THE SADDERING DEPARTURE OF ARCHITECTURE

In the centers of Polish cities are demolished valuable modernist objects of the era of communism. The phenomenon has all features of vandalism. Article considers the reasons for this situation and discusses the mechanism occurring. It notes the reasons of the destruction in the developed economic relations and the transformations of the society, which took place in the last twenty years.

Keywords: vandalism, communist era architecture, disappearance of architecture

No-one knows the roads to posterity,
One – after unassisted combat;
Why, the temple does not accommodate it
In the rooms he has chosen.
Cyprian Kamil Norwid, The Mature Laurel [1].

The situation of the valuable architecture of the bygone epoch in Poland is critical – especially the fate of public buildings raised in the postwar period, under the so-called Polish People's Republic (PPR), is deeply saddening. The illness which began in Warsaw with the spectacular demolitions of the beautiful, monumental buildings of the Moskwa Cinema in Puławska Street or the Supermarket in the nearby Unii Lubelskiej Square turned into an epidemic and attacked the capital city of Silesia – Katowice. We lost the railway station, an excellent work of the team of authors Kłyszewski, Mokrzyński & Wierzbicki, Baildon's sports hall, Buszko & Franta's Tourist Centre in the Provincial Park of Culture and Recreation. When the tunnel under the Roundabout was built, its underground interior, designed by Lipowczan, was annihilated. The Palace of Royal Weddings in Korfantego Street was pulled down. They are planning to demolish more buildings in the so-called new city centre, e.g. Gottfried's DOKP office building at the Jerzy Ziętek Roundabout. The unique Covered Market, designed by Stefan Bryla, is also doomed to annihilation...

Most objects which could I see in Katowice in the late 1960s on a school trip devoted to the contemporary Polish architecture do not exist anymore. They say that the Spodek concert hall and the Zenit department store are the only public buildings constructed in the centre of Katowice at that time which have a chance of enduring.

Sad questions arise: What are we dealing with? What does this holocaust of the PPR's modernist architecture mean? Is this phenomenon just a collection of acts of vandalism? If so, how is it possible in the 21st century, in a city which was expected to become another cultural capital of Europe?

Hannah Arendt claims that an interest in a creator makes sense if he is a genuine architect, the creator of objects which civilization leaves behind as the quintessence and testimony of the spirit which enlivened it. Let us notice that only those public objects which were designed as monumental are being destroyed in Katowice. The residential architecture of those times, raised under a much stronger pressure of legal and

technological limitations, often in a very primitive manner, remains untouched for various reasons (would the owner of a flat let them destroy his property which may serve him for many more years?).

All the demolished buildings shared three sins: a public owner, an excellent central location and a defined situation of ownership.

Sadness felt while saying goodbye to something which will never come back is a natural human experience which dramatically afflicts the departing generation and is almost inconspicuous for the contemporary one. Several years ago, when Marian Skalkowski, a well-known Silesian architect, a representative of the generation active in the 1960s–1980s, was asked to organize an exhibition of his works, he replied that he was unable to present or document those objects because most of them were not there anymore.

It seems that we are coping with a serious matter which includes key information on the society we are creating today, its way of thinking about architecture as well as ourselves as architects who serve it.

To begin with, let us have a close look at the issue of vandalism. The European linguistic tradition defines vandalism (from Latin Vandalus) as an inclination to the thoughtless and pointless destruction of everything that enriches human culture. Louis Réau’s book _Histoire de vandalisme_, published in Paris, may be helpful [2]. We learn that this notion came into being in France in 1794. This neologism was invented by a republican, deputy confessor Father Gregory, as a definition of destroying works of art and architecture during the revolution. The list of French losses in this hefty volume begins with the Germanic Vandals. These barbarians, which started their journey in the fifth century from the area of today’s Poland, destroyed a large part of the Gallo-Roman architecture, while the native inhabitants pulled the rest down for the construction of fortifications… At the end of this work, Michel Fleury and Guy-Michel Leproux draw the readers’ attention to the fact that vandalism is being reborn. They write that its current cause is a craving for money and other economic interests. They lie on the fate of heritage as heavily as the revolutionaries’ naïve declarations and choices. They claim that its result is the extent of damages, unprecedented in history, and the low quality of works raised in return. They wonder how this kind of vandalism can exist when the entire heritage of culture in a contemporary state comes under public control, its protection is the subject of social consensus, while the heritage itself is the subject of constant research. In their opinion, the French apparatus for the protection of cultural goods is to blame – it is a machine without a pilot, blind and impotent, immersed in contradictions and torn all apart!

Referring the history of French vandalism to Poland, we might say that the vicissitudes of this phenomenon are similar. Obviously, all came later in our country. The very beginning was the Tatar invasion in 1241 which destroyed Małopolska and Silesia. However, it was the Swedish invasion in the 17th and 18th century which totally destroyed the architecture of Polish cities as well as countless castles and palaces. Some cities vanished, some lost 90% of their buildings [3]. The scale of vandalism and robbery was so large that even in the 19th century in some Polish cities there were ruins after the Swedes’ barbarian actions, not to mention the castles where most damages turned out to be permanent. Just like in France, World War I destroyed all the involved areas. After regaining independence, the society recovered its stress and hatred of the partitioners on architectural objects. World War II was the European peak of vandalism and savagery. The devastations were catastrophic – they made more than 50% of the substance of 177 historical cities [4]. Big Polish cities, especially the capital, suffered the most. Katowice did know such experiences. Practically, vandalism never came here. Political transformations in the city which had been intensively developing since
the 19th century meant the construction of its centre in new locations which resulted in the legibility of the stratification of architecture in individual historical periods. An exception was comrade Grudzień’s plan to brutally interfere in the urbanism and architecture of Giszowiec – fortunately, it was just partially implemented thanks to strong social resistance with the active role of the local community of architects. After 1990, the phenomena and forces described by Louis Réau started to act – a craving for money on the newly created market allowing brutal realization of economic interests. The existing architecture began to disappear slowly. We must add that seeking the real vandals in the restoration service (after Michel Fleury and Guy-Michel Leproux) would be naïve. Such a mode of thinking would make sense in a police state.

No Haussman, who had to use destruction as a necessary antidote for an ill city, is behind the demolition of our fathers’ architecture. Quite the contrary, in Katowice we can clearly see a crisis – new office buildings stand empty and cannot find any purchasers or lodgers. Squares after demolitions are undeveloped and at best hardened with gravel. Vandalism serves speculative operations on the real property market. It is ordinary prodigality of unused buildings which are still materially capable of existing. Who gave all those that decide about destruction the right to actions which devastate a large fragment of the wealth of the city and destroy the traces of the past as well as the values of culture? A lack of social resistance in the city dwellers, who seem not to notice what is happening, makes us think, too. Perhaps its cause lies in a lack of acceptance for the modernism of those days.

The architects – the creators of those works – were the disciples and followers of the great authors of the modernist movement who once rebelled against the elites, wanting to serve the entire society. The whole further development of modern architecture was supposed to be related to that rebellion. The society, also ideal-ized by Katowice’s modernists, changed into today’s consumerist society. The principal difference between the elite society and the consumerist society in the treatment of architecture is that the social elites desired architectural culture. Rising or lowering its products onto the level of social merchandise, they used and abused them to their egoistic ends but did not consume them. This architecture, even in a distorted form, endured and preserved certain objective character – it changed into ruins and piles of debris but did not disappear.

The consumerist society does not want culture but entertainment and food [5]. Hannah Arendt notices that the merchandise offered by show business is consumed literally just like all the groceries. Architecture cannot be treated as ordinary merchandise. According to the traditional model, it is not a value which exists on account of its usefulness and exchangeability only.

Architecture used to last for generations. These days, when demolishing replaces refurbishing, it is consumed in several weeks.

Architecture belongs permanently to the world, has its dignity measured with its ability to face the process of living. Vitruvius, Alberti and even Laugier assumed that exploited buildings would be refurbished or transformed in accordance to current needs, while totally destroyed ones – replaced with new objects. The 19th-century Romanticism introduced the restoration of buildings as a serious obligation of the developed societies [6].

It is curious that speculators on the stock exchange know this perfectly well. It can be exemplified by the railway station in Katowice. First, it lost current restoration and refurbishment. Water leakages were not repaired; mechanical devices, escalators did not work for years etc. The dirty building became a dwelling place for homeless people, drug addicts and beggars. Most public areas were chaotically rented for primitive trade and services. It resulted in the planned decline of the features of attractive
merchandise emphasized by the contrast with public spaces in the city whose quality was rising continuously. At present, similar operations are being carried out in J. Gotfried’s office building at the Roundabout.

However, the direct threat is not the society or entertainment industry which satisfies its needs. Quite the contrary, the society, which does not desire culture but entertainment, creates the abovementioned climate of indifference. The real threats are developers and profiteers as well as collaborating, usually talented (undereducated? cynical?) architects who ruthlessly move towards the realization their ambitions which, in their opinion, can be implemented quickly in this connection full of compromises.

As far as architectural creation is concerned, most architects can easily resist the unrefined temptations of mass culture. It is much more difficult to understand that the mass society’s appetites are voracious. Architecture vanishes as a result of consumption accelerated by the developers. Newer and newer goods must be delivered, consumed within several years and replaced with something else (e.g. a supermarket), while architecture means the formation of a space belonging to the sphere of the world which differs from the sphere of life.

Hannah Arendt writes that …a given object belongs to culture if it can persist in time [7]. Durability is the exact opposition of usability which makes a building slowly disappear from the world of phenomena because it is used and exploited.

Let us recall John Ruskin’s words from The Seven Lamps of Architecture: We can live and carry out religious practices without architecture but we cannot remember without it. How cold is any history, how lifeless are any ideas in comparison to what contemporary nations write and unchangeable marbles carry! We often manage without long pages of uncertain documents thanks to several stones lying on each other! The ambition of the builders of the ancient tower of Babel was properly directed. In this world, there are only two serious defeaters of human oblivion: Poetry and Architecture. The latter is, in a way, part of the former and – in reality – it is mightier: it is good to know what a man thought and felt as well as what his hands touched, how their strength was formed, what his eyes could see in every day of his life [8] Well, Ruskin is virtually unknown in our country. Here we can see one of the causes of vandalism and the social acceptance for its results. We must not overlook the fact that The Seven Lamps of Architecture, which changed the paradigm of the approach to the architecture of the past in the theory of architecture, was published in 1839 and since then it has not been translated into Polish. In Western Europe and the United States, it is still considered as an influential work. It is not treated as a monument of the literature of the epoch of Romanticism but is republished every several years. How many such important books do we miss? When will we finally become Western people who, like the Swiss for instance – which was emphasized by Kapuściński time and time again – respect their past and constantly care for their material things. They do not bin what can be washed and painted in order to serve on.

Such a reflection makes my sadness related to the fleetingness of architecture even more profound.

ENDNOTES


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