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NON-REFERENTIAL ARCHITECTURE AS A WAY OF PRESENTING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE BUILDING

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Abstract

The article is about the non-referential architecture – a way of creating truth, not only about the buildings and the ideas but also about the current times. The seven rules, which, according to Valerio Olgiati, should be the principles for the designers, are deeply analysed. The Author gives historical and current examples depicting each rule separately to check how innovative is the Swiss architect's approach.

Keywords: non-referential architecture, truth, modernity, Olgiati

Streszczenie

Tematem artykułu jest architektura niereferencyjna jako sposób na kreowanie prawdy nie tylko o samych budynkach i ich ideach, ale również o czasach współczesnych. Analizie poddaje się 7 zasad w duchu których, według Valerio Olgiatego, powinno się obecnie projektować. Autor podaje historyczne oraz współczesne przykłady obrazujące każdą z zasad z osobna, by sprawdzić na ile nowatorskie jest podejście szwajcarskiego architekta.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura niereferencyjna, prawda, współczesność, Olgiati

1. THE TRUTH ABOUT MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Apart from “architecture of spectacle,” which has been described by Tom Dykchoff and “junkspace” which is Rem Koolhaas's object of interest, it is possible to find different approach for designing in current times. It is represented by the works of many Swiss architects such as Peter Zumthor and Valerio Olgiati. These architects concentrate on creating *milieu* in their buildings which is “the cultural climate, defining atmosphere, or physical location in which a person lives or in which events occur.”¹ (Ill. 1) This architecture's features were described in *Non-Referential Architecture*² written by Valerio Olgiati and Markus Breitschmid. The authors claim that the non-referential architecture is the only correct way

¹ *Milieu* [in:] WinEveryGame, https://www.wineverygame.com/words/milieu.html?fbclid=IwAR0aVzRigIPLq7eChr6KhDtx1lh_AyivAUO_xP4ft1gwM7NfPsuXLpouk (access: 5.5.2020).

² M. Breitschmid, V. Olgiati, *Non-Referential Architecture*, Park Books, Zurich 2019.



Ill. 1. The Interior of the Kolumba Museum, arch. Peter Zumthor, source: author's photo

of designing the buildings in the times of globalisation, mass media influence, flattening of the cultural borders in the world and lack of ideology. These aspects have always been very influential for architecture. The Non-Referential Architecture is the answer for the lack

of precise style in current times. This is a designing way which can be used by the author to present the truth about their idea for the building. This truth should consist of the seven principles of the non-referential architecture: experience of space, oneness, newness, construction, contradiction, order and sensemaking.

The reference has been described by the Oxford dictionary as: “the action of mentioning or alluding to something.”³ Olgiati, creating the antithesis of this definition, emphasises that his forms do not relate to any historical style, political ideology or even the surrounding which always related to architecture. These forms must be a pure transformation of the innovative idea for the building.

2. THE 7 RULES OF THE NON-REFERENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

2.1 EXPERIENCE OF SPACE

According to Edward Husserl and Maurice Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology of the perception, the experience of space, our impressions and emotions are the product of the mind and the sensibility of the perceiver. Olgiati denies this theory and claims that the way we experience the space is created by the architect from the beginning of the design process. “What is important to realize for architects who design buildings is that for a person to be able to have such a distinct objective experience of space, it is necessary for the architect to create an experience of space with intention.”⁴ The author does not concentrate only on the internal spatial and functional structure. He emphasises that our first contact with the building – with its external structure, should be a conscious effect of the designer’s thought and a signal which a form sends to the perceiver. Moreover, the moment when the observer starts moving through the building should be a starting point of a sensual experience. Olgiati compares the whole time which a person spends in the building, to the perfectly composed symphony in which every element is important and is the part of the holistic vision of the architect.

It is worth to mention that Olgiati is not the first architect who concentrates so much on the experience of space. The idea of Villa Savoye in Poissy, designed by Le Corbusier, is based on the similar ideological rules. The architect even prepared a scheme how a visitor should move in the building and experience it. On the other hand, Valerio Olgiati rejects modern ideology which wanted to impose on the perceiver the way which he should move in the building. According to Olgiati’s idea, this way should be felt subconsciously by the visitor and there is no need for the additional guides.

2.2 ONENESS

According to Olgiati, oneness, in architecture and the realised buildings, is deeply connected with the designing process and the creation of space. These are the borders, in which the whole form, the exterior and interior, can be set within one idea. This is architect’s one and precise proposition for the answer for the designing problem. Swiss architect mentions two

³ Reference [in:] Lexico, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/reference> (access: 8.5.2020).

⁴ M. Breitschmid, V. Olgiati, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

ways which can be taken to design a building. The first one – the designing by division, is the only correct way which should be taken by the architect creating non-referential architecture. It is based on choosing the general borders for the design and putting all the needed functions and spaces in it, creating an abstract, non-precise form. Later, dividing this form, we can get more and more precise scheme of the building. The form starts to get its shape and finally we can reach the stage of solving very precise details of the design. The other method, called designing by adding, is, according to Olgiati, wrong one. The process is opposite to the method of dividing. The architect starts designing from the void and adds all the needed functions and spaces within the building reaching at the moment the peak of the composition which can be acknowledged as finished. The most important disadvantage of this designing way is the lack of the borders. Adding another forms, the designer can reach a chaos and the composition, apparently finished, may occur to be a worthless mass consisting of accidentally added elements ”[...] the exterior and interior spaces of buildings are to ‘an architecture of dividing.’ This is contrary to buildings whose spaces are the result of additions of geometrical shapes. It is impossible to create oneness through and additive-compositional mode. In other words: a whole cannot be made out of parts.”⁵

Valerio Olgiati also mentions that designing: the different heights of the floors, different levels of the ceilings or different levels of the floors interfere the perception of the building. On the other hand, analysing the Kolumba Museum, designed by Peter Zumthor, there is no doubt that the author had a very precise and clear idea for the building. Different heights of the floors, which are visible both in the external and the internal structure, do not interfere the perception but enrich its structure.

2.3 NEWNESS

Newness, in non-referential architecture, is not only a rejection of responding to the historical architectural styles. Nor is it a manifestation of the 21st century technological possibilities. Newness is deeply connected with the current times, with the epoch in which all the ideological attitudes that always influenced architecture are not actual. The buildings need to be designed for the visitors and perceivers, they do not need to be the part of the wider context. They must initiate the dialogue with the visitor, and their spaces are to be precisely designed spatiotemporal course with the observer in its centre. Newness is a hard to define aspect of architecture. The architect must face it personally. The designer is obliged to judge whether their building possesses the aspect of newness and whether the current times can face it. Olgiati mentions two architects whose buildings are nowadays acknowledged as innovative but the opinions about them were extremely different in the times when they have been realised.

Gaudi’s architecture was considered bizarre at the time when he prouced his work. In contrast, despite all the discussions about the merit of Gehry’s architecture, his work has never been labeled as naive and bizarre nor was it, for that matter, labeled as particularly fashionable. Instead, Gehry’s architecture has always been taken as a serious contribution and his work is understood as significant for society.⁶

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

Newness is connected with the times of realisation. The same relates to the aspect of beauty.

Anda Rotenberg, the author of the books, critic and the historian of the art, claims that the beauty requires an understanding, assimilation and generalisation. Something that has not been widely generalised is not understood as beautiful. The generalisation means that the new and avant-garde masterpiece entered the canon of beauty.⁷

Analysing Antonio Gaudi's architecture nowadays, majority of people think that it is not only beautiful but also very innovative despite the fact that it was perceived as bizarre in the times of realisation.

2.4 CONSTRUCTION

The principle of the construction means choosing the most appropriate building material. However, it does not mean that a designer must use only one material in the whole building. The rule needs to be applied only for the construction elements and they can be supplemented with additional materials. The choice of the construction material needs to be made by the architect and it should be adapted to the specificity of the object.

For example, concrete has the attribute of being a 'casted material.' Thus, it would not make sense to cast in concrete a building whose idea requires a modular (composed) form. On the other hand, it is very nature of brick that it always results in something modular, because a brick is a small, typically rectangular module. For example, it is nonsensical to build an irregularly undulating shape in masonry.⁸

What is more, Olgiati describes one more aspect of the construction in the non-referential architecture. However, it requires a knowledge of structural engineering and building mechanics from the architect. The construction of the building should always be designed by the architect, not by the civil engineer. The structural shapes and the forces in the buildings are inevitable elements of the architecture and must be integrated with it. Olgiati claims that the role of the civil engineer is downgraded and they only need to calculate the dimensions of the construction elements. Their locations should be chosen by the architect.

The history of architecture shows that the division between the role of the architect and the engineer was not always so clear as it is nowadays. Vitruvius was not only an architect but also a civil engineer. He also had a knowledge about planning of the cities and constructed war machines. However, we can find notable architects who were and are able to possess both architectural and engineering knowledge in the 20th and 21st centuries. The buildings designed by Pier Luigi Nervi and Santiago Calatrava are deeply connected with the Olgiati's principle of construction. These are forms that integrate architecture with civil engineering knowledge. They are sculptural forms in which the flows of the forces are clearly visible. These are the buildings made of the structural grids.

⁷ N. Juzwa, *Piękno w architekturze* [in:] *Defining the architectural space. Tradition and modernity in architecture = Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej. Tradycja i nowoczesność architektury*, vol. 1, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, Wrocław 2019, pp. 65–71.

⁸ M. Breitschmid, V. Olgiati, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

2.5 CONTRADICTION

Contradiction, as a compositional strategy being an integral part of a building, gives it meaning. It is not a simple creation of an opposition to the structure of the building or an attempt to fulfil it with an element which is a contrast. Contradiction is a subtle manifestation of the architect's creativity and his idea for the dialogue with the visitor. Olgiati tries to present this principle basing on a simple example. Entering the building and seeing the staircase, we realise that there is a space above it. The human mind does it automatically and we do not even realise this process. Let us imagine that after entering the building we see two pairs of stairs, one by one (Ill. 2). In this situation, our mind starts to analyse why there are these two pairs of stairs, which one we shall choose to get to the next floor or even whether they end at the same floor. The process of analysing is conscious. The simple design made a visitor start to think and correspond with the building. The example of the contradiction in the building presents how the unconscious thinking may evolve into the deep analysis. Olgiati connects the contradiction with the beauty hidden in the building, writing about Kant's three phases of analysis: the sensorial stimulation, the stimulus developing human's imagination and illustrating of the thoughts. Following the German philosopher, the architect claims that the ideal contradiction in the building is based on the dialogue with the visitor, stimulating their imagination and illustrating their thoughts.



Ill. 2. The Staircase in the Visiting Center Swiss National Parc, arch. Valerio Olgiati, source: <https://divisare.com/projects/222882-valerio-olgiati-visiting-center-swiss-national-parc>, access: 5.5.2020

The contradictory elements can be easily found in a lot of deconstructivists' realisations, especially in the buildings designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au. The intensity of many different

elements, staircases, landings, footlights and terraces forces a visitor to analyse which way should they take, or even start to think whether some elements have been designed for any communicative purpose or are just the decorative elements designed to admire. The curved form in the centre of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning Exhibition in Shenzhen, which seems to be a sculpture, is the communicative sector hiding the lifts and staircases (Ill. 3).



Ill. 3. The Interior of the Museum of Contemporary Art & Planning Exhibition, source: <https://www.archdaily.com/800332/museum-of-contemporary-art-and-planning-exhibition-coop-himmel-b-l-au>, access: 5.5.2020

2.6 ORDER

Architectonic order links the idea for a building with the built architectonic actuality. Hence, the architectonic order is how the idea is first conveyed into form by means of building elements: the formation of walls, floors, roof, openings, and columns amongst each other within its ordering system. These primary elements make the order present. In other words, the idea for a building is first articulated by an ordering system.⁹

Olgiati presents two designing methods which can be chosen by the architects: inductive and deductive. The first one is based on the knowledge from the experiments. This method is not characteristic for the non-referential architecture. The second one is a manifestation of the

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

idea and requires choosing the rules by the designer. These principles must be assumed by the designer as true and the conclusions must be driven from them. The object, designed using an inductive method, is the effect of the chaos and may be based on the false principles. The deductive method is the only one that is able to set the design in the precise borders and realise the non-referential object. Olgiati presents this method basing on an example of a watch. It can be beautiful, but the idea of joining a human with a time fulfils the masterpiece.

The deductive method's idea bases on the German Idealism philosophy which "[...] gives even more power to the mind. Not only is certain knowledge of the world to be found in the mind, they claimed, it must also originate in the mind. The mind for the Idealists creates the world."¹⁰ According to Olgiati, the mind creates the building. Architects have to find the truth in their minds to set the rules. Basing on them, they will be able to start the design process.

2.7 SENSEMAKING

Sensemaking is included in the answer for the question – why was the building raised? Fulfilling other six principles of non-referential architecture does not make the building sensemaking. What is more, it does not assign the form to the non-referential architecture. Moreover, it is not about the beauty or functionality of the object. It is important to notice that, according to Olgiati, we all live in the non-referential world. The cities are more and more similar to each other. Despite completely different culture all over the world, we can find similar buildings, similar shops, similar restaurants everywhere. Accepting this reality, sensemaking of the building becomes more and more important because it makes architect's work valuable. The roof of a typical house might be just a shelter providing physical comfort or may become, in a metaphysical sense, a shelter for the souls, human's asylum.

Sensemaking was always connected with architecture. Designers used to work for Gods, to present the majesty of the masters, to present a technological progress and even to demonstrate political ideologies. These used to be the ideas that let the architects know why they worked. It is worth to notice that Olgiati claims that there is a lack of such ideas and ideologies nowadays. We became the hostages of the consumerism and the designed buildings are raised for one purpose – to earn money.

3. THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NON-REFERENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

Valerio Olgiati, using seven principles of the non-referential architecture, presents how architects may show the truth not only about their buildings but also about the current times. However, each rule is not an innovative idea of the architect but an aspect that can be found in the historical and current periods. On the other hand, Swiss designer is the first person who gathered all these principles in one place, giving architects a designing method in non-referential times. Precise analysis of the elements of the building, from the idea to the details, gives an opportunity to set the design in the borders.

What is more, Olgiati ennobles the role of the architect-creator, denying a modern model of designing in the team. He believes in the prophetic mission of architecture which can be

¹⁰ M. Gelernter, *Sources of Architectural Form a Critical History of Western Design Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995, p. 33.

realised only by the mind of one person who is the head of the design. It is an ideological return to the 20th-century modernism ideas.

Despite the will to start a dialogue with the visitor of the building, non-referential architecture requires some involvement and analysis. Olgiati, using: the experience of space, oneness, newness, construction, contradiction, order and sensemaking, tries to simplify it for the perceiver. His designs are the holistic forms where every element is inevitable and each one is the transformation of the architect's idea. It is the manifestation of architect's intelligence. Following Olgiati: "I am convinced that today it is still possible and indeed necessary to base designs on ideas, and to create buildings that are capable of contributing to the cultural intelligence of our time."¹¹ On the other hand, we should think whether this is the only proper way that should be taken by the 21st-century architects. Would we still have time for ourselves if you we were surrounded by the challenging and demanding buildings?

Designing the buildings regardless of the surroundings and the context is also questionable. Valerio Olgiati purposely presented his mock-ups without surroundings at the exhibition at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in 2008 (Ill. 4). This is the manifestation of the architect's claim that the building and the idea are the most important. The context is less important or even worthless. It is worth to notice that similar ideology may be represented by the majority of 21st-century architects. These designers, described by Olgiati, Koolhaas and Dyckhoff, could cause the disappearance of the differences in the world cultures and the buildings.



Ill. 4. Photo from the Valerio Olgiati's Exhibition at ETH Zurich, 2008., source: V. Olgiati, *A Lecture by Valerio Olgiati*, Birkhauser, Basel, 2011

¹¹ V. Olgiati, *A Lecture by Valerio Olgiati*, Birkhauser, Basel, 2011, p. 2.

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