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PARK AS THE AVANT-GARDE OF ARCHITECTURE

PARK JAKO AWANGARDA ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Architecture is sometimes embedded in a surrounding context. Throughout history, creators of successive generations did not give much thought to the works of their predecessors. Instead, they would rebuild, alter, and sometimes even destroy them. Such was the path to novelty and economic needs. Such problems have been discussed and taught for some time. Fortunately, however, the term *architectural monument*, whose author is exempt from worrying about the surroundings, has been coined; we naturally only become aware of this after it has acquired such status over time. In art, authors strive to gain the status of avant-garde creators, there are times that force the birth of new styles or even tendencies. The 1980s saw the outbreak of the deconstructivist revolution. The new must negate the old, but ideally, this must be accompanied by an intellectual record or a presentable idea. The movement of architects associated with Deconstructivism did not produce uniform manifestos, but Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette design was a statement in itself, and philosopher Jacques Derrida's involvement helped to solidify the movement's name. However, after its peak, Deconstruction has lost public interest and is slowly dying. Nowadays, architecture is once again at a crossroads and it is not clear which way its creators should go.

Keywords: architecture, avant-garde, novelty, deconstructivism, de la Villette

Streszczenie

Architektura bywa wpisana w jakiś otaczający ją kontekst. Historia pokazuje nam, że kiedyś twórcy kolejnych pokoleń nie zastanawiali się nad dziełami poprzedników. Były przebudowywane, zmieniane, czasem dewastowane. Taka była droga do nowości i potrzeby ekonomiczne. Od jakiegoś czasu takie problemy są dyskutowane i są przedmiotem nauczania. Jednak na szczęście narodziło się określenie monumentu architektonicznego, którego autor jest zwolniony od przejmowania się otoczeniem. Oczywiście zdajemy sobie z tego sprawę dopiero po uzyskaniu przez niego statusu po jakimś czasie. W sztuce autorzy dążą do uzyskania statusu twórców awangardowych, bywają takie momenty, które wymuszają narodziny nowych stylów lub choćby tendencji. Lata 80. XX w. przyniosły wybuch rewolucji dekonstruktywizmu. Nowość musi negować stare, a najlepiej gdy towarzyszy temu jakiś intelektualny zapis, jakaś dająca się przedstawić idea. Ruch architektów związanych z dekonstruktywizmem nie stworzył jednolitych manifestów, jednak projekt Bernarda Tschumiego na Parc de la Villette był manifestem samym w sobie, a pomoc filozofa Jacques'a Derridy przyczyniła się do ugruntowania nazwy kierunku. Dekonstrukcja jednak po latach świetności znudziła się odbiorcom i powoli umiera. Współcześnie architektura znowu staje na rozdrożu i nie wiadomo, w którą stronę mają podążać jej twórcy.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, awangarda, nowość, dekonstruktywizm, de la Villette

1. INTRODUCTION

When looking at the contemporary architecture around us, one would think that context is not needed or is not the focus of designers' attention. However, this lack of consideration towards the surroundings is not a contemporary issue. Throughout history, architecture has primarily been created for advertising and this has always been its most important purpose. Such commercial architecture was called *novelty architecture*. Such an art of building was intended to emphasise the advertising value of a building. This relates to what Charles Jencks writes about these days. One of the earliest and best-known examples of such architecture may be the Statue of Liberty in New York or the earlier design of the Parisian fountain known as *L'éléphant de la Bastille*. The commissioners wanted to pretend to be great patrons and leave behind works that were unique. At the turn of the 20th century, artists and architects were driven to transform the public's perception of art. However, due to technological limitations, their work was often limited to theoretical projects. They could only create drawings or mould shapes out of clay that had never been seen before. Nowadays, nothing is forbidden and there are no longer any inhibiting rules, styles or audience habits. Modern building materials and computers support designers on their way to creating novelty. Anything that is created automatically becomes a work of art just as it happens with *ready-made* art in galleries. Although this statement is a generalization, the artist by creating something sends a signal that it must have some value. Otherwise, it would not have been created in the world of capitalism.

The lack of a unified style of contemporary architecture also seems significant; there can be no question of any styles today. What once seemed to be the most important – continuity of styles, and ultimately the struggle and negation of the works of predecessors – has disappeared. In historical architecture, one can easily identify a Baroque, Gothic or Classicist building; just as in painting, sculpture and music. The stylistic uniformity that once prevailed dictated that building should be based on recognised principles or copying the works of the great masters. Regional variations arose from the interpretation of principles, the innovativeness of the creator, and their level of knowledge or skill. Nevertheless, these variations were often only noticeable to those who were paying close attention. During the 19th century, the uniformity of architectural style started to fade away; buildings constructed according to different stylistic rules coexisted. However, they were all created with the same underlying principle – recognizing that different architectural styles were appropriate for different building purposes. As Piotr Krakowski writes:

It is worth noting that in historicism, the choice of historical styles, including Renaissance forms, resulted not only from formal-aesthetic concerns, but also from the need to pursue a content programme, specific iconographic aims, and expressed specific threads of meaning and symbolism. The Renaissance style was mainly used for cultural institutions, museums, universities, and schools as it was considered an artistic representation of humanism. On the other hand, the Neo-Baroque style was reserved for palaces, residences, and theatres. Towards the end of the century, there was an attempt to attribute the characteristics of 'nativeness' to the Baroque style¹.

¹ P. Krakowski, *Teoretyczne podstawy architektury wieku XIX*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa–Kraków 1979, p. 76.

It is evident that the unique functions of the buildings were associated with a particular style. Despite the diversity, these styles were combined into a certain compactness. From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, the multifaceted nature of architecture has no longer been a concern for anyone. From then on, expressionist, functionalist and classicist trends existed side by side; there was also Art Deco architecture. Each had its own period of dominance, but the “competition” didn’t seem to bother them. Nowadays, the same holds true. Dariusz Kozłowski wrote:

Today, architecture, and arguably all art, is no longer the plastic expression of a particular ideal, it is the expression of any ideal to which the creator can give form. So there are no architectural trends, there is only the originality of the great creators. Each of them does it in their own way, and one cannot see any single theory of architecture or even attempts to agree on it: there is no understanding when speaking different languages – [...]. It is not so much the art called architecture itself that has become the supreme value, but the “convention” that makes it possible to accept new shapes favourably and perceive them in a friendly manner: if the spectator accepts the convention, it seems that the further play becomes a pleasure, but one can never be quite sure: is it an opera seria or buffa? The ‘architecture of the minimum’ and the ‘architecture in a headdress’ are sometimes accepted equally².

As one can sadly see, this is not an invention of the present times.

2. MODERNITY AND HISTORY

The city is created by architecture. A perfect example of this is a work that was meant to be a park in a name but is presented as a complete architectural work consisting of multiple small structures or a single large building. As we enter the 21st century, it can be said that contemporary architecture encompasses a multiplicity of directions existing between extremes – minimalist architecture and expressionism. Maybe this is just an extension of a long-observed dichotomy of attitudes, ideas, and forms of expression. This is exactly how Antonio Vivaldi named his compilation of violin concertos *The Contest Between Harmony and Invention*. This is where the first contradiction in the Parc de la Villette project comes, which arose due to a misunderstanding that led to the misinterpretation of the name of the deconstructivist architecture. One of the reasons for that was the term’s appearance in Bernard Tschumi’s competition entry. The author referred to his design process as a “deconstruction” of the park plan. To achieve this, Tschumi sought the guidance of Jacques Derrida, the philosopher who founded Deconstructivism in philosophy. Derrida explored various ways of interpreting and reading language and cultural products. It should be noted that the lack of precision and the greatest ambiguity concerns precisely the term “deconstructivism”, which at its peak referred to a broad type of architecture that tried to incorporate a variety of tendencies. It took its name from the 1988 exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the same year, the University of Chicago held an exhibition with a more precise name *Violated Perfection*. The MoMA exhibition featured prominent architects such as *Coop Himmelblau* Group, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind,

² D. Kozłowski, *How to find a new text? – or rational and poetic pre-text* [in:] A. dal Fabbro, *Cracovia: Arx & Forum*, Dreossi, Pordenone 1999, p. 48.

Bernard Tschumi, Zaha Hadid, and Rem Koolhaas. It documented the emergence of a new trend that relied on abstract thinking, tested and presented through drawn construction³. The name “deconstructivism” was accepted without objection by the architects, although the philosopher himself did not make it easy for us to understand it:

I would say that the difficulty of defining and therefore also of translating the word ‘deconstruction’ stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or that translation, are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, etc. And that goes for the *word*, the very unity of the *word* ‘deconstruction’, as for every word⁴.

The architecture of the park, with its landscape and buildings, does not fit neatly into the deconstructivist trend, including the series of unique buildings called *Les Follies*. However, the term has still gained interest and is often mentioned in literature, living a life of its own. The work is so intriguing that it has become the object of a kind of cult among architects. The author describes it this way:

The paradigm of the architect passed down to us through the modern period is that of the form-giver, the creator of hierarchical and symbolic structures characterized, on the one hand, by their unity of parts and, on the other, by the transparency of form to meaning. (The modern, rather than modernist, subject of architecture is referred to here so as to indicate that this unified perspective far exceeds our recent past.) A number of well-known correlatives elaborate these terms: the fusion of form and function, program and context, structure and meaning. Underlying these is a belief in the unified, cantered, and self-generative subject, whose own autonomy is reflected in the formal autonomy of the work. Yet, at a certain point, this long-standing practice, which accentuates synthesis, harmony, the composition of elements and the seamless coincidence of potentially disparate parts, becomes estranged from its external culture, from contemporary cultural conditions⁵.

The park’s design doesn’t intend to dictate how it should be used by the visitors, but rather inspire them to come up with their own way of utilizing it. In today’s world of diverse architecture, the concept of ‘novelty’ appears to be the most significant aspect to consider. When one observes other art forms, one can see a dramatic tendency to find uniqueness in the annihilation of oneself. On the one hand, the deconstruction of form is aimed at disintegration, and on the other hand, the minimalist approach leads to non-existence. New ways to record space and express ideas are pursued. Tschumi presents a unique approach to representing competition projects, his architectural record is no longer conventional and appears almost cartoonish. It describes and identifies the frenzied battle with the landscape, as well as the scattering of seemingly unorganised pavilions across it. However, it is more of a deconstruction in a name than in the shape of the elements. There is also a struggle with the traditional image of the Baroque park that people have in their minds. It turns out that the gardens of Versailles are no longer considered fashionable, even though we are in Paris. The

³ B. Russell, *Architecture and design 1970-1990. New ideas in America*, Abrams, New York 1989, p. 90. See also: “Domus” 1988, no. 696, p. 48, notes on the exhibition.

⁴ C. Norris, A. Benjamin, *What is Deconstruction?*, St Martin’s Press, London–New York 1988, p. 33.

⁵ B. Tschumi, *Parc de la Villette, Paris* [in:] A. Papadakis (ed.), *Deconstruction in Architecture*, Academy Editions London 1988, p. 33.

architect's claims of not being concerned with form are obviously exaggerated. The different sections of the garden are designed perfectly, and each of the thirty-five *follies* has a seductive form. The pavilions, with greenery and grass as their backdrop, fall apart in a constructivist rather than a deconstructivist way. Likewise, one can reflect on Arnheim's thought to "[...] consider here what psychologists call the relations between 'figure' and 'ground'. These terms are not self-explanatory. They refer to specific perceptual phenomena, susceptible of clear-cut definition. They are not what a sculptor calls a figure nor what a builder calls the ground, although they can be applied to both"⁶. Here, too, one can find figures arranged on the ground, slightly contemporarily deconstructed.

This deconstruction of the form of the traditional French garden leads to novelty. We should keep in mind that the competition in question took place way back in 1982, which is quite a long time considering the ever-evolving nature of modern-day architecture. The author writes:

Architectural and philosophical concepts do not disappear overnight. [...] It can lead to new concepts, as one objective here is to understand a new concept of the city, of architecture. If we were to qualify an architecture or an architectural method as 'disjunctive,' its common denominators might be the following: 1. Rejection of the notion of 'synthesis' in favour of the idea of dissociation, of disjunctive analysis. 2. Rejection of the traditional opposition between use and architectural form in favour of a superposition or juxtaposition of two terms that can be independently and similarly subjected to identical methods of architectural analysis. 3. Emphasis placed, as a method, on dissociation, superposition, and combination, which trigger dynamic forces that expand into the whole architectural system, exploding its limits while suggesting a new definition⁷.

Tschumi explains the details visible in the decomposed axonometries of the park. Theorists attempt to link the work to the trend of decomposition, but in reality, the name is probably irrelevant here. The work harmoniously coexists with the works of other architects, and its diversity is one of its defining characteristics.

The work is believed to be one large structure, but divided into many separate parts. It is considered to be one of the earliest and most influential projects of the deconstruction movement. However, the park has also faced criticism for its vast size and lack of connection with its historical context. Yet, it is important to note that the author achieved the goal of creating a park that is fit for the 21st century and, most importantly, provided a sound theoretical basis for it. After all, four hundred and seventy architects entered the competition that resulted in the design, including such prominent designers as OMA, Zaha Hadid and Jean Nouvel. History shows that Bernard Tschumi's win was no coincidence and to this day we can still admire this park-building and his ideas have not lost their appeal.

3. CONCLUSION – MODERNITY

The park with its greenery dominated by modern buildings, metal structures and abstract forms, has become an opposition and contrast to the traditional architecture of Paris. It is

⁶ R. Arnheim, *Dynamika formy architektonicznej*, Oficyna, Łódź 2009, p. 77.

⁷ B. Tschumi, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

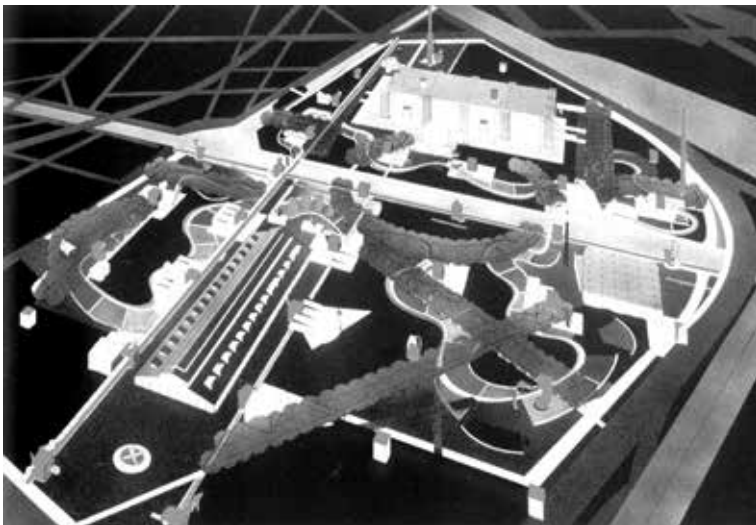
a place that boldly combines the past with the future and provides inspiration for modern urbanism. First the design itself and then the completed Parc de la Villette shocked architects and users alike, and perhaps, on the contrary, paved the way for the canon of public places for years to come. However, time passes and the architects' desire to surprise never ends. The park grounds have been decorated with a new building. This time delicious and ornate. The Philharmonie de Paris designed by Jean Nouvel again shocks audiences already accustomed to red *follies*, proving that everything can remain the same, but architecture must change. The new building can be considered more deconstructivist than Bernard Tschumi's previous timid attempts at breaking down the form of the classical park. It remains to be seen which of these architectures will withstand the test of time better. I am tentatively placing my bet on Tschumi, as the design of the philharmonic is incomprehensible, decomposed and "glitzy" that it may eventually lose its appeal to passers-by in a few years.



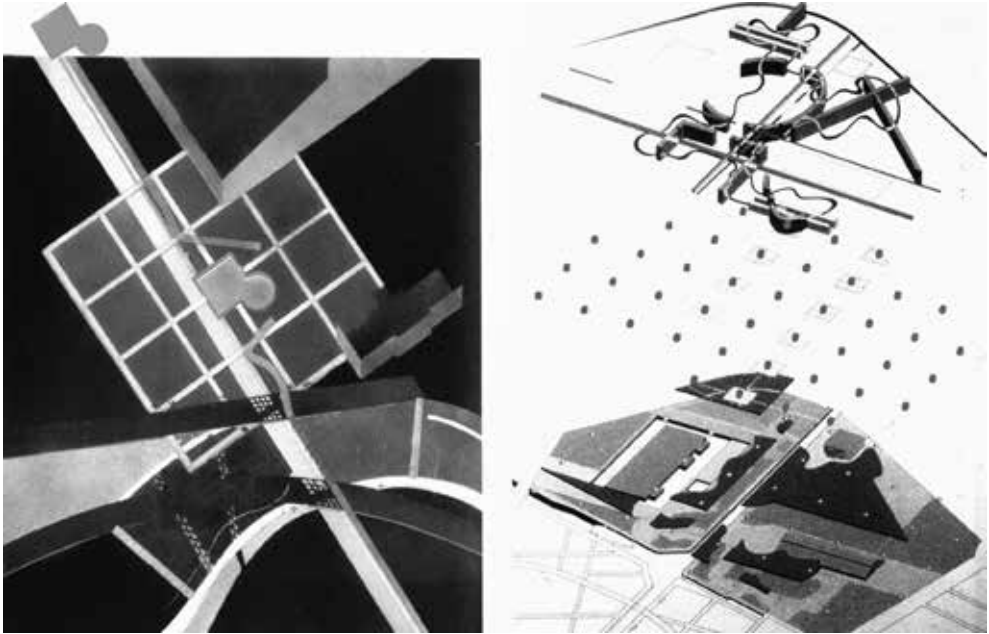
III. 1. Parc de la Villette, photo by TK.



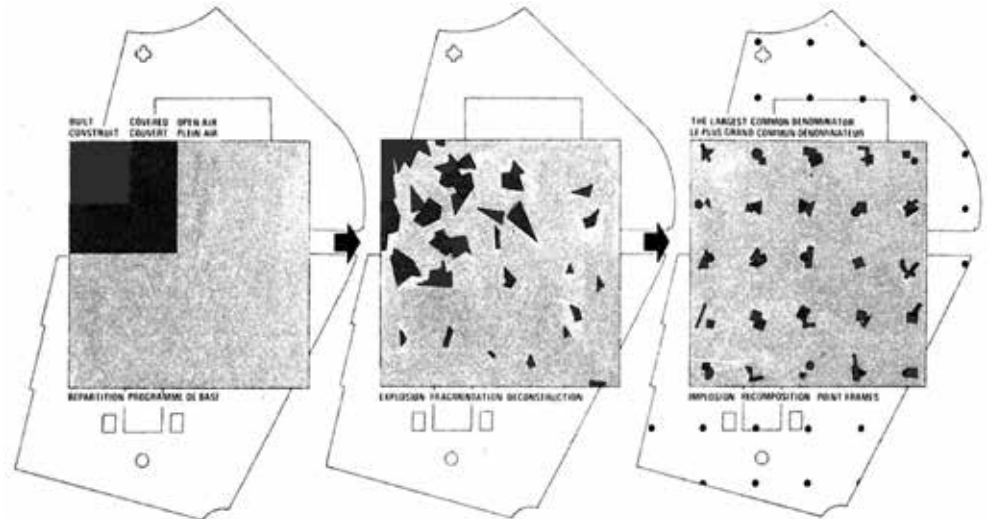
III. 2. Parc de la Villette, photo by TK.



III. 3. Parc de la Villette, source: A. Papadakis (ed.), *Deconstruction in Architecture*, Academy Edition, London 1988.



III. 4. Parc de la Villette, source: A. Papadakis (ed.), *Deconstruction in Architecture*, Academy Edition, London 1988.



III. 5. Parc de la Villette, source: A. Papadakis (ed.), *Deconstruction in Architecture*, Academy Edition, London 1988.

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