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MULTI-FAMILY PALACE
OR URBAN MONUMENT?

Abstract

Leon Krier says that the city is made up of streets and squares, blocks and monumental buildings. The location of the house is unspecified. Does the lack of seriousness and fulfilling everyday usability exclude it from the world of monumental architecture? Ricardo Bofill denies it – he proposes an apartment in the palace, in an urban monument on the outskirts of the metropolis. It is in his residential buildings that one can find postmodern attempts to join the fragmented city and artistic search for new sources of architecture, which, like a literary travesty, lead to surprising results. Perhaps that is why Charles Jencks calls the architecture of these buildings a wonderful paradox.

Keywords: multifamily house, urban monument, Bofill

Streszczenie

Leon Krier mówi, że miasto składa się z ulic i placów, kwartałów i monumentalnych budowli. Miejsce domu jest nieokreślone. Czy brak powagi i wypełnienie codzienną użytkowością wyklucza go ze świata architektury monumentalnej? Ricardo Bofill zaprzecza – proponuje mieszkanie w pałacu, w miejskim monumencie na obrzeżach metropolii. To w jego budowlach mieszkaniowych odszukać możemy postmodernistyczne próby złączenia pofragmentowanego miasta i artystyczne poszukiwania nowych źródeł architektury, które prowadzą, niczym literacka trawestacja, do zaskakujących rezultatów. Być może dlatego Charles Jencks architekturę tych obiektów nazywa cudownym paradoksem.

Słowa kluczowe: dom wielorodzinny, miejski monument, Bofill

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The contemporary city and its structure are constantly changing, and so is the place and form of the house. Therefore, one can find a few concepts and ways of understanding the house and its role. One should also agree with the obvious fact that the house has its own architecture. Yet, it is impossible to clearly define it. According to one of the conference theses, houses in city centres often take the form of monumental buildings. It is possible to prove this thesis, although it also seems that this architecture is related to the structures of public functions. Seriousness, grand decor or sublimity is not associated with houses, but public edifices in big cities. Today, monumental architecture is probably not reserved only for the authorities of the state or clergymen. It is also erected by private investors. Hence, one can find commercial and residential buildings that possess these exact qualities. As stated in the conference theses, residential buildings *continue to play the game of skyscrapers most willingly*[1]. These, however, are not monuments, according to Leon Krier, because *the monumental presumption and the hollow rhetoric of a Karl Marx Hof in Vienna or recent flashy experiments always painfully reveal their domestic purpose. Conversely, a public hall of immense size with insufficient ceiling height and inadequate architecture will never acquire true monumentality and civic significance*[2]. Therefore, can't the structures for dwelling be monuments?

The following examples are intended to demonstrate that the structures serving a "normal" function can sometimes constitute works of monumental architecture. One should go back a little to the period of postmodernism. The large housing complexes constructed at the time in cities became an important part of them. It sometimes even happened that the houses formed the city or gave rise to it. They were built with the conviction that the housing function of the structure is not in contradiction with the need to build monumental architecture, providing them with the appropriate architectural setting.

According to Charles Jencks, postmodernists dissenting from Modernism sought a new style, using modern technology, which consisted of adversity, and always remained dual or multi-layered. *Sometimes it stems from juxtaposition of new and old as in James Stirling's work; as in the case of Robert Venturi and Hans Hollein; and nearly always it has something strange about it. In short, a highly developed taste for paradox is characteristic of our time and sensibility*[3].

The architects decided to appeal to tradition, symbolism and the local conditions in order to create the language of architecture comprehensible to the recipient. In order to try to understand and describe the essence of the movement, one should first recall what occurred in literature. The postmodern architects keenly used such measures as parody, pastiche, grotesque, and self-mockery. They experimented with combining different styles and genres in one work.

Wacław Sadkowski writes in the afterword to the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* by John Barth: *it is impossible to comprehend literature without delving into the artistic and moral atmosphere, and it is not only because the mesh of allusions and references included in the text of this novel (stylistic tropes, quotations, linguistic inlays) – the spirit of the narrator's ironic defiance towards their own creation becomes elusive. Artistic treatment is not reconstruction but a pastiche, a travesty, a paraphrase of tradition.* These words should also refer to architecture. The forms adopted from the past are juxtaposed, processed and formulated

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[1] The theses of the conference Defining Architectural Space
[2] L. Krier, *Architektura – wybór czy przeznaczenie*, Arkady, Warszawa 2001, p. 35.
[3] Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna,* Arkady, Warszawa 1987.

in a new way. Therefore, this type of an architectural game is unusually difficult; it demands exceptional abilities from the architect.

John Barth determines his artistic conduct as follows: *personally, being of the temper that chooses to rebel along traditional lines, I'm inclined to prefer the kind of art that not many people can do: the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration*[4]. These words should be regarded as a description of contemporary post-modern architects. That which was very quickly accepted and recognised as the masterful paraphrase of reality in literature, struggled to establish its foundations in the built environment of architecture. The criticism of Modernism following the changes seemed groundless. The socioeconomic evolution determines if not forces the transformations in the world of architecture. Recognition of the legacy of historical forms as the only material for modern architectural creations of long-lasting value seemed to be a controversial attitude. In 1966, Robert Venturi gave rise to the search for free forms reflecting contemporary needs and requirements of historical heritage in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Thus, despite the superficial references to tradition and astonishing or even unexpected transformation into a form, Postmodernism intellectually provided the possibility of combining or reconciling that which had preceded it with what was expected from the present. The present shows that this attitude has not shaped a direction strong enough to secure a long-lasting position in the world of architecture; it is a forgotten phenomenon in art.

The Postmodernists were probably the last contemporary authors who tried to merge the fragmented functionalist city anew without referring directly to historical urban planning arrangements. They found the possibility to restore permanent features and structures – including monuments – to the city in the composition of modern techniques and traditional elements of architecture. This was supposed to restore the urbanised space to its users anew.

The architecture created by Ricardo Bofill, heading Taller de Arquitectura, is referred to as postmodern classicism; it seems to confirm this expression. The formal past is interspersed with contemporary material in these buildings. Analysing Bofill's residential buildings, Roemer van Toorn advances the right thesis about the recognisability of the structures and the identification of their users with the specific building. It is possible to say that one lives in Walden, in Les Arcades, in Abraxas Theatre, Antigone – in a characteristic building of a specific and original appearance[5].

Les Espaces d'Abraxas built in Marne-la-Vallee between 1978 and 1982 is a housing development characterised by a large scale and originality. Composed of the palace, theatre and arc, it serves a residential function. The classicist architectural forms give the buildings their identity and create urban space on the outskirts of Paris. The semi-private space of the contemporary development was closed in the courtyard of the theatre. The façades of the ten-storey amphitheatre were divided into three parts. The massive half-columns form the elevation and the spaces between them were filled with glass bay windows. The idea does not seem to be new – such a solution can be found, for instance, in the Marov's multi-family house in St. Petersburg, designed in 1910 by Vladimir Shchuko, who is also known as the co-author of the design for The Palace of the Soviets. The classical architectural language coexists with the modern technology of concrete prefabricated elements, glass half-columns

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4   J. Barth, *Literatura wyczerpana*, [in:] *Nowa proza amerykańska*, Czytelnik Warszawa 1983.
5   R. van Toorn, *The Man who Mistook Style for a Living* [in:] van Toorn R., Bouman O., *The Invisible in Architecture,* Academy Editions & Ernst and Sohn, 1994.

Ill. 1. Vladimira Shchuko, Marov's multifamily house, Petersburg 1910., source: Frampton K., *World architecture 1900–2000: A critical mosaic.,* Vol.7, Wien 1999

Ill. 2. Ricardo Bofill, Taller de Arquitectura, La Place du Nombre d'or, Antigone, Montpellier 1999, source: www.ricardobofill.com

or green roof. The nineteen-story Abraxas Palace, which is named after the wizard's spell – abracadabra, also tries to hide the residential function. This game designed by Bofill, based on the metaphor, gives surprising results.

The architect achieves a similar unusual atmosphere in the implementation of the design for an ensemble of apartment buildings on the shores of an artificial lake Les Arcades du Lac St – Quentin-en-Yvelines near Versailles. This architecture creates an urban space known from the past with a determined centre, block, street, square and plaza. What occurred here is an apparent return to the heart of the city, to the core implemented as a round pedestrianised piazza with a temple in the middle. The urban layout is clear, axial and geometrical. The buildings have an intimate scale; the height of three or four storeys seems to be acceptable for the residents. The architecture is composed of ornaments, arches, rusticated walls with pilasters – the forms reserved for prestigious architecture. The tectonics is enriched by columns, pilasters, cornices, sometimes with distorted proportions in relation to the prototype –all of these shapes buildings that serve a residential function.

The Antigone residential complex developed in the newly created district of Montpellier in France seems to be slightly more complicated – it is the largest project of this type completed by Bofill. The axial composition of the entire complex, referring to classicism, emphasises historical affinities. There is a statue of Nike in the central square of Antigone. What was created here was the mise-en-scène architecture with a variable arrangement of buildings and simultaneous familiar motifs of façades – with massive columns, pilasters around the windows and rustication surrounded by greenery around the buildings whose planning basis is also a geometric rigour. The mighty crowning of the building takes the form of a three-level cornice that holds balconies of the flats. In order to illuminate the top floor rooms, the architrave entablature with a closing cornice with an openwork support structure assumes unprecedented size, negating the classical proportions.

However, the most interesting example reflecting the architect's creative attitude is *La Fabrica*. This is a very original house in the city, which Bofill made from a disused cement factory in Barcelona. He transformed the existing, abandoned industrial building into an apartment and studio. This is a place that came into being as a clash of concrete buildings and warehouse facilities with the romanticism of ruins surrounded by greenery. The complex consists of 8 silos (remaining from the original 30), subterranean galleries and machine rooms, which were partially rebuilt and adapted. Demolition of the fragments of concrete walls created in order to illuminate the premises or for passageways gained historical architectural frames. Slender Gothic biforia were placed in the vertical cylinders of the silos. The classical form of the detail appears against concrete formwork planes. The contrast of industrial architecture in the form of concrete blocks with individual interiors is equally intriguing. Here, one can find Gothic elements juxtaposed with the contemporary form in accordance with the postmodernist paraphrase. It is impossible not to agree with the description of the development offered by the Taller de Arqitectura: *This project is evidence of the fact that an imaginative architect may adapt any space to a new function, no matter how different it may be from the original one*[6]. The author explains that he finds surrealism, absurdity, and magic in this place; abstraction in the pure volumes and brutalism[7].

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[6] http://www.ricardobofill.com

[7] *Ibidem,*

Ill. 3.   Albert Hein, *Untitled*, 1982, source: van Toorn R., *The Man who Mistook Style for a Living* [w] van
Toorn R., Bouman O., *The Invisible in Architecture,* Academy Editions & Ernst and Sohn, 1994.

Describing Bofill's architecture in the article *The Man who Mistook Style for Living*, Roemer van Toorn recalls the work of the artist Albert Hein from 1982. It seems that this is an apt comparison. The work constitutes a part of a series called *Grotteschi* (*it.* grotesque) in which the sculptor cover electric heater pieces of white marble in the shape of an ancient façade with four columns topped with a tympanum, thus making it a perverse piece of architecture. This is a similar game to that of providing "ordinary" things with an extraordinary appearance that Bofill pursued.

One can probably find the definition of the city proposed by Leon Krier in Bofill's residential complexes – the city consists of streets and squares, blocks and monumental buildings. Charles Jencks, in turn, calls this architecture a wonderful paradox.

Seeking the idea of the house in the city further, one can follow Le Corbusier's thought who believed that *architecture consists in building a shelter*[8]. This seems to be the most fundamental function of the building, especially a house. The master explains further that these shelters for contemporary people are the *illuminated surfaces*[9].

This thesis can be found in the works by Mario Botta who has repeatedly stressed the importance of the house as a shelter. Therefore, it is in vain to seek the principle of open space or permeation of the interior and exterior here, which remains so prevalent in contemporary architecture. Botta's buildings always have their own distinctive structure constructed from defined solids.

The La Fortezza offices and housing complex in Maastricht is formed by two linear volumes connected at the corner by a higher cylindrical block cut open. The development is becoming a key part of the shape of the place and layout of the streets. The rhythm and repetitiveness of square and rectangular window openings against the ceramic façade create the architecture of the building. They provide a sense of order and balance, and make this an urban structure. Residential apartments were located in the cylindrical block, so that the inner courtyard would create the space for residents.

Another multi-family house in Lugano has the form of a cylinder. The author *emphasised its autonomy among the cubic forms of urban development.* Massiveness of the walls with symmetrical openings is broken with a variably constructed brick façade. Horizontal stripes emphasise the original form and disrupt the uniformity of the walls. A symmetrically and deeply hollowed courtyard changes the appearance of the building from the other side – sharp semicircles ascend, providing lightness for the building. The scale of the building is intimate; it does not dominate the surroundings. Its geometry and balance constitute the accent against the surrounding buildings. The shape of a cylinder is often used by the architect who explains it as follows: *a cylindrical shape does not need a façade that could confront the neighbouring buildings*[10]. It is an original house in the city, which possesses the characteristics of monumental architecture.

With the limited compositional means – a basic transformation of Euclidean geometry, using the most basic natural materials and the development of external form and the interior, Mario Botta achieves expressive works. The detail of his architecture results from the applied

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[8] T. Barucki, *Architekci świata o architekturze*, Kanon, Warszawa 2005.
[9] *Ibidem.*
[10] M. Pabich, *Mario Botta. Nikt nie rodzi się architektem,* Wydawnictwo Politechniki Łódzkiej, 2013, p. 310.

building materials. It often stems from the context of the place, not being at variance with the originality and recognisability of this architecture.

It seems that one could also possibly select Polish implementations from the recent years for the set of monumental multifamily buildings. One of them is the residential and commercial complex *Murano* in Warsaw constructed according to the design by DDJM office. It takes the form of a block in the centre of a big city; its architectural shape exposes the corners, which ascend gradually. The architecture of the buildings is recognisable, taken from the recent past. The appearance of the façade is inspired by the architecture of socialist realism, so widely present in the capital city. According to the authors, *Murano refers to this stylistics, seeking the individual atmosphere for its residents, providing them with the spatial awareness of living in the city centre*[11]. It seems that it is a rather bold decision to directly invoke the spirit of unwanted architecture, so firmly connected with the political background of the country. Perhaps it is an act acknowledging a certain cultural tradition and maintaining its continuity, without erasing awkward elements.

The relation between symbolism, function and architectural form seems to be a significant one in the discussion referring to architectural monumental works. Residential buildings do not have a particular symbolism and their function is not a means of conveying great social ideas. Yet, this does not mean that they cannot be monumental. Nowadays, iconic and original buildings are created – they have been given priority in the creation of new districts and cities. They reflect contemporary achievements and ambitions of society. We do not know whether they represent the values similar to the monuments from the past, but they definitely constitute the symbol of the times in which they are created. The role of the house in the city is invariable – they are supposed to ensure the possibility of dwelling, sense of security, sometimes luxury and prestige. Yet, do they satisfy the need for beauty?

R e f e r e n c e s

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[11] www.ddjm.pl, retrieved in 2011.