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I DO NOT LIKE CONCRETE?

NIE LUBIĘ BETONU?

Abstract

I do not like concrete. Why? No doubt, it is a consequence of first impressions. It is the fault of the wrong climate, wrong place and time – of the grey, rainy and chilly Poland of the 70s and 80s of the 20th century. Right now, it is too late and, at the same time, far too early for a fascination with concrete. There are too many negative associations with party hard-liners (in Polish “party concrete”), blocks of flats, callousness, mediocrity, dirt, hopelessness. And then, the Big Change. Studies at the Faculty of Architecture in the 90s and the discovery of Concrete ‘with a capital C’, as an Undisputed Idol... Maybe once again there are too many big words, references to concrete “moralists and dandies of architecture”... And now? Who knows, maybe it is a potentially good time for a transmutation – not only of concrete but also of our attitude towards it.

Key words: concrete, contemporary architecture, empathy

Streszczenie

Nie lubię betonu. Dlaczego? To zapewne wina pierwszych wrażeń. Niewłaściwego klimatu, miejsca i czasu – szarej, deszczowej i chłodnej Polski lat 70. i 80. XX wieku. Na fascynację betonem już za późno i jeszcze stanowczo za wcześnie. Zbyt wiele negatywnych skojarzeń – z partyjnym betonem, blokowiskiem, bezdusnością, bylejakością, brudem, beznadzieją. A potem Wielka Zmiana. Studia architektoniczne w latach dziewięćdziesiątych i odkrycie Betonu „z dużej litery”, jako Bezapelacyjnego Bożyszczka... Może znowu zbyt wiele wielkich słów, odwołań do betonowych „moralistów i dandysów architektury”... A obecnie? Kto wie – to potencjalnie dobry czas na transmutację – nie tylko betonu, lecz również stosunku do niego.

Słowa kluczowe: beton, architektura współczesna, empatia

1. Introduction

I do not like concrete and I have the courage to admit it. But why should this fact be at all interpreted as a symptom of heroism? Why does it sound like a confession of an embarrassing secret? After all, the conference theses mentioned both those architects for whom concrete is “a contemporary stone, predestined to create beautiful, grand and

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sublime things “, as well as those “others” who regard it as “an ugly material which is unworthy of having its appearance revealed”. The problem is that belonging to those “others” has for a long time constituted a feature, which stigmatizes, not only architects, but, funnily enough, even the average, “grey” recipients of their architectural realizations. After all, the grey concrete, together with steel and glass, constitute the “big three” – i.e. the fundamental building materials, which are universally being associated with innovation and technological progress, with a rational approach, enlightened thought and the Modern Movement whose innumerable post-modern mutations create the image of modern-day architecture...But this is only a fragment of history, which is associated with the rediscovery of concrete at the turn of the 18th c. The history of concrete and its use goes back to the architecture of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt or Greece. The Roman builders proved to be genuine masters as regards the use of “caementum” and “betonium”, which from being merely a binder of stones and bricks, they managed to raise to the rank of independent building materials. As the chief ingredient of the water-resistant binder, pozzolan (or else its various substitutes), the volcanic tuff from the vicinity of Puteola, “continues to hold together Hadrian’s Wall, the Colosseum, the Pantheon or the aqueduct in Nimes up until the present day”¹. “There also exists a certain type of ash, thanks to whose natural properties, one that is able to create constructions, which are truly worth admiring...When mixed with lime and crushed stone, this ash not only ensures permanence to all buildings, but even when used for the construction of dykes at sea, it hardens under the surface of water” – wrote Vitruvius with enthusiasm in “De Architectura Libri Decem”².

It is an undeniable fact that without concrete, neither the astounding dome that crowns the Roman Pantheon, nor the currently tallest building in the world – the 828 m high Burj Khalifa tower in Dubai would have existed...And yet, one may get the impression that sometimes we feel a little uncomfortable with the “mandatory” and “politically correct” admiration for concrete. When writing about the 19th century and the era of the fin de siècle as well as the clash between eclecticism and pre-modernism, Wojciech Kosiński welcomes enthusiastically the “triumph of steel and glass”³. It seems that the lack of concrete in this context can easily be explained – as the time of its full “emancipation” was to arrive a little later. But is it the only reason? Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński approves of the “beautiful time of modernism”; he writes about Modulor, the “man of concrete”, takes delight in Ronchamp chapel and the La Tourette priory, as well as in the works of the contemporary architects who resorted to concrete in their design projects. At the same time, he notices and criticizes all forms of pathology – both those, which are obvious to everyone, and the new ones, which are hard to define. “The dramatism of the prefabricated housing estates, which though politically motivated, was also partly the result of our activity, continues to unfold right in front of our eyes, like a warning” – he writes. In another place, he adds a comment referring to the Polish realities: “Dramatism

¹ W. Szafranek, *Pucolana dla zabytków /Pozzolan for the Monuments/*, 6.03.2008, www.sprawynauki.edu.pl.

² W. Raczkiwicz, *Beton – materiał budowlany znany od wieków /Concrete – a building material known for centuries/*, *Przegląd Budowlany* No 10/2012, p. 13–18.

³ W. Kosiński, *Paradygmat miasta XXI wieku /The Paradigm of the 21st century City/*, Cracow University of Technology Press, Kraków 2016, p. 93.

is nothing else but a complex of being behind, both in respect of professional knowledge, and taking delight in the natural character of the materials at hand. It is expressed in the counter-reaction to the prefabricated housing estates, by creating primitive architecture filled with the *nouveau-riche* abundance of forms and materials”. Yet, the temptation to ignore and disregard concrete is not alien to this author either. “The contemporary times are not – unfortunately – an era of stone and wood, but in reality, sometimes of steel and glass. (...). The 21st century may become an era of wise come-backs to the full alphabet of materials – and maybe, on the principle of counter-claim, an era of return to the materials that are undoubtedly people-friendly, that is traditional ceramics, stone and wood” – concludes Kucza-Kuczyński⁴. It seems that the time of an ardent faith in the transmutation of concrete and mankind, inspired by Le Corbusier’s writings, and a conviction expressed for instance by Sigried Giedion that this material can be used “without any reservations and limitations”⁵, belongs definitely to the past. Therefore, a certain dose of skepticism seems legitimate as an immunological reaction to the new “lay” threat, which may be posed by the architects’ “sudden delight with the natural character” of this building material.

2. Why?

Why I do not like concrete (and I am by no means an exception in this respect)? In all likelihood, this is caused by my very first and definitely negative impressions associated with this material. It is caused by the wrong climate, place and time of the “concrete initiation”, which took place in the grey, rainy and chilly Poland of the 70s and 80s of the 20th century. At that time, the ambitious realizations created on the basis of the concrete technology, tended to disappear amid the flood of callousness, crumminess and the omnipresent dirt, which were subsequently joined by hopelessness. Being myself a resident of a one-family home, erected in the twenty-year period between the two world wars, I could not for the world understand why a dreary prefabricated housing estate could possibly constitute the subject of anyone’s dreams. And I am not referring here to the unquenched and unquenchable “lack of housing”, which was omnipresent in the Polish People’s Republic – but to individual people (known to me personally) who were ready to exchange their apartments in beautiful and functional tenement houses and villas built in the past, for “new, bright flats” (so called ‘Ms’ in Polish) on the newly-built prefabricated housing estates. Clearly, the “magic of modernism” and the decadent “propaganda of success” still continued to tempt individuals. My personal experiences associated with “concrete” had also failed to bring about an “illumination”. A few years spent on a prefab housing estate in North Africa, only confirmed my negative intuitions and stereotypes. The Mediterranean sky and sun contributed little to the humanization of the concrete housing

⁴ K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Zawód – architekt. O etyce zawodowej i moralności architektury* /Profession – Architect. On Professional Ethics and the Morality of Architecture/, Warsaw University of Technology Press, Warsaw 2015, p. 62, 63, 73, 74, 103.

⁵ S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń, czas i architektura. Narodziny nowej tradycji* /Space, Time and Architecture. The Birth of a New Tradition/, PWN, Warsaw 1968, p. 548.

estate. The Corbusier notion of “premeditated, flawless and magnificent play of volumes in light”⁶, had also failed to bring about a positive effect.

The feelings and emotions experienced years ago can hardly be brought back in their entirety as they continue to be obliterated and altered by an abundance of successive life experiences. Yet, I was able to find a nearly perfectly recreated climate of those years in a book by Andrzej Basista, entitled “Architektura i wartości” /Architecture and values/. Two small photographs presenting a concrete housing estate in Kraków-Prokocim in 1978 and a panorama of the Nowa Huta steelworks in 1988, were able to arouse the dormant ghosts and specters⁷. Such illustrations effectively immunize one against architectural and social utopias and reveal the naked truth concerning the ugliness of fly ashes, ferroconcrete blocks and prefabricated estates – that are totally resistant to noble transmutation. Such is the true face of “brutalism” – not of the grandiloquent artistic stand, as in Unité d’Habitation, but a ruthless treatment of man – a common resident and recipient. “By means of unfriendly architecture and its impact over the years, an architect is able to lessen the psycho-physical quality of the entire generation. Such was precisely the case with the generation of prefabricated housing estates⁸ – the latter accusation is also indirectly leveled at concrete.

3. Maybe after all?

My studies at the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology in the years 1990–1995 as well as a stormy political transformation, which was taking place in Poland at that time, could have radically changed my attitude towards concrete. For apart from expert knowledge concerning the advantages associated with the use of this material, the University also ensured contacts with the genuine masters of the theory and practice of its transmutation. We were able to come into contact with renowned artists, charismatic lecturers, cold-blooded rationalists, apologists, defenders and sometimes even “apostles” of concrete... Why did I not let them convince me (fully)? Maybe it was because of my youthful contrariness or the irremovable but for me extremely important discrepancy between the opinions of the architectural milieu and the majority of laymen⁹. It was suggested from different viewpoints, such as, among others: Modernism, Postmodernism, and apparently pluralistic Postmodernity, that concrete must, or at least should be liked. The attitude towards it evolved – from that of a benchmark of “morality” and social engagement to the gauge of good taste. A lack of acceptance of “concrete aesthetics” irritated architects-demiurges and aroused compassion among builders-artists. Whereas outside the university campus, I still failed to notice any signs of a genuine rootedness of the “new tradition”, be it modern or already post-modern¹⁰, whose birth had been signaled by Giedion much

⁶ Le Corbusier, *W stronę architektury* /Toward an Architecture/, Center of Architecture Foundation Press, Warsaw 2012, p. 80.

⁷ A. Basista, *Architektura i wartości*, Universitas Press, Kraków 2009, p. 59–61.

⁸ K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Zawód.../Profession.../*, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

⁹ P. Setkowicz, *Niepoprawni Moderniści* /The Incurable Modernists/, *Czasopismo Techniczne*, book 12-A/2004, p. 119–124.

¹⁰ P. Setkowicz, *Utilitas? Firmitas? Venustas?*, *Czasopismo Techniczne*, book 8-A/2003, p. 278–282.

earlier in his writings¹¹. The relatively rare symptoms of admiration for concrete among the non-architects¹², brought to mind the equally “mandatory” expressions of delight with regard to the contemporary art. How many people are genuinely moved by Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica”? How many of them realize that the painting does not really present the annihilation of a town but a corrida – as the artist was more inspired by bullfights and the figure of the bull-Minotaur with whom he liked to identify himself, rather than in the tragedy of the Spanish civil war?

My resistance was also aroused by what appeared to be too unilateral attempts to explain the shortcomings of the native concrete architecture by the influence of the “system”; according to these interpretations, the ways of using this material also fell victim to systemic faults. Socialist modernism (which N.B. produced some outstanding works of architecture), prefab housing estates, errors and distortions – were looked upon as ailments, which apparently plagued mainly the architecture of the former Soviet bloc. Whereas in the free world, the new and ever newer theories were supposed to find general support and enjoy general social acceptance. The problem is that after the fall of the Iron Curtain, we gained an opportunity both to admire the magnificent achievements of modernism and post-modern pluralism in architecture, and to make shocking discoveries. Charles Jencks is of the opinion that the Marseille Unité d’Habitation is a “building, which is both dramatic in its gigantic size and just as frightening as the Parthenon”¹³. Corbusier himself affectionately compared the effect of béton brut to “wrinkles, birthmarks and hooked noses”, which decide about people’s individuality. “Flaws can be observed in all sections of this building! Thank God, we have no money! (...) Mistakes are innate to man’s very nature; they are our share and everyday life”¹⁴ – he exclaimed during the opening ceremony. Today the Marseille apartment block is flourishing thanks to the snobbery of the wealthy...”Every architect who does not consider this building to be beautiful should put his pencil down”, declared Walter Gropius¹⁵, in this way gagging the mouths of all potential critics. Unité d’Habitation simply had to be built as the true test of every (utopian) concept does not consist in criticism, but precisely in an attempt to realize it.

Unfortunately, due to some incomprehensible choices and not so much the exerted pressure, also the free world has not been free of realizations that are difficult to accept. A good example of such a realization may be the puzzling “Torre Velasca”, erected in the 50s of the 20th century, near the Milan city center, in the vicinity of the university and the cathedral. This 106 m high concrete “mushroom”, designed by the BBPR architectural office, was erected in a city area destroyed by the allied air raids during the Second World War. The modernist unceremonious bluff of the design was masked by the quite cynical “contextual” rhetoric. The peculiar form, as well as the choice of the materials, had been justified by the designers’ wish to make the skyscraper look similar to a mediaeval keep, in

¹¹ S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń... /Space.../, op.cit.*

¹² P. Setkowicz, *Nigredo – czyli kolor w odwrocie /Nigredo – that is colour in retreat/, Czasopismo Techniczne, book 6-A/2007, p. 392–396.*

¹³ Ch. Jencks, *Le Corbusier – tragizm współczesnej architektury /Le Corbusier – and the Tragic View of Architecture/, Art and Film Publications, Warsaw 1982, p. 151.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 156.

¹⁵ M. Irwing (ed.), *1001 budynków, które musisz zobaczyć /1001 Buildings you must see/, Elipsa Press, Poznań 2008, p. 488.*

an attempt to preserve the town's panorama!¹⁶ In reality, apart from Le Corbusier-inspired associations with a gigantic silo or a leaky water tower, the building seems to be reminiscent of colossal German anti-aircraft artillery posts – flaktürm. The latter “tall shelters”, and at the same time reinforced concrete “keeps” bristling with canons, had been designed by Albert Speer in 1940, apparently in consultation with Hitler himself. After the war, some of these buildings-constructions, capable of providing shelter to a few or dozen or so thousand people, resisted all attempts to demolish or else adapt them. In a gesture of hopelessness, the entrances to them...had been concreted¹⁷. It can hardly be expected that these monuments of military history and Nazi insanity could possibly constitute a universally accepted esthetic model worthy of imitation! Yet the construction of Torre Velasca can somehow be justified – by the neophyte faith in the prime mover and (salvific) power of the modernist vision of development.

But how can we explain the realization of a 100 m tall, concrete Trellick Tower, authored by Ernő Goldfinger, in the very heart of the London Ladbrooke Grove quarter? The brutalist vertical copy of Unité d'Habitation, was erected in the memorable year 1972 – remembered by the famed demolition of the prefab Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in Saint Louis, authored by Minoru Yamasaki! The building, rejected by the recipients as “ugly, unfriendly and encumbered with all possible plagues of modernism”, had been erected at the moment of the symbolic “death” of this movement¹⁸. Here is a grim joke of history and a warning levelled at all the architects who are ready to lend their talent to the service of petrified doctrines... Enveloped in the London fog, the Trellick Tower concrete is currently undergoing the only type of transmutation that is still accessible to it. As a “pure example of brutalist architecture”, it arouses a masochist admiration and is subject to preservation maintenance. Such examples can, unfortunately, be multiplied.

4. And now?

Where are last century's “ideologically colored” concretes? It has turned out that there is too little room for them in the postmodern, pluralist world. They have shared the plight of the opinionated architectural narrations. They have been subjected to the omnipresent thermo-modernization efforts and an invasion of dappled colors whose role is to give identity to the modernist “non-places”. Yet, the joy derived from the atrophy of the oppressive doctrines is not complete. Amid the heat of ideological contentions, one comes across a demise of the legitimate conviction concerning architecture's social mission. In the computer-assisted process of designing and realization of investments, the status and ethos of architect-designer is subject to a slow but steady erosion.

Does one prefer raw concrete with traces of clapboard, or maybe smoothly plastered polystyrene foam, susceptible to the attacks of woodpeckers and children armed with plastic spades and shovels? It seems that it is better to escape from such troublesome questions into the world of enduring, useful and beautiful contemporary architecture – for no doubt such architecture

¹⁶ A. Basista, *Architektura.../Architecture.../*, *op.cit.*, p. 234; www.mediolan.pl/torre-velasca.

¹⁷ J. E. Kaufman, H. W. Kaufman, R. M. Jurga, *Fortyfikacje Trzeciej Rzeszy /The Fortifications of the Third Reich/*, ed. Rebis, Poznań 2011, p. 233–239.

¹⁸ M. Irwing, *1001.../*, *op.cit.*, p. 579.

does exist! A good example of the latter are for instance the “custom designed” one-family homes, authored by Robert Konieczny. “Typical objects are bad. It is as if we produced single-size shoes: some people might find them appropriate, but the majority – probably not. The same principle applies to architecture”¹⁹ – he declared in one of his interviews. As little as that and as much as that! His own home, known as “Konieczny’s Ark”, suspended on a mountain slope in Brenna, was built on a reinforced concrete construction, which “could have become an elevation straight away”, yet it does not force anyone to “accept concrete”. Yet, no doubt, it can convince many to it. This building seems to combine the opposites. It is, literally and metaphorically, light, simple, cheap and jocular (a barn + vessel), and at the same time, serious and mature as regards the quality of the applied architectural solutions and its realization. When needed, it is energy-efficient, closed and secure – or else, sunny, open and friendly. It is permanently linked with the place and it minimalizes interference in the natural surroundings... The first prize in the 20th edition of the competition The Polish Cement in Architecture was granted for “creating a building that is synthetic in form and use of materials, well-fitted into the surrounding landscape – thanks to a skillful use of empty space, contained in a concrete structure”²⁰. Nearly all of us strive for such a human face of concrete.

5. Summing up

A multiverse is a collection of all possible universes, apparently including those that are parallel to ours. For scientists do not rule out the possibility that innumerable numbers of them may exist side by side. If such is the case, it may well be that a happier variety of our reality, in which the 20th century was not an age of world conflicts and revolutions – including those taking place in the fields of architecture and art, is in existence somewhere. In this alternative universe, after the “age of steam and electricity”, there occurred a Great Evolution. Also there, in the year 1910, Adolf Loos wrote an article entitled “Architektur”. “A building does not have to be liked by anybody. A work of art is the private affair of the artist. A building is not... (...). A work of art has no responsibility to anyone; a house is responsible for everyone. A work of art wishes to wring people out of their comfortable situation. A building has to provide comfort. A work of art is revolutionary, while a building is conservative. A work of art charts out new paths for mankind and thinks about the future. A building thinks about the present. Mankind is in love with everything that ensures its comfort. It detests everything that wishes to tear it away from its customary and secure position and leads to anxiety. And that is why, it loves a building and detests art”²¹. Yet in the other universe, the above words were understood as a wise word of caution. That is why, Le Corbusier’s book “Vers une architecture” was received with enthusiasm in certain circles – as a manifesto of a truly great artist. Needless to say, the literary hacks, wannabes and madmen, in the manner of Vladimir Ilych Lenin or Adolf Hitler were refused the right to publication? In the other universe, my alter ego uncritical love for concrete is no doubt very much alive.

¹⁹ A. Cymer, *Robert Konieczny – życie i twórczość* /Robert Konieczny – Life and Creative Output/, 25.04.2013, culture.pl/pl/tworca/robert-konieczny

²⁰ A. Bulanda (ed.), *Konkurs Polski Cement w Architekturze edycja XX-ta* /Competition: Polish Cement in Architecture, 20th edition/, ARCH No 2 (40)/2017, p. 23–29.

²¹ A. Sarnitz, *Adolf Loos*, Taschen/TMC Art Press, Cologne 2006, p. 10.

6. Conclusions

I do not like concrete, but I respect it, if only due to the fact that “it may serve to build both a road and... a monument”. It is a potentially noble material, just as the stone which may undergo a transmutation. It is us – architects, who after well over a century of trials and errors, should be able to finally understand that in order to create architecture, one does not need any Verba secretorum, but only a tiny bit of empathy and common sense. In his book “Ornament und Verbrechen” Adolf Loos wrote: “We have got art which has eliminated ornament. After a day’s work, we relax by listening to Beethoven or Tristan. My shoemaker cannot do it. I have no right to deprive him of his pleasure as I have nothing in exchange to offer to him”²².

In view of the above, let us say “no thank you!” to the candidates for a new Hermes Trismegistos and the authors of successive “emerald tablets” who have nothing to offer to the shoemakers of this world.

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