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## POSTMODERNISM AND TECHNOLOGY

### POSTMODERNIZM I TECHNIKA

#### Abstract

Postmodernism, as a direction being “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” depended on the geopolitical and economic situation. In Poland, which was behind the Iron Curtain until 1989, the possibility of realizing of buildings remaining in the spirit of the era came with a delay of many years. The article presents selected examples of realizations from the history of world and Polish architecture, which, through case analysis and comparative method, provide evidence for the thesis.

*Keywords: postmodernism, technology, economics, Polish architecture*

#### Streszczenie

Postmodernizm, jako kierunek będący „logiką kulturową późnego kapitalizmu”, uzależniony był od sytuacji geopolitycznej i gospodarczej. W Polsce, do 1989 r. będącej za Żelazną Kurtyną, możliwość realizacji obiektów pozostających w duchu epoki nastąpiła z wieloletnim opóźnieniem. W artykule przywołane są wybrane przykłady realizacji z historii architektury światowej i polskiej, które poprzez analizę przypadku i metodę porównawczą stanowią dowód dla tezy.

*Słowa kluczowe: postmodernizm, technika, ekonomia, polska architektura*

In the thesis given to the participants of this year’s conference, we read:

New insights are emerging in architecture, seeking to break the habitual perceptions of the form of a building and the style in which it should be built. Technology is creating new opportunities, opening up new horizons for artists [...] After all, architecture should not only be a technological creation, but also a work of art<sup>1</sup>.

Evidence of this thesis can be seen in the evolution of trends in architecture after the modernism period. Postmodern realizations in countries where access to technology was made possible by economic conditions occurred much earlier than in Poland, which was located in different geopolitical conditions behind the Iron Curtain.

The second half of the 20th century was a period of breakthrough events in many fields in the world; in 1969, the Apollo 11 lander with astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon, in 1974 Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn used the word Internet for the first time, in 1975 Microsoft Corporation was founded and a year later Apple. World economies are developed under

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<sup>1</sup> Thesis in English 2024 [in:] International Conference – Defining the Architectural Space, <https://dpa.arch.pk.edu.pl/thesis-in-english-2024/> (access: 16.10.2024).

the influence of the liberal policies of both the United States of America under the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989 is the period of so-called Reaganomics) and the United Kingdom during the period when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister (1979–1990). During the period of stability, the direction of postmodernism, focusing on differences, historicizing, ironic, with elements of pastiche, focusing on “freedom of expression”, affected cultural fields such as literature, film, music and philosophy. In 1991, Fredric Jameson summarized these tendencies in a book with the significant title *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

In Poland, the first partially free elections were held in 1989. Until then, the system of the economy of the Polish People’s Republic, modeled on Soviet solutions, was in place; the “logic of capitalism” to which Fredric Jameson refers did not apply. Political instability (in Poland, between 1980 and 2000, more than a dozen people held the office of Prime Minister) was accompanied by extreme economic turbulence (in 1990, inflation in Poland reached a historic level of 585.8%). As a result of economic differences with the developed countries, there were also differences in access to technology, which caused postmodernism in Poland to appear with a delay of more than a decade. This is written by Małgorzata Włodarczyk and Marcin Włodarczyk:

The economic and social crisis [in Poland], which began at the end of the 1970s and lasted into the 1980s, did not allow the full implementation of postmodern ideas and patterns in architectural and urban realizations. Also due to material shortages<sup>2</sup>.

The article will present the more significant realizations of postmodern architecture with different functions – single-family house, office building, cultural building, multifamily residential – from the world and Poland, indicating the differences in the periods in which they were created depending on the economic context. The selection was made according to the key of the oldest important realizations from each category, with the aim of showing time differences in the appearances of postmodern trends.

Charles Jencks dates the death of modernism to July 5, 1972 at 3:32 p.m., to the moment of demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in Saint Louis, completed between 1952 and 1955 to a design by Minoru Yamasaki<sup>3</sup>. However, Diana Giardino points out that signals of the end of modernism had already appeared earlier citing four books; Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961), Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), Aldo Rossi’s *Architecture of the City* (1966) and Hasan Fathe’s *Architecture for the Poor* (1969)<sup>4</sup>. Bohdan Paczowski already points to Louis Kahn as a precursor of postmodernism, describing the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, completed in 1959–1965 (while classifying it as one of the “ten buildings that decided the shape of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture”<sup>5</sup>). Charles Jencks, on the other hand, believes that the first modernist architect who applied the ornamental cornice and traditional arch in a postmodern characteristic was Robert Venturi in the building of the Board of Governors of the Nurses and Dentists Association (1960)<sup>6</sup>.

**Single-family house.** In 1964, a house designed by Robert Venturi was realized in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, for his mother, Vanna Venturi. Designed on a rectangular plan, the small, approximately 9-meter-high building is one of the first examples of postmodernist experiments.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Włodarczyk, M. Włodarczyk, *Architektura postmodernistyczna w Krakowie. Wybrane przykłady*, SARP Oddział Kraków, Kraków 2016, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> C. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Arkady, Warszawa 1987, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> D. Ghirardo, *Architektura po modernizmie*, VIA, Toruń 1999, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> B. Paczowski, *Zobaczyć, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 334.

<sup>6</sup> C. Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

The gray front facade features historicizing cornices and arches, as well as freely composed windows and slits in the facade. Hidden behind the facade is a small (several rooms) complex and “intriguing interior”<sup>7</sup>.

**Office building.** In 1980, the Portland Building, designed by Michael Graves, was built as “an example of the assimilation of postmodernism by mainstream American architecture”<sup>8</sup>. Charles Jencks (the building was featured on the cover of the Polish edition of his book *Postmodern Architecture*) cites the unflattering (“dog kennel,” “jukebox”) protests of the modernist community against the planned construction of the office building. Compositionally, the building is divided into three classical elements – base, core and crown. Realized in pastel colors, it evokes Egyptian associations, although it is still less ornate than the project envisaged – it is stripped, among other things, of the figure of “Portlandia” carrying a trident and wheat wreath, which was supposed to be on the facade, and the temples on the roof<sup>9</sup>, increasing the symbolic character of the architectural message.

**Cultural building.** Among some of the more significant museum objects of the 1980s was the New State Gallery in Stuttgart designed by James Stirling and Michael Wilford and completed in 1984. The proposal to expand the neoclassical existing gallery involved the realization of forms and planes finished in sandstone with bright metalwork elements, and, like Michael Graves’ American realization, provoked lively discussions among modernists.

**Multifamily residential.** The monumental Abraxas Spaces was realized in 1978–1982, designed by Ricardo Bofill and Taller Arquitectura in Marne-la-Vallée near Paris. The complex, realized from prefabricated concrete and inspired by the historic, classicist forms of the palace and theater, was called by Dariusz Kozłowski “the greatest work of postmodernism”<sup>10</sup>. The idea behind the complex’s gigantic scale in relation to the surrounding context was to elevate the significance and sense of importance of public housing.

In Poland, one of the landmark architectural events of the declining period of the Polish People’s Republic was the 14th Congress of the International Union of Architects, held in Warsaw on June 15–21, 1981, attended by some 3,000 architects from around the world and where one of the speakers was the already-cited Charles Jencks. In the afterword to the Polish edition of *Postmodern Architecture* Wojciech Kosinski writes:

Postmodernism is one of our opportunities for a healthy renewal of building: it is healthy food for investors and creators. Of course, in the serious edition: we can’t afford the eccentricities of Western snobs [...] Postmodernism is inevitable, attempts to ban it, as some Polish modernists, whose sun is going down inexorably, would like to do, will not help. Postmodernism is the peak of the great mountain of general retreat from the aberrations of modernism<sup>11</sup>.

**Single-family house.** Villa Bateau-Bateau was realized in Cracow in 1996, designed by Dariusz Kozłowski and Maria Misiągiewicz. The rectangular body of the house, referring to the form of a ship, is overshadowed by a wavy curtain wall. The gray facade with composed

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<sup>7</sup> D. Ghirardo, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> C. Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> D. Kozłowski, K. Ingarden, R. Loegler, *Wszyscy wtedy czytali Derridę i wszystko wydawało się możliwe*, interview by A. Gzowska, M. Karpińska, D. Leśniak-Rychlak, “Autoportret” 2018, no. 4(63), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> C. Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

“postmodern” details of asymmetrical windows or negative stairs may evoke connotations of the architecture proposed by Robert Venturi.

**Office building.** In 1991, a high-rise building designed by Jerzy Czyż, Andrzej Skopinski, Jan Furman, Lech Robaczyński and Marzena Leszczyńska was put into use in Warsaw. The 128-meter-high building is considered by Anna Cymer to be a manifestation of the new times<sup>12</sup>. One can find references to the Portland office building in the rectangular building, especially if we imagine it in the form it was originally planned – as during construction the gold facade cladding was changed to reflective glass. It should be noted that the beginning of construction is dated to the 1970s, but due to economic conditions, work was stopped, and construction was completed many years later.

**Cultural building.** The building of the Silesian Library in Katowice was developed according to a design by Jurand Jarecki, Stanisław Kwasniewicz and Marek Gierlotek in 1989. The building, founded on an elevated platform, consists of a pedestal on which the main building of the library stands. Modernist elements can be found in the object, but the aesthetics of the complex’s expansive glass portico are postmodern, while the central section may evoke associations to the Portland realization or the Museum of Modern Art in Takasaki (1974), designed by Aratra Isozaki.

**Multifamily residential.** Polish housing policy of the 1970s and 1980s changed as late as 1982 with new government programs – assumptions until 1990<sup>13</sup>. Polish realizations of housing estates are smaller assumptions than those found in the West (leaving aside even Ricardo Bofill’s monumental realizations), and even smaller than earlier realizations in the country, which was due to the collapse of the housing market during the transition from the command-and-control system to the market system<sup>14</sup>. One of the recognizable examples is the Centrum E Estate by Romuald Loegler, completed in Krakow between 1988 and 1995, located in the neighborhood of the socialist realist Nowa Huta Central Square. The staircase towers topped with triangular spires, cornices, steel finishes and pastel colors define the buildings as a postmodernist work.

Romuald Loegler recalls the period of the second half of the twentieth century and Polish realities in the words:

We have to deal with the internationalization of construction in the sense of technology, materials, certain conventions that arise from this industrialization [...] the catalogs of house factories included three hundred thousand different details, but only five were produced<sup>15</sup>.

The mentioned examples of buildings realized in developed countries in the 1960s to 1980s, as well as Polish realizations of the 1980s and 1990s, which belong to the same direction, can provide evidence for the conference’s thesis that “technology comes in, which can introduce materials with higher strength and better properties into construction. This enables us to construct buildings differently than before, which once seemed unrealistic”<sup>16</sup>. Architecture and the possibilities of technology have an ongoing relationship.

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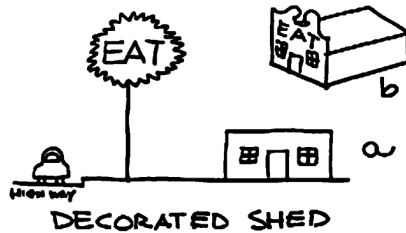
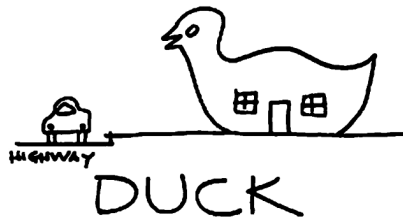
<sup>12</sup> A. Cymer, *Architektura w Polsce 1945–1989*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, Warszawa 2019, p. 389.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 363.

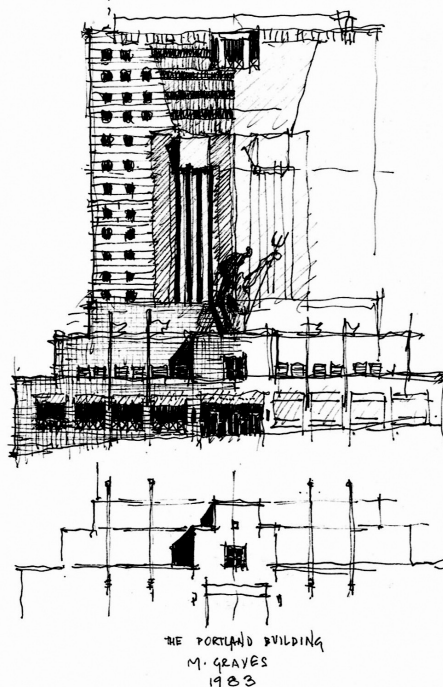
<sup>14</sup> A. Cymer, *Długie lata 90. Architektura w Polsce czasów transformacji*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2024, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> D. Kozłowski, K. Ingarden, R. Loegler, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

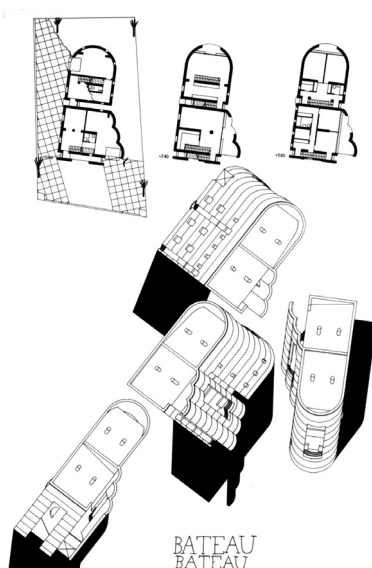
<sup>16</sup> Thesis in English 2024 [in:] International Conference – Defining the Architectural Space, <https://dpa.arch.pk.edu.pl/thesis-in-english-2024/> (access: 16.10.2024).



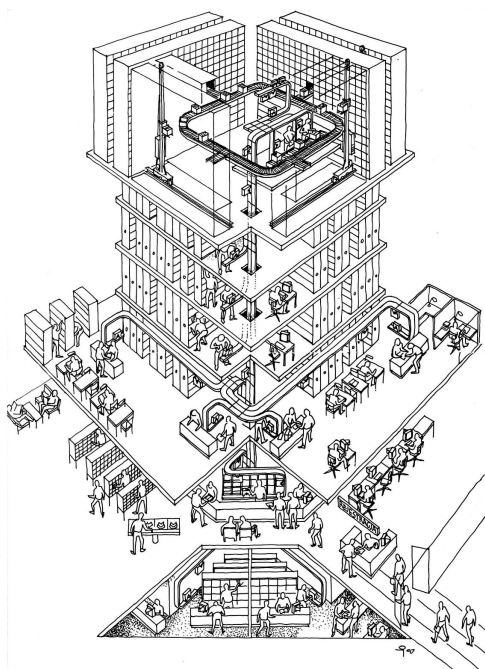
III.1. Robert Venturi's categories of architecture; the duck and the decorated shed, source: A. Zilliacus, *Sin City Embellishment: Expressive or Kitsch?* [in:] ArchDaily, 20.09.2018, <https://www.archdaily.com/797803/sin-city-embellishment-expressive-or-kitsch> (access: 16.10.2024).



III. 2. Sketch of Portland Building by Michael Graves, source: nscoleman, *graves does Portland* [in:] Coleman Architecture, 28.07.2016, <https://colemanarch.com/2016/07/graves-does-portland/> (access: 16.10.2024).



Ill. 3. Drawings of Bateau-Bateau Villa by Dariusz Kozłowski and Maria Misiągiewicz, source: Bateau-Bateau, willa dwurodzinna [in:] Dariusz Kozłowski, <http://www.dariuszkozowski.arch.pk.edu.pl/projekty/images/batoux/bateau.gif> (access: 16.10.2024).



Ill. 4. Instytut Dokumentacji Architektury Biblioteki Śląskiej, Schemat zarządzania księgozbiorem, source: Tożsamość. 100 lat polskiej architektury [in:] Przewodniki Online po projektach Narodowego Instytutu Architektury i Urbanistyki, <https://przewodniki.niaiu.pl/tozsamosc-100-lat-polskiej-architektury/> (access: 16.10.2024).

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