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DEPREDAATION IN ARCHITECTURE (SELECTED EXAMPLES)

SZKODNICTWO W ARCHITEKTURZE (NA PRZYKŁADACH WYBRANYCH)

Abstract

The conference, whose main theme for fourteen years has been “Defining the architectural space”, will this year attract participants’ attention with a provocative extension – “games and play of architecture”. From a wide spectrum of thematic approaches related to “games and play” with architecture, the author chose the aspect of the possible threats which may arise if irresponsible or immoral and ideologically determined people dabble in architecture.

Keywords: art, beauty, reception of art, conscious shaping of space, mastery, social utopias, wars, totalitarianism, “fascist (Nazi) architecture”, social realist architecture, totalitarian ideologies

Streszczenie

Konferencja, której przewodnim tematem od czternastu lat jest „Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej”, w tym roku koncentrować będzie uczestników prowokującym rozwinięciem – „gry i zabawy architektury”. Z szerokiego spektrum możliwości ujęć tematycznych dotyczących „gier i zabaw” architekturą, autor wybrał aspekt możliwych zagrożeń, które mogą się pojawić w przypadku parania się architekturą przez ludzi nieodpowiedzialnych albo niemoralnych i zdeterminowanych ideologicznie.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka, piękno, odbiór sztuki, świadome kształtowanie przestrzeni, mistrzostwo, utopie społeczne, wojny, totalitaryzm, „architektura faszystowska (nazistowska)”, architektura socrealistyczna, totalitarne ideologie

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1. General issues

From time immemorial there has been a discussion among architects on the prosaic topic of “what is architecture?”. During previous conferences a number of questions were posed whose guiding motive was “defining the architectural space”, i.e. the question of how to qualify all (and diverse) activities related to architecture. The definitions of these concepts have evolved depending on the time, the prevailing styles and fashions, i.e. the changes taking place in the life of societies.

One of the most popular definitions says that architecture is *the art of shaping space*. A broader definition states that architecture covers buildings, interiors, but also a wider field of view – on the scale of cities and regional planning, and thus it also includes urban issues, etc. Without going into an analysis of all these definitions, one can say that architecture should be ranked among the arts. The architectural art is a conscious and the most masterly way of shaping and arranging space (through properly selected constructions and forms) in accordance with the intended function. The author wants to emphasise that this is a conscious shaping of space.

Space is not only a common property, but also an essential ingredient (and often determinant and regulator) of existence in human civilization, responsible for the welfare of individuals and societies to a large degree. That is why someone must bear certain consequences for its development – either good or bad. Thus, this art cannot be born in any circumstances – e.g. in the course of “playing” with art – by just anyone. Only masters in every category of art – e.g. painting, sculpture, music, poetry, etc. – possess this special ability to “play” (in a good sense of the word). Stanislaw Witkiewicz’s words spoken to the painter Leon Wyczółkowski (over a hundred years ago) are perfectly suitable to illustrate this ascertainment: (...) *I like you, Wyczół, you scoundrel, for the way you play with art.*

The “organisation” of the reception of each piece of art must have a special setting; it is, for example, the mood of the theatre scene during the poem recited by an actor, exhibiting paintings or sculptures in museums. This requires a whole set of measures, involving different ways of displaying, selecting background colours, lighting, sometimes background music, and even room temperature, etc. The display of architectural objects in different contexts is similar – these can include landscape, the existing urban fabric, or the context of historic cities.

Likewise, the exhibition of the interiors are the sum of sometimes even contemplative experience of the master-architect, before the implemented expressions will induce all kinds of impressions on the part of the viewer. In general, people tend to perceive art very individually, but there are exceptions, when the artistic experience becomes compelling for all.

Furthermore, it appears that... even the weather (also associated with climate), the location of the facility or the interior in a specific geographical and cultural area, the type of lighting and many other factors affecting the individual and collective perception have an impact on the artistic experience.

For example – also (only – one might say) experience reported by the first astronauts who viewed Earth from the spacecraft are undoubtedly among the most authentic, which the majority of mankind identified emotionally with, even though those were merely the accounts of those who described the view of the Earth with cries of delight. In particular contrast

– a moral one – to this description are descriptions of the experience of American pilots who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. According to their account, the mushroom cloud carrying total disaster was also a phenomenon of indescribable beauty! This brutal comparison shows how fragile the border showing different aspects of beauty is.

One might ask what Paris would look like if the visionary design of a famous architect Le Corbusier in 1924 had been implemented. Its starting point was the demolition of the centre of Paris for new buildings (i.e. Plan “Voisin” – urban unit for 3 million inhabitants).

The history of mankind shows different aspects of problems associated with art – both positive and negative; some of them gave their creators and patrons satisfaction and joy, waking general awe, others triggered human tragedies and curses.

2. Architecture and politics

A particular tragedy for the man of the twentieth century was, among others, the interwar period, when totalitarian systems striving to realise social utopias came to power in a number of countries. The ideology of these systems, based on contempt for man, led to acts of genocide and the extermination of entire peoples. Undoubtedly the consequences of World War I contributed to this – the collapse of the monarchical system and the post-war poverty created an opportunity for totalitarian systems. In Russia, after the 1917 October Revolution and under Stalin’s subsequent rule, an extreme communist regime lasted until his death in 1953¹ and continued for many years after Gorbachev’s watershed and the collapse of the USSR. The acquisition of power by Mussolini in 1922 initiated fascist governments in Europe. Hitler comes to power in Germany in 1933, and fascist general Franco in Spain in 1936.

The effects of these political facts with their accompanying ideological-propaganda doctrines affected artistic creativity, and especially architecture. In Europe, Modernism is fought due to political and ideological motives. In the Soviet Union, a new architectural style called “Bolshevik architecture” appears. A fashionable trend (or actually a guideline) in design in the countries dominated by totalitarianism is heavy, massive Monumentalism, indicating the power of authorities, chauvinist glory and strength of the nation and its security.

The building of the Reichsbank in Berlin, realised by Heinrich Wolff – according to the special wishes of Hitler – became a breakthrough example (to follow) of (aesthetically) toxic architecture in German architecture. A particular expression of the architecture of the National Socialist regime is the work of Albert Speer² (a personal architect and a personal favourite of Hitler, Berlin’s chief architect and head of the Todt Organization). Among his numerous projects the building of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin (1936–1939) should draw one’s attention. The design of both the interior and exterior of the building is dominated by monumental (and even megalomaniac) features, “Nordic” austerity, as well as the total expansion of the power wielding Hitler (Russians dismantled the building in 1949). Features of megalomania manifested themselves also in the design of the Reichsparteitagsgelände grandstand in Nuremberg. A special object that aroused emotions was the “Ehrentempel” (i.e.

¹ After Stalin’s death, the main methods of his regime were changed in many countries occupied by Russia after the Second World War by introducing “modified forms of socialist realism”.

² Albert Speer, a student and assistant of Heinrich Tessenow, in 1936 he was commissioned by Hitler with the reconstruction of Berlin (the so-called “World Capital Germania”).



- III. 1–2. Socialist realist residential buildings which until recently occurred en masse in Poland in various embodiments
- III. 3. Multifunctional building in Karpacz
- III. 4. Advertisements as spatial and architectural accents – the bane of Polish urban-rural landscapes

the Temple of Honour) in Munich (1934–1935), built by another of Hitler’s trusted architects – Paul Ludwig Troost.

The architecture of this tragic period for humanity had particularly dramatic consequences in the design of the concentration camps – Auschwitz-Birkenau, Buchenwald, Dachau and further – with specially designed gas chambers, crematoria and other buildings intended for destruction of lives. The names of renowned artists involved in this are particularly astonishing, such as Erich Franc from the elite art academy Bauhaus, the designer of the gate

to Buchenwald with the famous inscription above it: “Jedem das Seine” (To each what he deserves). The symbol of the greatest destruction in the history of mankind was the concentration camp (Konzentrationslager) in Auschwitz with the famous entrance gate and cynical inscription “Arbeit macht frei” (Work makes you free). As can be seen, even in the hands of brilliant creators, art can be used for the purposes of works and activities morally impossible to accept.

3. Examples of Polish architecture from the period of constraint

Fascist and Soviet totalitarian imprinted a special stigma on Polish soil. Wars combined with the destruction of civilization (including architectural) and cultural achievements carried incredible acts of vandalism on Polish soil combined with the extermination of elites and enslavement of the nation. Let us recall here one incredible perversion. One of the Nazi architects, named Gross, planned on drawing boards – after winning the war and the complete enslavement of Poles – not the extension of Warsaw (even in a Nazi style) but its **urban-surgical reduction – amputation, cropping** – planned and precise reduction to a small urban organism as a new and merely symbolic “capital” of the slave state.

The architectural symbol of the post-war period in Poland is the Palace of Culture and Science – “a gift from the Soviet people to the Polish nation” or “a gift of Stalin” for Warsaw. Designed by Russian architect Lev Rudnev and constructed in the centre of Warsaw in the years 1952–1955, it is a blend of various forms of social realism and Polish historicism. Together with the spire it is 237 metres high, thus constituting the main architectural accent of the city. This year (2015) the palace will be celebrating 60 years of existence. The Palace of Culture and Science has always aroused pejorative feelings among the inhabitants of Warsaw and Poland. However, it still remains one of the symbols of the capital due to its architecture and history. It also should be noted here that there are a lot more of such “gifts” (even if “ideological” ones) in the form of various smaller or larger objects in the style associated with the system of Soviet totalitarianism. A particular implementation within this scope was the Vladimir Lenin Steelworks in Cracow together with the Nowa Huta township³. The steelworks and the new town were built on fertile rural areas that had been expropriated. In total, for the purposes of the abovementioned investments peasants had been expropriated from contemporary rural areas (76 km²) for the extremely low compensation of 5–10% of the nominal value of land. On the one hand, a strong industrial plant was created, giving jobs and houses to people. On the other hand, the legacy of farming culture and traditions of the Polish countryside of dozens of generations had been swept away. In his diagnosis of the transformations that took place in post-war communist Poland at all levels of life, including planning and architecture, Andrzej Lorek [2, p. 171] notes that: *[...] Communism was the cause of the destruction of the economy and economic rights, as well as the distribution of the existing social order, it annihilated its feasibility, and of the conversion into a total*

³ According to Małgorzata Włodarczyk, in the case of Nowa Huta designers managed to avoid the influence of decision-makers in the so-called “Moscow spirit” during its implementation, as happened in e.g. Warsaw where the so called MDM was constructed on the ruins of the capital (the Warsaw Housing Quarter) “...It was a city implemented from scratch in post-war Poland...”, [4, p. 6]

counterproposal for the state of lawlessness and political terror. Throughout the postwar period, until 1989, we dealt with an architecture of “peculiar socialist realism” which is difficult to be logically defined.

4. Conclusions

The issues signalled here, related to the brutality of architecture, which are antithetical to joyful games and the play of architecture and art in the broad sense, can provoke further discussion about art in general. Joyful architectural creativity presumably infects broad masses of its recipients. People identify with their place of residence and their surroundings. After 1989, the Polish economic system changed from socialist to capitalist. The 25 years of experience since then has shown that architecture must be governed by certain laws and rules. Architecture left to the laws of arbitrariness and relaxation is also unacceptable.⁴ There are many concepts in defining architectural trends and rights, especially regarding single-family housing. Among them, a noteworthy trend is represented among others by Maria Misiągiewicz, who states: [...] *In the prevailing stylistic pluralism, minimalist architecture appears to be the result of a longing for a simple architecture which is synonymous with intellectual and elegant style. This idea can also be perceived as a protest against the excess of shapes frequently imposed by the pressure of commercialism.* [3, p. 131]

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⁴ W. Kosiński, who highlights this issue, provides a visionary warning: ... *Apart from the obvious epochal values, the ongoing political transformation since 1989 also brings about extremely serious systemic defects when bad law reflects in a deterioration of reality, Introduction to the Polish edition* [1, p.11]