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NARRATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE. AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF FORMS

NARRACJE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ARCHITEKTURY. ESTETYKA I ETYKA FORM

Abstract

The article deals with the issues of forms and meanings of contemporary architecture which is shaped by culture. In seeking the answer to the question about narratives and the message these forms convey, we referred to the concepts of aesthetics and philosophy. Relationships between forms of architecture as well as perception and relation with the environment were presented. In particular, contemporary strategies of pressure through forms of consumer architecture were shown. Comparisons of different artistic attitudes and architectural concepts revealed various articulations of values and expectations as well as social needs.

Keywords: architecture, form, aesthetics, philosophy, culture

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto problematykę form i znaczeń współczesnej architektury kształtowanej przez kulturę. Poszukując odpowiedzi na pytanie o narracje i przekaz jaki te formy niosą odwołano się do pojęć z zakresu estetyki oraz filozofii. Pokazano związki między formami architektury, a sposobem percepcji oraz relacją z otoczeniem. W szczególności pokazano współczesne strategie presji poprzez formy architektury konsumpcyjnej. Porównania odmiennych postaw artystycznych i koncepcji architektury pokazały różnorodne artykulacje wartości i oczekiwań oraz potrzeb społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, forma, estetyka, filozofia, kultura

*A building may have artistic values if its various forms and contents
coincide in a clear basic mood capable of making us feel moved.
This art has nothing to do with interesting configurations or uniqueness.¹*

Peter Zumthor

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a clear relationship between architecture and man, which allows us to deduce the importance of forms created. In this perspective, architecture never lies. It is a faithful testimony of times and the way of life of societies. But there is also another perspective in which we can ask about the narratives of architecture and which are used by its creators.

¹ P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, Kraków 2010, p. 19.

It is a method of constructing space which transmits certain contents to a recipient and creates areas conducive to specific behaviours and evokes specific emotions. In this sense, architecture speaks of values. Throughout history we have had numerous examples of totalitarian, fascist, or communist architecture.

They are all a faithful testimony of time, but at the same time they constitute an example of certain social and political concepts. If we subject these concepts to valuation, there is undoubtedly such a phenomenon as engaged architecture that operates with forms which create narratives with a clear ideological message. And in this sense, we can talk about the pressure and oppression of architecture, its lies or its truth, which are written not on its banners, but in its forms.

And what if we look at our Western contemporary architecture in a similar perspective and subject its forms and their message to a certain aesthetic and philosophical judgment? For this purpose, we will consider types of aesthetic experiences arising as a result of the perception of architectural forms. We will distinguish and describe them on the basis of selected examples. Finally, we will confront them with the philosophy and the theory of architecture.

2. ARCHITECTURE AND AESTHETICS. BETWEEN CONTEMPLATION AND EXCITATION

‘Pursuit for silence is ancient, numerous, and common. It marks the entire history of mankind. Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Pythagoreans, also Christians, Catholics, or Orthodox Christians, felt the need for and benefit of silence. This need often went beyond the sphere of *sacrum* and religion’.² Silence and peace influence our mood. They help us achieve a state of tranquillity. Then we can experience the outside world with some distance and delight. And the focus on the subject of perception in the search for beauty we will call aesthetic *contemplation*.³ Aesthetic experience is a multilevel process in which all the senses participate. Hence, its structure and course can be complicated by various emotional states of a recipient. If an object is more conducive to stimulation and *excitement*, emotions will be the factors which will dominate experiences and will not be conducive to any reflection.⁴ The richness of forms of architecture allows a recipient to meet different needs. Therefore, its works balance between satisfying the need for innovations, moving the senses, and the need for reflection, stability and tranquillity.

Let us first look at what silence in architecture is all about. What are the forms and strategies of silence? What images does it evoke? Masters in painting silence and focus are Edward Hopper and Giorgio de Chirico or Jan Vermeer. Their paintings show its diversity, richness, and power of expression. Silence with nostalgia, anxieties of silence and tranquillity of silence. There are privileged places, somehow created to ‘hear’ this silence. When we think about silence and reflection in architecture, images of buildings such as churches, chapels, monasteries⁵, libraries, museums and hospitals cross our minds. Strategies of silence are connected with different functions and activities which need various places.

² A. Corbin, *Historia ciszy i milczenia*, Aletheia, Warszawa 2019, p. 61.

³ M. Gołaszewska, *Zarys estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa 1986, p. 301.

⁴ M. Gołaszewska, *Estetyka pięciu zmysłów*, PWN, Warszawa-Kraków 1997, p. 25 and next.

⁵ P.L. Fermor, *Czas milczenia*, Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich, Warszawa 2015. The author, looking for a place conducive to concentration when writing a book, describes the time he spent in several

Let us now consider how, regardless of its function, a building can foster this look which is close to contemplation. Peter Zumthor is a master at creating forms that bring a viewer into a state full of balance and attention to every element of the environment. He writes about it as follows: ‘When we look at objects and buildings which seem to live in harmony with one another, our perception calms down and becomes indifferent in a special way. (...) Our perception becomes silenced, unbiased, and non-possessive. (...) To see an object now also means to sense the world in its entirety (...)’⁶.

Zumthor is the winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize and he lives and works in the Swiss Grisons which is attractive in terms of landscape and promotes the design of architecture combined with nature. The well-known Zumthor’s project is the Therme Vals complex which was completed in 1996. It is a SPA, but completely different from such typical commercial places. It was designed for the luxury of the senses, where this luxury consists primarily in experiencing the landscape, the matter of stone, water, silence, and muteness. All these elements were finished in every detail in order to launch the process of mutual complementing experiences and feelings. They all serve to achieve internal harmony. The second example to quote here is the modest field Brother Klaus’ Chapel.⁷ It was built nearby a small village. It is a small object made of traditional materials, although uncommonly used. There are no new media or any facilities at that place. It is a small, rectangular, slender building which is entered through a metal triangular door. The light gets into the interior through a hole at the top and small thick glass inserts placed in the walls. When it rains, the water falls down to the inside and forms puddles. It is dark there, but candles lit by visitors slightly lighten the place. A bit sloping dark, rugged, and rough walls ‘embrace’ a newcomer. Although the chapel is located completely off the trails, surprisingly many fans of experiencing silence, reflection and concentration arrive at that place.

In the history of architecture there were periods when forms for contemplation became an important topic. Cathedrals definitely belong to this type of works. Nowadays, architecture conducive to *contemplation* is articulated to a lesser extent. The chaos of urban architecture and the style of modern life which is dominated by the speed and changeability of *contemplation* are not favourable. New strategies are created to meet the needs of contemporary culture.

After many centuries of domination of metaphysics, the time has come when science is looking for the meaning around the concept of the individual and their being. It also has its repercussions in the way it constructs and perceives space. Architecture rejects tradition and looks for new forms and meanings to express the needs as well as the way of life of man in the city.

The emergence of the concept of situationist cities in the 1950s seems to be an important moment for shaping the present day.

The book *Statements for New Urbanism* by Ivan Chitchevlov contains many terms that herald current changes in the organization and perception of urban space. The author described a city which was like a maze devoid of clues. The formula of confusing, mixing

monasteries. This is an interesting reading showing how the perception of reality changes depending on the architecture of the place where we are. At the same time, how architecture becomes a vehicle for the truths that we discover thanks to it.

⁶ P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, Kraków 2010, p. 17

⁷ More information, for example: *Peter Zumthor’s Bruder Klaus Field Chapel Through the Lens of Aldo Amoretti* [in:] ArchDaily, www.archdaily.com/798340/peter-zumthors-bruder-klaus-field-chapel-through-the-lens-of-aldo-amoretti (access: 8.06.2020).

plots and perspectives was to foster the feeling of freedom of an active individual aware of their own goal, and experiencing space was to be fun. In this way, the theme of playing with architecture appears. 'The need for total creation has always been closely associated with the need to play with architecture, time and space (...)'.⁸ This is the need to knock you out of your comfort zone, to create challenges and rediscover yourself. 'A rational transformation of old religious systems, old stories and first of all a psychoanalysis into the architectural expression is becoming increasingly urgent when all the reasons to evoke passions disappear. Everyone will live in their own private "cathedral"'. The situationist city is chaotic, active, and its space is variable and cannot be captured by any rigors. It is constantly demolished and created from scratch, so no plans or maps could have been created. The concept remained in the minds and perhaps a certain natural consequence of such thinking about space is referring to it in the category of events. Bernard Tschumi proposed this way of defining architecture. This approach is connected with the functioning of architecture as a kind of variable scenography and a special way of perceiving architecture. The aesthetics of dynamic, full of expression space breaks with the category of static observer and *contemplation*. A mobile observer dives into space in search of exciting experiences.⁹ Equipped with 'body extensions', GPS and the Internet, s/he experiences space kinetically with all senses and intensity. His/her main desire is to experience by stimulating and surprising the senses. In 'the society of spectacle' (Guy Debord) everything is a commodity and everything is a spectacle. Life is focused on buying and experiencing, on challenges and tasks.

Architects compete with one another in concepts for the architecture of surprise. The turn of the 20th century saw designers who are specialists in creating such spectacular architecture. Each project which was created in the studio of stars such as Frank Ghery, Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron or Daniel Libeskind became an event. In this way, designing architecture resembles the fashion market, and its aesthetics as well as images function similarly on the social consumption market. Celebrity architects shape tastes, but they also 'produce' images which meet the needs. Users need more and more sensations and it is increasingly harder to surprise them.¹⁰ Corporate, banking, and surveillance capitalism is a system which drives itself. Every consumer strives to have as many goods as possible and 'experience' as much as possible. This is Baumann's 'collector of experiences'.

The seat of the Foundation Louis Vuitton, which was established in 2014 in Paris, is a good example of the object which is a combination of art and business. Frank Ghery created a concept referring to the tradition of the 19th-century glass pavilions. However, a direct inspiration for creating the object's form was the image of a sailing ship. The architect created a series of expressive sketches which are a kind of free motion recording and waving sails. Digital programs as well as mock-ups and models made it possible to develop details of the

⁸ I. Chtcheglov, *Sformułowania dla Nowego Urbanizmu* [in:] E. Rewers (ed.), *Miasto w sztuce. Sztuka miasta*, Universitas, Kraków 2010, p. 308.

⁹ Arnold Berleant indicates how transformations of contemporary art lead to new aesthetics. It rejects distance and a contemplative attitude. According to him, one of the reasons for this is a certain continuity between art and life, which currently coexist to create a common aesthetic field in the process of experience. A. Berleant, *Prze-myśleć estetykę*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 91.

¹⁰ G. Piątek, *Moda i architektura – romans wstydlivy, ale pożyteczny*, Architektura-Murator, 2008, no. 8, https://archirama.muratorplus.pl/lifestyle/moda-i-architektura-romans-wstydlivy-ale-pozyteczny,70_88.html (access: 8.06 2020).

project connected with the idea of a sailing ship. The projection is highly fragmented and has a rather complicated layout of rooms irregular in the outline.

The whole building is a composition made of three white irregular bodies covered with reinforced concrete panels, which was juxtaposed with curved surfaces of glass stretched on a wooden-steel structure. It is, first of all, them that bring to mind maritime associations. The body is connected with water surfaces, and in part also with a stair-shaped waterfall. The movement of water is gentle, just like the trail of a sailing ship. The drawing on the floor fragments around the object freely continues soft lines and the fragmented subdivisions of the body. All these compositional treatments strengthen the dynamics of the basic body of the object. The combination of all shapes makes up a narrative about architecture, which, though motionless, tells the story about travelling, wind in sails and flowing water. Real weather conditions complete this scenography and the architecture of sailing 'is happening' in front of a viewer. In favourable weather, it may seem like a struggle against the stormy sky and rain. In another one, it appears as calm drifting.

Dynamics of the composition is complemented by the play of lights, reflections, and a drawing of shadows. In some views, the building is a vertical structure of piled up shapes. In others, it is a horizontal mass of irregular shapes which are arranged in one direction, as if following a gust of wind.

Diversified materials, juxtaposed on the basis of contrast, complement the impression of denying the laws of gravity. The bodies spin, dance, and flow as if they were to 'explode' in a moment. A viewer is intentionally put into a state of bewilderment and confusion.

This strategy of architectural discourse, which seduces a viewer by offering images that move the senses was called *ecstasy* by Ewa Rewers. They become a breeding ground for the eye which balances by experiencing in a space full of surprises and ecstatic sensations.

It is a situation of perception of architecture, when we lose the experience of our own borders, and we go towards the experience of '(...) liberation from the body, to infinity, reducing gravity, the pleasure of flying'.¹¹

The aesthetics of *excitement/ecstasy* becomes the face of consumer architecture filled with moving changeable images. These forms are conducive to stimulation and movement, therefore they are used for promotion and sales. Architecture becomes a product. An indirect form of **pressure** on the consumer.

3. ARCHITECTURE AND PHILOSOPHY. BETWEEN NEEDS AND DESIRES

The distinction between perception of the 'static eye', which is connected with *contemplation* and the 'balancing eye', focused on *excitement*, has its further logical consequences. They can be developed on the basis of a philosophical distinction between *needs* and *desires*. Especially since, according to Epicureans, this skill creates two different types of relationships with the environment. So, it also has an influence on the face of architecture. Let us briefly try to look at these fundamental philosophers' theses, which are connected with our reflections.

Needs are the basic conditions for survival, whereas *desires* are all 'excessive cravings' which constitute a source of *excitement* and provocation to the senses. Epicurus claimed

¹¹ E. Rewers, *Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta*, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 331.

that '(...) the joy of life is felt (...) when you are not absorbed by *needs* and satisfying them. (...) Where there are *needs*, there is always a risk of not satisfying them; (...) The one who has the least *needs* has the most pleasure'.¹² Thus, excess causes a deficit because the more we have, the more it seems to be missing. A pursuit of extraordinary sensations, a desire to experience over-dimensional sensations threatens with the inability to arouse admiration for the basic values of the environment. This is a particularly important topic. When we break away from nature, experiencing growth and dying cycles as well as seasons with it, then we are less interested in *needs* and more in *desires*. Desires to have more and more things. Desires of eternal youth. Advertising dictates what else we need to have in order to achieve some imaginary state of happiness. Architecture of *desires* shapes shopping malls, places to satisfy them. We focus not on the quality of life, but on the number of sensations. This is the rhetoric of instilling in the client a constant sense of lack and dissatisfaction. Marketing and advertising – strategies created by our culture are based on persuading continuous insufficiency, dissatisfaction and, as a result, creating *desires* which are connected with the promise of fulfilment, the promise of achieving happiness. Life is focused on buying and experiencing, on challenges and tasks. In the 'society of the spectacle' everything is a commodity and everything is a spectacle. It includes architecture because it presents visions of who we could be instead of focusing on who we are...

4. AESTHETICS AND ETHICS. LIES AND TRUTH OF CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER ARCHITECTURE

A building is a material articulation of our ideas of a good life. Those which repel us contradict our understanding about the true meaning of existence. Talking about architecture is therefore talking about values.¹³ And creating architecture is creating values.

The once popular slogan saying that the form results from the function can be replaced by the phrase that the form results from culture.¹⁴

Architecture reflects values of culture of which it is a product. When everything is a response to some market demand, each product is created not so much as a result of the need to satisfy beauty, but in response to these demands. Subsequent studies group consumers, then determine their tastes and preferences in order to ultimately receive guidelines for the manufacture of a product. Mass human architecture is a game about gaining a client.

Architecture, which is connected with marketing of various goods, is often combined with the promotion of art. One may wonder whether this 'marriage' really serves art. Most often it gives its status to trade facilities, but it loses its independence and sometimes credibility. We have already got used to calling shopping centres as galleries. A question may be asked: who is lying here? Art or trade? Or maybe trade just uses the art of design to exert an effective pressure on potential customers? Architecture constitutes an element of the entire continuum in the process of experiencing and consuming images, including advertising.

¹² W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, vol. 1, PWN, Warszawa 1995, p. 140.

¹³ A. de Botton, *Architektura szczęścia*, Czuły Barbarzyńca Press, Warszawa 2010, p. 69.

¹⁴ In this context, Henryk Skolimowski, who demanded that eco-ethics should be included in the design process, was critical about the forms of contemporary architecture as early as in the 1980s. The author criticizes codes and regulations which 'guard the ethos of technical culture and strengthen it'. H. Skolimowski, *Filozofia żyjąca. Eko-filozofia jako drzewo życia*, Pusty Obłok, Warszawa 1993, pp. 158, 159.

A question about the ethics of architecture arises. Can architecture resist the process of participation in the excessive production and consumption of goods which do not contribute to creating social well-being?

Is it possible today to design architecture without succumbing to fashions and according to one's own values? Even if they did not match those 'commonly sought for'?

Are there architects who see traps of contemporary consumer architecture? Those who can restrain their own ego above other goals of designing architecture. And they often have to struggle with the ambitions of an investor who wants his/her building to dominate the surroundings and come into being in it at all costs...

Zumthor puts it in this way: 'I gladly imagine myself designing and building houses, from which at the end of the construction process I partly withdraw as a designer, leaving behind a building which is itself, and which as part of the world of things serves living and exists without my rhetoric'.¹⁵

And he further defines the essence of architecture, which looks for forms more for the *needs* and also contributes to *contemplation*. It introduces order and calmness into space, including the emotional one: 'For me, there exists a beautiful silence of a building which is connected with concepts such as self-control, obviousness, persistence, presence, and coherence, but also warmth and sensuality; to be itself, to be a building, not to present something, just to be something'.¹⁶

Zumthor's architecture itself seems to be at the opposite pole in relation to buildings operating with an excess of stimuli and signs which are a game of emotions with a viewer, promising an exciting experience. Its architecture, in terms of the shape of aesthetic experiences, is close to the philosophy of the Stoics, who proclaimed experiencing the world from a distance on the basis of feelings, not emotions. They claimed that in this way it was easier to achieve peace, which according to them was the primary goal and value giving a sense of happiness.

Zumthor's attitude towards reality is well reflected by his words: 'I carefully look at the built world and, creating my own buildings, I try to absorb what seems valuable to me, improve what disturbs me, and re-create what we lack'.¹⁷ And then, there appear sentences that we treat as the final reflection for our considerations: 'I think that contemporary architecture must recall the most appropriate tasks and possibilities for itself. Architecture is not a vehicle or a symbol for things which do not belong to its essence. In a society which practices the cult of the unimportant, architecture can resist it in its scope, counteract the use of forms and meanings, and speak its own language'.

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¹⁵ P. Zumthor, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

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