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THE GREAT PRETENDERS. NEW INCARNATION OF EXPRESSIONIST ARCHITECTURE

WSPANIALI SYMULANCI. NOWE WCIELENIE EKSPRESJONIZMU W ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

This paper is a comparative analysis of form of selected contemporary architecture from the circle of New Expressionism. The point of reference are, among others, works of avant-garde art. New trends in architecture contradict the old dogmas of architecture. Sometimes, form of architecture is unrelated to the structure of the building and doesn't express the function of the building. Iconic buildings designed by the stars of contemporary architecture resemble abstract sculptures, unrealized visions of avant-garde artists or natural forms. Logic, "ethics" and rationality in design are replaced by the fury of almost limitless creativity. Buildings from the circle of expressionism of the 21st century pretend surprisingly well not to look like architecture.

Keywords: avant-garde, expressionism, organic abstraction, contemporary architecture

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest analizą porównawczą formy wybranych dzieł architektury współczesnej z kręgu nowego ekspresjonizmu. Punktem odniesienia są między innymi dzieła sztuki awangardowej. Nowe tendencje w architekturze zaprzeczają dawnym dogmatom architektury. Forma architektoniczna bywa niezwiązana z konstrukcją budynku, nie wyraża też w oczywisty sposób przeznaczenia budowli. Ikoniczne budynki zaprojektowane przez sławy architektury współczesnej przypominają abstrakcyjne rzeźby, niezrealizowane wizje awangardzystów czy formy naturalne. Logikę, „etykę” i racjonalność w projektowaniu zastąpił szal niemal nieograniczonej kreatywności. Budynki-rzeźby z kręgu ekspresjonizmu XXI wieku zaskakująco dobrze udają, że nie są architekturą.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, ekspresjonizm, abstrakcja organiczna, architektura współczesna

The dogma linking the architectural form with the logic of the construction, structure and function of a building was present in the architecture of the 20th century for many years. Architects were referring to concepts such as: "truth," "honesty," "integrity," etc. When the high-tech style emerged, architectural form began to be composed of structural elements, installations, pipes and wires. Architecture has reached an extremum in its "honesty." Crossing another border, architects gladly rejected the modernist principles, the decor returned, no longer in the form of details, but the shape of entire buildings. Architects were given complete freedom in shaping the architectural form free from structural and functional constraints. Many of iconic buildings in their form do not reveal any ties to the traditional architecture. Instead, they resemble abstractionist sculptures, unrealized visions of avant-garde artists or

things belonging to the natural world. Contemporary iconic buildings pretend surprisingly well that they are not architecture.

Over a century ago, expressionist architects applied organic shapes to their designs. Buildings they envisioned were supposed to refer to the raw forms of nature, they had curved shapes or forms with sharp edges, irregular shapes and asymmetrical facades. One of the most frequently repeated motifs in expressionist architecture was the form of the crystal. The “crystal” architecture was drawn by: Mies van der Rohe, the Luckhardt brothers, Wenzel Hablik, Hans Scharoun and others. Nowadays, expressive “crystal” forms dominate in the architecture of Daniel Libeskind. The architect explains:

Crystals are one of the most perfect creations of nature. Their shapes often appear in my designs. I love the fact that they absorb light while reflecting it. They are often seen as complex forms with many faces, but the box is also a crystal, although very simplified. I could talk about crystals for hours. They are a miracle to me.¹

Libeskind, considered to be a member of deconstructivist movement, creates buildings composed of intersecting blocks, dramatic angles and sharp edges. His architecture is very recognized and characterized by the domination of expressive form over function.

In 2007, two museums designed by Libeskind's office were opened. One of them was the extension of The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Architect admits that the form was inspired by the crystals he saw among the museum's exhibitions. Libeskind “nailed” three interpenetrating blocks covered with metal cladding onto the historic building. Blocks are twisted as if the ground had collapsed beneath them. The effect of the catastrophe is intensified by the black strips of windows that cut across the building. The whole thing looks like the old museum building was stuck on the top of a piled-up ice floe. It is similar to the view that Caspar David Friedrich captured in the painting *Sea of Ice*. The artist depicted the story of a failed polar expedition in a dramatic and expressive way, he painted the scaled, broken masses of ice covering the sinking ship. Libeskind treated the old museum similarly, it is “drowning” under the pressure of the cold and sharp form of the new building.

Daniel Libeskind also designed the new building of the Denver Art Museum. It stands next to the building designed by Gio Ponti, which was opened in 1971. The Italian architect designed the museum as if it was a modernist stronghold, the high walls are cut here and there with irregularly arranged openings and bay windows. The “fortress of art” is covered with convex glass tiles so the building shimmers with silver reflections. Libeskind alluded to the Ponti building, the new part is covered with titanium panels, and the body is also cut with small, irregularly placed window openings. The building is located in an open space, it can be freely viewed from many sides. This situation encouraged the architect to create an effective form. The museum looks like an expressionist sculpture. Again, the whole thing looks like broken ice, crystals, or mountain boulders dropped in the city center. While in Ontario the crystals from the museum's collection were the inspiration, here the architect referred to the forms of the Rocky Mountains. Both Libeskind's designs resemble the models of the Luckhardt brothers – expressive sculptures resembling mountain ridges, full of sharp spikes and edges. Denver Art Museum is dominated by a huge, slender spike – the prow of the “art spaceship.” Here, deconstructivism takes on a neo-futuristic style. However, the impressive

¹ D. Libeskind, *przełom: przygody w życiu i architekturze*, Wydawnictwa Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2008, p. 176.

form was created at the expense of functionality, and the museum is criticized for numerous functional deficiencies that hinder the free display of the works of art.

Another Libeskind's "crystal" buildings were erected at the entrance to the historic Keppel Port in Singapore. The complex of residential buildings of various heights was completed in 2011. 1,129 apartments in isolated high-rise buildings offer views of the ocean, Sentosa Islands, and Mount Faber. The complex consists of six towers, 178 and 120 meters high and eleven lower apartment buildings. They form a freely composed group, located among greenery. Buildings have a curved, dynamic form, rising on the shore like giant architectural stalagmites. Shiny, curved towers are finished with slender, transparent peaks, which make the composition even more expressive. Forms are similar to the drawing by Hermann Finsterlin presenting the idea for the Cathedral of Light. Glass towers designed by Libeskind illuminate the bay and sparkle with reflections in the water, being the new Singapore's "cathedral of light."

In 2008, Zaha Hadid's office won the competition for the new building of the port in Antwerp, the second largest port in Europe. The building was to house offices for 500 employees. It was proposed to locate the headquarters in the port, on the island of Mexico, on which there was an over a hundred-year-old fire brigade building. The requirement of the competition was to incorporate the new cubature into the old building, built in the style of Hanseatic residences. The winning concept assumed to build over it, avoiding enclosing the historic building and not to obscure it. A huge block in the shape of a pointed crystal was placed on the old building. The form is hewn – planes of rhombuses, trapeziums and triangles appear in the façade, as in the expressionist paintings. In the gleaming glass surface of the Antwerp building, the reflection of the sky shimmers in shades of blue. The "skin" of the crystal is cut with a mesh of triangular windows, a mosaic of glass of various shades and translucency – from transparent to non-transparent, to optimally regulate the interior lighting. Panes placed at different angles make the shiny body of the building resemble a rough diamond. Architects admit that the concept resulted from three formal assumptions: proposing a vertical direction of expansion was inspired by an unbuilt tower that was to be the dominant feature of the original fire brigade building, the white form of the support and the interior of the building refer to ocean liners, and the crystal form is a direct reference to diamonds, which the city is famous for. In Antwerp, 85 percent of the stones imported from all over the world are polished.

The façade's ripping quality is generated with flat facets to the south that gradually become more three-dimensional towards the north. This perception of a transparent volume, cut to give the new building its sparkling appearance, reinterprets Antwerp's moniker as the city of diamonds. The new extension appears as a carefully cut form which changes its appearance with the shifting intensity of daylight. Like the ripples on the surface of the water in the surrounding port, the new façade reflects changing light conditions.²

The office building, which is 40 meters high, offers a panoramic view of the port and the city, which was one of the most important commercial centers in the world before it suffered from the Second World War. The crystal block ended with a sharp point surprises with dynamism, it is reminiscent of the famous design of a glass skyscraper *Freidrichstrasse* by Mies van der Rohe from 1921, which impressed with the expression of the corner and the lightness of

² Port House [in:] Zaha Hadid Architects, www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/port-house

the transparent block. Zaha Hadid also had in her portfolio designs of modern yachts. In the Antwerp building she draws on the design of modern ships, the white plinth on which lies a glass block, cut by a strip window is a contemporary travesty of marine modernism. It must be admitted that the effect of this compositional mixture is impressive, and the scale and expression of a huge sculptural block hanging over the historic building creates a dramatic impression. The crystal by Zaha Hadid levitates above an old building like a futuristic liner ready to unmoor and leave the port.

The form of the Qatar National Museum, designed by Jean Nouvel, is also supposed to refer to the shape of the crystals. The building, which was opened at the beginning of 2019, consists of interpenetrating discs clad with panels of cream colored concrete. The architect explains that he was inspired by the desert formations found in Qatar.

The desert rose, a flower-like aggregate of mineral crystals occurring only in arid coastal regions, is the first architectural structure that nature itself creates, through wind, sea spray and sand acting together over millennia. It's surprisingly complex and poetic. Taking the desert rose as a starting point turned out to be a very progressive, not to say utopian, idea. I say 'utopian' because, to construct a building 350 metres long, with its great big inward-curving disks, and its intersections and cantilevered elements – all the things that conjure up a desert rose – we had to meet enormous technical challenges.³

The building, which consists of 11 galleries, is planned as a loop that winds for almost 1.5 kilometers. In its center there is the lovingly restored palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani, which since 1975 has been the house of the Qatar National Museum. The new museum is the second significant Nouvel realization in the region, in 2017 the Abu Dhabi Louvre was opened, a building covered with a large dome made of several layers of aluminum panels in the shape of cut stars. Transparent roof let the sun's rays through, creating an unprecedented play of light and shadow inside. Among many projects designed by eminent architects in the Middle East, those designed by Nouvel should be considered as the most spectacular.

Expressionist buildings that were created in Hermann Finsterlin's imagination contradicted architectural tradition and were free from constraints of basic construction problems. Finsterlin in 1919, postulated the creation of organic forms in architecture:

We, the inhabitants of the Earth, can see manifestations of refined forces only on a few small objects that have become forms of nature [...] Think of huge Inca sculptures, monolithic temples of India, the possibilities of iron, artificial stone, large fusions of glass and light building materials that are currently in use. Consequently, there must be many means that will produce forms as rich as those found in nature.⁴

The organic fantasies of Finsterlin began to be realized in architecture with the eccentric houses of Antti Lovag, Vittorio Giorgini, Antfarm or in exhibition pavilions which were ahead of everyday architectural reality. In the world of public buildings, biomorphic forms appeared at the end of the 20th century in the projects of: Peter Cook, Frank Gehry or Jan Kaplický.

³ J. Nouvel, *Architectural and Museographical Design: The Desert Rose*, www.jeannouvel.com/en/projects/musee-national-du-qatar

⁴ H. Finsterlin, *Berchtesgaden*, [from:] G. Celant, *Architecture & Arts 1900/2004: A Century of Creative Projects in Building, Design, Cinema, Painting, Photography, and Sculpture*, Skira, Milan 2005 pp. 226–227.

One of the icons of blobitecture is The Kunsthaus in Graz. In 2003, Graz was the European “capital of culture,” and for this occasion the authorities decided to build a new museum of contemporary art. After two competitions, it was decided to realize bold concept of Peter Cook and Colin Fournier. Peter Cook, the founder of Archigram, referred to the concepts of a living, moving city – the building in Graz was “brought to life” through a multimedia cover. Among the tenement houses in the city center lies a slimy, shiny and flickering “architectural worm.” It looks like a form of different civilization. The facade panels hide 900 lamps illuminating at night the body of this electro-architectural symbiote. “The building got many names, maybe nicknames. Some see it as a snail, others as an udder of a cow, and others call it a Friendly Stranger, which is a reaction to its unusual form.”⁵ The organic form of the museum resembles a blob shape of the dining building, designed in 1975 by Günter Domenig, located in the courtyard of the Franciscan Sisters’ school in Graz. Thanks to this building and other outstanding architectural realizations, such as Mur Island, Graz has built an image of a city promoting modern design and architecture.

Jan Kaplický attempted to build one of the impossible works of Finsterlin by designing the building of the National Library for Prague. Rendering shows a shiny gold blob covered with spots of purple glazing, something like a cosmic octopus or other creature from science-fiction movies. The form is reminiscent of Finsterlin’s *Konzerthaus*, a design that looks like a wavy mountain topped with a purple growth. During his career Kaplický realized several spectacular buildings belonging to the blobitecture trend. Despite that, the library in Prague turned out to be too extravagant and like Finsterlin’s visions, remained an unrealized project of an extravagant visionary.

In 2001, architects from Coop Himmelb(l)au won the competition for the Musée des Confluences in Lyon – an interdisciplinary museum combining elements of anthropology, ethnology and natural sciences. The name of the museum refers to the confluence of rivers – the building is located on a peninsula, where the Rhone meets the Saone. The project is a part of the revitalization of this city’s area. Together with the building, the architects designed the park and the coastal promenades. There are terraces on the roof of the museum overlooking both rivers. Musée des Confluences has a complicated shape, it resembles a drawing by Hermann Finsterlin depicting a fancy city forming something like a snow-covered ridge of an alpine massif. The museum partially stands on large “legs,” creating arched spaces that look like coastal caves created by water erosion. The main body of the museum, without windows, houses three levels of exhibition halls, architects call it “the cloud.” The entrance area of the building, called “crystal,” is a large glass atrium that collapses like a black hole. The great funnel, around which the stairs wind, has been called the “gravity well.” The museum looks like a form of matter right after the Big Bang, and it refers well to the exhibition inside, which tells the history of the world from its birth. Wolf D. Prix explains that deconstructed forms, lack of center, grid and axis bring the museum space closer to Einstein’s theory of relativity. The decomposed form of the museum is close to the ideas presented by Austrian architects in a provocative manifesto:

Architecture has to be cavernous, fiery, smooth, hard, angular, brutal, round, delicate, colorful, obscene, lustful, dreamy, attracting, repelling, wet, dry, and throbbing. Alive or dead. If cold, then cold as a block of ice. If hot, then hot as a blazing wing. Architecture must blaze.⁶

⁵ T. Kozłowski, *Architektura a sztuka*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2018, p. 185.

⁶ C. Himmelb(l)au, *Architektura musi płonąć*, 1980 [in:] C. Jencks, K. Kropf (eds.), *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013 p. 313.

The architecture of the building met with criticism, it was described as “exhibitionist.” Prix defends the concept by explaining a complex form:

if we want to have an optimistic society that has the capability to solve complex problems with complex solutions, we have to live in this complex society. meaning: if you are living in boring spaces your brain doesn't work in a creative way. if you only think in architectural terms, only architecture will come out. we were fascinated by the spacesuit, the space helmet, by the formula 1 racing car, by the music – the tension of the riffs of Keith Richards is a role model for our structures sometimes.⁷

The architect's words, implying social effects from the shape of architecture, sound similar to the futurist manifesto.

With the expansion of expressive architecture in the 20th century, from the Sydney Opera House to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, a new semiotic category emerged, which Charles Jencks calls “iconic” architecture.⁸ The shape of the iconic building does not have to relate to the function, it aims to create something extraordinary, interesting, recognizable, memorable, and at the same time reaching a wide audience. Architecture has become an element of marketing, architects are required to create a spectacular building that is to gain immediate fame. The architectural form is to be a unique, self-referential sign. The requirement for contemporary buildings to be iconic and their scale make the architectural works even more spectacular. New design and construction possibilities overcome old limitations and enable the construction of the most abstract shapes. The canons of styles were replaced by creativity and the search for novelty. Bold, sculptural forms dominated the architectural world and media.

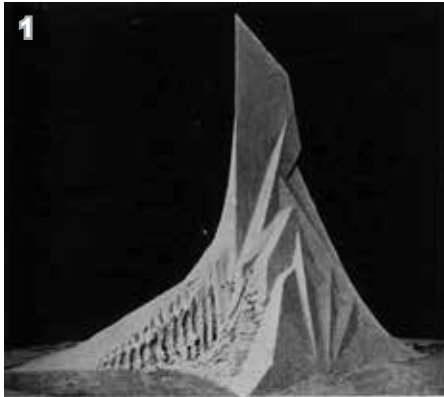
Robert Venturi's slogan *all right*, announced in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), has come true on a larger scale than the originator intended. [...] The space of modern architecture is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed, unexpected neighborhoods of forms occur in it, metaphors become literal, fictions enter reality.⁹

Contemporary architecture is formalistic, it does not speak a common language, but uses means and forms well known from the history of architecture and sculpture. In the case of new, expressive architecture, form is the most important aspect, many elements of the building are created for the sake of form, architecture becomes close to the abstract art. The goal of the contemporary architecture is to create a surprising architectural form, just as it was in art in the times of the Great Avant-garde. The new expressive sculptural buildings have their source in the dismantling of the language of classical architecture, initiated at the beginning of the 20th century. Architects derive from the heritage of avant-garde art and utopian “paper architecture”. In the hundred years since the beginning of the avant-garde, tremendous progress has been made and some futuristic, utopian visions of avant-garde architects, updated to the technical realities of the new era, came into reality. Among other trends, biomorphic and neo-expressionist architecture arose: buildings in the shape of blobs, crystals, and organic forms imitating nature. Although, the vast majority of the emerging built environment is still “conventional” architecture, these few exceptions send the observer to the extraordinary world of infinite possibilities offered by the imagination of architects and artists.

⁷ P. Stevens, *Wolf D. Prix explains his design of lyon's musée des confluences* [in:] designboom, <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/coop-himmelblau-musee-des-confluences-wolf-d-prix-interview-video-spirit-of-space-12-22-2015> (access: 22.12.2015)

⁸ C. Jencks, *The iconic building*, Rizzoli, New York 2005, p. 7.

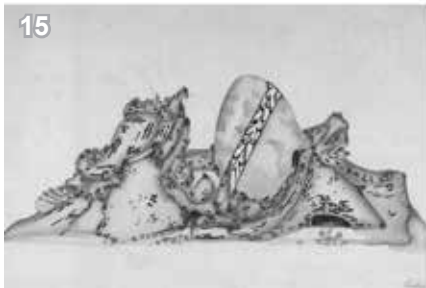
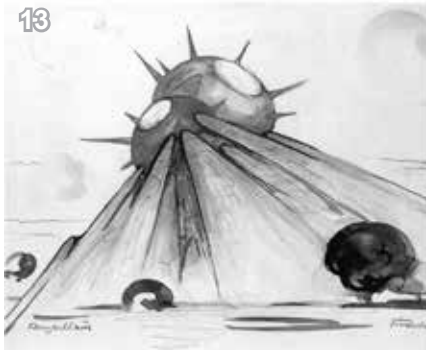
⁹ M. Misiągiewicz, *Ideas, Pretexts, Inspirations...*, Pretekst, 2010, no. 3, p. 57.



- Ill. 1. Hans Luckhardt, *Form Fantasy*, 1919, source: www.simondlinardi.blogspot.com
- Ill. 2. Daniel Libeskind, *Denver Art Museum*, 2006, source: www.archdaily.com
- Ill. 3. Caspar David Friedrich, *Das Eismeer*, 1823–1824, source: www.wikipedia.org
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 III. 8. Zaha Hadid, *Port House in Antwerp*, 2008–2016, source: www.archdaily.com
 III. 9. *Desert rose*, source: www.pinterest.com
 III. 10. Jean Nouvel, *Qatar National Museum*, 2003–2019, source: www.dezeen.com



- Ill. 11. Hermann Finsterlin, *Palazzo Pfahlbau*, 1917, source: www.50watts.com
 Ill. 12. Peter Cook, Colin Fournier, *Kunsthau Graz*, 1997–2003, source: www.area-arch.it
 Ill. 13. Hermann Finsterlin, *Konzerthaus*, 1919, source: www.50watts.com
 Ill. 14. Jan Kaplický, *National Library in Prague*, 2007, source: www.cijeuropa.com
 Ill. 15. Hermann Finsterlin, *Die-Stadt*, 1916, source: www.50watts.com
 Ill. 16. Coop Himmelb(l)au, *Musée des Confluences*, Lyon, 2001–2014, source: www.tripadvisor.com

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