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HOUSE / NOT-HOUSE  
– IN SEARCH  
OF A CONTEMPORARY MODEL

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DOM / NIE-DOM  
– W POSZUKIWANIU  
WSPÓŁCZESNEGO MODELU

**A b s t r a c t**

Witold Rybczynski, discussing once the issue of comfort, pointed out that the development of an idea of a home is independent of a constantly changing model of living. According to this statement, the architectural form depends entirely on the idea of the design, not technology or variable function. Today, we can find a number of examples of homes which present an image of current design tendencies in this field. Houses, palaces and castles coexist in the same space. The main distinguishing feature of contemporaneity is the variety of forms, ideas, patterns of habitation. Today, architecture is looking for new means of expression, sometimes drawing from a vocabulary of forms not used before in this area. This trend has raised the concerns of Léon Krier who, criticizing contemporary reality, named it “false pluralism”. Is this right? These considerations constitute an attempt to answer this question.

*Keywords: theory of architecture, perception of architecture, contemporary architecture*

**Streszczenie**

Niegdyś Witold Rybczyński omawiając zagadnienie komfortu wskazywał, że rozwój idei domu odbywa się niezależnie od zmieniającego się nieustannie modelu zamieszkiwania. Wedle tego stwierdzenia forma architektoniczna zależna jest wyłącznie od idei projektowej, a nie od technologii czy zmiennej użyteczności. Dziś odnaleźć możemy szereg przykładów domów, które ukazać mogą obraz aktualnych tendencji projektowych w tym zakresie. Domy, pałace i zamki współistnieją w tej samej przestrzeni. Podstawowym wyróżnikiem współczesności jest różnorodność form, idei, modeli zamieszkania. Dziś architektura poszukuje nowych sposobów wypowiedzi, czerpiąc niekiedy ze słownika form dotychczas niewykorzystywanych w tym zakresie. Tendencja ta wzbudziła obawy Léona Kriera, który krytykując współczesną

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rzeczywistość określa ją mianem „falszywego pluralizmu”. Czy słusznie? Rozważania stanowią próbę odpowiedzi na to pytanie.

*Słowa kluczowe: teoria architektury, postrzeganie architektury, architektura współczesna*

Houses, palaces and castles coexist in urban space. The basic distinguishing feature of the present is the variety of forms, ideas, patterns of inhabiting. Witold Rybczynski, once discussing the issue of comfort, pointed out that development of an idea of home is independent of a constantly changing model of living. As he writes, “It might seem that numerous inventions, created at the turn of the century, which contributed to greater comfort in the home, will affect its appearance. Meanwhile, nothing like it was”<sup>1</sup>. Referring to the interior of the house, he indicates its dependency on taste and fashion, not on technology. Following subsequent phases, Rybczynski presents the history of the development of the “idea of a house” from historical forms up to contemporary minimalist tendencies. He stresses that “modern building has been completely converted; not only the entire interior layout, as well as finishing materials, furniture, accessories and set of chairs were planned”<sup>2</sup>. Referring to the properties of an architectural thing as entirety – a house built in a city – one should, according to the above considerations, point to the primacy of a design idea as the basic factor shaping the form of the building. The development of architecture is based on technology and technique, but they have a supportive role, not a fundamental one. Simultaneously, in his considerations Rybczyński warns of “the cult of originality”, pointing to the fact that according to this assumption what is new, by definition, is regarded as better than what it was. As he writes: “belief in the power of art, which allows the laws of physics to be overcome, there is something charmingly naive [...] People are collapsing in a Barcelona chair or stretching up to get out of an Eames couch is not convenient, try to just put up with discomfort in the name of art – or prestige – which is not the same”<sup>3</sup>. And yet, for some time architecture has been heading in this direction – old styles are long gone, and the present day is based precisely on originality. Strictly speaking – the different attitudes of various artists coexist in the same reality, and the only definition that gives the opportunity to describe houses in contemporary city is diversity.

This feature describes not only activities in the field of architecture, but also refers to all forms of activity of contemporary man, especially if it is considered in relation to seven billion people. In the age of information, opening borders, flow of data and ubiquitous Internet, this is particularly visible. Nevertheless, it raises the question of whether architecture, released from the shackles of homogeneous style and based solely on the principle of “the cult of originality”, loses anything from the essence of its existence. Do the properties of an architectural thing remain unchanged or – reflecting human activities – do they transform along with the evolution of their users?

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<sup>1</sup> Comp. W. Rybczyński, *Dom. Krótka historia idei*, przeł. K. Husarska, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2015, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 303.

As L. Krier writes “The compliance of symbol and meaning, form and content, style and rank is not the result of passing convention, but a convergence of fundamental importance. The architecture of the Convention may exist or have any lasting value only if the relation of the appearance of the building to its function has all the characteristics of an obvious truth. Convention on the nature of things cannot be forced. But to the modernists it is systematically practised by confusing the coffee pot with a bottle of wine – which causes breakage of the bottle or a burnt hand”<sup>4</sup>. He indicates devaluation of the meaning of forms, to which arbitrary forms, arbitrary and “uni-forms” contribute. And yet Krier’s “false pluralism” exists in contemporary urban spaces. A doctrine which only accepts traditional architecture is a false assumption. For the hypothesis that historical architecture is the only way possible to accept by the art of building is wrong. Historical cities are – in fact – inhomogeneous in their structure. They are products of human civilization, developed since the dawn of history, and therefore fragments from different epoch’s layer within one city. One of the properties of the house in the city is coexistence with other buildings, and this relation (a building with its context) is one of the elements influencing the perception of architecture by its perceiver.

The point of view presented by Krier is likely in contemporary reality, but in fact it expresses only one of the possible voices in the discussion on the shape of architecture, considering the diversity of attitudes. Contemporary architecture broke with traditional codes. Some buildings created around follow archetypal forms, established for centuries. In others, design ideas reveal (for contemporaneity) forms reserved so far for structures with other functions. An example of this kind of thinking is the *Terrace House* designed by Hiroshi Sambuichi.

The house was built in Hiroshima in 2001–02. The rectangular building was placed on a steep slope, its shorter side towards the road. The forms of neighbouring buildings indicate that the district is residential, but this house hides its function behind concrete walls. They lack windows, loggias or balconies, which signify residential buildings, including those placed in the nearest surroundings. The primary solid, defined by the geometry of the concrete walls, decides the character of this architecture. The way in which they were built influences their perception. They look like a smooth, almost shimmering surface, and only traces of vertical and horizontal divisions indicate that they were realized *in situ*.

Among the four walls defining the rectangular solid of the house, the front façade adjacent to the street draws attention – in this elevation has been placed only one, extensive, rectangular cutout, located on the axis. A deep shadow indicates that the cutout leads into the building. This singular and only hole in the walls of *Terraced House* indicates an important moment – the point of crossing the boundary between public and private space. This kind of shaping the volume of a house is reflected in the words of Janusz Włodarczyk: “A hole in a wall, a jump through water – they aren’t values in themselves, they serve something, they promise something...”<sup>5</sup>.

Locating the rectangular building on a steep slope influences the fact that only the front façade of the house has a height of two levels. The opening in the front elevation – the

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<sup>4</sup> Comp. L. Krier, *Architektura. Wybór czy przeznaczenie*, tłum. P. Choynowski, Arkady, Warszawa 2001, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

gate of the house – leads into the rooms planned inside: a garage and a storage room. In this deep niche the entrance to the upper level is also located – the residential level. This was placed at the first floor. A rectangular flat roof stretched between opposite boundary walls determines the shape of the plan. The spatial concept of the upper storey contradicts the impression of the solid without windows. The residential zone occupies the central part of the plan, and interior walls separating the residential space from both terraces are completely glazed.

The impression which *Terraced House* produces seen from the outside is different from that which the interior might cause. The house is in fact open on two longitudinal interior patios (front and rear), boundaries of which on one side are the glazed walls of the interior, and on the other sides – a concrete wall defining the form of the building. An internal, closed garden may evoke distant memories of a Roman House<sup>6</sup>, and simultaneously it recalls words of Siegfried Giedion, who drew attention to contemporary interpretations of the element of patio; the words, which brought this element again to architecture<sup>7</sup>.

The shape of *Terraced House* seems to be leaning on the idea of a clear, even rigorous separation of private space and public space. This rule is clearly perceptible in the architectural concept by Hiroshi Sambuichi, who said that this spatial disposition gives residents a feeling of safety, necessary privacy, but also provides exposure to light, air and nature<sup>8</sup>. According to this assumption was realized a house whose form is not associated with utility. The rectangular solid, regular and covered with the flat roof, is not surprising, but the complete lack of windows in the facades of the building introduces dissonance – the gap between the image of the house and its proposed form. For the common observer it might be associated with a factory or a warehouse<sup>9</sup>. But at the same time this building is the “home” for its users. This property is not immutable – according to the proverb “my home is my castle” it can become a “castle”, but also a “prison”, or a “temple”, but certainly it will not be “a glass house”. The building is no longer just a building material forming a shape; it becomes the basis for their users for an act of “establishing” that makes it “the home”.

Architecture today not only uncovers new forms for “old” utilities, but also transforms archetypal ones using the contemporary language of the art of building. *Rudin House* is not a house in a city, but this project shows exactly this way of thinking about an architectural form. The archetypal shape of the house – a symmetrical form with a gable roof, and yet the composition leaving no misunderstandings – the building has become an icon of contemporary thinking about the architectural form of the house. Designed by the team of Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron, the building was realized in 1997 in Leymen. This House “is a poetic transformation of both: a child’s drawing of a home with a gable roof, a chimney and large windows, as well as the idea of a primitive hut – the first, according to the tradi-

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<sup>6</sup> comp. T. Broniewski, *Historia architektury w zarysie*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1959, p. 88–89.

<sup>7</sup> S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń, czas i architektura. Narodziny nowej tradycji*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1968, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Comp. H. Sambuichi, *Terrace House*, „GA Houses”, 2002 nr 71, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> Similar impression can also make the „safe house” designed by R. Konieczny, in which movable walls allows to isolate the interior from the exterior completely.

tion of Enlightenment, conscious work of architecture of man”<sup>10</sup>. In this project, facades are not symmetrical, the building’s material is contemporary (concrete), and the whole house is set on poles on a rectangular plate of a *plateau* raised above the ground. Also the entrance is unusual – it leads via stairs from the bottom of the building. The method of raising the house above the ground provides a better view of the surrounding landscape and, at the same time, it brings to mind associations with the design of Le Corbusier in Savoye. The ground floor remains free, and all functions are arranged on the first and the second floor (connected with the space designated by the geometry of its roof). The windows, freely composed at the surfaces of each of the façades, reveal arrangement of functions. Larger windows on the lower floor indicate a living area, smaller within the upper floor illuminate bedrooms. The design idea, showing minimalist trends, is also the way in which architects used the material to build the volume of this house: concrete poles, the concrete plateau, the concrete walls of the house – the reduction of the material highlights the ascetic reduction of form. The material also highlights the contrast – the weight of the building, “levitating” on the poles over the declining terrain, flowing below it.

The essence of this project is the way in which the architects paraphrase the archetype of the form of the home. The contemporary interpretation enters into a dialogue between history and contemporaneity. The element of the language from the past is transformed, and the architectural thing gains a new dimension – reflected not only in composition, but also in the building material. This shape may be perceived as an abstract object, while simultaneously, it clearly testifies to its belonging to residential architecture.

The properties of an architectural thing are not only limited to its physical presence in urban space. In the contemporary reality, in which various materials are used to construct forms with different functions, the materials can also be considered as an element “irrelevant” to defining the characteristics decisive about the essence of the building. When examining the properties of the architectural thing in relation to aesthetic values, the words of Roman Ingarden are confirmed: “when we discover the work of art in it and we feast our eyes on its beauty or refer to its ugliness with disgust, it comes to that particular equation not only as a real object for us, but what’s more – the reality of it begins to lose its importance for us”<sup>11</sup>. Precisely in this perspective usability of the building or its materiality, determined by materials (their texture and colour), does not decide, in only one way the properties of the architectural thing. This is indicated by the words of Roman Ingarden, who, when describing the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, highlights the dual nature of the existence of this building:

“We can consider it for a while as a certain real thing, as a pile of stones, which, in some way arranged, form a wholeness for themselves. This wholeness has only physical properties... [...] Moreover it has e.g. some (after construction) a once fixed form (shape)... [...] It consists of specific parts, which have real and material properties for themselves, and which therefore hold together, bound in one unit, having new and respectively designated properties”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Mielnik, *Współczesne tendencje minimalistyczne w architekturze domów jednorodzinnych. Część druga*, „przestrzeń i FORMA”, 2011 nr 16, p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> Por. R. Ingarden, *Studia z estetyki. Tom II*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1958, p. 115–116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

These words relating to the cathedral in Paris may also be used to describe any house in any city. The physicality of the building, the material out of which the form was built, as well as shaping the whole from its parts, is only one of the levels on which we perceive a building – in this sense, only as an architectural thing in the actual reality. The most important thing, in relation to the properties of architectural things, seems to be the level at which our perception goes beyond physical reality of the building. Ingarden notes that “We can also take quite a different approach, such as the one when we are back in the harmony of an arrangement of masses, when we are immersed in the charm of the silence of a Romanesque basilica or we play with lightness and graceful of Ionic columns, etc. Changing one attitude to another does not, admittedly, eliminate the identity of the real thing, towards which we behave in one way or otherwise, to which we turn in one attitude or another”<sup>13</sup>. I might also add that this attitude may change, depending on the recipient. Along with this change the way we perceive architecture is being transformed. The consequence of this modification – perhaps evolution – is the diversity of properties of an architectural thing, which is reflected in the customer-building relationship.

The properties of an architectural thing change. Usability, materials, design ideas are subjects of constant metamorphoses, since the dawn of history to the – yet undiscovered – future. This process continues with following projects, successive realizations. It follows varying utilities, developing technologies and techniques. The change of the form of the building itself is, however, primarily the result of an architectural idea. This allows more and more new areas to be discovered for this art. The appearing to the contemporaneity of what was absent in the past makes changes to the future. Along with the ongoing process of evolution of reality (one can hope that it is a development and not retroactive) the perception of the recipient also alters. It is a continuous process, which could even be described as “evolution”. It does not alter the real identity of the house in the city, but it makes the properties of an architectural object undergo various permutations – making it as variable as the building–recipient relationship. With the change of perception of architecture, art is constantly changing, regardless of the weight of its physicality reflected in walls of brick, glass and concrete. Today architecture is looking for new ways of expression, drawing both from the vocabulary of forms used previously, but also discovering new ones or transforming those already existing in the past.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 116.

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