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ARCHITECTURAL GAMES AND PLAY WITH FORM, OR ON THE PURSUIT OF PRETEXTS TO SHAPE THINGS

ARCHITEKTONICZNE GRY I ZABAWY Z FORMĄ, ALBO O POSZUKIWANIU PRETEKSTÓW DO NADAWANIA RZECZOM KSZTAŁTU

Abstract

While shaping things, architects frequently seek pretexts in the world of art, to justify the originality of the accepted solutions. Such pretexts are also spatial games and play with the form of the object devised by architects. They are based on rules and guidelines, which have a direct impact on the idea, composition or implementation plan of the designed facility. Architectural games and play are also repeatedly used in the process of educating future architects.

Keywords: games and play of architecture, pretext, creative idea

Streszczenie

Nadając rzeczom kształt, architekci niejednokrotnie poszukują w świecie sztuki pretekstów, aby uzasadnić oryginalność przyjętych rozwiązań. Takimi pretekstami stają się również wymyślane przez architektów przestrzenne gry i zabawy z formą obiektu. Ich podstawą są reguły i wytyczne, mające bezpośredni wpływ na ideę, kompozycję czy zamysł realizacyjny projektowanego obiektu. Niejednokrotnie architektoniczne gry i zabawy znajdują także zastosowanie w procesie kształcenia przyszłych architektów.

Słowa kluczowe: gry i zabawy architektury, pretekst, zamysł twórczy

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The essence of architecture is to give things shape. To this end, architects search for pretexts to justify their creative decisions. Contemporary artistic practices and numerous affinities between architecture and other fields of arts [10], especially sculpture and painting, allow one to treat this ability in shaping things as a kind of spatial game or play justifying the search for original features for the designed facility. In the numerous games and play of architects it is often more important to establish rules directly affecting the very essence of the design idea than to give the final expression to the form of a given work. Doing this requires not only skills, expertise, talent, but, above all, a unique idea to determine the spatial principles for the design of a work – and so finding rules for architectural and games and play with form. Importantly, both compliance with and violation of the rules can be equally important in the search for compositional originality. The most appropriate field for creative experimentation, based on spatial invention of games and play with form, seems to be the theory of architecture. Justifiably, one finds it also in architectural education in the form of numerous exercises on spatial imagination and creativity. The rules and principles of the creative game are also dictated during architectural competitions; many a time, breaking these determined victory. The creative idea and the game of building architecture can be also based on the original implementation of the object. In these games, the architect is not only a draftsman of architecture, but also the initiator and active participant in directing the proposed process of structure erection.

The most interesting architectural games include primarily those relating directly to the essence of composing and creating the image of a building. Here one can find numerous spatial games and play consisting in adding and removing forms. These are closely linked to the issue of the solid and void in architecture, and thus relate to the shape of the architectural object perceived as a kind of built structure together with its interior – limited by surrounding it with a defined matter or hollowed. The image of the building is mostly perceived in the context of a built structure resulting from giving materials appropriate forms and their combination or integration in a coherent, deliberate aesthetic whole. The shaping of the object's form can also take the complex form of Corbusierian “learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in light.” [6, p. 80], or play in collating and creating relationships between solids, or seek purist moderation maintaining a tight rein on a single elemental solid, tending toward Minimalism. In his book *Experiencing Architecture*, Steen Eiler Rasmussen draws attention to the fact that during the creation of architecture: “it is possible to have quite a different conception. Instead of letting his imagination work with structural forms, with the solids of a building, the architect can work with the empty space – the cavity – between the solids, and consider the forming of that space as the real meaning of architecture” [8, p. 46]. The pretext for seeking the original form of the work can consist here in defining the void, created in the creative process by the skilful use of the principles of matter subtraction from a given volume of a solid. The principle of matter subtraction has been used a number of times in the history of architecture. S. E. Rasmussen recalls several hollowed temples in Karli in India. One can mention here many other structures hollowed out of the rock, such as Egyptian temples and tombs, and objects in Jordan's Petra created this way. These also include the Lycian rock cut tombs of Dalyan in Turkey and such original structures as The Church of Saint George in the Ethiopian town of Lalibela. The void, clearly defined, limited by a partition, formed in the process of rock material subtraction, forms a kind of sophisticated space predisposing it to be perceived in the terms of a classic work of art.

It is said that “architects do not build but draw”. Among the currently drawing architects one can find those for whom capturing the idea of the architectural thing in the relevant matter is closely linked to its original implementation plan. In this case, the creator also plays at builder, designing and supervising the unique process of materialisation of the work. He does not use solutions typical of engineering logic and rationality, but by inventing and imposing a unique method of object implementation he searches for the aesthetic nature of the building, resulting directly from the accepted idea and compositional principle of the work. A reflection then occurs – what was a more important stimulus for the character of the building thus devised? Was the implementation idea planned for the purpose of materialisation of the adopted form of the object, or did an unconventional construction process become a pretext to search for a specific idea of the work? The integrity of both of these creative motives seems to point to the original essence of the idea of an architectural object – the consistency of the work’s implementation rule and its form which was represented in a suitable material. The very act of construction rises to the rank of an extraordinary artistic event – a happening – aimed at the pleasure of creating and erecting architecture. The careful planning of the original process of the “birth” of the object by the creator can contribute to a feeling of sublimity and uniqueness of the work’s form created this way. The frequently adopted manner of its implementation assumes the character of a spontaneous act of creation, more often than not rising with its expression to the rank of an architectural joke – play with shapes, solids, icons. Regardless of the creative convention assumed and the purpose of the building, this phenomenon allows the intended work to be subsumed in the category of contemporary architectural art. In this case, the concept of an object is expressed by the consistency of the design and implementation idea. Their mutual correlation and logical, coherent relationship give the form of the building a unique artistic expression. It is more appropriate for an artist-sculptor than for the profession of architect-engineer. The building is perceived as a sculpture rather than as a machine-installation. Two small buildings can serve as an example illustrating this way of thinking about an architectural work. The first – *Bruder Klaus Field Chapel*¹ was designed by Peter Zumthor [9]. As a result of burning a stack of tree trunks cast in concrete, a unique, sacred interior was created. The object’s implementation concept became the pretext for finding the final form of the building. The second one is a monolithic building *The Truffle*², designed in Ensamble Studio [7]. The titular “truffle” resembles a natural stone, cast in concrete in an earth formwork. Inside, a single space residential interior with modular compressed hay bales was created. Before it was finished, it served as a pasture for a calf. In both cases we deal with a particular form of the game of playing “the creator” whose immediate area of operation is not so much the drawing board itself but the building site – being the “stage” for an architectural performance or artistic event. The design becomes a scenario here. The architect, in turn, is not so much a screenwriter but a director of this performance. The pretext for the emergence of both these objects is the original implementation idea, whose attractiveness is based on a story – an architectural anecdote – possessing its dramaturgy and important turning point, often included in an architectural joke, in the “birth” of an object. When the intention of the work’s concept is correlated with the sculptural act of construction,

¹ *Bruder Klaus Field Chapel*, Peter Zumthor, Mechernich-Wachendorf, Rissdorferweg, Germany, design: 1998–2007, implementation: 2007.

² *The Truffle*, Ensamble Studio (Ricardo Sanz, Javier Cuesta) & Anton Garcia-Abril, Costa da Morte, Spain, design/implementation: 2010.

there is a subjective sense of unity of form and matter, constituting the entire expression of the architectural work. It is also subconsciously sensed by the observer (the recipient). Discovering the implementation genesis of the observed object completes the understanding of the uniqueness of the idea adopted by the creator. Once the observer has gained the knowledge of the building's creation, they simultaneously discover the justification for its spatial plan – curiosity is satisfied. An interaction ensues – the architect's game with the recipient of the work's mystery hidden in the act of creation (construction), and the audience's fun at guessing the mystery.

Architectural games and play, constituting a pretext to seek the shape of the object, are also widely used in teaching future architects. An example here is the topics of the course designs created under the supervision of Professor Dariusz Kozłowski from the Department of Housing Architecture and Architectural Composition of the Faculty of Architecture at Cracow University of Technology. *The house, or playing with the cube* theme is covered during the third semester [1, p. 22–29]. The student has at their disposal a cube – regarded as the ideal form – and designs an architectural composition – a house – following strict rules. The rules of the game are determined by the assigned modular grid. The essence of this play consists in the game of removing elements from the cubic volume in accordance with the lines set by the orthogonal modular grid. Designing a cubic house is a pretext for learning architectural regulations and rules of composition in the process of architectural education. *Concrete Architecture – Play of Solids – House in the Landscape* is a theme covered during the fourth semester [2, p. 8–35]. The titular *Play of Solids* refers to the Corbusierian “learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light.” [6, p. 80], which in turn is a pretext for seeking the original form of the building. At this point the game of a student contest also appears. An interesting game is also offered to students within the specialised design or diploma seminar. The topic *Place seeking form, form seeking function* becomes, in accordance with the presented assumptions of the exercise, “the search for the lost record of the idea of a City, Monument or House in the World Museum of Imagination through spatial reconstruction of the painting and its application in the real city site” [3, p. 6–7]. The pretext for the topic of the spatial game formulated this way was El Lissitzky's thesis saying that “painting is an interchange station to architecture” [quoted after: 3, p. 7]. The game begins with finding the appropriate painterly composition which can be spatially embedded in the selected context of the urban fabric. Flat compositions of abstract paintings become pretexts to seek the shape of objects and to give their forms a spatial expression suitable to the location [4]. In his book *Zapis myśli o przestrzeni (The record of thoughts on space)*, Piotr Gajewski described reflections which accompany the attainment of the exercise's objectives: “The works are based on the assumption that every painting, even that created in the manner of non-representative art, is a synthesis of the multidimensional world. If so, it can be tempting to restore the space recorded there. This restitution is not of the nature of a mathematical proof, as is the case of Renaissance *veduta*, but is the hypothesis of the existence of a three-dimensional world under the guise of a flat composition. The concepts of recreating the real world on the basis of the same paintings may be different, just as interpretations of reality are subjective. The experiment conducted by Professor Kozłowski shows that architectural spaces are recorded not only in the Renaissance views of Venice, but also in abstract painting” [5, p. 34].

Nowadays, one can observe the universally prevailing pluralism of creative doctrines in architecture. This phenomenon is conducive to the development of numerous spatial games based on pretexts existing in contemporary art in the broad sense. The focus on the

individualism of creative solutions strengthens the importance of moving away from the existing significance of styles, movements, trends, and a classical concept of beauty in contemporary architecture in favour of the paradigm of form originality and diversity. It is not without reason that this state of affairs is also affected by the widespread reign of the democratic nature of social systems in the countries of the Western World, oriented towards commercial, consumption and often social model of shaping architectural forms. It aims at playing with the audience rather than the pleasure of creating ambitious works seeking higher values in art. Pandering to the masses and creative populism ultimately lead to the fall of the essence of architecture, regarded as a unique art form which expresses human civilization's aspirations in a tangible way. Referring to pretexts from the world of art – primarily painting and sculpture – enables us to save its spirit. Numerous games devised by architects give the opportunity to implement creative ambitions both in the theory of architecture and during the design and implementation of buildings. There is also a rationale for using them in architectural education as they formulate composition principles and the rules for creating forms of buildings. Seeking and finding the appropriate pretexts to justify the adopted creative solutions is also a form of architectural play whose ultimate goal is the pleasure of creating, drawing, naming, classifying and describing things from the world of contemporary architecture.

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