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THE HOUSE FAÇADE
IN THE URBAN SPACE
ON THE EXAMPLE OF BERLIN

FASADA DOMU
W PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ
NA PRZYKŁADZIE BERLINA

Abstract

We learn houses from their exterior and from their external visual aspect, which hides and defends its interior, often leaving them undiscovered. A façade as part of the most exposed, by virtue of its form, geometry, construction, material used, its texture and colour is the essential part of the whole – part of the urban fabric, which gives the interior an urban expression, and buildings a tangible form. Berlin is a city of the future, full of multicultural relationships and meanings. It is also a city that has become a training ground for many world-class architects. It is a city of many faces.

Keywords: facade, Berlin, elevation, decoration

Streszczenie

Domy poznajemy po ich powierzchowności, wizualnym aspekcie zewnętrznym, który skrywa i broni swoje wnętrze, niejednokrotnie pozostawiając je nieodkryte. Fasada jako element najbardziej eksponowany, z racji swojej formy, geometrii, konstrukcji, zastosowanego materiału, faktury i koloru staje się istotną częścią całości – elementem tkanki miejskiej, która wewnątrz urbanistycznym nadaje wyrazu, a budynkom namacalnej formy. Berlin to miasto, które stało się poligonem dla wielu światowej klasy architektów. To miasto o wielu twarzach.

Słowa kluczowe :fasada, Berlin, elewacja, dekoracja

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The archetypical meaning of a house has today acquired a totally new dimension. A house as a symbolic castle, a safe haven, a guardian of “hearth and home”, must be also a sign of prestige, evidence of the diligence, reliability and credibility of its residents. The exterior of a house is its façade. The most exposed image of the building, which can, in a very overt or exhibitionist way, uncover the interior with all its secrets, or wear a mask that intentionally presents a false image of the house. Elevations of buildings – houses – situated side by side, forming the frontage of the street, may be compared to a picture exhibition. The task of a passer-by is to guess which picture is the closest to the truth. Thanks to increasingly advanced technical solutions, architects have become better liars, employing modern ornaments to deceive the audience, leaving it speechless with wonder.

A city is a place of many faces – a bank of faces in a model agency. It is a place comprised of countless varied building façades – reflections of their residents’ dreams, the whims of their authors, a patchwork of historical features, or a sign of their times. The architecture of Berlin has all these features. As one walks along Berlin streets, one can come across true pieces of art, a pride of local community, or a historical monument. The capital city of Germany is well-thought-out, designed and built with the future in mind. The multitude of architectural ideas and compositions that form the voice of this multicultural city makes the spectator feel a part of it, and the shocking and sometimes abstract surroundings make only a positive impression on them.

Building elevations are based on an architectural concept which defines composition pattern and the relations among its individual elements. A façade, as the most prominent element, due to its geometrics, construction, materials used, texture, and colour, becomes a major element of the whole – the composition. Elevation plays an important role in urban space. It gives expression to urban interiors and tangible form to buildings. The form, which shapes the subsequent aesthetics of street frontage and directs further aesthetic developments of the interior.

The relations and proportions between the individual planes forming a building and interrelations between the planes and their texture, structure or ornaments is the essence of contemporary architecture. Abandoning traditional, historical ornaments exposed a new way of defining planes that form buildings. Contemporary elevations, despite the absence of visible embellishments, are full of life, contrasts, vivid colours, chiaroscuros and textures. A contemporary architectural detail enhancing the impact of a plain, although it differs considerably from the historical one, to a certain degree becomes a reproduction of a traditional ornament. Modern building methods, new materials and technologies significantly enriched the possibilities of expression of the contemporary architect. An architectonic detail is no longer the only means of expression, it can also be the whole elevation which, through its structure, material, technical devices, becomes a peculiar kind of decoration – a modern ornament.

An ornament forms an intermediary scale between the scale of the size of the object and of the fraction of material of which it is made. According to Christopher Alexander, the purpose of an ornament in architecture is to highlight visual links among individual elements within an object and in relation to the surroundings.¹ And ornament and its scale is the focal

¹ in: W. Januszewski, *Powracający problem ornamentu – elementy teorii dekoracji w architekturze współczesnej*, [Ever-returning Problem of Ornament – Elements of Theory of Decoration in Contemporary Architecture] p. 235–239; Ch. Alexander, *Język wzorców [A Pattern Language]* Gdańsk 2008, p. 1156–1162; Ch. Alexander, *Nature of Order*, Berkeley 2002, p. 145–150.

point and conveys an additional message to an observer about interrelations and features of the elevation. A modern architectonic detail, often being the plane itself, defines a building as such or distracts attention from it.

The leading motif in shaping an object's aesthetics is composition and decoration based on creating a visual effect for the elevation. Based on this principle, they have been divided into three groups represented by three consecutive paragraphs, each featuring an example of a real architectural object:

- Texture (typical surface features: texture, material, colour) – Block of flats, Lützowplatz – Block No. 234, Mario Botta
- Structure (the way of combining elements forming a whole, external form, surface cover, structural system, which determine the character of the elevation) – Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz – Apartment building L40, Bundschuh Architekten
- Ornaments (to embellish something with something else, additional elements, decorations, e.g. technical devices (ensuring functioning of the building, high – tech), cornices, sculptures, portals – Apartment building and Office building, Linkstrasse 6, Tiergarten, Richard Rogers Partnership

1. TEXTURE

Texture (from Latin: *textura* ‘weaving’, from *text*, *texere* ‘weave), in the Arts – the representation of the tactile quality of the surface of a painting, piece of graphic art, sculpture, piece of handicraft, etc., depending on the material and technique used as well as the individual style of the artist. (Definition from the Polish language dictionary published by PWN)

The simple form of a building, symmetry and small scale of a concept do not necessarily mean that a given object will be ignored by passers-by. An aptly designed elevation, featuring subtle details and reasonably selected texture makes a building as such interesting. The austerity and crudeness of the exposed material combined with geometric game and variety of interrelations of bricks forming the elevation adds a unique character to the elevation. The works by Mario Botta show consistency in shaping the form, searching for symmetry, and – most of all – in materials used. In this way he draws upon tradition where a wall (a barrier separating the interior from the exterior) as well as geometry and symmetry (succinctness of form) has defined the house as a safe place, a haven.

*“The house is intimately related to the idea of shelter. A cave carved out of the rock is like a mother’s womb. This is the concept of the house that I defend. When I am tired of the world, I want to go home. There I can regain my energy to prepare for the next day’s battle. As long as there is a man who needs a house, architecture will still exist.”*²

The desire to show the essence of material by adopting the specific aesthetics can now be fulfilled through showing the true nature of the material, which, in a peculiar way, thanks to an architectonic detail, harmonizes with the whole work.

This is also the case with the building at Lützowplatz – Block 234, designed by Mario Botta. The house by a street, a typical corner building, crowning two street frontages. A simple

² P. Jodido, *Mario Botta*, Taschen, Köln 2003, p. 9.



geometric form attracts the attention of the passer-by not with excessively sculptured shape and clever form, but with the composition and texture of the brickwork. The regular arrangement of windows sets the rhythm, while radiating patterns in the corners of the windows enhance the effect. The two colours of brick make the whole building even more expressive, and their alternating arrangement strengthens the general character of the concept. The natural red colour of the brick, its texture and arrangement, highlight the decorative character of the elevation. The ornamental role of the brick in the case of this house seems to be a purposeful introduction of an additional ornament within the homogeneous aesthetic concept of the whole wall. Square and circular openings as well as rectangular cuts contrast with the structure of the full massive wall. The open corner of the buildings is like an invitation to come inside, enhancing the “protective” character of the external walls which, supported by pillars and separated with horizontal windows, seem to levitate, dominating the aesthetics of the building. The texture playing the ornamental role appears to be an interesting, delicate addition to the whole concept.

Embellishment of planes seems to be the simplest form of decoration, which only functions in one dimension. Yet, the architecture is never single-dimensional, and adequate correlation between the form and the plane seems to be one of the key compositional foundations. The small scale of the texture and the precision of the detail add prominence to this “small” architecture.

2. STRUCTURE

Structure is the arrangement of and relations between the parts or elements of something complex. (Concise Oxford English Dictionary)

The form of a piece of art is the ways and means used to present content, which via individual components, composition and mutual relations form this piece of art. The structure of an object is, therefore, a formal outline given a shape whose aesthetics results from its construction, function, and also composition.

An arrangement or a structure of elements are only a part of the form so understood. According to Ingarden, in the case of a piece of art, a correlate of form is, in this sense, the contents as something surmised on the basis of what has been perceived³.

Architecture is born out of an idea – without it, it is purposeless empty form. The idea shows the capability of composition as a solution in geometry and of materialisation in the structure. The external structure may, but doesn't have to, be a direct consequence of the static arrangement of the building. It should, however, give the building its unique formal expression. Quite significant also is the function of a building, which via underpinning assumptions determines the formal ones.

The form here is understood as the sensually perceived image of the building, comprised of the character of shapes, and the whole results from the process of creation of space and impressions associated with it.

³ [after:] W. Welsch, *Estetyka i antyestetyka [Aesthetics and Anaesthetics]*, [in] R. Nycz, *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów [Post-Modernism – An Athology of Translations]*, Kraków 1996, p. 524.

When the form is kept simple, every gesture, recess, shade assumes great importance in the context of the whole. And even more important becomes a human being, movement, action, or sound. In the space free of elements distracting attention, it is possible to precisely locate accents and channel the impressions of the audience. Such understanding of simplicity is the return to architecture defined by means of components, such as line and plane, mass, emptiness, light, and shadow.

The simplicity of the appearance is not the aim in itself here, but rather a form of expression. It is a means of expression, a tool offering a limited, yet quite broad, range of possible effects, as regards the appearance or structure, but also a more general perception of the quality of simplicity.

A piece of architecture resembles an autonomous sculpture for which the form, as an authentic image of the structure, via its honesty, delivers the value such as truth of the function.

This can be seen in the multi-family building L40 in Berlin. It is a residential building enclosing a quarter of urban development. By means of simple forms of expressions stemming from formal and aesthetic assumptions, the author achieved an interesting, extensively sculptured façade, one of its greatest assets being the play of light and shadow. This was possible due to the consistent composition of the façade. Dividing the building by means of horizontal lines made it look lighter and, to some degree, enforced the horizontal character of the building, although the proportions of the elevation are closer to a square than a rectangle standing on its longer side. The architect decided to “break” the solid mass of the building by means of wide glazing and terraces, thus adding a sculpture-like character to it. Hollows, loggias, terraces and window recesses acquire an ornamental function, but do not interfere in any way with the general perception of the building as a whole. This trick has become a leitmotif of the whole concept and the ‘ornament’ so created – a formal embellishment of the elevation which does not spoil its consistency. Playing with half-light seems even more interesting when one realises that the set-back walls are not parallel to the face of the external wall; therefore, the shadow falling diagonally enhances the sculptural character of the building. Horizontal elements clearly highlight the horizontal character of the building, thus becoming an intentional ornament.

Formal embellishment is demonstrated mainly in the conscious composition of the building and a consistent aesthetics. The ornament introduced here is not an extra element but a component of the whole, contributing to the composition of the whole building and defining its aesthetics.

3. ORNAMENT

Ornament (from Latin “ornamentum” – “ornament”), in fine arts – a decorative motif, single or repeated in a specific pattern, found in all types of artistic creation from its beginnings.

High-tech is perceived as a trend in architecture, related to post-modernism in the broad sense. Unlike in modernism, the focal point is the object itself and not its functional purpose in the space. It is the goal in itself. The structural system and technical devices of the building are exposed and treated as an ornament. High-tech architecture makes use of known construction technologies in a different way: in building structure and their technical equipment.

Technical elements, such as blinds or solar panels become peculiar modern ornaments particularly when arranged in repetitive sequences. This architecture is an attempt to incorporate the technical facilities of the building into its structure.

The apparent integration of the technology with the building is but a search for originality and an aesthetic game with the composition of the elevation through unveiling contemporary ornaments.

The façade of a high-tech style building, like the façade of a post-modernist one, adds extra meaning (sometimes symbolic) to it and places it within a relevant typology, but is not directly related to the arrangements of functions. Functionality is rejected. Architecture is treated as art detached from reality. Ornament and symbol are back in grace, and architecture is making use of irony, surprise, or the absurd.

A residential and office building in Berlin, designed by Sir Richard Rogers is a perfect example of high-tech architecture, particularly because of its industrial character. It is situated within a row of buildings performing different functions which to some degree determines the style and type of detail used. The façade as such is simple and the formal assumptions stemming from the function of the object are not very demanding, which must have encouraged the author to use additional ornaments. The designer has decided to embellish the elevation by exposing technical and utility elements of the building, such as exterior staircases (usually hidden behind the walls), blinds, or visible structural elements. Due to its function, the staircase ensuring vertical circulation between the storeys of the building is a strong vertical accent and seems to divide the elevation into two parts. The author seems to like this division, as he decided to highlight it with the finishing materials. Also the arrangement of balconies and their crude industrial character differs, creating new compositions on both sides. The author, apparently trying to emphasise the different functions of the first two storeys of the building, has decided to daringly break the vertical arrangement of the upper storeys by emphasising the horizontal layout of the lower floors and displaying their structural system.

The decorative character of the elevation is most strongly visible in the exposed utility functions. Components of the building which are often hidden inside, such as internal stairs, structural system, wiring and piping systems, acquire an ornamental function here. The author intentionally uses them as an aesthetic argument in composing the elevation and gives formal prominence to their visual meaning.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Architecture may be subordinated to values, to the process of its intellectual perception depending on the individual emotions evoked by forms involved in creating the shape or overtly manifesting its decorative character. This aspect can highlight the message conveyed by the form or even determine it when the level of interference with external shape conditions taking up into new architectonic tasks.

The façade of a house in the urban space is a part of a greater whole, be it the building or the street frontage. Whether it is a detached house or a part of a set of adjacent buildings, it represents certain values which seem to be important from the perspective of the author, resident or observer. The truthfulness of the image to a great extent depends on the observer and his/her naiveté. An experienced eye will easily recognise which elements of the elevation

are there for aesthetic reasons and which just had to be there; which have been used as an element of composition and which are indispensable.

Architecture is explicitly a synthetic activity which has to adapt itself to the form of life as a whole. This adaptation does not request that every work should be related to the total whole. The individual work concretizes secondary wholes, but because it belongs to an architectural system, it participates in a complete concretization. New concretizations can neither imitate the past, nor break completely with tradition. They are dependent upon the existence of symbol-systems which are capable of development. This implies that we should conserve the structural principles of tradition rather than its motives⁴.

The use of elevation as a decorative element, in pursuit of – however understood – beauty which, after all, is no longer the key objective of art (as Apollinaire put it: “Nowadays we like ugliness as well as we like beauty”) plays a significant role, along with opportunities and pitfalls.

Unlike in architectonic trends, the focal point is the object itself and not its functional purpose in the space. It is the goal in itself. The structural system is exposed, while architectonic details of the building are treated as ornaments.

The ornaments or embellishments of the façades presented above are not understood as a reference to the art of the 16th or 17th centuries, but as the use of means of expression and way of thinking aimed at developing the language of hidden tensions in form and the meanings they convey. Today’s architectonic form should be rather a historical interpretation of the past than its direct continuation.

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⁴ [after:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture*, Warsaw 2013, p. 48.