate the facility that lay behind a breakthrough in the history of architecture.

Referring to the abovementioned object in the collection of MoMa, its pure form and proportions underlie its perception by the viewers as an important detail in the spatial conception of the building. Nevertheless, existence of the object in deprivation of its specific context sounds like a traumatic experience. Facing the entire facility, we, the viewers, are faced with completing the narration with the puzzle pieces of the whole. Isn't such manner of presenting history connected with a crisis of modern values? Architectural history as a "Project of crisis," referred to in the title hereof, can be dually interpreted. Firstly, as an attempt of closing a given chapter of history, in which architectural icons played a major role in the social discourse. Secondly, as an attempt of grasping of the passing time – the history of architecture has always been delimiting the epochs, classifying one after the other in sequence and archiving the achievements of the previous ones. The archiving of the past (cataloguing), as mentioned above, may, but not necessarily will, enable us to create new cause and effect relationships, contributing to further development of the truth in architecture.

5. TRUTH CONTAINED IN PORCELAIN

The last object held in MoMa collections that I would like to research is a fragment of porcelain-enameled cladding panels featuring flower motifs,¹⁷ designed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown for the Best Products Catalog Showroom building, Langhorne, Pennsylvania in the years 1973–1979.¹⁸ This characteristic building made a name for itself

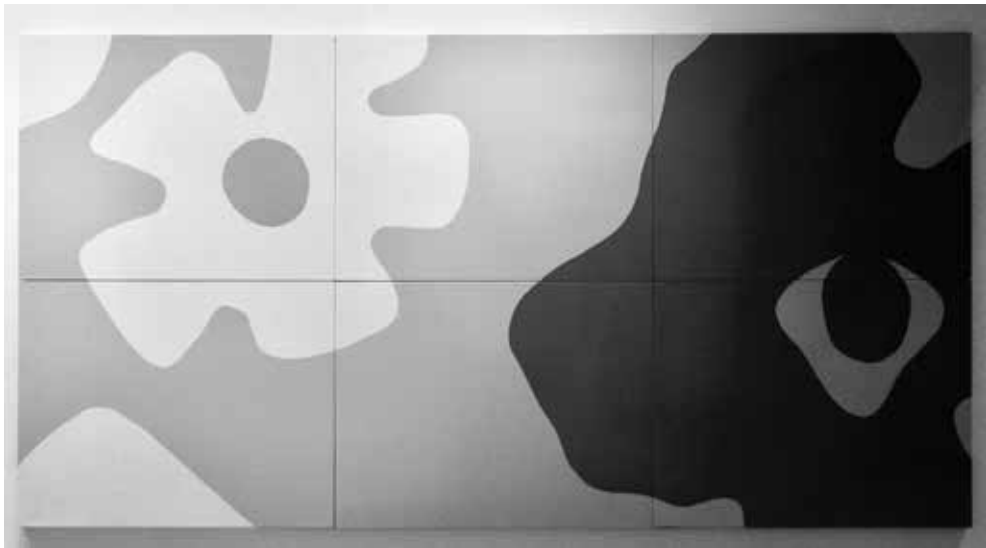
¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

¹⁷ Porcelain-enameled steel panels (233.7 x 598.8 x 4.4 cm).

¹⁸ The decorative porcelain-enameled steel cladding panels on the Best Products Catalog Showroom in Langhorne were removed in 2006, to be replaced by a reflective-glass skin for new owners. Nearly 300 of the panels were saved, some distributed to art galleries including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the RIBA in London.

in the history of architecture as a work reflecting a strong attraction of the designers to the American consumerism of the late 1970s. The decorative motif of white and red flowers was, according to the designers, meant to create the “wallpaper” effect, they wrote about it as follows “Large abstract red and white flowers were chosen for their obvious appeal to the viewer, while the random ‘wallpaper’ effect of the overall pattern in relation to the panel module and the edges of the building reinforced the two-dimensional graphic scale of the pattern.”¹⁹ This two colour structure would next determine the new artistic trends in the second half of the 20th century.

Similarly to other architectural details discussed herein, this one also creates the impression of a piece deprived of its natural context. In case of this object, seeking the truth is underpinned with the realisation how an ordinary steel structure of a store building could become an icon of architecture owing to one exceptional detail (Ill. 4). Reflecting on the aspects of truth and falsity, we could risk the statement that the spatial form of a building is a true component of the entire composition, and the porcelain and steel elevation is intended as a laugh provoking game played with the viewer. Returning to the theoretical divagations of M. Tafuri, we could classify that object as part of the modern city perceived by M. Tafuri as an advertising and self-advertising structure and such is the object discussed. “The city as an advertising and self-advertising structure, as an ensemble of channels of communication, becomes a sort of machine emitting incessant messages.”²⁰



Ill. 4. The fragment of the porcelain-enamelled steel panels, from the Best Products Catalog Showroom.
Source: Author's archive

¹⁹ The fragment of the description of the project from the website: *Best Products Catalog Showroom*, <http://www.venturiscottbrown.org/pdfs/BestProducts01.pdf> (access: 21.05.2020).

²⁰ M. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1976, p. 166.

6. CONCLUSIONS – LAPIDARIUM OF MODERNITY

The set of architectural artefacts selected for the purpose of this article from MoMa collections has supported the tracking of the evolution of the truth in architecture. The truth can, thus, apply to either the architectural detail and to its structural material. Without doubt, trying to locate the ideology of architecture in contemporary world, we can again use the words of M. Tafuri, who said: “The ideology of design is just as essential to the integration of modern capitalism in all the structures and superstructures of human existence, as is the illusion of being able to oppose that design with instruments of a different type of designing, or of a radical ‘antidesign.’”²¹

The lapidarium of modernity in the collections of MoMa shows the strength of architecture as an artistic discipline, on the one hand, but diagnoses the inevitability of the passing time and the susceptibility of architecture to time rather than its resistance. It is clear that the examples of the fragments of the buildings that once gained the icon status and influenced modern design, when confronted with the conditions prevailing in a museum, lose their impact. We could say that in the museum we are surrounded with a collection of metal, glass, porcelain and plastic objects that are no longer useful. Their impact has ceased to attract us and they have remained only as witnesses to the history. We once assigned space for exhibiting Roman architectural works, we can say that now, we are doing the same with the achievements of modernism.

Addressing the history of architecture as a ‘project of crisis’, we have to ask the question about the direction we shall follow in our searches for the genuineness (truth) of architecture. What are the criteria of such truth? Sincerity of materials? Genuineness of the form? Or perhaps truth about its history? Unfortunately the only truth that may remain is the truth that architecture passes away and so do the people that remember it, whereas the historical buildings, e.g. Roman architecture, last despite being in crisis no longer used in the primary sense.

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