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NONREPRESENTATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITEKTURA NIEPRZEDSTAWIAJĄCA

Abstract:

Contemporary architecture is slowly becoming an expression of the wonderful lie of art. Contemporary art does not have to imitate anything, or at least it should not. Everything we remember is to be forgotten. The advertising function of architecture is more important than its function. The latter is so obvious that it is no longer mentioned. However, the problem of the existence of contemporary avant-garde remains unresolved, such building, once exceptional, is replaced by commercialism. The novelty, as it usually happens, is shaped by the negation of the "old". Architects must create works that resemble nothing. Their shape is to deceive the unfamiliar audience and trick them. Cinemas and office buildings are to resemble crystals and their simplistic function is to be carefully hidden. This is how new art is born.

Keywords: architecture, novelty, avant-garde, falsehood

Streszczenie:

Architektura współczesna powoli staje się wyrazem wspaniałego kłamstwa sztuki. Sztuka współczesna nie musi niczego naśladować, a przynajmniej nie powinna. Wszystko, co pamiętamy, ma odejść w zapomnienie. Reklamowa funkcja architektury jest ważniejsza niż jej funkcja. Ta ostatnia jest tak oczywista, że już o niej się nie wspomina. Problem istnienia współczesnej awangardowości zostaje jednak nierozwiązany, takie budowanie, kiedyś wyjątkowe, wyparte zostaje przez komercję. Nowość, jak to zwykle bywa, jest kształtowana przez negację „starego”. Architekci muszą tworzyć dzieła, które niczego nie przypominają. Ich kształt ma zwieść nieobeznanego widza i oszukać go. Kina i budynki biurowe mają przypominać kryształy, a ich prostacka funkcja ma być skrzętnie ukryta. Tak rodzi się nowa sztuka.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, nowość, awangarda, kłamstwo

1. UNRECOGNISABLE CREATION

People need to be deceived, rather than expecting the truth, they merely want some promise of happiness. They vote for politicians, knowing that their lives will not change for the better, and yet, they still hope so. The same situation is true of the need for beauty. After all, we do not know what is beautiful until someone explains it to us. In their premeditation, architects also try to deceive the audience. It is not a vulgar ordinary bluff, but it is clearly a "noble lie of art".

The most appropriate words for explaining or understanding architecture may again be those by a writer-theoretician of literature. The words by Paul Valéry, a French poet, essayist and prose writer, can help us understand the shape of contemporary architecture. He writes:

That which we sing or preach in the most solemn, or most critical moments of life, which we hear in the liturgies, which we whisper or shout in the raptures of passion, which we reassure the child or unhappy with, which testifies to the authenticity of the oath – all these are words whose content cannot be expressed in clear terms or separated from a certain manner and tone of their expression, without depriving them of their meaning and effectiveness. In all these cases, the accent and sound of the voice are more important than that which evokes understanding: they speak more to that which is life in us than to our mind. What I mean by this is that these words are a much stronger stimulus for us to come into being than to understand.¹

The contemporary lack of some coherent and unambiguous design theory can indeed be an expression of every creator's *vocal sound*, whereas the function can be considered as *understanding*. Such duality appears already in the texts of Aristotle, who claimed that the substance is composed of matter and form. And "...that 'substance' is perceived in two senses: as the final substrate, which is not predicated of anything else, as well as something, which is concrete, is also separable: and such is the form and shape of each thing."² The detachment from the memorised forms and the lack of need for a function, as seen in modernist architecture, are obviously not entirely new. They already appeared among expressionists at the beginning of the 20th century, however, those artists acted more or entirely theoretically due to the lack of technical possibilities for their projects.

Today, this aspect of contemporary architecture along with its detachment from trivial utility and abandonment of the idea of the past is becoming the most important element of building a new form. Such a novelty is seemingly becoming an expression of the lack of imitation of anything and hiding the function of buildings from the audience. Architecture can finally become fully abstract. As the last of the arts, it can finally abandon figuration. Let us remember that the world of art has long been accustomed to drawn, unprecedented shapes of the works by futurists and expressionists.

Maria Gołaszewska wrote that "art is a function of the state of culture at a certain level of human development."³ Contemporary abstract art and architecture neither resemble nor suggest reality, regardless of whether this reality was or was not the starting point for the artist.⁴ Abstract architecture, which emerged constructed at the end of the 20th century, tries not to imitate anything, tries to deceive one with its shapes. Contemporary continuators, or less elegantly, imitators of expressionists' thought, want to detach themselves from the reality of the existing architecture, or at least so they claim. The abstraction of architecture is a continuation of trends created in art, an expression of changing trends in all arts and a continuation of such thoughts as Kandinsky's or Munch's ones. It was Kandinsky who "[...] did not recognize one of his vibrant landscapes, which had been turned upside down. Kandinsky realized then that a painting may be deprived of descriptiveness."⁵ It turned out that the changeable content or detachment from the truth did not change the reception of the work. Rather than finding any particular approach here, theorists see a normal change.

¹ P. Valéry, *Estetyka słowa*, PIW, Warszawa 1971, p. 191.

² Arystoteles, *Metafizyka*, PWN, Warszawa 1983, pp. 119–120.

³ M. Gołaszewska, *Zarys estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa 1984, p. 190.

⁴ J. Le.[ymarie] *Abstrait Art* [in:] *Nouveau dictionnaire de la peinture moderne*, Paris 1963, p. 1, quoted after: A. Kotula, P. Krakowski, *Malarstwo, rzeźba, architektura*, PWN, Warszawa 1981, p. 144.

⁵ J. Bell, *Lustro świata. Nowa historia sztuki*, Arkady, Warszawa 2009, pp. 377–378.

The Polish sociologist, Marcin Czerwiński, explains this with the concept of passing time: “Throughout the course of my previous considerations I perceived the decline of the mimetic art simply as a phenomenon given to us by history.”⁶ Architects also strive to depart from presenting the world as their predecessors did. Works are perceived as certain abstractions. Onomatopoeia can appear in construction just as well as in literature. Mieczysław Wallis presents such a phenomenon in literature, writing:

In the works of representational arts, the representational elements overwhelm the ordinary sensual elements, which by themselves arouse joy. In a poetic work, especially one written in prose, words affect us above all with their semantic side: we do not always realize that they also affect us with their auditory side. Likewise, although perhaps not to the same extent, in a given painting, the lines and patches of colour are for us, above all, signs representing certain objects. It is only the connoisseur who delights in the clusters of lines and colours as such.⁷

This is a literal description of abstract modern avant-garde architecture. Again, the philosopher, Giorgio Colli, can help us here, revealing before us *Two sides of abstract representation*, he writes:

Abstract representation analysed in its elemental content can develop as confidence and immobilization or as tension and twine. In case of the former one, the representation is isolated in its nature of expressive reflection of immediacy, in the latter – it indicates the union and constitutes an expressive leap towards externality. In both cases, the performance possesses an object, but not to the same extent. The object is defined precisely when it appears as part of the evocation of something direct, which was later established as something widespread or as an abstract object in the proper sense. In contrast, when the evocation is the thread leading back, the fabric captured while unfurling, then both the object and the subject turn out to be a mutual tangle. In short, the representation appears as either an object or a union.⁸

It can be an excellent description of the quick sketches of Frank Gehry’s designs. Watching his tangle of lines, one can ask whether the author will discover the purpose of the designed building himself or maybe whether he will recognize which drawing shows what.

2. APPARENT LACK OF CONTENT

Thus, as we can deduce, a contemporary work of art should be abstract and should convey expression, and most importantly, it should also pretend to be something other than it really is. For a better effect, creators abandon the memorised principles of design. The composition of the work must therefore change. What Maria Gołaszewska once wrote about and what served as a basis for creating art must be forgotten. Definitions of the composition of artwork are no longer fashionable, and what was once most important: “[...] symmetry, balance, compactness, unity in diversity, etc. The composition of the work in a broader sense (care for transparent structures) also included such principles as the unity of place, time and action (in the theatre), rhythmicity (in music: allegro – largo – allegro), cyclicity (in poetry and

⁶ M. Czerwiński, *Samotność sztuki*, PIW, Warszawa 1978, p. 144.

⁷ M. Wallis, *Przeżycie i wartość*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1968, p. 92.

⁸ G. Colli, *Filozofia ekspresji*, Universitas, Kraków 2005, pp. 113–114.

music), time sequence according to natural chronology (in the novel, theatre, film)”⁹ does not interest anyone anymore. What Thorsen Rodiek described in a less complicated way, *symmetry, rhythm, beauty*,¹⁰ is no longer the most important determinant of architecture. Something new or, as it happens in art, not new at all. The “New Expressionists” seem to have a new – different approach to creating a work of art. This is about its new expression and the already known intellectual or merely obstreperous play with the audience in the style one remembers from the works by Marcel Duchamp. Contemporary architecture is to be funny and imitate his *Fountain* from 1917. As we can see, what architects propose today is far from being a pioneering approach. Such plays with the audience were already proposed by artists from the early 20th century.

In the poetics of Expressionism, the issues of the situation of the artist and the nature of creation occupy one of the central positions. The etymology of the trend itself indicates the special importance of the creative subject in the act of creating a work of art. The term ‘expressionism’ in its most primary sense is nothing else but the expression of internal content. The leading role of the artist also results from the special conditions of the so-called expressionist attitude, usually identified – as it was attempted to prove – with the attitude of revolutionary rebellion and uncompromising struggle for new art. The radical character of the Expressionists’ programme – which also defines individual artistic intentions – suggests a conviction of an exceptional creative potential, which should reveal several new qualities unknown to earlier art in the act of creation. In other words, an artist who usurps his power to legislate for his own creation must be of incomparably greater interest than one who remains faithful to the more or less common conventions of their time.¹¹

Thus, the abstractness of an artwork, its ambiguity and the departure from realistic representation becomes most important: “in an expressionistic work, the represented world gives way to the expressed world. Awareness of this transformation was the basis for the first definitions and syntheses of the trend. As early as 1916, Hermann Bahr considered the new attitude to reality as the main argument for the opposition between Impressionism and Expressionism.”¹² Yet, the contemporaneity forgets about an important part of the expressionists’ thought about its social dimension related to the “pedagogical” approach to the creation or the theme of the work. It also forgets about activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism.¹³ The advertising expression of architecture, which Charles Jencks wrote about and which is so important nowadays, was once negated. Builders seem not to remember that: “for in art, we are not dealing only with some pleasant or useful entertainment, but... with the development of the truth.”¹⁴

In architecture, the emergence of non-representational art was difficult. It came as a consequence of actions taken in other visual arts but also owing to technological advancement

⁹ M. Gołaszewska, *op. cit.*, pp. 394–395.

¹⁰ T. Rodiek, “*Differenz in das Reale schneiden*” – *Baugeschichte und Dekonstruktion* [in:] T. Rodiek, *Daniel Libeskind – Museum ohne Ausgang, Das Felix-Nussbaum-Haus des Kulturgeschichtlichen Museums Osnabrück*, Wasmuth, Tübingen-Berlin 1999, p. 35.

¹¹ T. Baranowski, *Estetyka ekspresjonizmu w muzyce XX wieku*, Elan, Białystok 2006, p. 57.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 80.

¹³ R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Harvard University Press, London 1982.

¹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Wykłady o estetyce*, vol. 3, PWN, Warszawa 1967, p. 683.

and the introduction of computers to design. What was impossible to imagine for Heinrich Wölfflin in 1915 is now becoming the norm. In his book *The Principles of Art History*, he did not foresee the appearance of new architecture today, as he wrote: "Painting can be tectonic, architecture must be. Painting only fully develops its own peculiar values when it takes leave of tectonics. For architecture, abolishing the tectonic framework would be tantamount to self-destruction."¹⁵ The architecture of Deconstructivism or, even more broadly, of decomposition manages, seemingly, to detach itself from the tectonic assumptions of statics. The role played by the beauty of construction in Modernism becomes forgotten, if not neglected, then nobody pays any attention to it anymore. It must be possible to construct a building, and its exterior does not have to match the interior. The architects try to imitate painting or create painting themselves. Painted axonometric drawings by Zaha Hadid or almost automatic sketches by Frank Gehry turn into tectonic architecture after construction. Yet, it may be that after the removal of *tectonic scaffolding*, the opposite is happening and such architecture is even more tectonic than the classical or modernist one. Its uniformity, compositional consistency becomes visible at first glance and not just to art theoreticians. Rudolf Arnheim may have been right, as he gave the following explanation in the *Dynamics* section of his book *Art and Visual Perception*: "Moreover, by using formal criteria rather than referring to the subject matter, the theory avoids limiting the effect to images of mobile objects. It can explain why pictures of trees or mountains may look strongly dynamic and why this may also be true for wholly 'abstract' shapes in art or architecture."¹⁶ This is then what contemporary architecture is becoming like – abstract and dynamic, and most importantly, carefully concealing its purpose.

3. CONTEMPORANEITY

The problem of contemporaneity and its failure to represent the theme of an architectural work is also connected with the need for its monumentality. For years, architects have been trying to confront such a definition or classification of significant buildings since "throughout this period, monumental architecture had been subject to an official taste, rooted in passeistic and pompous eclecticism, which rarely manages to avoid ugliness or even ridicule."¹⁷ The contemporary architecture of New Expressionism is no longer afraid of ugliness or ridicule. The monumentality of all kinds of buildings becomes natural and desirable. Nonetheless, this is already something else. Architects are striving to create a "new" monument with new non-classical or non-historical shapes and completely new purposes, unrelated to such architecture previously.¹⁸ Departure from the function of

¹⁵ H. Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki, Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich-Wydawnictwo, Warszawa 1962, pp. 166–199, III. *Forma zamknięta i forma otwarta*, p. 194.

¹⁶ R. Arnheim, *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa*, Oficyna, Łódź 2014, p. 439.

¹⁷ J.P. Couchoud, *Sztuka francuska*, vol. 2, WAiF, Warszawa 1985, p. 151.

¹⁸ "We have lost our predilection for the monumental, the heavy, the static, and we have enriched our sensibility with a taste for the light, the practical, the ephemeral and the swift." Antonio Sant'Elia, *L'architettura futurista*, C. Baumgarth, *Futuryzm*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1978, p. 309.

advertising power or religion helps to create new forms of architecture. The function of the building and the monumentality associated with it is transferred from the inside to the outside. What gave a feeling of value and greatness with its purpose – a palace or cathedral – no longer exists. That used to be important: “The form of expression and means of expression play a secondary role in this respect. What is decisive is the effect of experiencing the whole work: a painting, a poetic work, a work of monumental art, whose sight gives us an impression of ‘classical beauty.’”¹⁹ No such beauty will ever be seen again, the spectacle of decomposition can be seen in the common functions of an office building or dormitory. A function no longer becomes a carrier of ideas, while “insignificant” buildings turn into monuments themselves.

An important criterion of contemporary abstract architecture is also its stylelessness. The words of Le Corbusier, who said that “styles” are a lie, may become contradictory today. What he wished for, however, was a complete departure from historical styles. And he himself is considered to be one of the creators of International Style. The contemporary departure from the principle of “truthfulness” or clarity of building construction is becoming the rule today. A new approach to sculptural architecture as art is born. Architecture, or rather architects strive to detach themselves from the traditional habits of the recipient. This happened in one of the first avant-garde projects by the Coop Himmelb(l)au group. The Falkestrasse rooftop remodelling in Vienna has gone down in history not only because of its shape. The new part of the premises of the law firm had no consideration for the context of the existing architecture in the historic district. The angles of the roofs of the neighbouring tenement houses and the related building regulations made it unrealistic to build. It deviated significantly from the intended roof pitches. However, the architects decided to fight for their innovative work. The presentation of the model to the Viennese authorities became a good moment to discuss contemporary architecture. During the discussion, the point was made that this is art rather than architecture. The architects eagerly picked up on such a course of discussion and replied that in this case, art is not subject to building regulations. This is how they managed to convince the authorities and build the first icon of Deconstructivism, even though still tentative one at the time. Everyone who tried to take a picture of this architecture discovers that the victory was only partly complete, as the roof is hardly visible from the street. However, it is the victory of art over imperfect building regulations.

Nowadays, the role of former symbols of power and authority has been taken over by public buildings, and they have become a symbol of the place, symbols of cities. Given the new aesthetics of architecture – abstract, nonrepresentational expressionist space, buildings do not have to resemble monuments from the past. Livio Vaccini once put it clearly: “... architecture appears when man feels a need which makes him look at a thing ‘in a way’; when he values general reasons above personal requirements; when he goes farther than necessary. [...] Architecture is a useless thing.”²⁰ Perhaps traditional monumental architecture is no longer essential to contemporary society, or perhaps there is only a change of purpose for such buildings. New monuments will remain the domain of commercial architecture. What is most important, the form of buildings must deceive and enchant us because architecture is the art in which you can live.

¹⁹ K. Michałowski, *Jak Grecy tworzyli sztukę*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1986, p. 83.

²⁰ L. Vacchini, *La necessità dell'inutile*, “Rivista Technica”, 1988, no.7/8. pp. 35–36.

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