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## POST-AVANT-GARDE SYNTHESIS OF ARCHITECTURE AND ART

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### POSTAWANGARDOWA SYNTEZA ARCHITEKTURY I SZTUKI

#### Abstract

This thesis concerns the influence of the avant-garde art on the change of architectural form in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The art of the Great Avant-Garde was characterized by formal experimentation and innovation. Technological development has enabled modern architects to realize buildings of spectacular, sculptural shapes. The architectural form has become independent from the function of the building. Contemporary architects draw inspiration from the works of the first avant-garde; Futurism, Constructivism, and Expressionism. Tendencies in architecture which refer to avant-garde movements can be defined as post-avant-garde architecture.

*Keywords: avant-garde, post-avant-garde, contemporary architecture, sculptural architecture*

#### Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje wpływ sztuki awangardowej na zmianę formy architektonicznej w dwudziestym i dwudziestym pierwszym wieku. Sztukę Wielkiej Awangardy cechowało eksperymentalstwo i nowatorstwo formalne. Rozwój technologiczny pozwolił współczesnym architektom realizować budowle o spektakularnych, rzeźbiarskich kształtach. Forma architektoniczna stała się niezależna od funkcji budynku. Architekci współcześni czerpią inspirację z dzieł pierwszej awangardy; Futuryzmu, Konstruktywizmu, Ekspresjonizmu. Tendencje w architekturze, nawiązujące do ruchów awangardowych określić można wspólnym pojęciem — architektury postawangardowej.

*Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, postawangarda, architektura współczesna, architektura rzeźbiarska*

Architecture was an important part of the avant-garde. At the beginning of the twentieth century, architects were the co-creators of avant-garde movements, art directly influenced their work. Architecture was influenced by the ideas of Cubists and Futurists. The expressionist, futuristic, constructivist and neoplastic architecture emerged. International structure

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of artistic movements has led to a rapid spread of new ideas. The avant-garde has transformed architecture; its formal innovation has been so significant that it still remains an inspiration for architects today.

Growing discouragement over the rigid structures of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century world of art led to an avant-garde revolution. This has resulted in artists' rejection of old principles and values, and consequently the pursuit of new forms of artistic expression. As Tomasz Kozłowski writes: "Also in architecture there is a new look, striving to break the habits of reception of the shape of a building and the style in which it should arise. Technology creates new opportunities, opens new horizons for artists"<sup>1</sup>. Since the late nineteenth century, the language of architecture has changed, simplified, but has not gained any radical new elements. „Even so truculent an anti-Secessionist as Adolf Loos remained a Classicist at heart”, writes Reyner Banham, “and the Futurists seem to have been almost alone in seeing that Platonic and Classicizing aesthetics were out of tune with their mechanolatry, or, indeed, any positive and fruitful accommodation to the new technology”<sup>2</sup>. The change initiated by the avant-garde architects introduced to the architectural elements of machine aesthetics, bimoric forms and compositions inspired by the avant-garde sculpture. Avant-garde architecture was a radical departure from classical architecture. It followed the art and theory of avant-garde movements — it was artistic and sculptural, significantly different from the continuous historic architecture. Formal experiments, relying on inspirations from distant fields, striving for abstraction and radical innovation can be seen in works of avant-garde architects such as Hermann Finsterlin, Erich Mendelsohn, Bruno Taut, and Hans Scharoun.

At the time of the avant-garde, it was difficult to realize any spectacular visions of the new architecture. A large part of avant-garde architects' architectural ideas remained unrealized due to the lack of technical and economic capabilities to implement them at that time. Expressionists created projects that could not be built back then. Same happened with the visions of modern cities drawn by Futurists. Saint'Elia died prematurely before he managed to complete any of his projects. Constructivists had managed to build some buildings before they were moved aside by Soviet ideology. Some of them moved to Germany, but progressive schools such as the Bauhaus were shortly shut down by the Nazis. While there was a wave of the avant-garde in arts, architecture was being dominated by the modernist style — the architecture of simple rectangular forms with reduced decoration. World War II was the definitive end of the dream of avant-garde architecture in Europe. The revival of freedom, opportunities to realize new ideas and loosening the modernist convention took place around the fifties. There were several spectacular buildings that stood out against the backdrop of the unified functionalist architecture of an international style. Some of the architects, tired of globally recurring patterns, sought new opportunities for expression by continuing the experiments formally in the spirit of the avant-garde. Stefan Morawski, who regards the Great Avant-Garde mostly as a formal movement, calls Alvar Aalto, Eero Saarinen, Frank Lloyd Wright and Pier Luigi

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<sup>1</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Tendencje ekspresjonistyczne w architekturze współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2013, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> R. Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, Praeger Pub., New York 1967, p. 109.

Nervi avant-garde architects<sup>3</sup>. These architects were associated with pre-war avant-garde movements. In retrospect, it can be argued that sculptural buildings designed by architects associated with the pre-war avant-garde were the symbolic closure of avant-garde architecture. The development of the form of buildings was enabled by the development of reinforced concrete technology. It was a time of poetic, sculptural use of concrete in architecture, a time of great concrete sculptures. Frank Lloyd Wright, designed the Guggenheim Museum in New York in the form of a reinforced concrete spiral, curving around an empty courtyard. Entering the interior, the visitor was at the center of a huge cylinder – a white ramp, spiraling upwards. In Mexico Felix Candela designed expressive forms of building from thin-walled reinforced concrete shells. Eero Saarinen designed TWA airport terminal in New York giving reinforced concrete shells a light, dynamic shape resembling wings of an airplane. During the design of the building, large-scale mock-ups were photographed in the studio to see if the elements of the structure create an impression of abstract sculptural forms. Luigi Moretti and other Italian architects developed their works by drawing from the Futurist and Expressionist traditions. Moretti combined modernism with organic forms and technological expressionism. Also, Le Corbusier turned from geometric purity towards expression and abstraction. The most expressive work of Le Corbusier was the pilgrim chapel in Ronchamp. Le Corbusier was an artist, he used to say; “Every day of my life I spend some of my time painting. I have never stopped drawing and painting, everywhere looking for places where I could discover the mystery of forms”<sup>4</sup>. The Notre Dame du Haut chapel is an example of carving in the form solely to achieve the maximum formal effect, it is a moment of definitive abandoning the principle of a rational relationship between form and function — expressing functions in the form. Siegfried Giedon wrote; „The fact that architecture is approaching sculpture, and sculpture approaching architecture does not mean a departure from the path of modern architecture (...) This is one of the reasons for the rich shape of buildings such as the chapel in Ronchamp (...). The secret of Le Corbusier is that he is also a painter and sculptor”<sup>5</sup>. One of the features that distinguish architecture from sculpture was the imperative of functionality of the architectural form. The boundary between the function and the form was definitely exceeded by Jorn Utzon in his design for Sydney’s opera house. Volumes of the building which consist of two opera rooms, were covered with „floating”, monumental shells resembling sails. The lack of connection between the outer form and the inner volume became the main objection to the building. “The question our generation has considered and answered is a question of conscience: Are we internally prepared to consciously go beyond pure functionality as earlier epochs have done to strengthen the word? The “shovels”, as Utzon calls its vaults placed one above the other, are unnecessary if only functionality is recognized in architecture, in which the direct, material interdependence of cause and effect can be verified. After half a century of development, modern architecture demands more. Autonomy of the word should regain its rights in a building, which goes beyond clean functionality. We are absolutely certain that only one creator has so far taken a risk of manifesting the

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<sup>3</sup> S. Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1985, p. 262.

<sup>4</sup> Le Corbusier, [in:] G. Świtek, *Gry sztuki z architekturą*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> S. Giedon, *Przestrzeń, czas, architektura Narodziny nowej tradycji*, PWN, Warszawa 1968, p. 18–19.



- III. 1. Alberto Giacometti, *Head-Skull* 1933 source:moma.org
- III. 2. Rem Koolhaas, *Casa da Música* Porto 2005 source: pinterest.com
- III. 3. Hans Scharoun, *Watercolor* 1919 source: art fuse.org
- III. 4. Santiago Calatrava, *Auditorio de Tenerife* 2003 source: fineartamerica.com

independence of expression”<sup>6</sup>. Architects more and more boldly separated the architectural form from function. The boundary between architecture and sculpture, which was demarcated by the practical role of architecture, began to blur. An example of contemporary monumental sculpture form, independent from the functional structure, is the Auditorio de Tenerife designed by Santiago Calatrava. A monumental form of the „snail” set with white concrete covers the building. Calatrava studied sculpture, drawing and painting, and his conceptual watercolors remind the work of pre-war expressionists, especially of Hans Scharoun.

The neo-avant-garde — the second period of the revolution in art – led to a change in the paradigm of art. The concept of art itself became the subject of conceptual art. The breakthrough was a change of language, a shift of interest from form to content, from aesthetic function to an intellectual function. The neo-avant-garde and conceptualism sought new areas for art, not new forms of old art. Considering architecture, because of its greater permanence, there was no such far-reaching change, as considering art. Extending the architectural form – releasing it from classic patterns and separating it from the function was a significant change in architecture, but it was not a paradigm shift. Architecture could not make a revolutionary change of its subject due to the unchangeable, utilitarian and material essence of architecture – building a physical environment for human activity. It is difficult to imagine that the essence of the concept of architecture could change, but it cannot be ruled out that the future conditions will make it possible. Joseph Kosuth in the essay “Art after Philosophy” claimed that neo-avant-garde art took up the place of philosophy. When art changed its paradigm and abandoned its interest in form, architecture began to expand in this field. „Architecture, after several decades of self-imposed autonomy, has recently entered a greatly expanded field. Against neo-rationalism, pure language theory, and postmodern citation fever, architecture--like sculpture some decades earlier--has found new formal and programmatic inspiration in a host of disciplines and technologies from landscape design to digital animation. Where former theorists attempted to identify single and essential bases for architecture, now multiplicity and plurality are celebrated, as flows, networks, and maps replace grids, structures, and history. (...) Blobs, swarms, crystals, and webs proliferate as paradigms of built form, while software has replaced traditional means of representation with dynamic effect”<sup>7</sup> After the time of the neo-avant-garde, architecture chose an opposite direction in comparison to other disciplines of art. The visual form began to be a dominant aspect. A part of contemporary architecture took over the dominance of artistic expression from art. Paraphrasing the title of Kosuth essay, one can argue, that architecture took up the place of art. While art abandoned interest in the visual forms, architecture took over the role of art in this field. Some architects, in opposition to what was happening during postmodernist historicism, sought new forms of architecture, also in search of inspiration from the Great Avant-Garde. New directions; High-tech and Deconstructivism, derived ideologically and formally from the first avant-garde, Futurism, Expressionism and Constructivism.

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<sup>6</sup> S. Giedon, *Przestrzeń, czas, architektura Narodziny nowej tradycji*, PWN, Warszawa 1968, p. 650.

<sup>7</sup> A. Vidler, *Architecture's Expanded Field: Finding Inspiration in Jellyfish and Geopolitics*, *Architects Today Are Working within Radically New Frames of Reference*, Artforum International Magazine April 2004.

These tendencies remained elite but the architects making them became big stars of architecture. Brave, sculptural, iconic forms became dominant in the architectural media circuit. Architectural concepts were presented in forms that belonged to the arts; “Many modern architects do not shy away from presenting their concept of space in the form of painting (Zaha Hadid), installation (Daniel Libeskind) or sculpture (Frank O. Gehry)”<sup>8</sup>. Famous architects’ buildings became increasingly bizarre and spectacular. It was a dynamic evolution of the architectural form, reminiscent of what was happening considering the art of the Great Avant-Garde. Architects at the beginning of the twentieth century demanded to cross the boundaries between disciplines and to create architecture coherent with the ideology and aesthetics of artistic movements. The emergence of architectural sculptures was a formal change in the spirit of the first avant-garde. The revolution of the avant-garde directed the thinking of architects towards drawing inspiration from science, technology, the present and the future. It led to a state where there was freedom to shape forms according to one’s own preferences, and both architecture and art of the past were a rich source of inspiration.

Modern architecture is characterized by great freedom and variety of forms. There are difficulties with the description of concepts and division of styles. It is more common to talk about tendencies; minimalist, expressionist, neofuturistic, organic and others. Systematizing the concepts of twentieth and twentieth-first century architecture is difficult and unclear. It seems that there is a need to make a distinction between concepts of modernism and postmodernism and the rest of the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries’ movements. Spectacular buildings designed by the stars of contemporary architecture are sometimes called the “avant-garde”. Such use of the concept of “avant-garde architecture” is incorrect because it belongs to the closed period of the first half of the twentieth century considering art. The contemporary stars of architecture do not form artistic groups, usually do not raise social ideas, do not write manifestos, and do not express same theoretical views or same artistic direction, as it was at the beginning of the century. There is freedom in the application of theory and form. Modern architecture fulfilled a part of postulates of the avant-garde. The boundaries between the arts are blurred, interdisciplinarity is strengthened, all artistic gestures are allowed, and creative freedom is devoid of imposed rules. Architects freely draw inspiration from the Great Avant-Garde. Zaha Hadid admits; „My work developed out of certain early precedents in modern architecture. My original intention was to inject the ideas of Suprematism into architecture. (...) Malevich’s compositions were definitive, or finite, but they also functioned as a picture frame — if it could move, it would frame something else”<sup>9</sup> The Great Avant-Garde is instrumentalized, as a source of formal ideas, without reference to the ideological or theoretical background. By analyzing the designs of the contemporary architecture stars, one can often find their formal counterparts among sculptures or paintings from the beginning of the last century. Contemporary buildings referring to early-stage experiments are „after avant-garde” architecture. Tendencies referring to

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<sup>8</sup> G. Świtek, *Gry sztuki z architekturą*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013, p. 221.

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Boyarsky interview with Zaha Hadid in; *Zaha Hadid*, Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York, 2006 p. 45.

avant-garde movements can be named as post-avant-garde. The prefix “post” contains both continuum and reaction, just as postmodernism expresses opposition to modernism while developing some of the modernist ideas. Jencks defines the term “post-avant-garde” as follows; „This new stage of the institution is obviously quite different from the previous (...) avant-garde — because it doesn’t try to conquer new territories; for the old „shock of the new” of Duchamp, it substitutes the new „shock of the old” of Mariani. (...) The Post-Avant-Garde comes after previous (...) it is not the front-line, but the second echelon, not the corps d’elite, but those who come onto the battlefield afterward, to mop up. (...) it doesn’t exist as an avant-garde because it is everywhere and nowhere, dispersed throughout the world as a series of individuals, and yet still a loosely shared cultural movement of those who come „after” the previous battles”<sup>10</sup>. Architects of the turn of the 20th and 21st century draw inspiration from various sources, creating recognizable, individual stylistics. Personal tendencies, exposing the individual creative process are also considered as characteristics to the post-avant-garde condition. As Tomasz Kozłowski writes; “Architects are striving for the originality of deconstructed forms, demonstrating a tendency for abstraction or dynamism, or for speaking a very poetical language based on individual, personal set of forms”<sup>11</sup>.

Contemporary architecture is characterized by freedom and diversity in shaping forms and structures. The decisive factor in shaping the form is the imagination and personal poetics of the architect. The richness of forms of today’s architecture is due to the development of building technologies and wider construction possibilities as well as the development of computer design. Modern technology has made the visions of Futurist architects possible to become reality. The avant-garde inspired architecture has existed for more than one hundred years. During that time, a great progress was made, but concrete remains one of the most popular materials to mold sculptural forms in architecture. The very most important architectural works of the turn of the twentieth and twentieth-first century are buildings of spectacular and expressive form. Contemporary buildings take on many different forms: sharp crystals, crusts, liquid ovals or biomorphic blobs. Modern, expressive, dynamic buildings are strong signs in urban space. The aim of the architects is to surprise with an innovative form as it used to be in the art of the first avant-garde. Each of the stars of contemporary architecture has developed its distinct, recognizable design style and its brand – the name which gives the building additional prestige. Many of these works are inspired by the world of art, especially by the Great Avant-Garde period, which has the greatest legacy of formal experimentation. The iconic architectural works of the twentieth and twenty-first century have their origins in the destruction of the classical architectural language that began at the time of the avant-garde. At the time of the fall of meta-narrations, architecture does not have one dominant style. The wealth and diversity of forms is a valuable feature that distinguishes the architecture of our time.

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<sup>10</sup> Ch. Jencks, „*The Post-Avant garde*” *Art and Design*, in: *The Post-Avant-Garde: Painting in the Eighties* Charles Jencks, Andreas Papadakis, Wiley-Academy, London 1987.

<sup>11</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Tendencje ekspresjonistyczne w architekturze współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2013, p. 186.

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