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ARCHITECTURE AS FUN OR HAVING FUN
WITH ARCHITECTURE?
– SELECTED EXAMPLES

ARCHITEKTURA ZABAWĄ
CZY ZABAWA ARCHITEKTURĄ?
– WYBRANE PRZYKŁADY

Abstract

In this article the issue of architecture as fun or having fun with architecture will be discussed on the basis of some concrete architectural examples, namely the Hundertwasserhaus in Vienna, the “Crooked House” in Sopot, the “Baj Pomorski” Theatre building in Toruń and the so-called “Spider” in Gorzów Wielkopolski. Notwithstanding the positive or negative result of the design, we shall consider the issue of having “good” fun in the process of creating a building.

Keywords: architecture, Crooked House, designer, Hundertwasser, play

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule zagadnienie: architektura zabawą czy zabawa architekturą zostanie omówione na zrealizowanych przykładach architektonicznych, a mianowicie Hundertwasserhaus w Wiedniu, Krzywym Domku w Sopocie, budynku Teatru „Baj Pomorski” w Toruniu oraz tzw. „Pająku” w Gorzowie Wielkopolskim. Niezależnie od pozytywnego czy negatywnego rezultatu projektowego, zostanie rozważona kwestia „dobrej” zabawy w trakcie tworzenia obiektu.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, Hundertwasser, Krzywy Domek, projektant, zabawa

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1. Introduction

For most of the people the word ‘fun’ is associated with the period of childhood and carefree adolescence, when every spare moment was spent having fun with friends. To be sure, this time has a certain idyllic quality but also, and perhaps above all, unrestrained creativity, adapted to the age of course. A child’s imagination is “infinite”, hence it is possible to have fun in so many ways with the minimum of tools or toys. It is generally believed that playing time is learning time, but does this only apply to children? Or perhaps it may be also extended to adults?

An insightful etymology of the concept of fun in Polish was given by Aleksander Brückner. The author argues that this word derives from “be”, “stay”, followed by “busy”, “employed” and only at the end it takes on the attributes of cheerfulness, merrymaking in the present sense of the word [1, p. 642–643]. An explanation of this concept, which is much closer to us, is given for example by *The Dictionary of the Polish Language*, from which we learn that fun means, inter alia, “activities that please us, that we enjoy, that allow us to spend time nicely; entertainment” [5].

In my opinion, the most general definition of fun was given by Johan Huizing, who claimed that “fun is a voluntary act or activity carried out within certain limits of time and space, according to voluntarily adopted, but unconditionally binding rules; it is an objective in itself, it is accompanied by the feeling of tension and joy and awareness of dissimilarity to ordinary life” [2, p. 22]. Looking at the above explanation of the term, it appears that the concept of fun is not only about making free time more pleasant and does not only apply to children, but everyone (regardless of age), who by doing a certain activity is feeling some sort of emotional state similar to contentment.

2. Discussion of the topic on selected examples

When looking at some completed works of architecture, it seems that the designer played with the shape of the building, its form, and even the texture and colour. In a sense, these are the outcome of some fun that the architect had with the designed building. In the surrounding reality, we find both positive and negative activities of this type. However, both types are the result of creative attempts to transform reality, and since they have been implemented, it means they brought some sort of satisfaction to the designer. When looking at the design process in this way (of course oversimplifying somewhat) we can compare it to fun as explained in the definition given by Wincenty Okoń namely, that it is “an activity done for your own pleasure, which is based on your imagination that creates a new reality. Although this activity is governed by rules, content of which is mainly derived from social life, it is creative in nature and leads to understanding and transforming reality” [3, p. 44].

2.1. The Hundertwasser House in Vienna

An interesting example of an approach to the design process treated as “good” fun is the work of Friedensreich Hundertwasser – an artist who, after only a few months, had abandoned his studies at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts [4]. Hundertwasser has left a legacy not only in painting, but also in architectural designs, next to which no one can stay aloof;

the observer is either delighted or surprised that “something like that” was allowed. A distinguishing feature of all Friedensreich Hundertwasser’s works was his passion for wavy lines, putting bright contrasting colours together and adding plant-like forms. While in buildings, he used windows of various sizes and sometimes placed them in quite surprising places; in addition, he always found space to put coloured ceramic tiles, columns and gold-plated balls or onion-shaped helmets – which became characteristic elements of his architectural works. For this reason, his architecture can be unmistakably recognized.

One of the most recognizable works by this artist is the Hundertwasserhaus in Vienna, situated on the corner of the streets Kegelgasse and Löwengasse. It was built in 1983–1985 and immediately became one of the many tourist attractions of the capital of Austria. Its architecture is typical of the work of Friedensreich Hundertwasser, entailing a complete lack of horizontal lines – only waves, the distribution of variously sized windows at different heights, and the use of colours on the façade more referring to illustrated books for children than a building serving commerce and residential functions. Further, the designer did not forget about his distinguishing features, such as Baroque-like columns and golden balls placed as finials of selected elements. Both the area of the plot and the façade with balconies and other bays is covered with vegetation, which is a kind of aesthetic completion of the visual reception of the building.

On the one hand, the use of the above components in the design proves Hundertwasser’s great courage, on the other, however, it shows that the designer had excellent fun when creating his work (this also applies to other buildings). Combining such different and diverse architectural components probably gave the artist a lot of pleasure, and in the end brought him some kind of satisfaction. In accordance with the definition cited above, it was some kind of fun – “good” fun.

2.2. The Crooked House in Sopot

In Poland, in Sopot, on Bohaterów Monte Cassino Street (the popular “Monciak”), there is an architectural feature which is the result of an architect’s “good” fun. We are talking about the Crooked House of course, which appeared on one of the most elegant and famous streets in Sopot in 2003 and immediately entered the cultural landscape of the city. Currently, no one could imagine Sopot, or more specifically the “Monciak”, without the Crooked House.

Previously, the architects Małgorzata Kruszko-Szatyńska and Szczepan Szatyński, inspired by the drawings of the famous graphic designer from Cracow – Jan Marcin Szancer and the Swedish graphic designer residing in, among others, Sopot – Per Oscar Gustav Dahlberg, played, during the design phase, with the shape and the form, to ultimately obtain a building whose architecture resembles far more the illustrations from children’s books than buildings in a health resort. The structure surprises by its complete lack of straight lines, everything is “crooked” (including window and door openings) – hence its name. This two-form little tenement serving commercial functions has three floors, a habitable attic and interesting, warm colours both on the façade and in the interior.

The Crooked House, although it is a relatively new feature among Sopot’s buildings, has already become a city symbol, a kind of hallmark. Each patient of the health resort and tourist of the city has this place on their sightseeing route. The popularity of the Crooked House has already exceeded the borders of Poland. This unique, fairytale house was placed on a list of the world’s 50 strangest buildings published by the Village of Joy portal and ended up as one of eleven on the list of unusual features announced by the American television station CNN [6].



Examples of “good” and “bad” play architecture (photographs made by J. Gubański)

Proposing and constructing such an original building with unique architecture was only possible due to an unconventional approach to design and creating the space without any design inhibitions and restrictions. The final result shows that the architects had great fun when creating it.

2.3. “Good” and “bad” fun with architecture

Equally intriguing and unusual playing with architecture can certainly be noticed when looking at the modernized “Baj Pomorski” Theatre building in Toruń, put into reuse in 2006. This is an interesting example, primarily due to the entry area, which is formed in the shape

of an open wardrobe with lots of drawers and compartments. Looking at the façade at the entrance, we have the feeling that we will soon cross the threshold of an enchanted wardrobe. Such a presentation may seem rather infantile to some, but when we know that the main users of this facility are children and young people, it becomes extremely accurate.

This fabulous effect was possible only due to the designers' extremely creative look at the space surrounding them, not giving in to the historical pressure of this place and being open to unprofessional, but also unique perception of the architecture, which resulted in inviting Pavel Hibicka, the stage designer, to the design process [7]. The final result of their cooperation displays openness and unlimited creative enthusiasm, and thus good fun.

Although the building of the Puppet Theatre definitely stands out due to its architectural costume, it blends perfectly with the buildings of the Old Town – it has to be mentioned that it is situated in the immediate vicinity of the ruins of a mediaeval castle built by the Teutonic Knights, and forms a part of the landscape in this historical part of the city, which is entered on the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites.

A completely different example of playing with architecture is the “Spider” in Gorzów Wielkopolski. The structure, considered strange, to put it mildly, by most viewers, is situated in the city centre at the roundabout. You can only access it from an underground passage, which does not, however, lead from the main circulation route, which is the Staromiejski Bridge. It is also unclear what the function of the feature is, since it is hardly accessible in terms of public circulation, and it turns out that it serves a wide variety of functions, from information desks and toilets, through a light fountain, a sculpture – signpost, an underground passage, to an architectural landmark with an observation platform (located at a height of approx. 20 m). And this architectural landmark gives rise to the greatest controversy, and not only among the inhabitants of Gorzów Wielkopolski. A building located in the heart of a city should refer to its history or be directly associated with its present time, while the “Pająk” surprises all viewers; what is it and why was it situated there. This feature disfigures the view of Gorzów from every point, whether from one of the most beautiful bridges in the city – the Staromiejski Bridge – or from the historical, half-timbered granary.

Still, there are also completely different opinions on the “Spider” in Gorzów Wielkopolski. For example, in the online guide to unusual places in Poland we can read: “The design is one of the most interesting achievements of 21st-century architecture in Gorzów Wielkopolski” [8]. You can certainly say that the example is not one of the most fortunate ones – the architects played with architecture, but it is possible that they had good fun when they created this design.

3. Summary

Looking at the examples discussed above, we can see that regardless of the final effect, there is a strong likelihood that the designers had good fun with architecture during the design process. They demonstrated not only great creativity in shaping the space, but also openness to the place and not allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by the historic character and history of the site, while at the same time showing creative courage in order to implement the designs for features of this type. It seems that in all cases, the architecture was fun and the designers had fun with the architecture.

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