

ANGELIKA LASIEWICZ-SYCH

ORCID: 0000-0002-9740-2430

Cracow University of Technology, Poland

THE TRUTH AND IMPERFECTION – EXPLORING THE MEANING OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

PRAWDA I NIEDOSKONAŁOŚĆ – W POSZUKIWANIU ZNACZENIA NOWOCZESNEJ ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

This paper attempts to formulate an answer to the question of the meaning of truth in modern architecture. The analysis presented here follows selected philosophical and theoretical concerns regarding both architecture and the truth notions – starting from ancient Greek philosophy up to modern times. It acknowledges the viewpoint of postmodern philosophers: that the truth is a rather useless concept and, nevertheless tries a romantic and critical alternative. It poses a question whether the original modern concept of truth referring to formal parameter of architecture (*structural, expressive and historical truth*) is relevant with the meaning of truthfulness as seen in a broader context of nowadays architecture. Answering it proposes the more complex 3-component idea of truthfulness of architecture extended upon how the building is *made*, how it is *used* and what it *represents*.

Keywords: architecture, meaning, modernism, philosophy, theory, truth

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o znaczenie prawdy w nowoczesnej architekturze. Przedstawiona tu analiza podąża śladem wybranych rozważań filozoficznych i teoretycznych na temat pojęć prawdy i architektury, poczynając od filozofii starożytnej Grecji, a kończąc na czasach współczesnych. Pomimo dostrzegania stanowiska postmodernistycznych filozofów, że prawda jest raczej bezużyteczną koncepcją, próbuje się tu romantycznej i krytycznej alternatywy. Stawia się pytanie, czy oryginalna modernistyczna koncepcja prawdy odnosząca się do formalnych kryteriów architektury (związanych z prawdą strukturalną, ekspresji i historyczną) ma związek ze znaczeniem prawdziwości w szerszym kontekście współczesnej architektury. W odpowiedzi przedstawiono tu bardziej złożoną trójkomponentową koncepcję prawdziwości architektury rozszerzoną na to, jak architektura jest *tworzona*, jak jest *używana*, oraz *co sobą reprezentuje*.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, znaczenia, modernizm, filozofia, teoria, prawda

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of truth in architecture reveals many fundamental questions. Each subsequent question refers to the next, embedded deeper and closer to the center of the discourse of science and philosophy. The question about the meaning of truth is one of those great questions posed by philosophy and science, and its greatness also lies in the fact that this is a type of question that every person faces in their life. Therefore, it combines a metaphysical and practical dimension; Aristotelian dichotomy of research and practical reason. The fundamentality

of this issue justifies an intellectual return to the roots of Western civilization and philosophy; to Athens and Aristotle, to the place where both the Western tradition of architecture and the whole range of philosophical concepts that shape our way of thinking were born. This tradition was also what inspired the concept of truth; it was expressed by Aristotle in his statement: "Every phrase means something (*semantikos*) [...]. However, not every phrase is a statement stating something (*apophantikos*), but only one that is true or false."¹ The theorem cited here helps refresh the issue of truth in order to ask again about the particular meaning of truth in contemporary architecture.

Nowadays, the power of questions about the truth and its twofold meaning: practical (experienced individually by man) and theoretical (posed by philosophy and science), has been weakened by emphasizing the problem of the internal relationship between truth and science. The element that certainly dominates modern science and its pursuit of truth is the idea of a method. *Methodos* – in the language of Greek philosophy, from which this concept originates means "to follow 'the path that one follows the other.'"² In the spirit of that thought one should understand the ethos of modern science, which obliges us to recognize as a sufficient condition of truth its verifiable certainty. Thus, truth becomes a kind of technical criterion; in which "certainty" seems more important than "truth." One manifestation of this approach may be an attempt to use the truth to solve current problems; this position seems to be guided by the American philosophy of pragmatism, which rejects the great metaphysical questions posed by traditional philosophy, focusing instead on finding practical solutions. The second may be a "mercantilization" of truth and replacing questions like "is this true?" and "what is it for?", asking: "can it be sold?" and "is it effective?"³ This triggers a new type of competence, which Lyotard calls "performative", in which effectiveness becomes a decisive criterion, replacing criteria such as "truth/falsehood" and "justice/injustice."⁴

Certainty and efficiency are, for sure, not the concepts that naturally adhere to the theory of art or the field of architecture as such, just as they are not properly applicable to the humanities. These criteria also fail to answer fundamental questions about the importance of architecture and its truth. However, the pessimistic belief expressed by Lyotard about the almost commercial nature of truth in today's science is being increasingly spread in the field of architecture. Less and less often, it poses maximal questions about the sense of architecture, narrows the spectrum of scientific inquiry to search for practical solutions, and strives for almost full commercialization of activities by acquiring performance competences by architects. All this is largely the result of the field's adaptation to the widespread phenomenon of "an architecture that diffuses into space planning, flexible arrangements (which can thus not be easily composed), and facades that reflect this central instability."⁵ Contemporary architecture, as Aaron Betsky notes, "neither justifies the whole process of modernization through representation, nor resists such processes, but rather is an activity

¹ Aristotle, *Hermeneutics* 4, 17a [in:] *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 1, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1990.

² H.G. Gadamer, *Cóż to jest prawda?* [in:] H.G. Gadamer, *Rozum, słowo, dzieje*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2000, p. 40.

³ J.F. Lyotard, *Kondycja ponowoczesna*, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 1997.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 143–144.

⁵ A. Betsky, *Violated Perfection: Architecture and the Fragmentation of the Modern*, Rizzoli, New York 1990, p. 28.

promoting consumption.”⁶ This type of activity aimed at “selling buildings”⁷ also contradicts the interest in “architecture as a living environment.”⁸

2. THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE

2.1 GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Questions about the truth of architecture appeared in its theory together with the advent of the age of *objective modernity*.⁹ Its roots go back to the tradition of Enlightenment where two paths of thought have begun: a “libertarian” path, rooted in human experience, initiated by Rousseau, and a “speculative” path, enlightened by the Spirit of science, expressed by Hegel. The path indicated by Rousseau is a path of action dictated by “practical reason”; in turn, the path indicated by Hegel is a path of idealism and “absolute reason.”¹⁰ Modern architecture, and especially its theory, has definitely chosen the path of idealism, as if forgetting the complementary path of practical reasoning that guided traditional architecture. In this spirit, the theorists of modernism borrowed Hegel’s concept of space, which according to the philosopher, was “a feature of architecture purposiveness.”¹¹ Due to the fairly widespread recognition of the concept of space creation as the essence of the architect’s work; architectural theories from the beginning of the 20th century began to be associated precisely with this concept. The promotion and usefulness of this new concept was possible due to its ambiguity. The German word for space – *Raum*, means both a material enclosure – a ‘room’, but also a kind of philosophical concept. This concept acquires a new sense in architecture, one that goes beyond a purely mathematical measure (a size of space – volume) as well as a description of physical reality (an empty space – void).¹² Therefore, the idea to use space as a key concept of architecture,¹³ seemed to be a good excuse to replace traditional theory

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ A. Moravansky, *Ciepłe podbrzusze architektury* [in:] J. Kusiak, B. Świątkowska (ed.), *Miasto-zdrój. Architektura i programowanie zmysłów*, Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2013, p. 73.

⁹ This term was formed around the second half of the 19th century, inspired by natural sciences, and became an expression of a new approach to science and philosophy in general. Objectivity understood in this way – as impartiality, independence, and cognitive distance – is also a generally accepted synonym and condition of science.

¹⁰ J.F. Lyoyard, *op. cit.*

¹¹ For Hegel, space as ‘enclosure’ should not be abstractly uniform and empty. This is what he wrote: “[...] what is required on the contrary is a formation differentiated in length, breadth, height, and the character of these dimensions [...] The movement of the spirit with the distinctions it makes and its conciliation of them in the course of its elevation from the terrestrial to the infinite, to the loftier beyond, would not be expressed architecturally in this empty uniformity of a quadrilateral”. G. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, p. 688.

¹² A. Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, London 2000, pp. 265–275.

¹³ *Space*, as stated by Michel Foucault, has become a keyword of the 20th century – not only in architectural theory: “In our era, space presents itself to us in the form of patterns of ordering” (M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heteropias* [in:] N. Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London-New York 1999, p. 351).

of architecture anchored in technical¹⁴ and craft knowledge by philosophy that could also support architecture sublimity and prestige. Turning to the theory of space and emphasizing the abstraction of spatial formation, the natural, mutual relationship of theory and building practice has lost its strength. It is also why architecture has become strongly linked with its own autonomous idea. This thought was well expressed by Walter Gropius:

A modern building should derive its architectural significance solely from the vigour and consequence of its own organic proportions. It must be true to itself, logically transparent, and virginal of lies or trivialities.¹⁵

It is easy to find the seeds of all topics related to the concept of the truth in modern architecture in Gropius's statement. These are: *expressive truth* ("true to itself"); *structural truth* ("logically transparent") and *historical truth* ("virginal of lies"). All these types of truth are interrelated, and together they make a modern building *true* through internal consistency and integrity. This should express the modern spirit (again a reference to Hegel's philosophy and the Spirit of history); demonstrate its structure and clearly express its own idea. And, what is worth emphasizing, it should express nothing more. So, honesty, transparency, simplicity, functionality and order – these are the modernist determinants of truth and beauty of architecture. The idea harmonizes with the special way of looking at architecture, described by Mies van der Rohe: "My perception of building is so very simple."¹⁶

2.2 OVERSIMPLIFICATION

The modern concept of truth in architecture referring primarily to its formal features was generally accepted and propagated by famous modernist architects. From today's perspective it might seem not only simple and legible, but even excessively simplified, at least for a few reasons. Firstly, because it concerns architecture only as a creation product (an *artefact*) and adopts only one viewpoint – the one of creator. Secondly, because it evades or abbreviates the sphere of use and perception of architecture. And, thirdly, because it focuses only on the physical reality shaped by architecture and in this realm it seeks justification for itself. In other words, the problem with the modernist concept of truth in architecture seems to rely on the oversimplification of the meaning of architecture. What seems apparent nowadays, the architecture and its meaning develops during the stage of creation but also at the stage of construction and use, it flows from the participation of architects themselves but also from the recipients of architecture as a work of art and its daily users. This is why, architecture – as a product of culture – is also a kind of statement, and it is on this particular basis that we can primarily assess its truthfulness. Therefore, the concept of its truth should then demonstrate this complex realm and extend upon how the architecture *is made*, how it *is used*, and what *it represents*.

The importance of truth in the process of creating an architecture boils down primarily to its "internal logic,"¹⁷ to the compliance of the final product with the architect's plan, to

¹⁴ This was necessary due to the science modern vision that was to autonomise technical disciplines traditionally related to architecture, such as construction engineering, environmental engineering, etc.

¹⁵ W. Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1935), after: A. Forty, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

¹⁶ Mies van der Rohe (1925) statement as quoted in: Neumeyer F., *The Artless Word. Mies van der Rohe on the Art Building* (1991) after: A. Forty, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

¹⁷ J. Mitscherling, *Dzieło sztuki – architektoniczne* [in:] A. Nowak, L. Sosnowski (ed.) *Słownik pojęć filozoficznych Romana Ingardena*, Universitas, Kraków 2001, p. 37.

“the sincerity and faithfulness of the author’s expression in the work”, and finally to the value of its “idea.”¹⁸ This meaning of truth refers to romantic concept expressed at the end of the 18th century by Goethe, who described his aesthetic impressions at the sight of the cathedral in Strasbourg. In it, he saw expressed the genius of its builder and it was this that, in his opinion, gave the cathedral’s architecture its truth.¹⁹ The truth of creation can also be seen in an *affirmation* of the act of designing and implementing a building itself, for the sole desire to create and interact with the designed object. This kind of attitude and commitment to design was undoubtedly demonstrated by F.O. Gehry, especially at the beginning of his architectural practice; this can also be heard in his statement from 1976:

My approach to architecture is different. I search out the work of artists, and use art as a means of inspiration. I try to rid myself and the other members of the firm, of the burden of culture and look for new ways to approach the work. I want to be open-ended. There are no rules, no right or wrong. I’m confused as to what’s ugly and what’s pretty.²⁰

Gehry concerns himself with building in the real world. His designs are characterized by creative spontaneity, articulation of everyday life by means of his own formal ideas for expressing meaning (“*pavillonizing*”, cutting, “*Matta-Clarking*”), a departure from reductionist abstraction in favor of creative expression, and by an effort to eliminate any cultural significance. As such, they are a model example of extremely modern architecture. The spontaneity and radical reference to the life of designed architecture treated as a ‘living organism’²¹ makes his architecture true, in a way.

The truth of architecture is also revealed in its *authenticity*. This category is usually associated with the concept of ‘inhabiting’, which Martin Heidegger introduced into the philosophy and in this sense it is related to the creation of man’s existential space. In a broader sense, it is also the category referring generally to using the architectural space. The authenticity as a feature of architecture seems to be an opposite of “imposing an *a priori* order on all activities” it serves.²² This suggests an “architecture of bold communication” with users rather than one of subtle expression.²³ This problem was exposed by some postmodern architects, in particular by Robert Venturi. Venturi argued for an architecture of pure communication, an antidote to a closed monument, that is “only scaffolding for a sign.”²⁴ Similarly, more contemporary architects such as Diller + Scofidio group use combination of technology and architecture using various electronic media to communicate with recipients.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

¹⁹ The cathedral builder was Erwin von Steinbach (J.W. Goethe, ‘On German Architecture’, 1772). Goethe’s original concept of truth in architecture was criticized by Kant (‘Critique of Judgment’, 1790) who called into doubt the concept of truth as an aesthetic category, after: A. Forty, *op. cit.*, pp. 299–300.

²⁰ Janet Nairn, “Frank Gehry: The Search for a ‘No Rules’ Architecture”, *Architectural Record*, June 1976, after: R.H. Bletter, *Frank Gehry’s Spatial Reconstructions* [in:] R.H. Bletter et al., *The Architecture of Frank Gehry*, Rizzolli International Publications, New York 1986.

²¹ This was the case at designing *Gehry House* (Santa Monica, CA, 1977–1978). Gehry about his design: “I remember the early process of designing the house: [...] Armed with very little money I decided to build a new house around the old house and try to maintain a tension between the two by having one define the other, and to have the feeling that the old house was intact within the new house...” (R.H. Bletter et al., *op. cit.*, p. 35).

²² A. Betsky, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

And finally – focusing only on physical dimension of the existence of architecture as an object, reduces the importance of architecture as a work of art, a cultural message and a representation of the community for which it is actually being created. Architecture as an object is a “living basis” of a work of architectural art, which depends both on the real, physical building as well as on the conscious act of the person who perceives it “with a special attitude.”²⁵ In this sense, the architectural work, as Roman Ingarden wrote, “is neither real nor ontically autonomous.”²⁶ In addition, if we assume that architecture not only has meaning and aesthetic value, but that it also possesses truthfulness, in the original Aristotelian sense, it must state something, represent something that comes from the outside of its own physical reality. This is how it was also seen by the outstanding modernist architect Louis Kahn, who expressed this by stating: “Architecture is reaching out for the truth.”²⁷

2.3 IMPERFECTION

An important question that this analysis brings is, whether and how the built architecture meets different categories of truth described here. Following the statement of Louis Kahn, and to illustrate these considerations, let’s look closer to one example of his design that created an outstanding late modernist architecture.

The *Yale Center for British Art* (1969–74) in New Haven (Connecticut) was designed by Louis Kahn in the last years of his life. In a sense, the *Yale Center* is Kahn’s most mature project. The building houses a private art collection, as well as an art library and educational space of Yale University. The architect’s original intention was to refer to the idea of a Renaissance urban *palazzo* by organizing the building around the huge central courtyard connected to the second internal courtyard and by giving the building an arcaded façade inspired by the Italian style. This concept was favored by the dense and rich urban context of the street, interesting architecture (university-owned buildings, mostly in the neo-Gothic style with the exception of the nearby, brutalist, modern Yale Art and Architecture Building²⁸ and the opposite Yale University Art Gallery²⁹). Ultimately, the design took a somewhat simplified form, a reference to the Italian style was replaced by refined simplicity in the English style. As Kahn explained:

I think of the Mellon Gallery [initially, the building was supposed to be named Palazzo Melloni – note by author] as an English hall. When you walk into the hall, you are introduced to the whole house. You can see how the interior is laid out, how the spaces are used. It’s as though you can walk into the house and meet the whole house and say, ‘Gee whiz, I think you’re great.’³⁰

²⁵ J. Mitscherling, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²⁷ Louis Kahn (1968) after: A. Forty, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

²⁸ This building was designed by Paul Rudolph, the dean of the architecture department at Yale (built in 1963).

²⁹ This building houses a rich collection of art belonging to Yale University. The structure is composed of neogothic, original part (in campus prevailing style) and modern extension designed by Louis Kahn in 1950 (built in 1953).

³⁰ Louis Kahn’s statement published in *New York Times Magazine* in 1970, after: D.B. Brownlee, D.G. De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, Universe Publishing, Los Angeles 1997, pp. 228–229.

The building that is the result of this project, creates a great setting for the art exhibited here and the rich university art library. Its refined, almost cuboidal architectural form is maximally simplified despite the complex functional program inside the building. The interior is organized around two courtyards, and the exhibition rooms on the first floor have a repetitive shape reminiscent of 'rooms'. The interiors are extremely bright (the system of rectangular skylights covers the whole building) and, despite the relatively small size, seem very spacious. In a formal sense – the building is perfect; nothing disturbs the silence and the atmosphere of contemplation of art. Vincent Scully said it was “wonderful”; “so quiet, so soundless, so timeless.”³¹ It is hard to disagree. Undoubtedly, it also meets the criteria of a modernist model of truth; creative expression is associated here with structural logic, and the building as a whole – despite the temptations of historical references – definitely represents the spirit of its time.

However, the perfection of this building as a physical object contrasts with the *imperfection* of its response to the three criteria of architectural truth described above. First, it is difficult to see spontaneity in the very act of creating this architecture; over the course of several years of work on the project, the vision and name of the project changed (Italian *palazzo* into English hall), but the main guidelines and design elements remained almost identical, which seems a somewhat artificial solution. In the utilitarian sense, in turn, the building is far from being open to users and communication in almost every sense. In the most general (metaphysical) sense, it is an ideal example of heterotopy – a type of space constituting the so-called “another place” – described by Michel Foucault,³² detached from actual life, place and time (storing time – *ad infinitum*), available to users only in a specific, strictly defined way. In a more practical sense, it is worth noting that the building carefully conceals its impressive interior and minimizes the importance of both premises located at the street level and the main entrance to the building. This creates a kind of incongruous situation of closing and isolating the building from the street life, despite its public character. Which, in turn, well presents the complex question of the truth of representation, demonstrated by this architecture. On the one hand, the building is in many ways an excellent representation of what is inside (British art, but also the elite audience of this art), while on the other hand, this architecture creates a vague sign in public space, detached primarily from the city life and New Haven community.³³

3. CONCLUSIONS

The truth of modern architecture appears as a conglomerate of various categories of ‘truths’ which remain in a specific relationship with each other. There is a truth of modernist ‘clarity’ of the architectural form; but there are also other meanings of the truth in architecture that extends further from the physical form of the artefact. These meanings are interrelated; the truth of creative expression is related to the truth of representation, and this with the actual

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

³² M. Foucault, *op. cit.*

³³ New Haven is a small town in Connecticut; its center is almost entirely filled by Yale University campus. The Yale architecture is prestigiously designed in neogothic (older part of campus) or in modern style (by famous architects such as: Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, Philip Johnson, Eero Saarinen, Gordon Bunschaft, Cesare Pelli). On contrary, New Haven’s outskirts are usually low-budget housing.

use of architecture and *vice versa*. Their sources reach back to the antic roots of our civilization and the essential idea of architecture. It combines practical issues and building processes (*tekton*) with an artistic, cultural expression (*arche*). Such architecture has always been closely related with society's members; it has had some practical and metaphysical goals: to provide man with a shelter and a living space, and to add meaning to his life. Thus, it created a reality defined as "belonging to man", which provided "a kind of atmosphere necessary to give his life a new sense and a new meaning."³⁴ Building by its very essence, goes beyond a purely practical dimension; it aims to realize the world of human culture, built upon certain values. Among them are those traditionally connected with the world of art, such as the general values of good, beauty and justice, under the influence of which we become better ourselves.

As has been shown here, the truth of modern architecture is a complex multi-layered concept. What makes it more complex is the problem of a difference between modernity and its representation in architecture and modern architecture understood as a specific style. In this particular sense, the architecture of Frank Gehry, although distant from the modernist *style* seems more modern than purely modernist architecture of Louis Kahn presented here as an example. As partly proved by this example, the complexity of truth fails to explain the complete power of architecture which contrasts reality and appearances. However, no matter how very confusing and difficult is this concept, the search for the truth is always necessary, the same as is the one for the essence of architecture.

³⁴ R. Ingarden, *Książeczka o człowieku*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1987, p. 24.



Ill. 1–3. The town center of New Haven is almost entirely occupied by Yale University campus. Only narrow strip mixed of public buildings, offices and parks surrounds it from low-budget family buildings and industrial areas. From top left: office building by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo (1965–69) – (1); park surrounding old campus – (2); campus architecture is primarily neogothic – (3)



III. 4–6. Yale Center of British Art as surrounded by neighbour buildings. From top left: building roof composed of rectangular skylights (4); a vis a vis building of Yale Gallery of Art (5); area as seen from the top of Art and Architecture Building of Yale, in foreground – Yale Gallery (part designed by Louis Kahn), in rear – rectangular structure of Yale Center of British Art (6)



III. 7–9. Yale Center as seen from the street level. From top: the entrance corner of the building (7) is covered by the overhanging structure of the building sheltering deeply the entrance space (8); the street elevation of the building featuring external shops on the ground floor (9)



III. 10–13. Yale Center of British Art – the interior atmosphere of art contemplation. From top left: skylight roof over the entering courtyard (10); the same space as seen from afar (11); the second, inner courtyard adjacent to the art library (12); the top gallery of British classical art (13)

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Author's Note:

Angelika Lasiewicz-Sych, Ph.D. Arch.

Adjunct at the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology where she teaches architectural design for public use and psychology of architecture. In 2001–2006/2010–2015 – an adjunct/guest lecturer at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw. Her scientific interests include theory and psychology of architecture, urban and architectural memory (a topic of doctoral thesis, 2001) as well as empirical studies on social behaviour and emotional attitudes towards architectural spaces.

alasiewicz-sych@pk.edu.pl