TECHNICAL TRANSACTIONS | CZASOPISMO TECHNICZNE
ARCHITECTURE | ARCHITEKTURA
9-A/2015

ANNA MIELNIK*

"PLAYING GAMES WITH ARCHITECTURE" – PER KIRKEBY'S FAKE BUILDINGS

„GRY Z ARCHITEKTURĄ" – FAŁSZYWE BUDYNKI PERA KIRKEBY

A b s t r a c t

The text describes play with architecture in the work of the Danish artist Per Kirkeby. His spatial installations, bordering between sculpture and architecture, show the interaction between the obvious and elusive, real and fictional, abstract and archetype.

Keywords: sculpturality of architecture, architecturality of sculpture, Per Kirkeby

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Tekst opisuje gry z architekturą w twórczości duńskiego artysty Pera Kirkeby. W jego instalacjach przestrzennych sytuujących się między rzeźbą a architekturą widoczna jest interakcja między oczywistym a nieuchwytnym, rzeczywistym a fikcyjnym, abstrakcją a archetypem.

Słowa kluczowe: rzeźbiarskość architektury, architektoniczność rzeźby, Per Kirkeby

* Ph.D. Arch. Anna Mielnik, Department of Housing Architecture and Architectural Composition, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

1. Sculpturality of architecture and architecturality of sculpture

The boundaries between architecture and the visual arts are nowadays becoming increasingly obscure. The continuous breach of the once universally recognized attributes of independent fields is noticeable. The work of architects who enter the field of art and artists who design architecture, can be seen as symptomatic of the image of the visual arts and architecture at the turn of the 21st century.

Sculpture is an area where the trend of an interest in architecture is particularly noticeable. Architecture and sculpture – as "the arts of real space" [6, p. 15] – share a common territory where the experience of space and its mulisensoriality are most important. Architecture is still determined by the permeability and usability, but building techniques and forms, which have always enabled an easy distinction between these disciplines, have changed significantly. Likewise, gone are the times when sculpture was understood solely as a compact solid limited in itself, curved through subtraction of fragments of the material or modelled by the addition of it. Today sculpture reaches for forms, matters, and themes typical of other arts. Creators undertake such artistic activities that either draw inspiration from architecture or encroach on its territory. Many of them use construction materials traditionally used in architecture, or the techniques and forms of architectural representation, e.g. models [6, p. 221], they address the issue of shelter, architectural styles, structures, and forms. In the experimental works of Dan Graham, Rachel Whitehead and many others – by addressing aspects such as space, phenomenology, perspective, and scale – architecture has invaded the field of sculpture. In turn, architects, from Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp to Frank Gehry, experiment with extremely sculptural forms of buildings.

The creators – architects and visual artists – play a game with the audience consisting in creating appearances, pretending. Eschewing the traditional systematization of the arts, they play the game – "Guess what am I?" – with the spectator. In his essay *Architecture's Expanded Field* from 2004 Anthony Vidler asks how we are to define particular arts as integral practices when "there no longer seems to be any division between [..] the aesthetically contrasted spatial and the functionally constructed spatial" [6, p. 78]. The question of whether it is a game – a conscious, purposeful activity based on a principle – or, as determined by Gabriela Świtek [6, p. 107], an inevitable quest for affinities of practices that sets the directions of artistic and architectural exploration today, remains open.

In this context, it seems obvious to recall the works of German artist Erwin Heerich who erected walk-in-sculptures on the Museum Island Hombroich, which look like magnified cardboard sculptures-models of composed cubes that he created serially. The walk-in sculpture becomes a walk-in architecture without function.

2. Playing with architectural form

An artist whose works also sustain a visual and conceptual dialogue with architecture is the Danish sculptor and painter Per Kirkeby. He creates three-dimensional objects where the interior and exterior (not always), structure, form, matter and scale – typical of architecture – can be distinguished. The use of architectural elements, building material (brick) and construction techniques considered to be traditionally architectural, as well as the scale of structures, means that his brick sculptures are perceived rather as "buildings of no function" [4, p. 148].

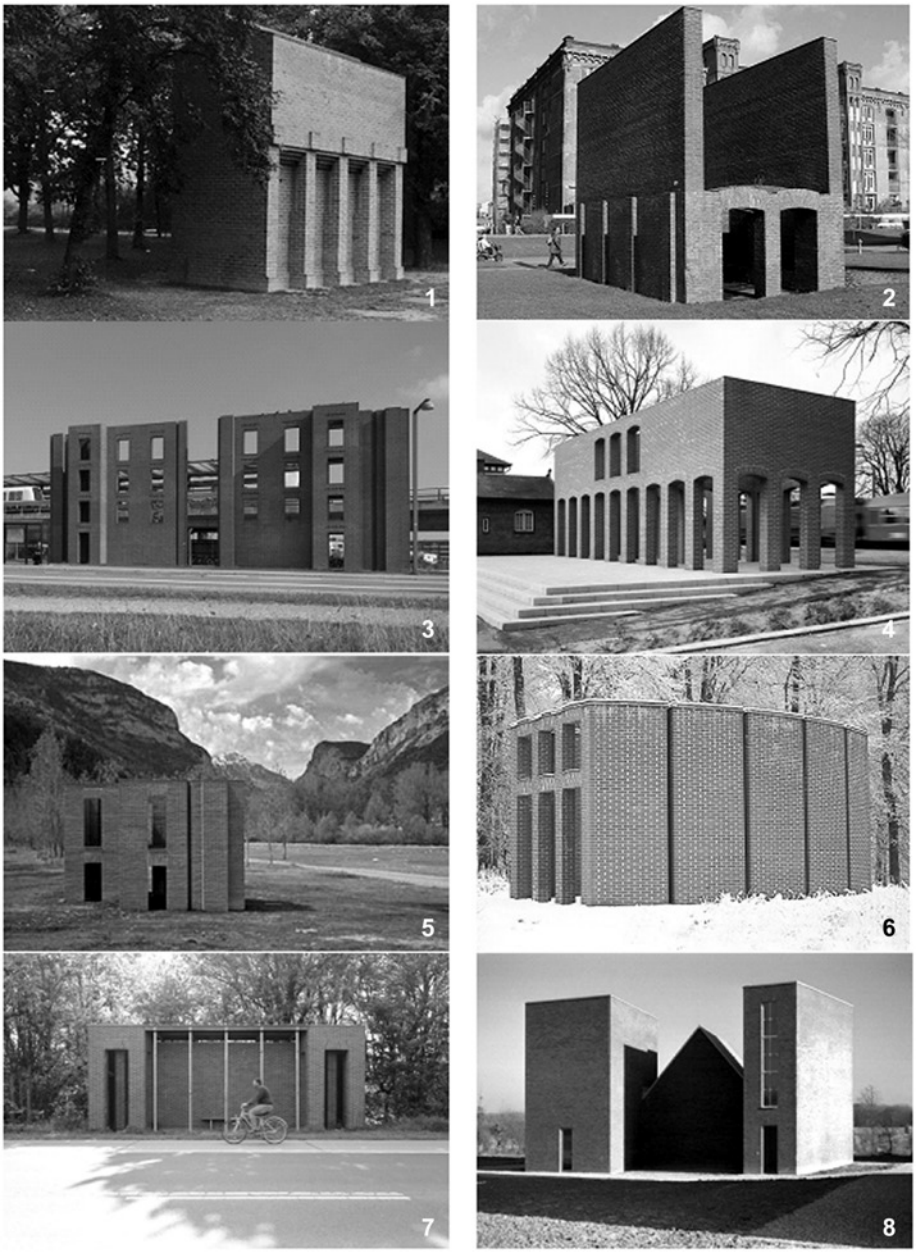
The concept of architectural sculpture is strongly associated with the 60s and 70s American Minimalism movement. However, in response to the exclusion of any references from a work (metaphorical or symbolic) to anything other than the work itself (literal art) by such artists as Robert Morris, Carl Andre, or Donald Judd, Per Kirkeby already in his first sculptures tended towards craftsmanship and discovering representational references to the architectural language [1, p. 613].

In the early stage of his artistic creativity, Kirkeby built smaller, brick structures commissioned by art galleries. Since the 70s he has been creating architectural sculptures "released" from closure in the form of walls, mazes, and towers in public spaces in cities and extra urban landscapes mainly in northern Europe. The first outdoor sculpture "Huset" (1973) was erected in the village of Ikast in Jutland. The small brick building, which referred to the Danish craftsmanship tradition, Mayan temples, and Byzantine churches, triggered a series of subsequent sculptures, more or less monumental, and either closed or walk in.

His sculptures embedded in the city space are not monuments commemorating or celebrating a specific event or person. They do not operate exclusively as aesthetic objects either. Silent like tombs without names, they become objects that represent the relationship of time and space, creating a frame for the memories, underpinning the concept of memory [1, p. 621]. By entering into relationships with the shape of space, directing attention to the immediate environment, conducting a dialogue with the space and the audience, they act as a "signpost of a place". Highlighting the architectural and historical conditions of the site, they restore its lost identity. They seem to remind us then, e.g.: "there is / was a city". Kirkeby's architectural sculptures, for the use of inhabitants and passers-by, condense fragments of time and history and the collective memory of the place [1, p. 613, p. 622].

Some of the sculptures are closed, tectonic structures that do not let the audience inside. Others allow a multiplicity of paths to traverse them. Some tend towards stereotomics and, as free-standing walls, have been stripped of floor and roof. Kirkeby uses borrowings from architecture, selected elements like pillars, walls, arches, vaults, platform, passages, colonnades, arcades, mazes, gates, and benches. Without quoting specific objects, elements and details, he plays with references to close and distant typology. One can spot the observatory, chimney, Roman aqueduct, or chapels in them. In the game we must allow for exaggeration, some features are exposed, others are not displayed. By abstracting specific elements, depriving them of their assigned purpose or giving other functions, Kirkeby plays with the possibilities of interpreting his works. "Kirkeby investigates the contradiction between the human inclination to read meanings into objects and images, and art's attempt to empty these very objects and pictures of meaning" [1, p. 616].

The syntax of sculptures consists of brick modules and structural elements of architecture. Kirkeby builds architectural sculptures according to the traditional notion of design logic. He emphasizes the physicality, the strong materiality of objects, and the truth of the material. Devoid of ornamentation, they possess only modest details typical of brick buildings, such as lintels, serrations, and graphic elements rather than symbols. The artist turned to brick buildings because the architectural language allowed him to introduce figurative connotations and historical references. [1, p. 615] In his works he also shows the ability to achieve an extraordinary balance between abstraction and figuration, through the play of clean, simple forms composed of recognizable architectural elements and reaching for archetypes. It should be noted that addressing the issues of



Ill. 1. Per Kirkeby, *Building (Brick sculpture)* for Dokumenta 7, Kasssel, 1982 [13]; Ill. 2. Per Kirkeby, *Brick sculpture*, Amsterdam, 1990 [9]; Ill. 3. Per Kirkeby, *Brick sculpture*, Copenhagen, 1994 [11]; Ill. 4. Per Kirkeby, *Brick sculpture*, Humlebæk, 1994 [12]; Ill. 5. Per Kirkeby, *Brick sculpture*, Centro de Arte y Naturaleza, Spain, 2009 [7]; Ill. 6. Per Kirkeby, *Brick sculpture*, Wanås (1994) [14]; Ill. 7. Per Kirkeby, *bus stop "Neuss-Minkel 2"*, Museum Insel Hombroich, 2000 [10]; Ill. 8. Per Kirkeby, *Three Chapels*, Museum Insel Hombroich, 2003 [8]

sustainability, types, archetypes, and identity, the past is particularly close to architecture of neoclassical origin. The main theme of the sculptures, however, is not a form of architectural representation, but the way they can transform the experience of the audience, the observer.

3. Playing with function

The artist uses forms typically immediately associated with architecture, yet deprived of functionality. He undermines the essence of architecture as a functional discipline. He questions the practical need, underlining its possible pointless beauty. The observer wonders whether it resembles architecture, and if it does, is it architecture? [6, p. 273]. Architecture freed from the postulate of *utilitas* allows for standing beside, challenging the dominance of functionality. "It finally eludes the power of utility defined as a supreme being, which everything, including form, is subordinated to" [5, p. 76]. Rigorous, based on simple and clear principles, ordinary, Per Kirkeby's sculptures are both peculiar and strange; they evoke a sense of disorientation. The artist plays with the mind of an observer who recognizes the forms but feels that not all adds up. The game between the obvious and elusive, real and fictional, architecture and archetype follows. The audience begins to wonder whether this is a "real" building and what this concept really means. This game can give pleasure.

4. Playing with ruin

Robert Morris defined ruin as a type of structure devoid of functionality and situated on the border between architecture and sculpture: "The ruins are exceptional spaces of extraordinary complexity, where unique relations between the availability and the barrier, between open and closed, horizontal and vertical, a plane and the wall [...]" [6, p. 281]. In point of fact, some of Per Kirkeby's sculptures resemble ruins abandoned somewhere in a public space. They produce the same specific mood that one feels in the vicinity of "dead" buildings. The artist gives a unique character to ordinary elements – of a ruin, vacancy, an uninhabited structure, a solitary wall with empty windows that emanate emptiness. These objects can be understood as a contemporary residue, remains – of buildings, a city, a culture. The selection of material is significant in this context – brick, which is the material which is culturally assigned to ruins. Brick is a seemingly ordinary material that stimulates associations.

These "false" ruins may become real ruins themselves in the course of time. Ruins fascinate, stimulate curiosity concerning their origin, as they seem to contain hidden or forgotten stories. "Ruins can be considered as a special case of criticism of architecture: a building in ruins loses one of the most important architectural features – spatial functionality, while remaining merely an aesthetic form. Ruins, as recalled by Morris, are not perceived as a sculpture, because they are usually an architectural remnant. Yet, devoid of functionality, a ruin becomes a sculpture, since the manners of space perception and aesthetic perception assumed in relation to it are subject to change" [6. p. 281]. In these sculptures-ruins one can discern the fight between the abovementioned classicism and romanticism.

5. Playing with the audience

In 1982, Per Kirkeby lured the audience of the contemporary art exhibition Documenta 7 in Kassel to a building hidden in the greenery of a park, which proved to be a sculptural object, without doors. It resembled a neoclassical building for a small power station. This and other small, brick, romantic objects of his authorship pretend architecture for some time. From afar. Once approached, they often turn out to be smaller than "real" buildings.

The sculpture located at the entrance to the railway station in the Danish Humlebæk (1994) is a kind of gateway, an invitation to the nearby Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. It refers to the architecture of the nearby railway buildings with its form (repeating arcs), material (red brick), and scale. It harmoniously fits the context. Situated on the hill, the "two-storey" rectangular sculpture consisting of arcades bearing complete walls above was deprived of the roof and thus the potential possibility of shelter from the rain and wind. Without function, it remains a pure form, rather a reference to a building, to something that everyone is familiar with and recognizes. In this way, the sculpture seems to position itself somewhere between that which we pass while travelling by train, and art whose experience we pursue. [12]

Another place chosen for a sculpture was an empty area near the DR-Byen Ørestad metro station Nord in Copenhagen (1994). This sculpture, in the form of a high wall, has a different function. There is no roof, no entrance. The wall, marked with holes resembling windows, becomes an ornament. It constitutes a portent of the city. It is ordinary but at the same time so specific that it becomes a sign of the "new" place, which, according to some residents, lacks a "spirit". Here, among the new, modern buildings, the sculpture looks like a portent of a house, or an empty shell, abandoned during construction (maybe it arose a little too close to the tracks?). Craftsmanship (masonry) transformed into art becomes a commentary on the contemporary dominance of concrete, steel, and glass.

In the Spanish Centro de Arte y Naturaleza, Per Kirkeby created (2009) not so much a physical structure, situated amid pastures on the banks of the Cinqueta River, but an "aphorism" which possesses materiality and form. The sculpture, based on the intersection of two equal squares, creates three spaces which can be entered through a series of openings mimicking the doors of a house. One could also draw a parallel between the openings in the upper part and the idea of windows, even though it is impossible to look through them. The object gives the impression of an abandoned place, ruins indicating that there once was a house. Through the openings we see the tops of the mountains and the sky over the Pyrenees, which intensifies its extraordinariness. [7]

Kirkeby completed his installation in the Danish Wanås (1994) on an estate neighbouring a castle, in the place where the park becomes a forest. The sculpture is reminiscent of a roofless park pavilion. The rounded, unbroken long sides have niches where one can rest. The structure can be entered through the openings at each end. The openings in the walls frame the surrounding wilderness, the upward opening frames the sky. The structure can be perceived as both open and closed, depending on the place one is looking from. The creator explores the issue of transparency with the sculpture.

Per Kirkeby's works in the German museum of "architectural sculptures" Insel Hombroich could not be missed. Here he still does not transform sculpture into functional architecture ultimately, be he certainly enters its territory more confidently. The first building erected by the artist in the museum is the small and prosaic bus stop "Neuss-Minkel 2" (2000). It is reminiscent of his "useless" walk-in sculptures, but the insertion of a bench and naming the

building proved enough for it to gain functionality. One can see how thin the line is. This simple, geometric, symmetrical object can be treated as the first stop to the world of art. In point of fact, it even corresponds with material, structure and form to Erwin Heerich's pavilions.

The name "chapel" could result from the external formal language of the three buildings, as well as the nature of the interiors which evoke the spaces of churches. Light and simple, they give the visitor the feeling that they will find peace inside. "The modest temples" are devoted to art here. Each of the three chapel consists of a low cuboid building with a gable roof which is adjoined by one or two higher tower structures. It seems, however, that as in the case of all objects within a museum, which in accordance to Erwin Heerich's idea was to provide a place for architecture as sculpture free of usefulness, function is secondary, what matters is their pure existence.

6. Conclusion

In the policy statement of the SITE architecture organisation, which referred to the interpretation of architecture as art, it was concluded that "art is critical, while design is passive and utilitarian". [6, p. 295] The artistic activities through which artists play the critical game with the conventional division of disciplines, and the discussions which such games arouse, can help restore architecture to its rightful place as one of the arts. They can show one how seemingly close it is from a civil engineering structure to a work of art. At the same time they demonstrate how difficult it is to cross this border, and that only a few succeed in it. Objects that are not architecture but look like architecture, buildings which have a function but look like sculptures, make the observer ask themselves: "How thin is the border between the functionalism of architecture and the formalism of sculpture?" [6, p. 510].

References

[1] van Acker W., Davidts W., *If Walls Could Talk: The Brick Sculptures of Per Kirkeby*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 31, Translation,* Christoph Schnoor (ed.), Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014.

[2] *Archisculpture. Dilogues between Architecture and Sculpture from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, Markus Brüderlin (ed.), Fondation Beyeler, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Riehen/Basle 2004.

[3] *Architecture & Arts 1900/2004: A Century of Creative Projects in Building, Design, Cinema, Painting, Photography, and Sculpture,* G. Celant (ed.), Milano 2004.

[4] Henney G., *Brickworks*, A&C Black, London 2003.

[5] Kozłowski D., *Transfiguracja form, albo – niech szczeźnie funkcjonalizm!*, [in:] *Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej – Architektura jako sztuka*, Kraków 2004.

[6] Świtek G., *Gry sztuki z architekturą*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013.

[7] http://www.art-agenda.com/shows/per-kirkeby-at-cdan-centro-de-arte-y-naturaleza

[8] http://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen_Kirkeby-Raeume_auf_Hombroich_fertiggestellt_15825.html

[9] http://www.buitenbeeldinbeeld.nl/Zeeburg/kirkeby.htm
[10] http://www.inselhombroich.de
[11] http://www.kulturarv.dk/1001fortaellinger/en_GB/an-artwork-for-oerestaden/images/newest/1/dsc3207-kopi-jpg-2
[12] http://www.kunsteder.dk/case/per-kirkeby-naar-kunsten-mimer-stedet
[13] http://www.museum-kassel.de/index_navi.php?parent=10666
[14] http://www.wanas.se/svenska/Konst/Konstn%C3%A4rer/Konstn%C3%A4r.aspx?fid=29