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THE LOGIC OF ARCHITECTURAL MANIFESTOS

LOGIKA MANIFESTÓW ARCHITEKTONICZNYCH

Abstract

Writing manifestos is very popular in the architectural community. By their very nature, they should be elevated and refer to the future, but the starting point should also be grounded in real primary conditions. When Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto, the spectre of communism was in fact already haunting Europe. This means that prophetic texts must be well-grounded and nevertheless logical. Unfortunately, this is often missing.

Key words: architectural manifesto, the logic of manifesto creation

Streszczenie

Pisanie manifestów jest w środowisku architektonicznym bardzo popularne. Ze swojej natury powinny być i uduchowione i dotyczyć przyszłości, ale też punktem wyjścia powinny być realne warunki startu. Kiedy Marks pisał „Manifest komunistyczny” faktycznie widmo komunizmu krążyło po Europie. Oznacza to, że profetyczne teksty muszą mieć dobrą podstawę i jednak muszą być logiczne. Niestety, tego i często brakuje.

Słowa kluczowe: manifest architektoniczny, logika tworzenia manifestów

1. MANIFESTO IN LIFE OF AN ARCHITECT

In the second edition of the book “Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture”, Charles Jencks, one of the editors of the work (alongside Karl Kropf, published by: Wiley-Academy, Chichester, 2006), at the very beginning of the introduction wonders why architects (and politicians) so eagerly write manifestos. The author finds two answers. Firstly, the aim is to announce a change in what exists around them, presented as a predictable event, which they do not try to justify in a particular depth. Instead, they strive for the manifesto to have a special form, like a book, and include suspense, like a limerick. Secondly, a manifesto is a variation on the announcement of its author’s existence, as the architect likes to be known not only for what he or she has built. Perhaps some of us will not agree with this opinion, but also those of us who are more moderate in spreading views do not write manifestos – at least for the most part of their careers.

Jencks considers the Ten Commandments to be the first manifesto, and looks towards Plato, who calls God “the architect of all things.” But he also notices that God, being an architect who creates reality, was able to threaten with destruction with the force of cosmic invaders and, hiding behind His own logic, evoke the desired emotions. It helps, Jencks argues, to address the manifesto to each of us individually, for example by using the word “you.” The

word “we” appears when the reader accepts the manifesto’s appeals as their own views. “The manifesto must manifest its content for you personally,” writes Jencks.

The manifesto should lead to the formulation of a theory which drives the invention of new buildings and meets the needs of cities. Unfortunately, today the manifestos and architectural theories seem to correspond with changes in the world, rather than trigger ideas for new architecture. They once again describe what has already been described and re-focus the architecture which could be of interest to sociology, which can describe the cities very well, but only those of yesterday. Meanwhile, we, the architects, are reassured in the opinion that light probably does not have to move in a straight line, which creates a new geometry, and thus a new architecture. So, we should expect manifestos to herald this new era of New Beauty in Other Cities, even when we are initially met with ironic remarks.

In the aforementioned book by Jencks and Kropf, about 150 architects are quoted, including 30 individuals who are quoted several times. The manifestos of these masters of architecture from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, i.e. those describing the architecture that emerged after modernism, refer to various phenomena which can be briefly presented in several points:

- organising architecture: manifestos suggest repeating forms but also creating new varieties of them,
- experiment: consent to an experiment, however not aimed at seeking architectural beauty,
- organising urban space: using matrices with written strategies for its development,
- self-limitation: limiting the amount, following the principles of ecology, using dialogue, etc.

Do the authors of manifestos use the guidelines of Jencks and Kropf, or do they follow the examples given? It varies. In 1986, UIA’s Scandinavian Section prepared the Appeal for Architecture and Peace, adopted by the Council of the Union in April 1986. The appeal has all the features of a manifesto, especially as it is accompanied by the Declaration – Architects Against Nuclear Weapons, For Disarmament and Peace. This rather justifiable declaration seems to be a response to the remarks of Lothar Boltz made in the early 1950s, when he was the minister of reconstruction of the GDR, concerning the construction of cities in the form of a garden:

You cannot build a garden city without political demoralisation of its inhabitants. It is not for nothing that the garden city is the ideal of American and English police chiefs, because its goal is to turn a working man into a rabbit farmer or a cauliflower grower ... the urban planner (by building a garden city) makes the (nuclear) war more digestible instead of making the entire city population, including the city planner, fight against the war, making sure it does not happen.

In other words, caution is advised when writing architectural manifestos. To what extent do we comply with this conclusion?

2. EXHIBITION MANIFESTOS

The title of the Eleventh Architecture Biennale in Venice (2008) was: “Out There. Architecture Beyond Building”. Risk-takers who want to translate the title into Polish immediately understand that Aaron Betsky, the director (an artistic one? a curator?) of the Biennale challenged the participants of the event to a difficult task: to show architecture and to talk about

it, yet without saying anything about it, nor showing it. This proposal is probably a continuation of the views which the director Betsky expressed, namely that he knew for sure that architecture is not a building, since building is an architectural tomb. It was a statement by someone who was organising a world architecture show – after all, we should know what will be organised, by whom and for whom? Without it, the exhibition turned into a building of the Tower of Babel, with its typical confusion of languages. The lack of a clear message is a common intellectual incompatibility between the participants of the Biennale, resulting in an exhibition resembling a comic book consisting of commercials, something like an architectural MTV or at best a review of the daily set of speakers in Hyde Park.

If we were to seriously discuss Mr. Betsky's definition of architecture, in which a building is so close to the tomb that we might as well put the equal sign between the two, we should start with slightly broader deliberations, or just go beyond the said definition.

Cities, then, as living museums of architecture, with the passing of architectural fashions, turn into architectural open-air museums. Only the permanent changeability of architecture, the physical changeability of buildings, would save them from constantly premature moral wear and tear. Today, it is not yet universally possible, although it does occur and the prognoses for the future are getting better. So, what do we want for architecture? On the one hand, we may want eternal youth, at least at the price of the cyclical repetition of Faust's adventure, or at the cost of subjecting architecture to a series of injections of some yet unnamed architectural botox. On the other hand, we can accept that architecture, like a human, has the right to age and pass away. However, even in this case there is no place for the word "tomb" to appear.

Since the participants of the exhibition wanted to keep up with the director Betsky, we observed a bizarre language of descriptions of architectural ventures, spoken as if from supposedly higher levels of architectural wisdom. It was architects and architecture critics climbing onto a pedestal with the word "art" on it, and art critics and its creators on a pedestal with the word "architecture" on it, in a sense imitating a lecture with the cool and catchy title of "Architecture must be eaten" which Betsky gave earlier in Wrocław.

Perhaps for this reason the creators' manifestos which accompanied the installations (except for one) were unreadable. It was some collective, terrible barbarisation of the intellect, simply gibberish which had nothing to do with similar texts written before in the last century. In addition, they had no point whatsoever, they contained a lot of naive praises, and everyone wanted to distinguish themselves by avoiding correct grammar and syntax. The one "only righteous" whom I mentioned, was Greg Lynn, n.b. the winner of the Golden Lion for the Best Installation entitled Recycled Toy Furniture. At the end of a long tirade, Lynn bluntly wrote: "It is irresponsible not to focus a biennale on buildings. It is scandalous to promote the art of architecture. We live only today and it is not manifestos that are needed but our service. Instead of delivering a quarter of an hour of fame, architecture should think about how to service a car at that time." Unfortunately, the observation of exhibitions other than the 2008 Venice biennale shows that the words of the irritated Greg Lynn can be applied to dozens of other cases.

3. NEWSPAPER MANIFESTOS

Manifestos can also be written differently, with attempts to provide a broader justification of the outlined theses, which does not necessarily mean that these attempts are successful. Our Manifesto (in Polish: Nasz Manifest) appeared in the Holiday Magazine of one of the

daily newspapers (25–26 July this year) – our, i.e. that of the former president of Wrocław, entrepreneur, mathematician and logician, as well as architect and (as the man himself terms it) architectural curator of the 2016 European Capital of Culture. The authors, for some reason, apologise for using the word manifesto, and then present it “in five commandments”, I quote:

- yes to cities (green and blue, based on public transport, sensible to maintain),
- yes to larger apartments, apartments which are accessible,
- yes to more public space, and a good city density,
- yes to more and better-developed liminal space,
- yes to a marriage of culture and nature (ecology, climate and all of us, inhabitants)

For the lack of writing space left, they only briefly remind us that there is “something like heritage”.

The manifesto formulated in the form of commandments (the words of Jencks about the Ten Commandments as the first manifesto come to mind) is a summary of a two-column text, which is a strange mixture of truths known for years with unjustified assumptions.

And so, according to the authors, during the pandemic, it “suddenly” turned out that the apartments are too small and do not have large terraces, and they also “suddenly” discovered that it was the result of a lack of a credit standing allowing inhabitants to buy something larger than a small apartment. But that’s the way it is, and that’s why we design such apartments, explaining all of the dependencies between real money and designing already during studies. The newspaper text shows that the authors do not know the textbooks which write about it and they do not know the study programme. This lack of knowledge translates into very free-flowing deliberations on how to cure the situation, namely, to build “accessible housing”. They believe that it is enough to simply state that an apartment is not a commodity or an investment vehicle, but a right, the right to housing. Immediately afterwards, the apartment “just will be. Like air.” It will be, as we read further, within financial reach. Because from the construction costs it is possible to “remove a few items that do not translate into the quality of life”. These will be: the cost of purchasing the land, the cost of the underground car park, Chinese marble, the cost of a mini balcony replaced by “hectares of unused roofs”. If we join these with constructing “on urban disused properties within the city centre, the costs will drop by yet further percentages.” The authors of the manifesto propose such a mechanism: the local government gives the investor the best, cost-free city centre disused property, he then builds large apartments with roof terraces, large common spaces, but without garages. The public moves in, the investor collects the rent for 30 years against costs and then returns the city building and the process starts all over again. Weak points:

1. Where are the real idle lands in the city centre?
2. The rules for assigning idle lands / plots of land to investors.
3. Construction financing rules – we have been pondering the issue since 1989 and we haven’t come up with anything sensible yet. There are three reasons: banks are not charity institutions, investors are not prone to take suicide risk, and hardly anyone believes in government’s or local government’s guarantees.
4. Is it really the case that a lot of cheap square meters of a large apartment will not cost the same as a few expensive square metres of a small apartment?
5. How many people would be inclined to be close friends with a random neighbour in enlarged staircases? I am afraid that communal inventions from the era of the Weimar

Republic and then the poor modernism, today, in the era of increasing autonomy, may not be liked by the people. I recall blowing up the Pruitt Igoe Towers in Saint Louis 50 years ago – this is where the common areas did not work. And perhaps a question to the authors remains, as to what they end up promoting: large apartments, or small ones with shared spaces?

6. Contrary to what the authors write, during the pandemic, one more often chooses to travel by a safe car rather than public transport which is not necessarily safe.
7. The belief that the necessary services will be provided within the reach of a pedestrian is indeed touching. Even if “locality expressed in planning thinking” causes us to plan these services, we know that our demiurgical approach means nothing to entrepreneurs. I am omitting here a well-known fact that in Warsaw, for example, we often tend to gravitate towards Plac Zbawiciela, although the coffee at an Italian cafe in Kabaty is of the first quality.

This is where the analysis of Our Manifesto can be concluded, although some remarks could still be made. It is a pity that one of its authors, having served as the Mayor of Wrocław for 16 years, only two years after leaving the office discovers the opportunities he had on hand to make the inhabitants of the city happy.

4. THE FALSITY OF THE NEWSPAPER MANIFESTO

I am aware of the fact that the Manifesto is not a program to be immediately implemented, but rather a record of thoughts which the authors wish to share with their readers. Nevertheless, they also rightly warn that if we do not start to seriously discuss changes in the approach to the problem of apartment availability, and housing more broadly, then the optimal situation in this sector of architecture and construction will continue to be pushed away further into a distant future. We must, then, begin the changes, with full awareness of where we are in terms of feasibility of implementing what the Manifesto proposes. And the beginning is not easy, and it does not seem likely for the so-called decision-makers to understand what the authors of the Manifesto mean, even with all the architectural and city-presidential support. One can, however, have reservations about the architectural support, and these concern a place very close to the hearts of the authors, as it seems.

On August 13th, two weeks after the Manifesto was published, an “innovative architectural design” by the Major Architects studio began to be advertised on the Internet. The design was intended for the Nowe Żerniki estate, and one of the author of the Manifesto, an architect, was involved in its programming and design.

The building, as we read, is a multi-family four-storey house, the size of an apartment building, with an oval courtyard in the middle. Inhabitants are to integrate, the needs of different age groups are not mutually exclusive (as was established in the discussion – but what discussion?), whereas the constant presence of neighbours is to increase the sense of safety, etc. This description resembles the praise of the Soviet house – a commune from the beginning of the 1930s. This house, if you think about it, is also something like Unité d’habitation, except it is horizontal. As for the apartments, approximate calculations show that the average size of an apartment is to be 42 m². Half of it consists of one microscopic room, a bathroom and a kitchenette in the hall. Some of them have a mini loggia, while larger apartments have mini balconies. The doors of the apartments open onto 50-meter-long corridors. Essentially,

everything in this building is an illustration of what the author of the Manifesto, and an architect who endorses Nowe Żerniki with his name, warns against.

According to the text published on the Internet, this project is to be “a prototype and perhaps a model to follow” – but it probably should not happen, since the authors of the Manifesto criticise the “idiotic concepts of micro-apartments” and claim that the medium-sized apartments, which they are just falsifying, cannot support family and social tissue. If they indeed cannot support family and social tissue, it does not change the fact that they are wanted. This is evidenced by the announcement of the Robyg company on August 28th, 2020, from which we learn that in the Włochy district, in Warsaw, in a building with about 150 of these micro-apartments (ranging in size from 17 to 36 m²), only half is available and they are quickly disappearing.

The same applies to the implementation of calls for cheap land for housing development. On August 21st this year, in the Real Estate supplement to the Rzeczpospolita newspaper, Renata Krupa-Dąbrowska published an article entitled “Where are the thousands of cheap apartments?”. The issue concerns the National Property Resources, which has been in operation for three years, but the works on improving regulations which are to streamline its operation are still ongoing. As the author writes, 900 ha of an attractive construction lands have been accumulated in the Stock, and these are “worth billions of PLN. However, since the National Property Resources (Polish: KZN) was established, there has been a shortage of land for private investors, which means that the prices of apartments are rising”. Plots from the Stock are not being sold, nor is the land belonging to state-owned companies, and they are not sold to KZN neither. The transfer of land for free or in-kind contribution to construction companies happened only a few times in the country!

The KZN was to collect land for the construction of 60 thousand apartments under the Mieszkanie+ (Apartment+) program, within the total pool of 100 thousand apartments to be built for the next 10 years. Also, as the entity responsible for the construction of apartments – they have construction sites – there are no special achievements. After three years, KZN built 1017 apartments, 1661 is under construction, and contractors are being sought for several hundreds. Dozens of experts, a president and two vice presidents are working on improving efficiency. It is to be feared that instead of an increased efficiency we will see a new legislation, as usual. It is worth noting that the construction production in the period after the political transformation was much lower than in the Polish People’s Republic (in the years of 1964–1989 no less than 150 thousand apartments per year was built, while in the period of 1991–2015 the number fell to an average of about 137 thousand apartments annually), the collapse occurred in 1996, when approx. 62 thousand of apartments were put into use.

Another problem is the single-family housing construction on the outskirts of the city and just outside its borders, which is what we refer to as the city sprawl. It is not entirely clear whether the authors of the manifesto are for (in times of the pandemic, the “suburban settlements appear to be more safe”) or against this development (“expensive to maintain” by the city). What is lacking is a clear statement that this capitalist space production is possible thanks to the tolerance of land speculation, the dictatorship of developers and the deliberate ineffectiveness of the district authorities in controlling the fast-changing processes with the help of virtually non-existent spatial planning. As a result, areas inhabited by groups of 100 000 people are created around Warsaw and other cities in Poland, and these spaces are almost devoid of social infrastructure and efficient communication with the rest of the city. The low quality of the created space is accompanied by the low quality of the apartments

themselves due to the developers cutting costs on construction materials. In her book “Chaos Warszawa”, Joanna Kusiak quotes the developer’s brutally honest confessions regarding the Białołęka district in Warsaw:

it is simply an area that should not be developed in the first place. It was primarily developed because it was the cheapest to do so there, and the reason why it was the cheapest is because it was not suitable. Something that is not suitable for living is cheaper than something which is suitable, as simple as that (...).

Bohdan Jałowiecki summarises the book by Joanna Kusiak on Facebook (May 10, 2018), and reminds us that the total of mortgages increased from PLN 36 billion in 2001–2006 to PLN 300 billion (EUR 75 billion) in 2012. Today this sum is even greater. These loans, apart from deepening social inequalities, because some people can afford to take out a loan and others cannot, also favour the construction of apartments on the outskirts of cities, i.e. the creation of new estates like Białołęka.

It is also important to consult the manifestos with representatives of local communities. This is not the case today. The most popular groups are those loud but marginal in the scale of the whole city, and they often represent and promote just themselves. It is difficult for the city authorities to oppose the utopian ideas of these circles, because a large part of them often come from the very same circles. As a result, housing programs are a collection of pious, not to say naive, wishes about the future living standards. Pretending that new building will only be green and not too high will only aggravate the problems, as will adopting wrong conversion factors when estimating the necessary land reserves to meet current and future housing needs. This poses a risk of further instances of uncontrolled housing developments on the outskirts or beyond the outskirts of the city. This type of thinking is observable in actions, which are drown in the flood of words of the published manifestos.

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