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ARCHITECTURE AS BACKDROP AND INSPIRATION IN THE WORKS OF PETER BEHRENS AND OSKAR SCHLEMMER

ARCHITEKTURA JAKO TŁO I INSPIRACJA W TWÓRCZOŚCI PETERA BEHRENSA I OSKARA SCHLEMMERA

Abstract

The scope of the research is the relationship between architecture and the performing arts and their transformation in the works of Peter Behrens in the Darmstadt Artists' Colony Mathildenhöhe and Oskar Schlemmer's later Bauhaus-Bühne in Weimar and Dessau. The stage concepts were compared with the model "Haus Behrens" and "Haus am Horn", with theoretical underpinning of the source text. The result of the study is a scheme illustrating a gradual evolution of architecture and scene arts at the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: Peter Behrens, Mathildenhöhe, Gesamtkunstwerk, Jugendstil, Oskar Schlemmer, Bauhaus, history of architecture, history of theatre

Streszczenie

Przedmiot badań stanowi poszukiwanie relacji pomiędzy architekturą, zagadnieniami sztuk performatywnych oraz ich transformacjami w twórczości Petera Behrensa w kolonii Mathildenhöhe w Darmstadt oraz późniejszej Bauhaus-Bühne Oskara Schlemmera w Weimarze i Dessau. Porównano koncepcje sceniczne z modelowymi „Haus Behrens” oraz „Haus am Horn” na podbudowie teoretycznej tekstów źródłowych. Efektem jest schemat ilustrujący ewolucję architektury i sztuki teatralnej początku XX wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: Peter Behrens, Mathildenhöhe, Gesamtkunstwerk, Jugendstil, Oskar Schlemmer, Bauhaus, historia architektury, historia teatru

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1. Introduction

Much like theatre performance, architecture is a process of stage production and creation of events which cause certain impressions. This creation and the perception of the established space itself allows deep emotions to be experienced by both architect and recipient. The issues of the relationship between architecture and its theatrical dimension and the role of the theatre at the beginning of the 20th century were the subject of works by Peter Behrens in the Darmstadt Artists' Colony Mathildenhöhe and Oskar Schlemmer's later Bauhaus-Bühne in Weimar and Dessau. It also became the scope of research conducted among others by Stanford Anderson [1, *passim.*], Małgorzata Leyko [10, p. 5–30], and Jadwiga Staniszevska [12, p. 183–190]. This study documents the changes in thinking about space, observed in visual works, painting, architecture, theatre and performing arts based on contemporary Jugendstil and Bauhaus projects. Research questions were selected to formulate this relation. The answers were provided by the projects but above by all the analysis of the source books and the comments of artists and contemporary critics.

2. Research questions and background

To what extent were the ideas of Behrens and Schlemmer applied only to the aesthetic and cultural level? Were they a response to social reform and the needs of modern man?

The situation in the 19th century was the starting point of this study. In architecture and the fine arts this period was defined by historicism and it referred to the aesthetics of a bygone age. Richly decorated house facades expressed the socio-material status of the European bourgeoisie. They were more a concept based on the patterns of the past rather than the result of an innovative design process, and they embodied the ideals of middle-class material well-being. Much like everyday objects, facades were a kind of product created using catalogue production-line items. The stylistic costume and illusive richness of the exterior was a theatre performance played on the stage of urban spaces in big cities.

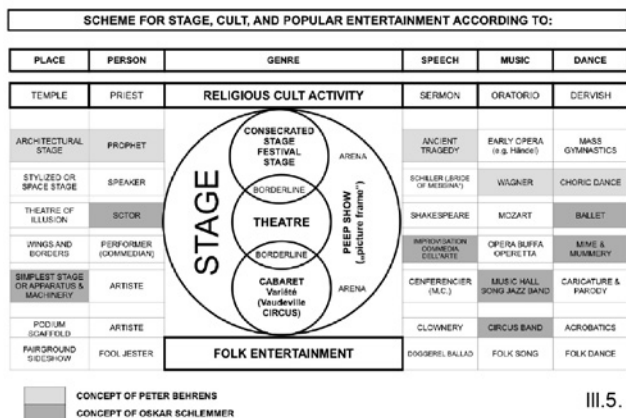
Along with the industrialization and the disappearance of the craft, the gap between life and art, which could be experienced in museums and theatres, widened. Rationalism, realism and naturalism in the visual arts almost excluded the elements of creation, fun, and sensual experience. Likewise, the nineteenth-century theatre, its repertoire, and the issues featured in plays, as well as spatial solutions, literally referred to history in a conventional manner. Current social and political problems were also presented in the form of costume. The role of the stage design and supporting machinery was to create an illusion. Unfortunately, the emergence of new technologies, including electric illumination, exposed the limitations of the previous stage solutions such as scenography, paintings, and the picture-frame stage dating back to the Baroque [7, p. 16]. The clear boundary between the decorative stage and the audience might be compared to the concept of façade in contemporary architecture. In the course of time the symbolic unity and emotional character of experience – the catharsis – had been lost. This was typical of Greek theatre, Shakespearean theatre, and the contemporary Japanese stage in which the actor went across a bridge to engage in better communication with the audience. It was necessary to reform and unify the theatre space.

3. Peter Behrens and the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk

According to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk – the unity within “the total work of art” – there was a desire to integrate and intensify various manifestations of artistic acts – visual arts, music, and literature. Facing the criticism of the superficiality of the formal solutions in architecture, perception and experience became the crucial concepts. There has been a shift towards the present and the timelessness of classical patterns. The emergence of Jugendstil and Secession was a deliberate break (lat *Secessio plebis*) [6, p. 2] with the past. It represented the superiority of youth and the joy of the creative process. The artistic patronage of Ernst Ludwig of Hesse in Darmstadt helped to create a breeding ground for the Mathildenhöhe artists’ colony. Joseph Maria Olbrich designed all the buildings for the first exhibition in 1901. Peter Behrens’ house was an exception. Despite the fact that he was educated as a painter, he designed his own house (Ill.1), followed by a series of other architectural projects. The creative atmosphere in the colony encouraged interaction while the 1901 exhibition “Ein Dokument Deutscher Kunst” was being prepared. The opening ceremony on 15th May was accompanied by a theatre staging of the play *Das Zeichen (The Sign)* [5] written by Peter Behrens and Georg Fuchs, music composed by Willem de Haan and illuminated. The play was held in architectural scenery such as on the stairs of the Ernst Ludwig Haus in the Mathildenhöhe colony. Hence, it might be compared to the Greek procession typical for theatre performances in honour of Dionysus and during the Roman Bacchanal. The new monumental stage affected both the senses and emotions. In this concept there was reference to the *catharsis* of the Greek theatre. The play was enacted on the monumental stairs, which became a kind of architectural stage. It was a prelude to a later theatre reform [2, p. 401–405]. Behrens created a simple stage which could be accessed by a few steps. It was slightly extended towards the audience. The interior referred to the stages of antiquity and of Wagner. The concept assumed a simplification of the space and the reduction of the fly tower. Symbolic painting and ornamental decoration replaced painted scenography. The actor’s costumes were not a copy but merely a stylistic reference to the past (Ill.2). The project of the Prinzregententheater in Munich designed by Max Littman in 1900 was an early precursor of this idea and had much in common with the Wagner’s theatre in Bayreuth. Rhythm and movement played a key role in the composition of space and its vertical and horizontal linear elements, which formed the stage. The designer assumed that the reformed stage would enable a harmonic perception due to the synergistic use of devices in a symbolic and simplified way. The title of his manifesto “*Feste des Lebens und der Kunst*” (“*Festivals of Life and Art.: Considerations on the Theatre as the Highest Cultural Symbol*”) emphasizes the idea of the theatre as a solemn celebration and a symbol of culture and universal beauty.

4. Oskar Schlemmer’s experimental stage. Bauhaus

It was the Bauhaus school that soon provided a fundamental change in thinking about the stage and architecture. Similarly to Darmstadt, a group of cooperating artists was essential for the creation of the stage in Weimar (1921–1925) and later in Dessau (1925–1928). Oskar Schlemmer, like Peter Behrens was a painter. Within the collective he established an avant-garde stage and a new language of visual forms. Instead of using a synergy of different artistic devices, Schlemmer focused on the translation of content through colour, mechanized



III.1.



III.3.



III.2.



III.4.

- III. 1. Haus Behrens, artists' colony Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, 1901, Author: p. Behrens, Fot: M. Bączkowska
- III. 2. Scene design for „Diogenes”, Hagen, 1909, Director: O.E. Hartleben, Scenography: p. Behrens, Source: „Kunstgewerbeblatt”, nr. 3, 1910, p. 41
- III. 3. Costume designs for “The Triadic Ballet”, author: O. Schlemmer, source: W. Gropius, A. Wensinger, The Theater of the Bauhaus: Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy; Farkas Molnár, Middletown, Connecticut 1961 p. 46
- III. 4. „Haus am Horn” Weimar, 1901, Author: G. Mucbe, Fot: M. Bączkowska
- III. 5. The analysis based on scheme for stage, cult and popular entertainment according to O. Schlemmer elaborated the author, Source: M. Bączkowska

movement in ballet and pantomime, or through geometric or organic costumes. For him the *“stage is a representation abstracted from the natural and directing its effect at the human being”* [8, p. 18]. This progressive approach was reflected in the *“The Triadic Ballet”* which was the result of a vision of the human body and its movement in a mathematically defined space (III.3). The actor did not need a complex and limited stage as in the 19th century theatre, and the play could be performed almost anywhere. Aside from Schlemmer, other Bauhaus artists also provided their visions of the new stage – Fakras Molnar with his *“U-Theater”*, and Andreas Weininger with *“The Spherical Theater”* [8, *ibid. passim*]. Laszlo Moholy Nagy experimented with light, movement and photography and kinetic sculpture. These concepts represented the dream of a *“total theatre”* – a kind of dynamic system in motion. Due to the difficult financial situation of the Bauhaus school, the stage was never completed. The school campus in Dessau served as an actual stage for artistic activities. In Weimar the stage experiences were accompanied by innovative architectural projects. The model *“House am Horn”* by Georg Muehe (III.4), which embodied an idea of simplicity, also provided the space for the viewer’s own interpretation. In contrast to Behrens’ ideas inspired by culture, the Bauhaus theatre created a stage based on clear, elementary forms with the principal role of human being as the source of word, movement and sound. In order to illustrate his concept, Schlemmer introduced a dialogue of two fictitious people: *“A: But I should be able to imagine something by seeing that! B: Why? Something is being shown to you. There is something taking place before your eyes, ‘a drama’, ‘a scene’ and you do not have to do anything other than just enjoy this. Keep your eyes open and receive impressions”* [10, p. 83]. Colours were not assigned any particular symbolic meaning. It was the play and sensual experience that mattered, especially in the works called *“Stick dance”* and *“Block play”*.

5. Conclusion and summary

Considering the play, modern cultural theorist Johan Huizinga sums up that *“we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means”* [9, p. 13]. Thus, depending on the situation, the architect can be at the same time a kind of Coryphaeus and Homo Ludens (lat. playing Man, the title of the book written by J. Huizinga) creating a mystery play or moving architecture depending on the choreography created. This is illustrated and modified by the author referring to Schlemmer’s diagram (III.5) of stage typology. This classifies the scene in the categories of cult and popular entertainment. Referring to the above and endorsed by the study of the contemporary social situation, architecture might be considered as a game and play in a space. It might also be an inspiration and backdrop for the performing arts. The result of this study is to present the relationship between theatre and architecture. In the project of his own house, Behrens used material solutions and fine details to pursue integrity and aesthetics in everyday life. The *“Haus am Horn”* as the prototype of a simple form was a response to the situation of growing abstraction in the mechanized world at the beginning of the 20th century. The evolution of the stage gradually encouraged

the viewer to participate by providing space for individual interpretation. Similarly, modern architecture in its simplicity was the scene of life and play. By inviting us to play it raised many more questions than answers.

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