

BOHDAN PACZOWSKI*

WHO PLAYS WHAT AND WITH WHOM? PLAY AND GAMES IN ARCHITECTURE

KTO GRA, Z KIM I W CO SIĘ BAWI? GRY I ZABAWY W ARCHTEKTURZE

Abstract

The Muses protected movement arts like dance or theatre. The works of architecture remain immobile. The architect might play while designing. He helped to establish the picture of a community bonded by religious or political beliefs. In times of crisis he turned back to nature and experiments. In our world – dominated by the power of money and technological progress – he must maintain imagination and reliability.

Keywords: game, imagination, memory, reason, reliability

Streszczenie

Muzy patronowały sztukom ruchu, jak taniec, śpiew i teatr. Architektura zbudowana trwa nieruchomo. Architekt mógł "grać" projektując, choć nie zawsze. Kiedy społeczność związana była silną ideą filozoficzną, religijną lub polityczną, współtworzył jej obraz. W okresach zagubienia zwracał się ku poszukiwaniom i naturze. W świecie dzisiejszym, zdominowanym przez bezideową grę pieniądza i niepojętą postępowość techniki musi zachować wyobraźnię, rozsądek i rzetelność.

Słowa kluczowe: Gra, wyobraźnia, rozsądek, rzetelność

* M.Sc. Arch. Bohdan Paczowski, Atelier d'Architecture Paczowski et Fritsch, Luxembourg.

In Greek mythology, the Muses were the patrons of arts and gaming but none of them guarded the visual arts. All their plays and games were somehow associated with movement. Music, songs, dance, theatre and poetry revive every time anew by performing, or reading, while the works of architecture and sculpture remain silent, still and constantly visible.

An architect might play a game – one way or another – while designing his project and looking for a shape to express it. In other words, he can only play before he builds his work, before his vision becomes reality. This game is – according to Friedrich Schiller [5] – a clash of two opposing forces: the sensuous drive and the formal drive. The sensuous drive prompts him to rely on intuition and feelings, whereas the formal drive directs him toward thinking and form searching. In this game, intuition can only be expressed through form, and form can be animated with feelings. Intuition without form remains unexpressed, and form without life is dead and empty. The winner is the one who can create a living form, a vivid shape.

In the past, an architect might have played a game while making attempts to create his chef-d'oeuvre: a project that would win the recognition and appreciation of city authorities, of a prince, or a king; a project that would outshine his competitors and be built. But he was not alone in that game. He worked for his patron and sometimes alongside him. He also had to take into account the religious and political contexts of his work. Therefore, if we want to see a game as a design strategy, we have to realise that its field, its rules and the number of its participants were broader than it might seem. This becomes clear as we look at the history of architecture.

During periods when community was bonded by strong beliefs forming a common way of understanding and perceiving beauty – as in ancient Greece, Rome and in the Middle Ages – the rules of architecture were stricter, more durable and left little space for gaming. Those rules were based on the continuity of close, understandable elements: on lasting architectural orders and their derivatives, such as the Roman composite order. The very idea of progress was still foreign to them. The exceptions being technical innovations – arch, vault, dome – unknown to the Greeks and invented by the builders of Rome. Vitruvius created his trefoil – *firmitas*, *commoditas*, *venustas* – as the universal rule of the game so enduring that it continues to be repeated to the present day, even though it has become more and more divorced from reality.

It is not known whether the iconic Mediaeval pointed rib-arch was created as the result of the game, and if so, who was the player that managed to create it. Was it an anonymous mason or the abbot of Saint-Denis himself, as the legend has it? What is important is that this style – with its flying buttresses and stone carved flowers – managed to survive for many centuries, continuously evolving into different variants. However, up to the Middle Ages, builders were regarded as craftsmen rather than artists. Often anonymous, they were obliged to perform their allocated tasks respecting the rules of sacram.

Ernst Gombrich [1] wrote that it was only in the Renaissance that architects started thinking about their mission, and not just their commission. It was then that the architect began to be recognised as an artist, and sometimes even as a “genius”. However, the new rules of the “game called art” – as Gombrich puts it – were not defined by the architects themselves.

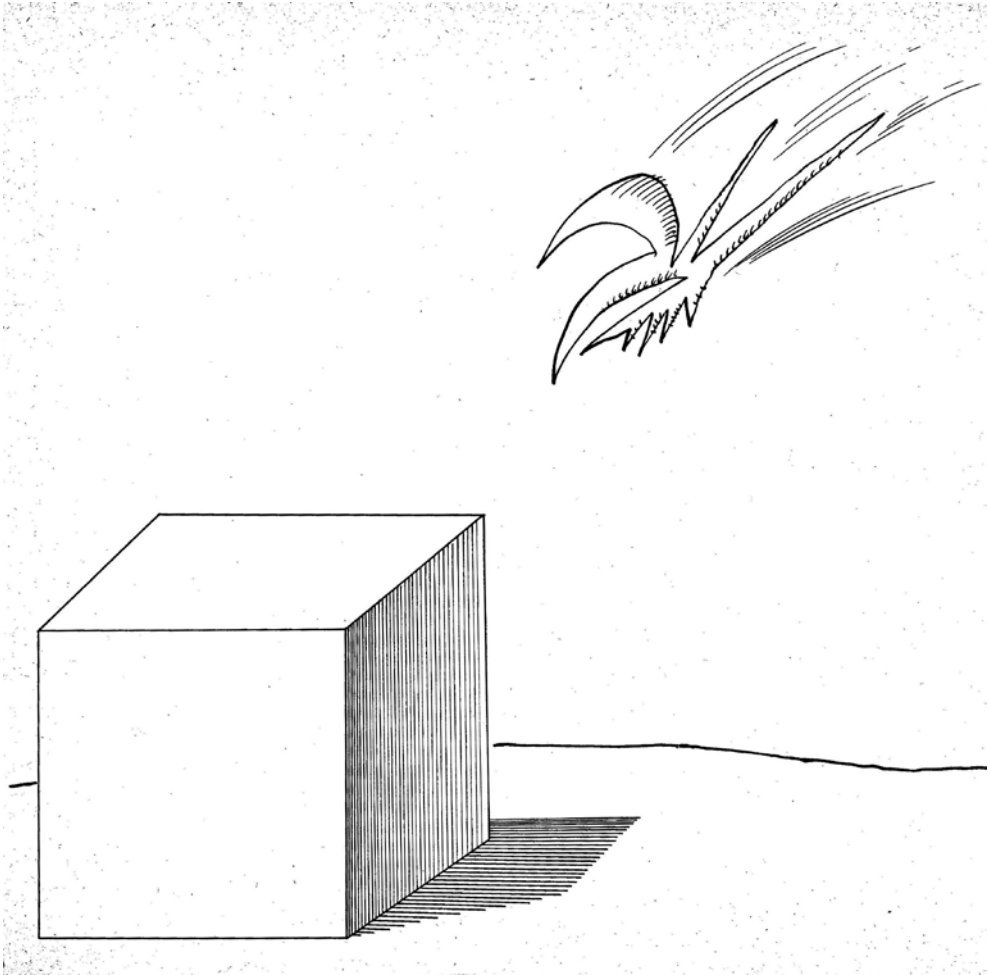
They were born in the aura of Renaissance Florence generated jointly by the humanists, the prince, and the artists. Therefore, the architects operated within a broader ideological and formal framework – a framework they helped to establish in pursuit of their quest and beliefs.

When in 1402 Brunelleschi, accompanied by Donatello, set off to Rome to study ancient Roman architecture, he did not seek for tricks to play in the game of architecture in order to seduce his Florentine patrons. After the years of humanist education, he had a sense of mission. He wanted to renew the image of architecture: to establish a new geometry of facades and a new manner of planning a building project, diametrically opposed to late Gothic architectural principles. His dome of the cathedral of Florence was a technical masterpiece, but it was only the Ospedale degli Innocenti where he developed his personal style: the semicircular arches springing from columns were airy and radiant, white as a bone in the brick coloured Florence. Brunelleschi's work was persistently created in response to the new vision of the world and the new place of Man in that world. The vision enriched by Brunelleschi himself with the new method of studying and representing space, namely, perspective.

Play and games came to the fore when the solar light of the Renaissance dimmed, partially because of the Reformation schism but also because of reading of the great pagan authors of antiquity. It was then that the coherent picture of the world was called into question, giving place to doubt and uncertainty. This attitude was heralded by Michelangelo in his late verses – *Rime* [3]. They are the personal testimony of the great artist – the crucial figure of the Renaissance art and architecture – showing all the contradictions that were plaguing him and made him feel “his own enemy”. This poetic confession has its counterpart in his *Non finito* sculpting technique where the unfinished parts leave space to the presence of nature – as can be seen in some of the statues of the Slaves and later in the Pietà Rondanini.

It was a time when artists returned to nature or looked for thrills in extravagant, bizarre buildings. Francesco I de' Medici – nicknamed *principe notturno*, prince of the night – in his quest to create the artificial world of theatre, alchemy, minerals and mysteries of nature found the ideal partner in the person of Bernardo Buontalenti, with whom he entertained to escape melancholy and boredom. The architect managed to constantly surprise him with unexpected forms. Above his Porta delle suppliche – the door of supplications – he broke the pediment in two parts and turned them against each other. He built famous (no longer extant) villa in Pratolino, once praised by Montaigne. He was also a scenographer devising famous *intermezzi* for the Medici court theatre and designer of the famous grottoes in the Boboli Gardens. At the same time in the region of Lazio the architect Pirro Ligorio built so called Park of the Monsters in Bomarzo – the giant sculptures of the monstrous creatures scattered in the green – for the prince Orsini. It was the time of Mannerism, also known as the Counter-Renaissance.

History is a continuous oscillation between periods of building a new world based on a common leading idea (either religious or philosophical or political) and periods of doubt in the credibility of such an idea when people are inclined to feel lost or torn and they look for escape in extravagances and entertainments. Classical Greece versus Hellenism, the early Roman Empire versus its decline, the Early Middle Ages and its autumn, the solar climax of High Renaissance and the sombre mannerist Counter-Renaissance, the intricate Baroque



Ill.1. Saul Steinberg. "The Labyrinth". Harpers & Brothers Publishers New York 1954

with its monumental urban architecture and ephemeral pageantry apparatus versus the classicism of the French court, the charms of Rococo and the eclectic wanderings of the 19th century, the attempts to find a new stylistic idiom in the organic forms of Art Nouveau and sophisticated beauty of Art Deco and finally the last great attempt to rebuild the world on the grounds of the great secular and political project of Modernity.

The beginnings of the 20th century saw a rise in the political commitment of architects – it was not a time for play and games. The revolutionary, radical Novembergruppe formed in 1918 included not only Brecht, Grosz, Kandinski and Klee, but also Gropius, Mendelsohn and Mies van der Rohe. At the time the Bauhaus school developed to shape a new generation of architects, and they all shared the desire to change the world improving the quality of people’s lives. Over the course of 20th century, this movement was gradually deprived of its ideals. The Nazi and Communist crimes ultimately undermined faith in the possibility and point of any social utopia. The strong moral message of the masters of modernist architecture was lost, it has dissolved into the monotony of the International Style. The architects felt entitled to ignore cultural differences and local specificity and in return they started covering vast areas of the globe with their homogeneous buildings. This boredom provoked a response in the form of postmodern architecture with its sense of irony and eclecticism. It has left behind a trail of ridicule and opened an era of “interesting architecture”, as Heinrich Klotz [2] – an essayist and the founder of the Museum of Architecture in Frankfurt – puts it.

Our world – ruled both by almost unlimited freedom of speech and expression and by distrust of the great ideologies – is dominated by two forces. The first one is the power of money which John Maynard Keynes saw as “a parody of an accountant’s nightmare” [4] and which has replaced any other merits and criteria. The second one is technology seen as a goal in and of itself and not just a tool. It has become a potent force shaping the ways of life, both individual and collective. Those two forces converge on the global market creating a gaming arena of unprecedented scale. Maybe it was the awareness of this state of affairs that has prompted the organisers to choose “Play and Games” as this year’s meeting theme. This is a reality to which an architect – especially a young one – must respond, and decide whether he considers the game the only determining factor or he chooses to add elements of memory, imagination, reason and honesty to his work.

The fact that the organisers have quoted the example of the 21 MINI Opera Space is meaningful. This pavilion at first appears as a joyful playing with form but is in fact a rational and functional solution. The simple geometry of walls and roof facilitates assembling, disassembling and transporting the elements. The spectacular, aggressive spikes in the building’s façade are the spatial representation of musical sequences of Hendrix and Mozart. Furthermore, they have sound reflecting and absorbing properties enhancing the acoustics of the building and reducing the outside noise. Maybe it is a game, but one that is based on vision, consideration and hard work. It gives no less joy and rapture, and is the only way of creating a true work of art.

At the outset, we were talking about the game as a tool of competition. The recent competition for the new Guggenheim Museum in Helsinki has attracted 1,715 projects from around the world. Among the entries there were many spectacular examples of architectural games

created with the aim of standing out from the others, gaining attention with a surprising form and eventually winning this game. And yet, the winning project by the Parisian-based architects Nicolas Moreau and Hiroko Kusunoki is charming but not surprising. It looks as if it was already there. Somebody wrote in a newspaper: “It is extraordinary that a design that triumphed over 1,700 competitors should turn out to be rather ordinary”. Is it disturbing or instructive?

References

- [1] Gombrich E., *Norm and Form*, Phaidon, London New York 1978.
- [2] Klotz H., *Moderne und Postmoderne*, Vieweg und Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main 1985.
- [3] Michelangelo, *Rime*, Oscar classici Mondadori, Milano 1998.
- [4] Moggridge D., *Keynes: An economist's biography*, Routledge, Oxford 1995.
- [5] Schiller F., *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen: In einer Reihe von Briefen*, Reklam 2000.