A transience of the architecture is a paradox. We erect the buildings, which are meant to be durable, and give them the signs of timelessness. In reality, the architecture yields permanent transformations, which include its material and semantic dimensions. An existence of the architecture is illustrated by the sequences of transfigurations. They are accomplished in the shapes of idea-concept imaginations, in the physical patterns of buildings and in the forms of memorized idea-myths – from a design until the end of their lifetime in our consciousness.

Keywords: architecture, transformations, transfigurations

Architecture – an idea, a work, a myth

Architecture is a metaphysical phenomenon – it comes into existence, endures and dies. Before it assumes its materialized shapes, it develops as an idea – a concept. In this phase, it acts as the subject of ruminations, simulations, projections, renderings and prefigurations. In constructed forms, architecture is the space where the history of civilization goes on. Edifices are meaningful signs of the presence of homo sapiens in the universe – they reflect human needs, beliefs, passions, abilities and restraints. Architectural works undergo diverse transformations – their physical and semantic features alter. Their inevitable fate is annihilation. However, numerous edifices which faded away without material trace remain in our memory – they still exist.

There is a kind of architecture which does not cross the border of an idea – it remains an unimplemented concept. Is an image of an edifice in the form of ideas, drawings or virtual models architecture? In his book from 2010, suggestively entitled Thinking through Architecture, Peter Zumthor formulates an unambiguous answer: A design or an intention committed to paper is not architecture but a less or more defective representation of architecture comparable to notes in music. Music needs performance. Architecture needs implementation. Then its body is formed. And it is always sensual [1].

Following the musical metaphor raises doubts concerning the quoted opinion. For those who can read notes, they become music. Ludwig van Beethoven, who began losing his hearing ability when he was twenty-five years old, did not give up composing. Being deaf, he conducted orchestras performing his pieces of music. For almost fifty years, Peter Cook – one of the creators of Archigram (1961) – struggled to remove barriers to the implementation of his visionary designs. He remained an architect, while his works were as famous as some outstanding edifices implemented at that time. Finally, those drawn edifices were materialized. The architecture of visualized ideas became the architecture of constructed works. One of such spectacular acts of birth was Kunsthaus in Graz (2003). In front of the main entrance to this gallery, its three-dimensional model for blind people was installed – one of the frequently used...
1. The stratification of the Vatican Hill’s buildings in Rome – according to Alpharani
2. The courtyard of the edifice of the Academy of Music in Katowice which was extended in 2007
3. The Chapel of Reconciliation in Berlin, built in 2000, within the sketch of the foundations of the neo-Gothic church demolished in 1985
The perception of architecture is possible owing to the senses – not just eyesight or touch. Its reception is co-shaped by acoustic impulses, the characteristics of temperature or humidity, aromatic impressions.

Today, when the borders between the real world and the virtual world are getting blotted out, we grow accustomed to architecture which is, as a matter of fact, an illusion of a physical space, a projection of visual impressions, a prefiguration of ideas. Paradoxically, architecture in a materialized or digitalized form comes under numerous analogical laws. It expresses human dreams of a perfect shape of space which becomes the direct environment of existence. It is the reality we create instinctively aiming to secure its durability, timelessness... immortality. Philip Johnson characterized the strength of the instinct of immortality which man includes in architecture with his provocative statement: The only true drive is immortality – not sex. [...] Monuments last longer than words. Civilizations are remembered owing to edifices. Nothing is more important than architecture [2]. That is why we try to implant metaphysical elements resisting the limitations of time and space into its forms.

Struggling against the inescapable process of the passing of architecture reflects some characteristic traits of diverse cultures. The Western civilization derives energy from the imperative of progress which can be summarized by the Creator’s biblical command: make the earth your subject. Stone edifices, especially those directly dedicated to the Creator in the form of monumental temples, became momentous acts of man’s struggle against the power of Nature’s elements. Stone – a building material stolen from conquered nature – is a symbolic expression of the dramaturgical history of the Western world. Paradoxically, the Western man’s unsatisfied creative instinct turns his existence into an exciting dream of total freedom, unlimited opportunities, eternal happiness; in reality, it means walking a tightrope over self-annihilation. Painful reflections after the collapse of another tower of Babel turn out to be moments of reason choked by the still unsatisfied illusion of immortality. The Eastern civilization, which still cherishes its primal core, derives energy from balanced interdependences in the world of nature – man acts as its integral link. Wood – a building material which nature gives to man as a present – strengthens his awareness of his own existence. The wooden edifices of the Eastern world are works which man responsibly includes in the perspective of fleetingness in the rhythm of cyclically reborn nature. Whereas the Western man preserves, restores, revitalizes or modernizes his architectural works, in the Eastern tradition a new generation rebuilds the most valuable edifices every twenty years – starting from the foundations, using a material carefully prepared ten years earlier [3].

Architecture submits to the flow of time – it is born, develops, grows old, gets worn out and finally dies... We know that the essence of architecture does not fit in any absolute notions: invariability, constancy, eternity. The attributes of finiteness and changeability, resulting from the receptivity of architecture to the impact of diverse factors or conditions, are suitable for it. Even particularly durable works of architecture under careful protection become eroded. The inevitable destiny of architectural works is a state whose dramaturgy is forcibly described by the biblical prophecy: not a stone will be left standing. The material end of architectural works does not close perspectives for their influence as a cultural phenomenon. There are some edifices whose impact assumes the shape of timeless legends, myths, archetypes, symbols – even though they do not exist anymore or even never really existed. We recall their shapes and give the expressiveness of universal ideas to these postfigurations. In the catalogue of these wonders of architecture, we find the sense of associations with the tower of
Babel, Salomon’s Temple, the Hanging Gardens of Semiramida, the Crystal Palace… or the WTC’s Twin Towers in New York.

**Architecture in transition – scenarios of transfiguration**

The creation of architecture is related to the realization of ideas. However, the essence of this manifestation of human creativity is not simulating fantasies but forming a three-dimensional reality in space-time. Shaping architecture is a metaphor of creation. It results in the transformation of the natural landscape into the cultural landscape. The primal act of these transformations is man’s creation of his home in the natural environment in the shape of rock caves, dugouts, burial mounds, huts or tents, finally in the durable form of households. The archetype of a house – constructed almost instinctively of natural building materials: clay, wood, stone – is a universal expression of man’s efforts forming a sequence of conscious transformations. Their crux is the integration of a human settlement in the natural environment. The inevitability of fading away, immanent in architecture, orders us to shape it – already at the stage of design – as a product without any features of a complete work but oriented towards diverse scenarios of transfiguration. Claudio Nardi equates this architectural imperative to such a metaphor: *The DNA code of architecture should include an ability to change, grow and transform* [4].

Architects do not invent anything – they just transform reality – this maxim is attributed to Alvaro Siza. In the temporal horizons which determine the lifespan of edifices, a series of interrelated transformations take place. The cycles of changing natural circumstances, related to the geographical location or local climate, intermingle with civilization fluctuations against the background of cultural, political, economic or technological transformations.

Contemporary civilization is not interested in the canons of timeless ideals, universal patterns or absolute values. The postmodernist supply of ideas is conducive to spontaneous reevaluations spreading across all the spheres of our civilization. Their range and pace is best summarized by the metaphor of a global bazaar. Its space, filled with sequences of original collections, seasonal expositions, special offers and sales, also imbibes those domains which we still try to define as culture. The characteristics of mechanisms stimulating the processes of contemporary culture are formulated by Zygmunt Bauman in his book entitled *Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności* published in 2011. The author confirms the twilight of independent – unbiased culture. Attempted creations which do not submit to the condition-dependent market rules or the pressure of spontaneously changing fashions are becoming a niche. Today’s culture is transformed into one of the departments in a gigantic store – the world experienced by people transformed, firstly and lastly, into consumers [5].

Under such cultural circumstances, criteria accompanying the formation of architecture are also devoid of any stable, unambiguous or universal ideological and esthetical canons. The global range of pattern exchange, the fast rate of their exploitation, the labile economic situation, the pressure of ecological awareness locate contemporary architecture in the area of impulsive reevaluations. Sequences of the contemporary transformations of edifices – from their formation to the physical end – are described with notions having diverse degrees of precision. The broadest of them, particularly expressive at present, is the notion of transformation. It has become the keyword for defining a series of processes in the scale of architectonic objects, urban layouts as well as planning structures. The semantic capacity of this notion also determines its generality. Characterizing the transformations of architecture more precisely, we use such
words as: modernization, integration, revitalization, reactivation, reconstruction, restructuring, restoration or restitution. The essence of transformations in the field of architecture could be narrowed down to its individual layers, e.g. referring to the Vitruvian triad: form, function, construction. In reality, however, the effects of these actions cannot demarcate the borders of conventional categories defining the features of an edifice. The sense of architecture is not limited to the esthetic values of a three-dimensional form, rational constructional qualities or utilitarian functional features.

An attempt to express such comprehension of the essence of the fleetingness of architecture finds a suggestive explanation in the juxtaposition of two notions: form and figure. Their shared Latin origins include a series of analogical semantic belts responding to the words: shape, form, kind, idea, layout, pattern, model, manner. These notions are not synonyms, however. The essence of their etymological separateness lies in metaphysical elements attributed to figures, contrary to forms which correspond with measurable physical features [6]. Architecture is not just a physically defined spatial form. Works of architecture are figures whose material structure encodes features, ideas, meanings, metaphors, symbols. As a consequence, all the transformations of architectural objects – these with natural and objective causes as well as those inspired by man’s activity – are composed into sequences of figures. Architecture is the art of transfiguration... Architecture lives as long as the process of its transfiguration lasts – when it stops, architecture comes to a standstill and becomes an archaeological object, a monument, a heritage park.

ENDNOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amory C., Philip Johnson, "Vogue", May 1964.
Arcta M., Słownik wyrazów obcych, Warsaw 1929.
Bauman Z., Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności, Warsaw 2011.
Jencks Ch., Ruch nowoczesny w architekturze, Warsaw 1987.
Kopaliński W., Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych z almanachem, Warsaw 2000.
Zumthor P., Myślenie architekturą, Kraków 2010.