

PIOTR PYRTEK*

PLAYING WITH MEANINGS

ZNACZENIOWE GRY I ZABAWY

Abstract

Meaning is an element of form wherever it manifests itself as an aesthetic aspect. Playing with symbols and allegories and the game of intentions and inspirations is an intrinsic element of art, so also of architecture which, too, needs meaning to become a valuable cultural element in the surroundings and a quality mark of perceptible form. Two interpretations: that of the author and of the observer seem to be its most prominent indicator.

Keywords: meaning, symbol, allegory, game, interpretation

Streszczenie

Warstwa znaczeniowa jest elementem formy wszędzie tam, gdzie przejawia się jako warstwa estetyczna. Zabawa symbolem i alegorią oraz gra intencji i inspiracji, jest nieodzownym elementem sztuki, a więc też architektury, która również potrzebuje znaczeń aby stać się wartościowym elementem kulturowym środowiska przestrzennego oraz znakiem jakości formy odczuwalnej. Dwie interpretacje: autora i obserwatora zdają się być jej najznamienitszym wyznacznikiem.

Słowa kluczowe: warstwa znaczeniowa, symbol, alegoria, gra, interpretacja

* M.Sc. Arch. Piotr Pyrtek, (Ph.D Studies) Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

1.

A game of intentions and inspirations, playing with symbols and allegories, or even manipulating perception, sensing the shapes and meanings is an intrinsic element of art. Meaning is an element of form wherever it manifests itself as an aesthetic aspect. Art, be it painting, literature, or architecture, is a sensual manifestation of the creator's thoughts, the materialisation of a game played with ideas and concepts, expressed by means of marks and symbols. Every space carries a sign – a message that has a narrative function – which can be interpreted. A sign is something perceived with the senses, something tangible that can be noticed by everyone. A symbol is a sign carrying a spiritual message, whose meaning is embedded in an idea and the sense of a work. Meaning can be analysed on three levels: the intention that the author wants convey, the form of the work, and the way a recipient perceives it.

The artists's play with ideas, with inspirations and meanings, encourages an intellectual game with the recipient. The discussion between the concept of a painting and the intention of the author is a real treat for an accidental viewer who – through indirect integration with the work – engages in an interpretative dialogue with the author. It's a game with a master. And although one can have an impression of excessive flashiness, often also resulting from the frequency of risky touching upon symbolic and iconographic motifs, the result of the game can quite often be very surprising.

2.

The iconographic presentation of an idea and meaning of the work is very risky, as it is the most popular method among art historians and, therefore, the most schematic, reducing the perception of paintings to works alone and putting them into ready-made academic pigeon-holes. A synthetic graphic denotation, combining in the most basic way the concept of shape and idea is boring and mundane. An idea should be an expression of meaning in a piece of architecture and a symbol, a mental shortcut substituted for a complex whole. Today's individual is surrounded by a completely different reality than their counterpart centuries earlier, when symbolism was reduced to a few defined signs and ideograms. The effort that he/she had to make to guess the functional or even conceptual intention of the author was rather scanty and the "convoluted intentions" of the other could easily be deciphered. Generally recognised ideograms give us a tool in the form of shortened information on well-known meanings and leave no room for a game of associations. Only the clever and well-thought out use thereof opens the door of imagination to new interpretations and meanings.

The meaning of architecture should never be too obvious... it should give an observer a chance to show what he/she can do, as in the popular game "Dixit"¹ it should leave room for guesswork... seeking associations between the narrator and the audience.

¹ Dixit – board and card game. Each player gets illustrated cards. The player whose turn it is chooses a card, lays it face down on a table, and gives an association that the card evokes in his/her mind. Then, the other players lay their cards. And here the game starts... other players have to match their associations with the intentions of the dealer. The box with the game says: „Hold your breath! The illustrations are revealed. They all have something in common – an enigmatic sentence. Now be careful, only one of the five images is the key. You'll have to use flair and intuition to find it while avoiding the other players' traps“.

Architecture needs meanings to become a valuable cultural element of the spatial environment and a quality mark of perceivable art. The language of shapes of an architectonic form is translated into a synthetic speech of signs, being nothing more than an algorithm noted down with the use of ideograms. The more varied and cogent is the notation, the greater is the value of the work. Playing with associations is a useful tool to define abstract ideas and concepts which can easily be transmitted to spatial forms. The more subjective the sign, the more fun it is to look for the true intention of the author, which has become a landmark of modern art.

A change in the way architecture is perceived expands the very concept of its perception, which becomes a direct cause of the modification of theory or architecture.

The author of a work, as an exponent of ideas and concepts, describes the phenomenon in a way known and comprehensible to himself. Contemporary architecture deploys a wide range of technologies, which allows for extensive manipulation with known solutions, both structural and related to meaning.

The same signs and symbols incorporated in a building by some may be perceived subconsciously (intuitively), at the level of archetype, and by others in a more conscious (rational) way. To be able to interpret the signs incorporated in a given work, one needs words, a sketch by the author of work explaining his or her intentions. This is how Dariusz Kozłowski describes his project of Resurrectionist Congregation Seminare [Seminarium Księży Zmartwychwstańców] in Kraków, presenting the complex threads of this ambiguous work [3, p. 63]:

Gate of Knowledge portal with no finial

stone mastaba

stairs

stairs towards light

shades of the Chapel

and

coolness of the library

soothing of anxieties and fears (...)

woods

open space

surrounded by walls of trees

and misleading directions

false alleys

mythical trees

water

in this mirror

a trace of the column of Resurrection...

A spectator, observer, passer-by... a third party not involved in creating a piece of art perceives the whole concept in his/her own way. In the act of active, intentional perception a spectator reads the values incorporated in the work through his/her individual interpretative modifications. He/she creates his/her own architecture of meanings from the piece of work observed. A perfect example is the poetic description of Le Corbusier's chapel in Ronchamp by Jan Białostocki [1, p. 107]:

... lines of the plan run slowly along the curving of the slope, like water seeking the most convenient and the shortest way to its destination, washing them capriciously, in a unambiguous and obvious way enclosing cosy, eternal forms which can be sensed and modified by a sensitive human hand, but which cannot be captured by steel compasses”.

“Growing in this plan, resembling a natural geological extension of the hill, are white, fleshy walls here and there ripped through by windows; they are a robust creation of the massive, bulged ceiling which, like a brown bursting coat, juxtaposes its lushness of rough concrete with the relative flatness of the walls. The organism of the building grows from the hill like a living creature...”

3.

According to Aristotle, asking a question about the reality is always preceded by establishment of facts and, at the same time, anticipates the answer. One should ask “about something” “in relation to something”, because asking only “about something” is like not asking at all. He also thought that the question “why” should be asked only when something is complex, because the purpose of cognition is to discover in reality the nature of relation between what belongs and to what it belongs. Interpreting means asking questions in order to achieve a better understanding of something. Seeking to understand a piece of architecture, like seeking to understand another human being, is a cognitive process consisting of two aspects: external (tangible form) and internal (meaning – ideas).

As Etienne Gilson puts it: “Sense or meaning is no longer a word, no longer the voice of the speaker or an object in whatever meaning of the word. The meaning so free of any materiality that it even escapes sensual perception” [2, p. 205].

Intentions are never homogeneous: they are a combination of the intended aesthetic vision, and also knowledge, experience, and the social and cultural habits and patterns assimilated by the artist, and also the intentions and expectations of the ordering party – the one who pays for the work. An author creates his/her work selecting an appropriate means of expression. Only after ideas are transformed into a spatial form can this form convey intentional meanings. Quoting after Dariusz Kozłowski *In order to exist architecture, perhaps more than other disciplines of art, needs a pretext, rationale, theory, idea or ideology to justify the artist's doings in his/her own and in the audience's eyes* [4, p. 24].

References

- [1] Białostocki J., *Refleksje i syntezy ze świata sztuki (Reflections and Syntheses from the World of Art)* Warszawa 1978.
- [2] Gilson Etienne, *Elementy filozofii chrześcijańskiej (Elements of Christian Philosophy)*, Warszawa 2003.
- [3] Kozłowski D., *Projekty i budynki. Figuratywność i rozpad formy w architekturze post-funkcjonalnej. (Designs and Buildings. Figurativeness and Disintegration of Form in Post-Functional Architecture)* Kraków 1992.
- [4] Kozłowski D., *Architektura czyli sztuka budowania rzeczy (Architecture or the Art of Building Things)*, ARCH, Warszawa 2011.
- [5] Krenz J., *Architektura znaczeń, Idea ujęta w kamień (Architecture of Meanings. Idea captured in stone)*, Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Gdańskiej 1997.
- [6] Krenz J., *Ideogramy architektury, Między znakiem a znaczeniem (Ideograms of architecture. Between Sign and Meaning)*, Pelplin 2010.