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TRUTH OR LIE OF ARCHITECTURE – SELECTED EXAMPLES OF WALTER GROPIUS'S WORKS

PRAWDA CZY KŁAMSTWO ARCHITEKTURY – NA WYBRANYCH PRZYKŁADACH DZIEŁ WALTERA GROPIUSA

Abstract

In her work, the author presents the unknown buildings designed by Walter Gropius in Pomerania, focusing mainly on one of the first – the granary in Jankowo near Drawsko Pomorskie. This project is the opposite of the works for which the architect is known. The discussion of selected objects is a contribution to the reflection on the topic of truth and lie in architecture in the existing research situation.

Keywords: Walter Gropius in Pomerania, Granary in Jankowo near Drawsko Pomorskie, truth of architecture, lie of architecture

Streszczenie

Autorka przedstawia nieznanie szerzej budynki zaprojektowane przez Waltera Gropiusa na Pomorzu, skupiając swoją uwagę przede wszystkim na jednym z pierwszych – spichlerzu w Jankowie koło Drawskiego Pomorskiego. Projekt ten stanowi wyraźną opozycję do dzieł, z których znany jest Architekt. Omówienie wybranych obiektów stanowi przyczynek do rozważań nad tematem prawdy i kłamstwa w architekturze w zaistniałej sytuacji badawczej.

Słowa kluczowe: Walter Gropius na Pomorzu, Spichlerz w Jankowie k. Drawskiego Pomorskiego, prawda architektury, kłamstwo architektury

1. INTRODUCTION

Truth, lie, false – three terms, which are used by people on a daily basis without thinking whether or not they define anything in architecture? Can they be applied to architecture? Everything seems obvious, we are used to the metaphorical truth being white, the lie being black and the falsehood being grey. However, architects can use colours, mix them and then nothing is white, black or grey anymore, or everything is a little bit.

What is more, architects are Artists, (usually) egocentrics, so if they want white can become grey, and grey can become black, or can have white spots, etc. Ultimately, like any artist, the architect, above all, wants his work to be well perceived, so if needed they will hide something “false” and expose something “real.” It seems very difficult to find (or detect)

the truth in architecture, and still it seems naïve to us that truth is definable; how to define the truth in architecture?

Walter Gropius certainly had his own truth which he describes in his book titled *The Fullness of Architecture*, a fascinating collection of essays written on architecture, the Bauhaus and the CIAM over the years. It is puzzling which works by Walter Gropius express the architectural truth, the ones of which he was proud on how to extend factory in Fagus in Alfeld, or those which he carefully hid from the world, like the granary in Jankowo near Drawsko Pomorskie. Małgorzata Omilanowska in *Walter Gropius's works in Pomerania* writes that "[...] the transfer of private photographic documentation of his work to Bauhaus-Archiv caused a real shock among researchers."¹ Suddenly they discovered the whole architecture by the great architect, but is it the real face of the master?

2. DESIGNS AND WORK BY WALTER GROPIUS IN POMERANIA

Walter Gropius, mentioned in one breath among the most outstanding architects of the 20th century next to Le Corbusier or Mies van de Rohe, at the beginning of his design path created several works in the area of today's Drawski Lakeland, which differ from today's perception of this master's architecture. He came to the village of Jankowo (before the war called Janikow) near Drawsko Pomorskie to the farm of his uncle Erich Gropius, where he designed his first buildings. There is still a granary there today, built between 1905 and 1906. Earlier, the uncle, supporting his nephew, had commissioned him to design houses for workers – two were built: the first one was built in 1904, the other in 1905.

2.1 GRANARY IN THE ERICH GROPIUS'S MANOR

The granary was one of the many buildings belonging to a large manor farm, where there were residential buildings as well as livestock buildings and rural industry workshops. The farm included, among others, the manor house, agronomist's house, carpenter's shop, livestock buildings, slurry, cowshed, pigsty and granary (which also served as a water tower) (Ill. 1).

The granary was located on the edge of the manor house, to the right of the driveway, near the main courtyard. Built in the native style – Heimatstil. The building has a compact body in which we can distinguish three parts: the main one, with a high tower embedded in it, and the southern lower one, adjacent to the main one, but not connected to it inside. The roof is covered with red tiles with dormers. On the front eastern, six-axis façade, there is a tower which is the dominant feature of the whole building, finished with a gable roof under which the clock is clearly visible. Above it there is the Prussian wall. To the right of the tower, in the central part, there is a four-storey avant-corps ending with a gable, which was used to transport the grain easily, hence the doors on each storey. The two highest storeys were built in Prussian wall technology. Between the tower and the avant-corps there are pairs of windows, individual axes are separated by buttresses.

¹ M. Omilanowska in *Prace Waltera Gropiusa na Pomorzu* [in:] *Sztuka XX wieku w Szczecinie i na Pomorzu Zachodnim. Przemiany i kontynuacje*. Materiały z Seminarium Naukowego Szczecińskiego Oddziału Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Szczecin, 18–19 listopada 2005, Szczecin 2008, p. 88.



Ill. 1. Granary in Jankowo near Drawsko Pomorskie, current state, photo by the author, 30.10.2019

The southern part is lower than the rest of the body and is covered with a sloping roof. The three-axis facade is two-storey, separated by buttresses, on the first floor there are doors, on the second floor there are semicircular windows. The northern elevation is similar to the southern elevation, three-storey with an attic, also on it we can distinguish three axes. There are windows on the ground and first floor, and a window on the ground floor is central. There are three levels of windows in the roof slope; just below the gable a small rectangular window, below there are two levels with two dormers arranged on the axis – the higher one is smaller than the lower one.

On the west side, the three-storey rear elevation is regular six-axial (except for the far south axis). The individual axes form two pairs of windows, in contrast to the front elevation, there are three storeys under the eaves due to quite large variety of terrain. The wall was built of lime-sand brick, nowadays it is possible to observe a large ventilation of individual bricks, which creates an interesting pattern on the façade. In the interior, currently devoid of ceilings and divisions, in the main part you can observe a wooden structure – two rows of double-braced poles. The staircase was placed in the tower. The landform made it possible to design large basements.

The granary building was a multifunctional facility which can be interpret from the body of the building: the main part for storing grain, the dominant tower served as a water tower, and the southern part was probably a coach house. An art historian, Małgorzata Omiłanowska, in her *Works by Walter Gropius in Pomerania*² believes that the facility does not give away its function. It certainly dominated the whole farmstead because of the high

² *Ibidem*, pp. 85–98.

clock tower, in which there were mainly one or two-storey buildings with a gable roof. The only building that was as impressive as the granary was the manor house, which, unlike the granary building, stood alone.

Małgorzata Omilanowska writes that this way of placing the building probably satisfied the ambitions of the then young architect Gropius. It seems that one should not fully agree with Omilanowska, because the building served two very important functions for the manor house, hence its size or dominance over other buildings does not seem to be exaggerated.

2.2 RESIDENTIAL HOUSE IN DRAWSKO POMORSKIE

Another building worthy of discussion is the residential house of Elisabeth and Otto Metzler, today often called the Metzlers' Villa. It was designed and built in 1906. The building which, as Gropius indicated himself was based on Uncle Erich's court designed by the Solf&Wichards³ office, has several features unusual for constructions at that time (Ill. 2).



Ill. 2. Metzlers' Villa in Drawsko Pomorskie, current state, photo: author, 30.10.2019

³ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

The building is located in a picturesque place by the Drawa River on a plot far from the street, currently hidden behind a large four-storey residential building that completely obscures it. It has undergone some changes since its creation, but the main idea of the designer has not been obliterated. It was an interesting design – two-storey building with an attic and a basement that is covered with a broken, mansard roof with extended flowing slopes – originally quite far from the front face of the wall.

It is also distinguished by its front (eastern) and gable facade. Just like in the granary, the designer used here the theme of the Prussian wall on the upper floor. On the front you can see innovative, different sized, rectangular, horizontal and vertical windows, probably matching the size, depending on the needs. This is probably the beginning of a functional idea in architecture. The southern façade has a centrally located avant-corpses ending in a gable with a clearly accentuated beam, covered with a broken roof, the sides on the ground floor have symmetrical doors, the first floor has two dormers. On the western side of the southern elevation, the roof slope was extended in a descending manner, creating a porch.

The western elevation is also very symmetrical, in the middle there is a semi-circular bay window topped with a balcony, on the ground floor there are rectangular windows on both sides, on the first floor with three windows there is a Prussian wall. The northern elevation is the simplest, it is primarily a roof slope with a dormer designed symmetrically, on the ground floor several windows of different sizes. Initially, the project⁴ had a porch under the extension of the slope on the east side, built up later. A very elaborate woodcarving can be seen throughout the house, which defines the character of the buildings. The architect designed the building in the Heimatstil style, which went beyond typical designs. It owes its unusual appearance to irregular windows or unusually, extended roof slopes. It seems that certain thoughts and ideas matured in the designer, which ultimately led him to functionalism.

2.3 OTHER WORKS BY WALTER GROPIUS IN POMERANIA

There are also other Gropius's projects in the Drawsko Lake District and Pomerania. Supported by his uncle Erich, he designed in addition to houses for workers and granary a smithy (1906) and a laundry room (1906) in Janikow manor. The forge, no longer existing today, was a small one-storey building with characteristic arcades, later rebuilt and demolished in recent years. Later in 1909, he designed other houses for workers, one of which was constructed by the road leading from Drawsko to the manor. It was rebuilt many times over the years and it still stands today.

The two-storey building with a simple cubic shape is devoid of details, an avant-corps is visible on the front elevation. The projects were probably influenced by his work in Peter Behrens's office in the years 1908–1910. Erich Gropius developed his business and, with it, commissioned his nephew to carry out further projects. He purchased the Golzengut estate in the area of today's Drawsko, and Walter designed houses for workers and the manor house reconstruction there. In 1911, another house for farm workers was built in Jankowo, a symmetrical, two-storey house with a flat roof. On the south and north sides, he designed one-storey extensions withdrawn from the main part of the building. Later, in 1912, an energy transformer by Gropius was built on the farmstead.

⁴ The original, signed by Gropius, design of the house was found by the teacher and councillor from Drawsko Pomorskie, Mr Romuald Kurzatkowski.

Gropius also received orders from other people, in Żołędowo (formerly Mittelfelde). In 1907 he designed farm buildings on behalf of the Brockenhausens, still in the style of his father. In 1913–1914, he returned to Żołędowo to design new farm buildings (henhouse, garage, guest rooms and a greenhouse). In the years 1910–1911, a manor house for Friedrich-Wilhelm von Anima was built in Miłocice according to his design, in which as in his earlier projects, symmetry dominates. A two-storey building, with a compact mansard roof, whose regularity is only disturbed by the veranda added on the south side. The front facade was five-axial with a central avant-corps with two pairs of windows placed symmetrically on its two sides, the arrangement of windows on the roof slope was a continuation of the ground floor. The axis of symmetry was emphasized by a low oblong dormer with five small windows.

In 1911, Gropius designed a malt factory in Gudowa for the Kleffel family, in which on the front elevation with an axial avant-corps with vertical stripes, ending in a massive gable, one can see on both sides of the avant-corps different window sizes. The last project carried out in Pomerania was a grain granary with accompanying buildings in Mirosławiec. A giant symmetrical building with a sparing façade, small windows, large lesenes, concave cornices, and a play of concave and convexity on the façades can be seen. Researchers believe that it is the closest to functionalism.

Analysing Gropius's works, we find two design trends. One related to the manor buildings (the manor house in Miłociny, Metzlers' Villa) which he designed in the native style, though with simplified detail, contained elements enriching the body (a fragmented body, mansard roofs, avant-corpses, oriels, rich woodcarving). The other trend was related to farm or industrial buildings. The blocks were much simpler without any details on the facades, usually covered with a flat roof.

3. WALTER GROPIUS WIDELY KNOWN AND ADMIRER

As already mentioned, Walter Gropius is one of the three great masters of the 20th-century architecture that future architects learn about. Naturally, not because of projects in Pomerania, but because of his later architectural, and above all, social works such as the Bauhaus. The architect, after establishing his own office, together with Adolf Meyer, designed the extension of the factory in Fagus. This long work, which began in 1911 and was completed in 1925, is considered very important to modernist architecture. The cuboidal block, with a reinforced concrete skeleton structure hidden inside the building (the external walls did not carry any loads), with numerous glazing in the form of curtain wall, was a modern building that has become a permanent feature in the history of architecture.

In 1914, Walter Gropius took part in the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne with his factory project, in which the form was to reflect the function. He used the architectural means of expression already known from the factory in Fagus, such as: simplified facade, curtain walls, glass combined with brick. All this was a bold proposal at the time.

In the years 1919–1928, the architect was the headmaster of the art school in Weimar which was moved to Dessau in 1925. Thanks to this, Gropius had a chance to design its headquarters, continuing the assumptions made while designing and implementing factories mentioned above. In *Pełnia Architektury (The full range of architecture)*, Gropius writes that “The aim of the Bauhaus was not to spread any styles, systems or dogmas. It

was just about reviving the design itself.”⁵ What is more, he emphasizes the role of project teams. Cooperation between an architect, an artist and a craftsman was important to him, because together they can create something creative and useful – together they can change the world.

He pointed out the need to experience what is designed – students were to build the designed elements. Participation in the housing exhibition at the Weissenhof housing estate in Stuttgart was an opportunity for him to present houses made of prefabricated elements. It was supposed to be the response to housing problems he perceived.

Gropius left Nazi Germany, first for England, then the United States, where he continued his work as an architect and teacher. In the years 1938–1952, he was the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at Harvard University. He designed, taught and published articles on architecture and the Bauhaus idea. As already mentioned, he hid his early works which saw the light of day only after the death of his second wife. Documents revealed from his private archive showed the scale of the architect’s activity in Pomerania. In the monograph devoted to Gropius, written by Sigfried Giedion, only one of the projects of houses for workers in Jankowo is presented.

4. THE TRUTH, FALSEHOOD OR PERHAPS AN EASY LIE OF GROPIUS

It is very difficult to determine what is truth, falsehood or lie in architecture. Filip Daszkiewicz, in *The Category of Truth in the Language of Architecture*, tries to define what truth is in architecture, draws attention to the subconscious meaning code written in our mind. If we talk about stairs, we have an idea of their appearance (they consist of steps, railings, steps, etc.). If we talk about a house, each of us has an idea of the house, depending on the age, different for children⁶, teenagers, adults or elderly people, it certainly depends also on the upbringing or an environment in which a person lives.

It seems that for most people interested in architecture, Walter Gropius is a master of functionalism, international style (he himself hated the term), a brilliant creator, a teacher for many generations of architects, craftsman and artists. We subconsciously associate glass curtain walls, functionality, cuboidal solids, lack of detail on facades with Gropius. When one stand in front of the granary in Jankowo, they experience a shock, especially today when the building stands alone in the field, naively asking ourselves where Gropius is “hiding himself”? They feel cheated, lied to, because this is not what they have expected. They have wanted modernity that they get a land-shaft, with no facilities in the form of a manor farm, a lonely building with no context in a large area that looks a bit like a “Gargamel house.”

Does that mean Gropius lied to us? Deceived? Or is that an easy lie? It seems, however, that it was not Gropius who lied to us, but we ourselves, having some clichés in our heads, knowing what we are going to see as recipients of architecture, we are focused on this “modern” Gropius and deceive ourselves. Hence the subsequent disappointment for which the great master cannot be blamed at all. On the other hand, while looking at the granary building in

⁵ W. Gropius, *Pelnia architektury*, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2014.

⁶ As part of classes in one of the kindergartens in Poznań, children were asked to draw their homes. Despite the fact that most children live in blocks of flats and flat roof houses, all the drawings were typical. They were one-storey with a slanted roof with a chimney, doors on the front elevation, several windows with muntin bars.

Jankowo, without looking at other works by Gropius, one can see a certain architectural lie in it, which was expressed by an unusual body for this type of function. Małgorzata Omiłanowska writes about him that “[...] it is an interesting building, because its external form does not generally betray its function. The windows and the clock tower, which are too big for the granary, bring to mind a rather provincial railway station.”

The thing is completely different with the apartment building for workers in Jankowo, north-east of the granary. Although there is no glass curtain wall or huge glazing, we feel much more like it is in Gropius's style – a cuboidal block topped with a flat roof, a simple detail. The Metzlers' villa, described above, although built in a native style, thanks to an unusual bend of the roof slope or unusual size of window openings seems to inscribe at least a little into the viewer's perception of Gropius's architecture, especially when looking at the front elevation, the viewer thinks of functionalism.

However, it is also worth considering this architecture through the prism of the book *Pelnia architektury (The full range of architecture)*, in which the architect wrote down his thoughts. We can read the works of Gropius seen in Pomerania differently. In his book, the architect writes about the way each of the future designers should go through, and through which he tried to guide each of the Bauhaus students. Gropius never finished his architectural studies (he tried twice) due to a lack of drawing talent. He pointed out, however, that this is not the most important thing, he believed that academic architectural education is inadequate, because theoretical education can lead to “[...] uncritical acceptance of the current style, fashion and kitsch.”⁷ What is more, a graduate of such an architecture school becomes out of touch with reality, hence he emphasized the importance of internships. At the Bauhaus students were to build what they designed themselves⁸.

“Any chance to leave the university and take part in at least some,... stages of building a house should therefore be used without hesitation by the young designer as the most important form of establishing a balance between knowledge and experience.”⁹ It seems that when Gropius wrote this, he meant himself, a man who, thanks to the support of his family, could gain architectural and construction experience. Gropius's path was that of an apprentice,¹⁰ hence each subsequent building designed by him enriched his knowledge and experience – his architecture evolved. This is clearly visible when we compare his three works such as the granary in Jankowo, the Metzlers' Villa and the factory in Fagus.

5. SUMMARY

It seems almost certain that while designing buildings in Pomerania, Walter Gropius gave them all his knowledge and creativity that he possessed. The truth in architecture is here and now,¹¹ so buildings such as the granary or Metzlers' Villa, although for the contemporary viewer seemingly “non-Gropian,” were architectural truth at the time of their creation. Perhaps the passage of time made them an easy lie for the viewer, not under the influence of

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.130.

⁸ Unconsciously this idea is continued by the scouts building their camps every year.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Wiedza akademicka, wiedza inżynierska [in:] autoportret, <http://autoportret.pl/artykuly/wiedza-akademicka-wiedza-inzynierska/> (access: 11.06.2020).

¹¹ The author here refers to one of the definitions of the word truth: what really is, exists or was.

the architect, but precisely because of the passage of time, because of the changes that have taken place in the world around us, in society.

As recipients of architecture, we often forget about the fact that the work of an architect matures and evolves under the influence of successive projects. Not one student of architecture, at the end of their education, realises that they could have done their work better. We don't know if Walter Gropius would like to design the granary in Jankowo or the Metzlers' villa differently. The fact that he did not boast about them in his biographies suggests that he would have changed something in them. On the other hand, it is the path that has shaped him and is perhaps more valuable than the works themselves – this is the truth of Walter Gropius.

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