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LESS IS TRUER?

MNIEJ ZNACZY PRAWDZIWIEJ?

Abstract

The truth of architecture is equated with sincerity – of the creator, form, construction or material. Mies van den Rohe delivered it in his abstract *Less is more* – a credo setting out the path to truth in art. This meant that the historical forms of detail, shape and colour were removed from classical architecture, while technology, the logic of construction and industrially manufactured material were incorporated.

The paper attempts to analyse the architect's projects completed in Europe and North America regarding the concept of truth in architecture and art. Maturity and creative awareness manifest themselves in the buildings that represent Mies's clear, determined style and his conviction as to how to express the form and content of architecture.

The world of art makes one believe that truth is the ideal essential for achieving beauty. Architecture materialises it differently every single time. Mies confined truth to a closed set of the language of forms that were used to develop it while limiting the search for novelty and originality. This is how he understood the role of the architecture of truth – as a sincere combination of structure, form and beauty of proportions. But does he lead us to the universal truth of art and architecture through this?

Keywords: van der Rohe, truth, sincerity, beauty

Streszczenie

Prawda architektury utożsamiana jest ze szczerością – twórcy, formy, konstrukcji czy materiału. Mies van den Rohe wygłosił ją w abstrakcyjnym *Less is more* – credo wskazującym drogę prowadzącą do prawdy w sztuce. Oznaczało to odjęcie z klasycznej architektury dotychczasowych historycznych form detalu, kształtu, koloru, a włączenie technologii, logiki konstrukcji i przemysłowo wytwarzanego materiału.

Artykuł jest próbą analizy zrealizowanych projektów architekta na terenie Europy i Ameryki Północnej w odniesieniu do pojęcia prawdy w architekturze i sztuce. Dojrzałość i świadomość twórcza ukazują się w zbudowanych budynkach, które reprezentują jasny, zdecydowany styl oraz przekonanie Miesa co do sposobu wyrażania formy i treści architektury.

Świat sztuki karze wierzyć, że prawda jest ideałem niezbędnym do osiągnięcia piękna. Architektura materializuje ją za każdym razem inaczej. Mies prawdę ograniczał do zamkniętego zbioru języka form, który służył do jej rozwijania, ograniczając jednocześnie poszukiwania nowości i oryginalności. Tak pojmował rolę architektury prawdy – jako szczere połączenie struktury, formy i piękna proporcji. Ale czy doprowadza przez to nas do uniwersalnej prawdy sztuki i architektury?

Słowa kluczowe: van der Rohe, prawda, szczerość, piękno

1. INTRODUCTION

The truth of architecture, which has been pursued by artists for centuries, has no clear definition. It seems to be written in the intuitive sphere instead. In contrast, it is apparently easier to define a lie – the negative but also deliberate one that sometimes leads to beauty.

The truth of architecture is equated with sincerity of the creator, forms, construction, function or material. It is the coherence and harmony between the elements that are easily read by the recipient. The category of truth and lies conceived this way is materialised in the buildings that underpin the following reflections. Yet the aspect of truth in a work of art is broader and more ephemeral.

Therefore, this problem in architecture should also be considered in the context of art.

These categories and the relevant questions seemingly transfer a work of art to a level different from the traditional level of discourse about it, which is primarily concerned with the notions of expression, construction, cohesion, originality or the power of evocation. The questions then concern the nature and role of truth in art in particular: Is 'truth' here merely a symbol of a particular feature (or set of features) of the work? Or is the term more closely related to a quality defined in a classical Aristotelian way?¹

2. THE TRUTH OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The truth of a work of art is synonymous with beauty, appropriateness; it also applies to the right proportions and noble appearance. "There is not one single issue of truth in art, there are many such issues as the word 'truth' has many meanings, and once the meaning has changed, so has the issue."² While seeking this feature, Heidegger places particular emphasis on it in the work and even "seems to build his concept of the work as a place of truth."³ Who influences how much of it is included in the work, though? And does one find it especially in art? "When we decide to seek our own truth through art created by artists, that is, by revealing someone else's truth, we agree that what the artist 'says' is true."⁴

This raises the question, rather doubtful in its outcome, concerning the objectivity of art. After all, artists always express themselves in a more or less personal and subjective way. Yet, for the sake of convenience, it should also be assumed that they reveal the truth in their work. As Maria Anna Potocka puts it: "in the case of art there is no other way out – one has to assume that art contains only truth, because with a different assumption the work ceases to be useful. When everything is true, the tension between falsehood and truth disappears."⁵ In such a situation, one approaches the beauty of a work of art straight away. And the game between lie and truth becomes pleasant.

It seems, however, that we are more often involved in a game that leads us to the concept of partial truth or half-truth. Perhaps it is deliberate – for the recipient to discover the mystery himself. The exhibition at Warsaw's Królikarnia Gallery in 2017, which concerned a collection of artworks relating to the titular half-truth, was dedicated to such a task. It is impossible to draw clear conclusions from the artists' statements, but the idea that the truth depends on the context is very clear – "there as many truths as there are contexts."⁶ This can

¹ W. Chudy, *Problem prawdy w dziele sztuki*, Roczniki Filozoficzne, 2002, vol. 50, no. 1, p. 75.

² W. Tatarkiewicz, *Prawda w sztuce* [in:] W. Tatarkiewicz, *Droga przez estetykę*, Warszawa 1972, p. 101.

³ G. Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, Universitas Kraków 2006, p. 73.

⁴ M.A. Potocka, *Dlaczego w sztuce nie ma problemu prawdy i dobra tylko jest problem piękna?*, BWA Zielona Góra, <http://bwazg.pl/teksty/2-maria-anna-potocka-qdlaczego-w-sztuce-nie-ma-problemu-prawdy-i-dobra-tylko-jest-problem-piknaq> (access: 09.2020).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Półprawda – Half-Truth*, Works by contemporary artists from Central and Eastern Europe from the

be directly related to the world of architecture – after all, the context is changeable and there are many pretexts for the work.

As a result, the audience gets lost in “distinguishing between what is true, probable, real, natural, authentic, reliable, clear, and what is untrue, false, counterfeit, forged, fake, inauthentic, stylized, ironic, illusory, deceitful, wrong, misleading, misguided, mistaken, unbelievable or unjust.”⁷

One can also notice that balancing between the two categories is constant and that decisions “clearly show that truth and falsehood underlie all kinds of human motivations, choices, decisions and behaviour.”⁸

Classical beauty was always connected with truth as only truth could create beauty. As John Keats wants it, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all you know on earth and all you need to know.”⁹ The Aristotelian idea of truth in art is contained in the imitation of nature. Nothing in it is perfect, so it requires human reaction and intervention. “Therefore, the decisive moment for the truth of art is neither its simple similarity to reality, its supernatural origin, nor – finally – the need to imitate the world of ideas.”¹⁰

Truth in architecture is rather a formal issue – we do not consider it as certain and lasting truths but as a way of creation and the building’s formal message. As Mies van der Rohe said himself: “Nothing can express the aim and meaning of our work better than the profound words of St. Augustine – ‘Beauty is the splendour of Truth.’”¹¹

Art does not have to contain literal truth. It can refer to it but also process and interpret it. It also allows for the denial of truth. In architecture, it is not that easy and unpunished any longer – all deception is discovered. Especially, as the architect’s actions are read in the real context of time and space, the context it is impossible to escape from. Thus, the truth seems to be important here.

Architecture has its formal limitations – it is impossible to free oneself from matter. Only theoretical and drawing works as conceptual considerations can ignore these requirements. “There is still unrest over the truth in art. It is precisely this unrest, however, that makes artists keep searching for it.”¹²

3. EXPLORING THE SINCERITY OF MIES’S ARCHITECTURE

The times in which Ludwig Mies van der Rohe created were a period of intensive changes in architecture. Many artists sought and followed their individual architectural paths. Alongside the masters of Modernism and Brutalism, Mies set his own direction of art formally limited to the necessary minimum, where truth and sincerity was a unique value.

Art Collection Telekom, October 2017, <http://www.krolikarnia.mnw.art.pl/en/temporary-exhibitions/polprawda-half-truth,18.html> (access: 09.2020).

⁷ E. Kosowska, B. Bokus, *Poza prawdą i fałszem* [in:] E. Kosowska, B. Bokus (ed.), *Prawda i fałsz w nauce i sztuce*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2020, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁹ After: U. Eco (ed.), *Historia piękna*, Dom Wydawnictwo Rebis, Poznań 2012, p. 315.

¹⁰ H. Kiereś, *Sztuka a prawda*, Człowiek w Kulturze, 1994, no. 2, p. 58.

¹¹ P. Blake, *Mies van der Rohe*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1991, p. 12.

¹² K. Podpora, *Sztuka na prawdę. Aktywność artystyczna wobec realiów społecznych. Wybrane działania polskich performerów drugiej połowy XX wieku w zderzeniu z kulturą fotograficznego odwzorowywania rzeczywistości* [in:] C. Słowik, A. Dobrowolska, M. Siedlecka (eds.), *(Nie)prawda w literaturze i sztuce*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk 2014, p. 137.

It is a paradox of architectural development that Wright's 'destruction of the box' led to the Functionalist principle of separating the technical structure from the functionally determined space-defining elements, which produced a general tendency to envisage buildings as simple boxes again. There is, however, a basic difference between the boxes before and after Wright in that the former were static entities containing an addition of separate rooms, whereas the new kind of box contains a free plan.¹³

The town combined these two trends by refining the structure and form of the buildings and freeing the layout of the plan from the construction. After all, he was most interested in the following: "We refuse to recognize problems of form, but only problems of building. Form is not the aim of our work, but only the result. Form, by itself, does not exist. Form as an aim is formalism; and that we reject."¹⁴

The analysis of the works of architects whose style is recognisable shows that the pursuit of truth often leads to simplicity and sincerity. This is what is equated with truth – buildings do not pretend anything, they do not hide their structure or components.

The initial development of Mies van der Rohe's creative path was influenced by Karl Friedrich Schinkel's classical architecture. Peter Behrens's buildings, both industrial and neoclassical monuments of government institutions, inspired Mies, who regarded them as equitable and important works in the "new spirit."¹⁵ He learned the purity and sincerity of the structure and the "idea of clear construction as one of the fundamentals we should accept"¹⁶ from Berlage. Yet, ultimately, he set a new direction in understanding the truth of architecture.

Mies's buildings are characterised by a recognisable but unobvious style of simplicity. The changeability and explorations in early works give way to the repetitiveness of forms and details with time. This is a result of full conviction about the truth created by this architecture and the development of the adopted set of solutions. "'Discipline' – is the slogan of Mies' life and work. Discipline, order, purity, truth."¹⁷ There is no denying it – after all, numerous completed projects justify it perfectly.

The thought of the Barcelona Pavilion, an extremely beautiful and expensive building constructed in 1929, immediately springs to mind. It was erected from noble and expensive materials, and the furniture and furnishings are still synonymous with modernity. The Barcelona Pavilion has entered the canon of masterpieces of modern architecture. It is not without reason that numerous copies of this work have appeared all over the world. But they are only buildings reproduced without any understanding of the original's solutions. After all, we find all the features of Mies's architecture there. Even though, he described it as the most difficult project, because he was his very own client and could do whatever he wanted¹⁸. The mastery of combining different materials concentrated in the space of a small object is revealed. The truthfulness of their use is emphasized by their separate planeness – the stone walls do not intersect and do not connect with the independent construction of pillars and roof. They are not a casing but independent partitions that delineate the gallery space. There

¹³ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Znaczenie w architekturze Zachodu*, Murator, Warszawa 1999, p. 207.

¹⁴ P. Blake, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹⁶ C. Zimmerman, *Mies van der Rohe. The Structure of Space*, Taschen, Köln 2016, p. 9.

¹⁷ P. Blake, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ C. Krohn, *Mies van der Rohe. The built work*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2014, p. 76.

are no difficult or weak fragments here – the whole is harmonious and clear. The truthfulness and sincerity of the structure and material fully materialise Mies's assumptions, while the liberated plan freely shapes the gallery space. Owing to this work, critics "recognised him as a true sculptor of architecture – an unquestionable master in the use of space, form, material and finishing methods."¹⁹

It seems that the New National Gallery (Neue Nationalgalerie) in Berlin also perfectly illustrates the master's formal assumptions. The structure of the building displayed rationally, like in the case of industrial buildings, shows the logic and beauty of the spatial arrangements.

The Neue Nationalgalerie is essentially an upper exhibition hall covered by a steel roof supported by eight pillars. The glass walls outline the interior on the floor plane that seamlessly connects to the surroundings. This geometric work required locating most of the gallery functions on the podium, which has access to natural light only from the façade from the side of the Sculpture Garden.

The idea of the upper gallery solution was not new – such a structural arrangement was proposed by Mies a few years earlier in the Bacardi Office Building project, with concrete to be used instead of steel.

It is here in particular that the clarity of the external and internal space is highlighted as the foundation and at the same time the culmination of all principles of minimalist architecture. It is a gallery space designed and constructed in such a way that it does not need any exhibit to be filled with visitors. The nobility of the material and the composition are similar to the principles of the neoclassical Schinkler's school of architecture. "Art is almost always a question of proportions,"²⁰ Mies would say – and this is of crucial importance here.

It is undoubtedly more challenging to achieve such a level of clarity and abstraction of space when designing houses. The function and complexity of the elements render the legibility of the structure difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, Mies also successfully applies the principles that we know from the Barcelona Pavilion. The Tugendhat Villa in Brno, or the slightly more traditional Lemke House in Berlin, shape the cubic, enclosed space. The later project in Illinois, the Farnsworth House, seems to be completely liberated from its function. The building with rhythmic proportions of the structure brought to full legibility and the necessary minimum is the architect's mature work, containing the credo of his architecture. It is therefore difficult to imagine a better materialisation of the truth and sincerity of the creator, although the work met with criticism from the client. The great discipline concerning the matter with which he worked leads to ground-breaking solutions not only in the architect's work but also in the history of architecture. Yet even here, he faced snide comments: "Mies exerts so much influence," said Philip Johnson once, "because it is so easy to imitate him."²¹

The sincerity of his architecture has not always been fully understood and interpreted in an obvious way. On the contrary, the Functionalists were surprised when it turned out that the real construction of the Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago is hidden under metal casings filled with concrete. They reproached the architect for decorativeness and hiding the truth about the structure of the building. Although the technical requirements had an impact, Mies justified it with aesthetic and compositional reasons – the pillars protruding from the façade plane give character to the architecture and form. This is an apparent lie – the cladding

¹⁹ P. Blake, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²⁰ C. Krohn, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²¹ P. Blake, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

of the pillars determines the plasticity of the building even though it might seem that it is only the result of fire protection requirements.

The architect had to distance himself from the accusations of using ornaments – after all, this was due to technology and compliance with regulations. He made a technical problem a complementary element to the form of the building, influencing its architectural expression. Moreover, the newly developed model of the structure proved to be so flexible that he successfully used and improved it in subsequent projects of high buildings. Here he maintains his stand for using steel to build skyscrapers as he believed that traditional walls ruin the expression of their architecture.²²

In the 1950s, America, filled with boredom and prosperity, stimulated the pursuit of novelty and otherness. This led to the omission of truth and sincerity: “They say they are bored with my objectivity. Well, I am bored with their subjectivity!”²³ The architect did not accept the pursuit of fads and the search for otherness, insisted on the constant development of existing solutions. He consistently strived to improve and enhance what had been successfully achieved so far. This meant the truth for Mies, whereas a blind search for novelty and otherness was a falsehood. “I don’t want to be interesting,” he once said in an interview, “I want to be good.”²⁴

The simplicity and logic of the construction solution determine the clear and universal structure of the architect’s buildings. This is a standard that has revolutionised the architecture to date, especially the way its structure is perceived as a repetitive and detailed element. Technology has provoked changes in the way buildings are designed and erected. The skeleton system improved by Mies has become a fully-fledged element of modern architecture.

An I-beam is the basic element of the structure of his building, it supported the roof and the whole space was closed with a glass curtain. The master described it as the “skeleton and shell.”²⁵ In the classical period, an elementary construction element was the column, while for Mies it was an I-beam. It was treated with the same attention and precision as in the past through the improvement of material, technology and architectural form. This is where the contemporary architectural detail was born – a precise element of the structure of a modern building that is largely the result of the adopted technique.

The Seagram Building proves these theses fully. The building was erected in New York City with attention to the quality of material and workmanship, and all the elements, including those that are also the equipment, were designed, defined and stubbornly implemented by the architect himself. Even when it required a huge financial investment. The pursuit of perfection, which may have been considered boring and not very original at the time, led to a timeless mastery of architecture.

It is described by numerous common features that Mies’s works share: the connection between the interior and exterior of the building, its contact with the ground, the solution of the building’s ground level, the separation of walls and structural beams. He found simple solutions for transitions and connections and intersections of various elements. The composition and combination of many types of materials – concrete, glass and steel – is also important.

²² C. Krohn, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²³ P. Blake, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

He combined various concepts and models of space, clearly exposing the structure that he separated from the construction, likewise the walls from the pillars, while the designated planes of partitions did not intersect.

This was accompanied by extraordinary precision, accuracy and attention to detail. Perhaps this particular attention to detail and material ran in his family – his father was a stonemason. Besides, Mies was a practitioner who did not graduate from architectural school, but he also remained an active author in the field of architectural theory. He arrived at truth through design and his own experience.

Despite a large number of commissions for commercial building projects, the architect consistently pursued the idea of technical quality, culture and sincerity. Improving technical solutions, often by repeating and developing them, is an important yet frequently overlooked element of Mies's architecture. This consistent evolution of the design assumptions in successive works should be interpreted as a striving for perfection, which resulted in recurring structural arrangements. It is close to the truth that "the basic principle of classicism – the development of universal solutions applicable to all kinds of structures"²⁶ became a guiding principle. This is accompanied by the clarity and legibility of the construction and structure of the buildings. "He defined rules by which he worked and was highly disciplined about adhering to them, and at the same time produced a remarkably varied repertoire of solution."²⁷ These principles are particularly evident in the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, where the architect had the opportunity to design and construct over twenty buildings with different functions. Each of them demonstrates the ability to combine steel, glass and brick, achieving a disciplined and varied architectural expression. The rhythm of façade and window divisions arranges façades and their elements orient the recipient towards the structure and construction of buildings. Each building has its individual features but without any doubt, they are the work of one architect. It is hard to find a better testing ground for an artist seeking the truth of architecture.

4. CONCLUSION

It seems that the search for sincerity and truth of Mies's architecture manifests itself in the accurate use of the right material, structure and layout, which leads to architecture through a thorough study of proportions. Attention to detail and the development of the assumed model of art are the features his architecture is described with today. Recognition gained over the years of practice and a strong position, especially in America, allowed him to design and implement the programme assumptions consistently. He could develop and refine an idea whose sincere structure is a value with great freedom. While Le Corbusier advanced the use of concrete, Mies specialised in steel by constantly striving to achieve the ideal and optimal frame structure and improving the systems created.

Achieving the truth of the work of art is difficult. Whether it is read correctly depends on many contexts. This is particularly important in architecture. There is no universal truth of art. But the search continues.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁷ C. Krohn, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

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