

TOMASZ KOZŁOWSKI\*

## THE BEGINNINGS OF CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONISM

## POCZĄTKI WSPÓŁCZESNEGO EKSPRESJONIZMU

## Abstract

The paper presents the influence of Expressionist ideas from the beginning of the twentieth century on contemporary architecture and its new trends. The contemporary trend of decomposition in architecture seems to be a continuation of the dreams of past creators. The works of Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l) and Lebbeus Woods could have been created in the same form 100 years ago.

*Keywords: architecture, expressionism, new forms*

## Streszczenie

Tekst stara się pokazać, jaki wpływ na współczesną architekturę i powstanie jej nowych trendów miały idee ekspresjonistów z początku XX wieku. Nurt dekompozycyjny w architekturze wydaje się być kontynuacją marzeń twórców sprzed lat, a dzieła Zahi Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l) au czy Lebbeusa Woodsa mogłyby powstać w takiej samej formie 100 lat temu.

*Słowa kluczowe: ekspresjonizm, architektura, rzeźba, dekompozycja*

---

\* Ph.D. Arch. Tomasz Kozłowski, Department of Housing Architecture and Architectural Composition, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

In 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Umberto Boccioni proclaimed the first *Manifesto* of futurism; two years later, *Der Blaue Reiter* came into being. However, in contrast to the painters, the architects of expressionism were unable to create a uniform movement. No defined group of authors was founded. Some episodic works could be classified as expressionist architecture. Charles Jencks wrote, “Buildings ‘lie on the horizon’ or ‘come into view from behind it’, they have their ‘front’ more acceptable than their ‘rear’ (just like living creatures), they are ‘smart’ or ‘casual’”<sup>1</sup>. It seems that contemporary architecture is constructed without any rules and abandons all the canons. Robert Venturi defined two categories of architecture called the duck building and the decorated shed. He claimed that he created decorated sheds because they reached the recipient more accurately. “In the semiotic terminology, the duck building is an iconic sign as *signifiant* (the form) shares certain elements with *signifié* (the content)”<sup>2</sup>. More than ever, the contemporary world understands signs which come in the form of self-explanatory icons on computer screens being recognized by adults and children alike. It would be difficult to classify contemporary art under any of these categories. A visitor cannot locate the front of a structure. In fact, there is no front or rear; elevations exist on paper only as they are indistinguishable – the rear sometimes gets as important as the front. What is most important, there is nothing usual about them. Such “unusualness” led to the emergence of a new term “paper architecture”. Architects try to present their ideas in the form of images which are sometimes incomprehensible to the recipients or even impossible to build like in the case of Zaha Hadid.

The works of Hugh Ferriss, an architect and a visionary, have a great impact on contemporary architecture and the manner of showing it. Even though he is best-known as the author of perspective drawings of buildings commissioned by other architects, he influenced several generations of creators. In 1929, he published a book entitled *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, where he presented his reflections and visions of the city of the future in the form of drawings and brief descriptions explaining individual functions of the contemporary metropolis. He dedicated it to the authorities of American cities working on the economic, legal, social and urban aspects of spatial planning. This work was supposed to draw people’s attention to the visual element as a necessary condition for modern design and a connection between individual parts of a city. Everything emerges from the morning mist which appears when he looks out of the window of his studio and stares at the neighbouring buildings. The city is a collection of vertical structures – perhaps it is the New York skyline, perhaps an expression of the needs of the times. The author presents a dramatic difference in the scale of a recipient and noticeable. In other places, the mist subsides to reveal streets and bridges which are always shown in a monumental or even expressive perspective – we do not know if they are observed from the viewpoint of a man or an ant. The city surrounds and overwhelms its inhabitant. Against the background of the sky, one can always notice the walls of omnipresent high-risers. Here, we can find proportions that differ from those in subtle drawings by Hans Scharoun or Hermann Finsterlin; everything is so American, big, too big. In the third part of his book *An Imaginary Metropolis*, Ferriss presents a number of designs for various functions of the city with laconic descriptions. *Night in the Science Zone* is a skyscraper

<sup>1</sup> Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Warsaw 1987, 113.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 45.

against the background of the black sky. Its simple volume without any details rises from amidst the surrounding houses. This drawing includes a “poem”:

“BUILDINGS like crystals.  
Walls of transparent glass.  
Ordinary glass hollow bricks covering the steel grid.  
Without Gothic art: without acanthus leaves: without memories of the plant world.  
The mineral kingdom.  
Glittering stalagmites.  
Forms as cold as ice.  
Mathematics.  
Night in the Science Zone”<sup>3</sup>.

The draughtsman did not predict that these words could be interpreted as the manifesto of the future generations of expressionist architects. Still, his work had an impact on mass culture as well. *Gotham City* (1940) is an imaginary location from American cartoons – a constructed (drawn) design by Ferriss. When we have a good look at *The Science Center*, we can notice Batman speeding in his Batmobile to face the worst public enemies.

Contemporarily drawn architecture is also attractive and inspirational. Maria Misiągiewicz situates ruins painted by Lebbeus Woods as well as his remaining works in *the Mythical Space*<sup>4</sup>. The world drawn by this artist calls up such associations. These are pen-and-ink drawings; the city is the territory of his creativity: at first it was the idea of *Centricity* – a polycentric city, then *Underground Berlin* (1988), *Aerial Paris* (1989), *Berlin-Free-Zone* (1990) and *Zagreb-Free-Zone* (1991)<sup>5</sup>. The forms that he used are never ideal. Architecture is not rational – it is unreal. We will not find any references to existing structures – it is his own world, far from perfection. All the images suggest comparison with a landscape after the battle, ruined and disorderly, or the world depicted in illustrations for Jules Verne’s stories and nineteenth-century engineering constructions. The author renders this world anew and does not care about the possible terror caused by the thought that someone would have to live in such a place. The captions become the names of the buildings and suggest potential construction sites. Woods writes, “We will build our structures and then learn how to reside and how to work in them”. The drawings are Lebbeus Woods’ way of learning things, his process of discovering things. He continues the graphic polemic which once became the focus of attention for the Modern Movement: Sant’Elia, Tony Garnier, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Hugh Ferriss. Woods defines his space of drawn architecture as *Anarchitecture*. A constructed equivalent of Woods’ drawings could be the design of rebuilding the roof of a building in Falkestraße, Vienna, prepared by Coop Himmelb(l)au – one of the first icons of deconstructionist architecture. The new part of the chambers does not refer to the surrounding architecture of the historical district. This design was unfeasible on account of the building regulations and the roof angle. When the authors were presenting their model

<sup>3</sup> H. Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, New York 1986, 124.

<sup>4</sup> M. Misiągiewicz, *O prezentacji idei architektonicznej*, Krakow 1998, 147.

<sup>5</sup> A. Papadakis, *Theory + Experimentation, An Intellectual Extravaganza*, Berlin 1993, 25-27: *Lebbeus Woods, Anarchitecture: Architecture is a political act.*

to the municipal authorities, somebody said that it was not architecture but art. The designers immediately answered that art did not have to comply with the building code. The glass roofing elements intermingle without creating uniform planes; they hide two-storey offices with a large conference room below. Thin constructional elements are expected to refer to the energy lines along the street; they are still quite constructivist in their expression. Charles Jencks compares this design to a pterodactyl which smashed on the ground.

However, the beginning of contemporary expressionism was Zaha Hadid's triumph at the architectural competition for a design of the *Peak Hong Kong Club* (1982–1983). "The expressionist revolution wanted to save Europe from a catastrophe but it was all in vain. A great new art came into being which (...) appears as a bundle of incompatible extremes to an observer who makes esthetical assessments. Expressionism, *de facto*, does not determine the uniformity of the style but esthetical qualities cannot be applied with respect to a revolution. The radicalism of this trend corresponded with the degree of endangerment for mankind. This strictly historical factor, unrelated to the domain of esthetics, is the spiritual epicentre of the entire movement which combines its opposites into a whole."<sup>6</sup> Such opposites within a whole can be found in artistic works bearing the traits of expressionism. The concept of the architecture of the club was rendered in the expressive images of the competition design which seem to fall to pieces of plans. This vision was based upon an exploding isometric presentation which showed a reality that, as it turned out later on, was impossible to implement. While describing the works of Sándor Bortnyik in 1921, Lajos Kassák, a Hungarian artist and architect, introduced a term which may become a proper name for Zaha Hadid's creations. Kassák writes, "He avoids the symbolical perception of things and presents a symbol as the simplest thing in itself. (...) Bortnyik's pictures are not paintings in the academic sense of the word anymore. This is pictorial architecture for you"<sup>7</sup>. Frank Gehry was included in the same category in his early years. After some time, the architecture was built and a brand new esthetical category – the architecture of deconstructionism – was born.

A pretext for Zaha Hadid's drawings may be searched out in an artistic trend which came up after 1946 – abstract expressionism called "The New York School". The painter Lee Krasner belonged to this circle. Her *Bald Eagle* shows the head of a bird. The author applied a maze of lines upon a handmade patchwork. Even so, a spectator can see the eagle. As with Hadid's work, this painting could represent an architectural thing without its title. "Describing, recreating, imitating – by means of shapes, hues, outlines, sounds, words – things and people in their physical forms or in the way they behave does not automatically create art. All the esthetics whose starting point is the subject of an artistic image, goes astray when it states that it recreated a selected object as well as when it requires art to capture the interior, the essence of a given thing or even its ideal form... Art does not deal with descriptions because it does not remain in direct relationships with sensorily perceptible objects belonging to the general fabric of images; they lack a natural, homogenous bond.

<sup>6</sup> W. Muschg, *Von Trakl zu Brecht. Dichter des Expressionismus*, München 1961, p. 19 and 21, after J. Chaluppecky, *Richard Weiner i ekspresjonizm czeski* [in:] *Literatura na świecie*, December 1978, 147.

<sup>7</sup> J. Brendel, *Od materii do architektury*, [in:] *Co robić po kubizmie?*, edited by J. Malinowski, Krakow 1984, 116.

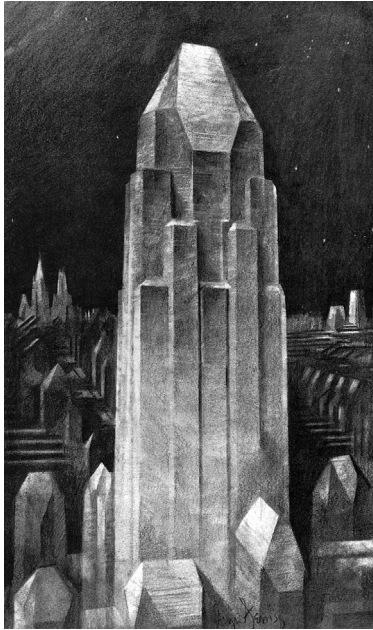
Art gets close to sensorily perceptible things in the end – it finds them in a different way when it returns from other areas with relations unfamiliar to us. When a sensorily perceptible shape appears in art, it is not the starting point but the access path for it...<sup>8</sup>. Similarly to Zaha Hadid's works, a painting may be incomprehensible without knowing its title but perhaps the artists did aim at the ambiguity of their concepts. We may not notice pictorial architecture in the design of the club just like we may not notice the bald eagle in Krasner's picture.

Commenting on the formation of expressionism in literature, the German writer and journalist Kurt Pinthus searched for an answer to the question why it became so popular: "Stylistic investigations, interpretations, structural analyses of works belonging to diverse trends within expressionism can be useful and helpful; however, the simple question 'Why?' is asked too rarely. Why did those authors adopt the 'expressionist' style? Why do the same motifs always appear in their poems, short stories and dramas? Not without a moment of hesitation, I used the terms 'expressionism' as well as 'commonplace and mass trend' because it has been claimed too frequently that expressionism was not 'a commonplace' and 'mass' trend or even that it never existed. It is not desirable or possible to propose a general, unambiguous definition of expressionism. The differences, often leading to the complete opposition of trends and styles, even within one and the same work, make a characteristic feature of expressionism; their shared feature would be intensity which had to stimulate expression so as to produce new forms and requirements."<sup>9</sup> Let us emphasize that the stylistics of expressionism in architecture makes a space superior to cubism and futurism which deliver a means of expression for it: cubism – geometry, futurism – dynamism. It is something unbridled, chaotic; it is intoxication taken from Nietzsche's theory of ecstatic Dionysian art. We can mention one of the attempts to classify this style made by Erazm Kuźma who came up with various meanings of the term expressionism: "Hierarchical systems. They fell on the middle phase of this trend when diverse groups tried to settle their state of possession. The name 'expressionism' could appear at two levels: a. The Superiority Variant: expressionism was a collective name meant for all the new trends. Cubism, futurism, formism etc. were expected to become the 'languages' of expressionism. b. The Equality Variant: 'new art' subjects all the 'isms' but equal relations dominate within them. As hierarchical systems created multisided oppositions, they had to abandon the axis of symmetry which was the basis for dichotomous layouts. The division needed just one relevant feature, e.g. emotionalism-intellectualism in the case of expressionism and formism or superficiality-profundity in the case of the Skamander group and the expressionists"<sup>10</sup>.

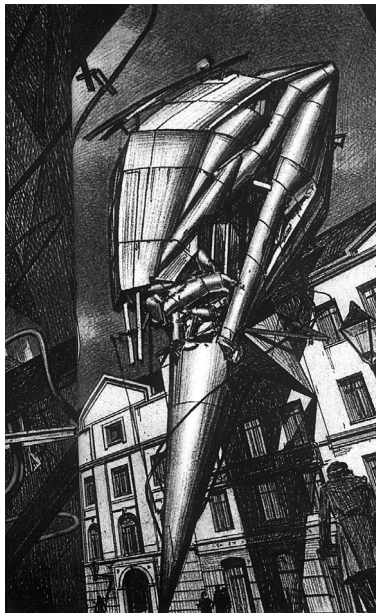
<sup>8</sup> G. Colli, *Po Nietzschem*, 1994, 98.

<sup>9</sup> K. Pinthus, *Wspomnienia o początkach ekspresjonizmu*, [in:] *Ekspresjonizm w teatrze europejskim*, Warsaw 1993, 5.

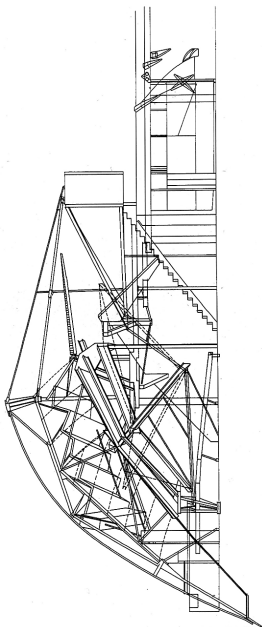
<sup>10</sup> E. Kuźma, *Z problemów świadomości literackiej i artystycznej ekspresjonizmu w Polsce*, Wrocław 1976, 60.



III. 1. Hugh Ferriss, *Night in the Science Zone*, 1929 (H. Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, New York 1986)



III. 2. Lebbeus Woods, *Zagreb Free-Zone* (Andreas Papadakis, *Theory + Experimentation an Intellectual Extravaganza*, London 1993)



III. 3. Coop Himmelblau, Rebuilding the roof of a building in Falkestraße, Wien, 1983–1988 (Amsonëit W., *Contemporary European Architects*, Köln 1991)



III. 4. Zaha Hadid, The Peak Hongkong, 1982–1983 (Zaha Hadid, *The Complete Buildings and Projects*, London 1998)



III. 5. Lee Krasner, *Bald Eagle*, 1955 (Hess Barbara, *Ekspresjonizm abstrakcyjny*, Köln 2006)