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DO HOUSES HAVE TO BE EVERMORE CURVED?

CZY DOMY MUSZĄ BYĆ JUŻ ZAWSZE KRZYWE?

Abstract

An attempt has been made to present the reason for the contemporary audience's interest in art – avant-garde architecture. Such a situation must be extremely stressful for the creators. Creating the “new” had always been associated with a lack of understanding on the part of a mass audience. Today, the architecture of curved lines, breaking with Euclidean geometry and right angle, is becoming commonplace. The whole creative work is getting radically detached from memorised habits. Canons in art and modularity in architecture are becoming obsolete. The pursuit of novelty has led to the demise of avant-garde movements and the creation of the category of “icon” of architecture unrelated to some style or function. The buildings that have earned the appropriate status can be the “canons of contemporary times”. They do not do it by the applied material as it used to be in the case of Le Corbusier's designs (and concrete), but by the unprecedented (perhaps unimaginable) shape. Coop Himmelblau creates rather than builds *Pavilion 21 MINI Opera Space*, giving it a sharp, tapering shape. And so are the contemporary houses, difficult to draw and describe, but easy to remember. Unfortunately, they are also becoming more and more acceptable for the user and an outside observer who have already got bored with the simplicity and ordinariness.

Keywords: breakdown of form, architecture, housing, avant-garde

Streszczenie

W rozdziale starano się przedstawić przyczynę zainteresowania współczesnego widza sztuką – architekturą awangardową. Dla twórców taka sytuacja musi być szalenie stresująca. Tworzenie „nowego” wiązało się zawsze z brakiem zrozumienia ze strony masowego odbiorcy. Dziś architektura linii krzywych zrywająca z geometrią euklidesową i kątem prostym staje się powszechnością. Cała twórczość odrywa się radykalnie od zapamiętanych przyzwyczajzeń. Kanony w sztuce i modularność w architekturze stają się przeżytkami. Pogoń za nowością doprowadziła do upadku ruchów awangardowych i stworzenia kategorii „ikony” architektonicznej niezwiązanej

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z jakimś stylem czy funkcją. „Kanonami współczesności” mogą być te budynki, które uzyskały stosowny status. Czynią to nie przez zastosowany materiał, jak bywało wcześniej z projektami Le Corbusiera (i beton), lecz niespotykany wcześniej (może niemożliwy do wyobrażenia) kształt. Coop Himmelblau tworzy *Pavilion 21 MINI Opera Space*, bo chyba nie buduje, nadając mu ostry, kłujący kształt. Takie też stają się współczesne domy, trudne do narysowania i do opisanía, lecz łatwe do zapamiętania. Niestety także coraz łatwiejsze do zaakceptowania przez użytkownika i postronnego obserwatora, którzy znudzili się już prostotą i zwyczajnością.

Słowa kluczowe: rozbitcie formy, architektura, mieszkaniowa, awangarda

1. HABITS

Architecture has been built in accordance with our habits, it does not involve belonging to a certain category of beauty. However, all canons have been created to reassure the recipient about beauty. Still, the assumption that architecture should be beautiful is difficult to prove. We may assume in our deliberations that certain theories and assumptions were supposed to lead to it. However, it is more difficult to prove in the post-modern era than it ever was. Let us begin with the philosophical theory of value and generalisation, which can be useful to us. Let us assume that “1. There exists the absolute value, which allows one to get to know itself and which we consider for the sake of it to be an end in itself; 2. There exists the norm binding for all people, which can be known and justified; 3. Life according to this value and norm is equipped with an absolute sense”¹. Such a universal approach is no longer valid in architecture. Beauty² has long ceased to be an object of the creators’ interest in architecture (like in other arts since Duchamp). Successive generations of architects forget about the once most important determinant of art in their pursuit of novelty and negation of their predecessors’ actions. The difficulty in understanding this concept in building becomes almost impossible to grasp today. Theories seemingly distant from architecture may be helpful in such an action.

In his book *Principles of Art History*, Heinrich Wölfflin often refers to comparisons between Renaissance and Baroque. He presents works from both periods, explaining the differences in understanding the architectural form. In the contemporary world after postmodernism (or all the time in it), we can notice similarities in such a perception with regard to Modernism and decomposition, i.e. Deconstructivism (in architecture). We may perceive Modernism with its rational approach to design as a continuation of Renaissance with its exploration of classical harmony and something that can be called Deconstructivism (difficult to define or completely extinct) as a contemporary Baroque. Modernizm mimo swych czytelnych reguł był niełatwy do odbioru społecznego, lecz współczesna architektura “w pióropuszu” staje się czymś zwyczajnym. Modernizm created according to rules once seemed something timeless.

¹ K. Kurowska, R. Rudziński, *Filozofia i wartość*, Warszawa 1981, p. 122.

² *Słownik języka polskiego*, Warszawa 1979, provides the definition: “Beauty «set of features such as the proportion of shapes, harmony of colours, sounds, which makes something appealing and admirable; also: the high moral value»: The beauty of nature. The beauty of music. The beauty of sculptures, paintings, tapestries. Admire the beauty of flowers. Admire the beauty of mountains, forests, seas, rivers. Love of beauty”, Vol II, p. 663.

“Once renaissance architecture had seemed to find an ultimate expression for wall and joint, for pillar and beam, for supporting and supported members, came the moment when all these formulations were felt to be rigid and lifeless. The change does not take place sporadically in details: the principle is changed. It is not possible—so ran the new creed—to set up anything as finished and ultimate, the life and beauty of architecture lies in the inconclusiveness of its appearance, in the fact that, eternally becoming, it approaches the spectator in ever new pictures”³. This may lead us to reflect on the meaning of the composition and its relation to beauty. The matter with composition seems to be easier than that with beauty as beauty in contemporary art loses its literal sense. “To put it otherwise, classic clearness means representation in ultimate, enduring forms; baroque unclearness means making the forms look like something changing, becoming”⁴. The very term of “baroque unclearness”, despite the difficulty of explanation, can be the motto of contemporary (from the end of the twentieth century) architecture.

One can recall Baudelaire’s theory here. Charles Baudelaire sought beauty in something unchangeable, detached from the matter of the work. He explained it in the following way: “(...) beauty is always and inevitably compounded of two elements, although the impression it conveys is one (...). Beauty is made up, on one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable, though to determine how much of it there is is extremely difficult, and, on the other, of a relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion”. (...) Consider, if you will, the part that exists eternally as the soul of art, and the variable element as the body”⁵. A similar duality can be traced in architecture. That which is transient or variable – function, that which is permanent and found only by successive generations – form.

2. PHILOSOPHY

Marxist philosophers discerned beauty in socio-political ideals, also referring to Aristotle. Leonid Stołowicz writes: “The creator of this theory is Aristotle. It raises an even greater interest because the author, a student of Plato, formed his views on beauty and modelled the ideal of society in a polemic with his former master. Aristotle opposes Plato’s dualism, the separation of the matter from its empirical manifestations and the recognition of it as an autonomous idea. He wishes to prove that »good and goodness are one, as well as beauty and beautifulness«⁶. He is convinced that the essence of beauty is not an independently existing idea, but it manifests itself through beautiful objects, things and phenomena”⁷. One can cite the whole: “The good, then, must be one with the essence of good, and the beautiful with the essence of beauty, and so with all things, which do not depend on something else, but are self-subsistent and primary”⁸.

³ H. Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki, Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Warszawa 1962, p. 275.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 275.

⁵ Ch. Baudelaire, *O sztuce*, Wrocław 1961, p. 194.

⁶ M. A. Krąpiec, T. A. Żeleźnik, *Arystoteles a koncepcja substancji*, Lublin 1966, p. 116.

⁷ L. N. Stołowicz, *Kategorie piękna a ideał społeczny*, Wrocław 1982, p. 72.

⁸ Arystoteles, *Metafizyka księgi o substancji*, [in:] M. A. Krąpiec, T. A. Żeleźnik, *Arystoteles a koncepcja substancji*, Lublin 1966, p. 116.



III. 1. Zaha Hadid, *IBA Housing*, Berlin 1986–1993, Foto. T. Kozłowski

III. 2. Zaha Hadid, *IBA Housing*, Berlin 1986–1993, Source: A. Betsky, *Zaha Hadid, The Complete Buildings and Projects*, Londyn 1998

Another theory related to it may be helpful for architecture. Historically, beauty was sought in the works that could be presented in the form of mathematical formulas, sometimes digits only. “This can be illustrated on any art, but preferably on architecture: according to this theory, the beauty of a portico is determined by the quantity, size and spacing of the columns. (...) in a narrower form it claimed that the ratio of the components constituting beauty can be expressed numerically. In an even narrower one: that beauty appears only in the objects whose parts are in the ratio expressed with a simple number, one to one, one to two, two to three, etc. It is the basis to call this theory the Great Theory. (...) This great theory was initiated by Pythagoreans. According to them, the beauty of things consisted in a perfect structure, which in turn consisted in the proportion of parts. Something that can be established: precisely in numbers. Thus, they initiated the Great Theory in its narrow form ...”⁹. In 1562 in the book *Canon of the Five Orders of Architecture* Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola shows with pictures and explains with the help of mathematical formulas the canons of beauty. To the authors of avant-garde from the early twentieth century, such an approach was not obvious. In 1919, Stanislaw Kubicki called in the expressionist spirit to snatch the man from the clutches of accounts and numbers¹⁰, which was to become a way to create beauty.

The sixteenth century brings other theories. Cesare Ripa was the author of *Iconology (Iconologia ovvero Descrizione dell'Imagini universali)* published in 1593, where he presented about four hundred major (great) allegorical concepts of his time. The book consisted of descriptions, then it was supplemented with drawings presenting ideal symbols of the well-known concepts. Here we can find the drawings of Grace, Symmetry, Art, Poetry, and most important for this part – Beauty. Beauty is described and then sketched as: “The woman whose head is to be hidden in the clouds, and the rest of the body – poorly visible due to the radiance that envelops it. A hand wielding a lily extends from this lightness; the second holds a ball and compasses. Beauty is drawn with its head in the clouds as nothing else is more difficult to express in the language of mortals and nothing else is more difficult to discover with the human reason than beauty, in created things that are, after all – figuratively speaking – only a reflection of the splendour, which the face of God shines with. This is how Platonists capture it Platonists as the original beauty is identical with Him”¹¹. At the end of this thread of the discussion, we can refer to the magical aspect of art. Again, Baudelaire words may be adequate here: “Any healthy man can go without food for two days – but not without poetry!”¹². These words sound as grim irony in the modern world.

3. CANONS

In architecture, there also appear national or regional canons. Canon is called the “space of agreement”¹³ by Leszek Szaruga, literary historian. A different approach to canon is present-

⁹ W. Tatkiewicz, *O filozofii i sztuce*, Warszawa 1986, p. 179–180, “... This theory was a generalisation of Pythagorean observations regarding the harmony of sounds: strings sound harmoniously, if the ratio of their length is the ratio of simple numbers.”

¹⁰ S. Kubacki, *Tamtym coś niecoś*, „Zdrój” 1919, [in:] J. Ratajczak, *Krzyk i ekstaza antologia polskiego ekspresjonizmu*, Poznań, 1997, p. 84.

¹¹ C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Kraków 2013, p. 128.

¹² L. Szaruga, *Powinność literatury i inne szkice krytyczne*, Kraków 2008.

¹³ Ch. Baudelaire, *Sztuka romantyczna dzienniki poufne*, Warszawa 1971, p. 43.

ed by Joanna Kurczewska. She seeks canon of art as the “museum of national masterpieces”, so opposed by the Futurists. The author writes: “According to the first reading, canon constitutes a collection of masterpieces from different fields of art and literature ordered by the history of the Polish nation (and so the multiplicity of generations of Poles). In other words, canon is a national tradition encoded in the forms characteristic of the various fields of art and literature [...]”¹⁴. Today, art dissociates itself from national traditions and traditions in general. Creating “new” art, contemporariness is not free from the imitation of the great masters of architecture from around the world. Canons are no longer important in design. Yet, we do recognise certain stylistic continuity in the constructed works. The slow death of Deconstructivism creates new aesthetics that do not relate to the creative work from years ago. However, no artists’ words will change the impression that we have already seen it somewhere. A certain canon of memories, which is stored in our thinking, will never disappear.

Creators usually seek to create theories that could help explain the fundamentals of their art. Matila C. Ghyka, Romanian philosopher and mathematician, begins his considerations on numbers with the chapter “From number to harmony”¹⁵. Man creates the golden ratio, the divine proportion, the number called ϕ (1.618). It is to be the way, the recipe for the achievement of the perfection of proportion, maybe beauty. However, in the case of such considerations, there always appears a contrary statement, and Claude Bernard introduces us to the uncertainty, saying that: “The best philosophical system is to have none at all”¹⁶. This can refer to the fine arts, which we will be able to observe together with the emerging avant-garde movements negating all the canons. If we take a closer look at nature and the same shape of leaves, Hippolyte Taine’s claims that: “The facts and phenomena resulting in the emergence of sensations are therefore beyond man – have an objective existence”¹⁷, may confirm the need to organise the world. We can explain this desire with striving for some objective (here existing outside man) determinant, therefore mathematically describable, and even necessary in architecture, which is the art of building. Taine repeated Goethe’s words: “»Fill your mind and heart however large, with the ideas and sentiments of your age, and the work will follow«”¹⁸. In the light of this principle, the value of art must depend on the art’s achievement of expression, which the chief *idea* of a given civilisation manifests itself with”¹⁹. Seeking to assign art to a particular state of consciousness, he further explains: “Art is the expression of social life, it is the expression of the era”²⁰. The contemporary world is trying to break with canons, strives for uniqueness. One can quote Mayakovsky’s words as a futurist: “Art has died: it has been either plundered by enemies-vandals or become the sutler of war. Art is dead and there is nothing to regret. It has died because it couldn’t keep up with life. You need to create the new one. The old one does not fit our times”²¹. The old one means beautiful, easy to name and describe. Mathematics has become redundant for the present. That, which could

¹⁴ J. Kurczewska, *Kanon kultury narodowej*, [in:] *Kultura narodowa i polityka*, ed. J. Kurczewska, Warszawa 2000, p. 34.

¹⁵ M. C. Ghyka, *Złota liczba*, Kraków 2014.

¹⁶ S. Krzemiń-Ojak, *Taine*, Warszawa 1966, p. 39.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

¹⁸ H. Taine, *Philosophie de l’art*, 1893, p. 107.

¹⁹ S. Krzemiń-Ojak, *Taine*, Warszawa 1966, p. 79.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

²¹ A. Junosza-Szaniawski, *Włodzimierz Majakowski*, Warszawa 1964, p. 162.

be easily explained, is no longer attractive. Man is seeking beauty in the unknown (apparently), what follows is “the diversion of attention from knowledge to the greatest pleasure of listening, the substitution of the desire for truth and recognition with the fulfilment of another desire – the desire for the voice of fiction”²². This could involve a departure from the clear-cut determinant of beauty and directing one’s attention to fantasy and breakdown of the existing forms of art. We are breaking with the historical approach to creation. Maria Gołaszewska defines it as follows: “[...] At the same time, the most well-known principles included: symmetry, balance, consistency, unity in diversity, etc. The composition of a work in a broader sense (attention to transparent structures) also included such principles as unity of place, time and action (in the theatre), rhythm (in music: allegro – largo – allegro), periodicity (in poetry and music), succession of time in accordance with natural chronology (in the novel, theatre, film)”²³. It can be expressed in a simpler way with Thorson Rodiek’s words who mentions symmetry, rhythm, beauty as a classical basis in historical solutions mentions²⁴. Symmetry and rhythm are the easiest to describe in mathematical formulas. One can add the correspondence of the caption under the painting with its content to this list. Heinrich Wölfflin puts it in the simplest, but not the easiest way to explain scientifically: “Every work of art has form, is an organism. Its most essential feature is the character or inevitability—that nothing could be changed or moved from its place, but that all must be as it is”²⁵. Here the problem overwhelms the author of the text. Despite the historical need for canons and definitions, we simply must know what is beautiful or, to put it another way, what is art (since the first term is completely immeasurable today, and so is undoubtedly the other one).

4. CONTEMPORARY TIMES

After this overly long introduction, we can address the problem of the condition of the house in the city. Contemporariness tries helplessly to kill all the building canons. Deconstruction once so attractive, is slowly dying. It does, however, take its toll on future generations of architects. New emerging forms are already impossible to create without the computer. Once exploring new areas for expressionism by the creation of dramatically decomposed form of the building, Günther Domenig’s *Stone House* in Steindorf in Austria from 1986 is turning into a memory today. For the moment it is rather unlikely to find followers (but such art will return). Despite everything, we still live in a state of culture, which is defined as – postmodernism. The myths of civilisation and art, such as avant-garde modernism (modernity) and belief in a single universal way for the development of the world have lost their persuasiveness. The diversity of ideas and forms is, after all, characteristic of the postmodern era, gradually leading to its demise (momentary), although this is not the end of the century, it seems to be *fin de siècle* for it. From the perspective of the early twenty-first

²² L. Marin, *Przyjemność opowiadania*, [in:] *O przedstawianiu*, Gdańsk 2011, p. 184.

²³ Th. Rodiek, „Differenz in das Reale schneiden” – *Baugeschichte und Dekonstruktion*, [in:] *Daniel Libeskind – Museum ohne Ausgang, Das Felix-Nussbaum-Haus des Kulturgeschichtlichen Museums Osnabrück*, Tübingen-Berlin 1999, p. 35.

²⁴ M. Gołaszewska, *Zarys estetyki. Problematyka, metody, teorie*, Warszawa 1984, p. 394–395.

²⁵ H. Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki, Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej, III. Forma zamknięta i forma otwarta*, Warszawa 1962, p. 166–199.

century the world of architecture is full of coexistence of different ideas and architectural forms. The diversity is so radical that the unity of architectural trends is not validated by the details of stylistic forms. A characteristic feature of this situation is therefore not so much – the multiplicity of trends, but – the multiplicity of creative attitudes of masters. The problem of “novelty” in architecture remains valid. In the past, in subsequent periods of art prevailing ideas contradicted previous ones in pursuit of – excellence or “novelty”, which above all resulted from weariness of the ongoing state (only latest fashions were denied). Today – surprising with originality of form constitutes part of the collection of creators and audience’s needs. Not only one artist’s works should be original, ideally – each work of an artist should be another novelty. For this reason, the significance of the role of distinctive urban architecture has been shaped, one which wants to see the role of space for art, similar to the role of Gothic cathedrals. For the time being, houses will be curved, at least for some time. New art, which will appear in the coming years, will certainly try to deny such a state (as it usually happens in the case of avant-garde). However, the apparent emancipation of recipients familiarised with deconstruction may foster (apparent) detachment from all rules for many more years to come. Yet, the modern world with its penchant for the advertising function of architecture can change instantly, creating something unpredictable today, even for Charles Jencks and for us for sure. Let us cry with a single voice “Long live curved houses!”. Let us express our faith in art, which is slowly passing away and which has been abandoned even by Zaha Hadid, the great originator of the revolution of the late twentieth century.

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