THE TRADITION OF A PLACE AND THE EXISTING CONTEXT AS AN IMPERATIVE VALUE

New architectonic forms located in European cities, which often assume surprising or extravagant shapes, adjust to the tradition and spatial context of a place of implementation. The New Philharmonic Hall in Hamburg will make a contemporary landmark – a new symbol of the city. This characteristic object is a formal dominant in the revitalized area of Hafen City which has been fulfilling port and industrial functions for more than one hundred years.

Keywords: New architecture, European cities

Having his recipient in mind, an architect as an artist wishes to evoke new, different experiences and to present his outlook on the surrounding reality. This reality must accept the present day in the esthetical aspect as well as transformations which take place in our cities, the pace of our lives, the achievements of technology, new building materials. The idea and forms of “liberal arts”, derived from abstract painting, accustomed us to feeling surprised and accepting rare shapes. It is always very hard for novelties to pave their way to the acceptance of esthetical reevaluations. An artist and an architect’s shared assignment is to convince their surroundings of the legitimacy of their reason. Apart from the Permanent Great Vanguard of the 20th century, kinetic and conceptual art searches for some “artistic tensions”. Especially public objects of culture: museums, theatres, cinemas often make sculptures with a huge, unheard-of impact. Their powerfulness must arouse emotions and moods. In recent years, we have been able to observe numerous implementations of culture objects in European cities. They assume various forms: either simple austere geometrical shapes or sculptured formations building unusually mighty and characteristic forms.

The New Philharmonic Hall in Hamburg forms a vanguard landmark legible in the panoramas from the port at the Elbe estuary, visible from the motorway and numerous expressways which surround the city as well as – owing to its large scale – from many sights in central streets. Hamburg – Free Hansa Town, destroyed by the fire in 1842 and then by the Allies’ raids during World War II., is being transformed and developed. Soon, it obtained the status of one of the richest German cities. For several years, it has been revitalizing the vast area (155 ha) of the former port district HafenCity. Located near the city centre, this district will have administrative functions, hotels, a university, residential and cultural complexes. It is predicted that 12,000 people will live and 40,000 people will work in the revitalized district in 2020 [1]. Its programme includes the renovation and adaptation of the former port storehouses, often built of clinker red brick at

* Węcławowicz-Gyurkovich Ewa, Ph.D. Arch., Cracow University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Institute of History of Architecture and Monument Preservation.
the turn of the 19th century, for new functions as well as the implementation of a number of new objects. Public spaces, squares, promenades, parks, new bridges over water canals are designed with attention. Apart from the university buildings and the Maritime Museum, the Science Centre and the largest-scaled New Philharmonic Hall will fulfill cultural functions.

The Philharmonic Hall is enormous – it will be 110 metres tall. In fact, it includes two buildings, one on the other, because its glass structure was laid on a storehouse (635,000 m²) called Kaispeicher A, designed by Werner Kallmorgen in the years 1963–1966 [2]. An open terrace is planned between the existing industrial form and the new glass body at the entire width of the edifice. Thus, a small clearance, seen from the outside, separates two parts – the existing brown brick one and the sunlit new glassed-in bluish and white one. That port building, 37 m tall and perpendicularly shaped, was finished with clinker brick from the outside and served as a storehouse for cocoa, tobacco and tea. It was located in Dalmannstrasse at Kaiserhöft on the Elbe right bank, on a triangular promontory just by the river. The form of the new body is surprising – its designers, the Swiss team Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron say, “...We are interested in human feelings, we want to affect all the five senses. Not only eyesight but also hearing, smell, taste and touch... The strength of our buildings is their immediate and big impact on a passer-by...” [3]

In a close insight, we have the impression that some of the glass sheets were deformed, as if on purpose. Such a principle was adopted for breaking the monotony of the façade. Each glass sheet has a printed design for sunlight protection. The external silhouette of this body is also supposed to resemble a mystical ghost ship lying at anchor in the port of Hamburg. The idea of its shape as an architectonic body is nothing new. In 1992–1997, Renzo Piano built the Museum of Science and Technology Nemo in Amsterdam which is covered with sheet copper and resembles the green hull of a ship. This 200-metre-long building is located in the harbour near the city centre and over an expressway. On the roof, the architect designed a generally accessible auditorium from which one can observe ship and boat traffic in the harbour. Nicholas Grimschaw built the Western Morning News publishing house and printing house in Plymouth in the form of a ship, too. Its body, opened in April 1993, does not stand in the harbour but on a meadow in the Bircham Valley within a local nature reserve. The curved lines of the hull were built of glass panes joined without any frames. Very narrow steel flexible connectors and crockets, designed by the outstanding constructor Peter Rice who collaborated with the architect, attract attention. A car park is situated at the back of a hill, therefore the main entrance leads through a kind of a ramp from which we can observe the narrowing ship hull down below. The editor-in-chief’s office is situated at the very top on “the bridge”. After two years, on account of the overheating of the glassed-in interior in the summertime, gigantic navy blue curtains had to be installed. The implementation has become the flagship example of the 1990s High-Tech trend and allowed the port city of Plymouth to enter all the publications on the latest European architecture. Another big office building, called The Ark, in the form of a mighty ship was implemented in West London by Ralph Erskine in 1996.
The New Philharmonic Hall in Hamburg (photo by E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich)
It is not Herzog & de Meuron’s first design adapting a postindustrial building for new functions, either. This team, the laureates of the Pritzker Award in 2001, implemented the Tate Gallery in London in 1996–1999. It is situated on the south Thames riverbank in the former Bankside Power Station implemented in 1947–1963 according to Sir Giles Gilbert Scott’s design. Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron won an architectural competition for a design of adapting the enormous modernist object for the Tate Gallery organized in the mid-1990s thanks to a delicate minimalist intervention in the existing body [5]. They added small elements of frosted glass to the brick edifice with some Art Deco elements. “Our strategy was to accentuate the physical mightiness of the Bankside, similar to the top of a brick building, and to emphasize its powerfulness instead of destroying it or trying to decrease it. It is a kind of the Aikido strategy when you use your enemy’s energy to your own ends. Instead of fighting, you take his entire energy away and steer it towards new unexpected ways…”[6] The museum is very popular, especially that a new footbridge, designed by Norman Foster, leading to the north bank in the vicinity of St Paul’s Cathedral, was introduced opposite it in 2000. 1.8 million people visit the Tate Gallery every year. Considering its popularity, the building had to be extended after four years. The first concept of extension (2004–2012) included 7,000 m² of new exhibition area and surprised the architectural world. Instead of a minimalist body, the designers suggested a narrowing ten-storey mound built of overlapping perpendicular blocks. No-one expected such a vibrant form designed by architects who used to follow the philosophy of reducing media to austere simple minimalist bodies based on such an authorial declaration: “In our opinion, beauty is the most important thing in a man’s life. Some claim that we should not even try to understand art; other people say that art is mostly thinking – reason and intuition as well. We are attracted to entire material and immaterial, traditional and vanguard, contemporary and ancient art… Minimalism cleansed bodies and elements making them laconic and expressive. Objects restrained by just a few walls refer to minimalist structures…”[7] The second concept (2008) is much calmer with narrow horizontal window apertures. Owing to the compactness of this body, its expositional area was increased to 10,000 m².

The Swiss architects are deeply interested in the adaptation of existing buildings for new functions. They say, “Dealing with existing edifices is an exciting thing for us because the limitations of such a design require various kinds of creativity. In the future, this question will be more and more important in European cities.” [8] Another implementation shows how to change an existing edifice by exposing instead of destroying it. It is the Centre of Contemporary Art CAIXA FORUM implemented in the former Mediodia power plant (1899) in Madrid in 2001–2008. This object, situated in the very centre of Madrid, next to the Prado Museum and the Queen Sophia Museum of Art, is built of clinker brick, while its four facades are officially protected. The facades have got four bigger windows situated in other places than the existing ones in order to show the contemporary time of creation. The architects added two storeys of rusty sheet iron. The top of the building – sometimes straight, sometimes slanting – refers to the neighbouring roofs, while some of the external tin panels become perforated to let the daylight into the interiors and the café. The decision to remove the ground floor was extremely surprising. The building seems to be floating over the ground. A small square in front of the building was extended with a space under the body which looks like a crystal of steel triangular elements. We enter the unreal world of contemporary art, full of surprises and bizarre elements, where the body almost drifts in the air, while the structural ceiling becomes a floor or an amphitheatre. This space is connected with the
narrow alleys in the city centre. The bold idea of the new creation has become the basis for enriching the existing environment.

In J. Herzog & P. de Meuron’s latest designs and implementations, the search for simple and clear things disappears for the sake of very complicated and sculptural structures. Even in these architects’ earlier designs, we were often surprised by the rich texture of their planes. If an architect choosing minimalism limited himself to the use of the austere simplified bodies of Euclidean geometry, where it was impossible to drill or cut out any shapes, while the number of window and door openings was reduced to the minimum, a search for other building materials – steel, glass, stone, concrete which were crushed, painted or printed – became a justification [9]. These days, architects want more. The diversity of applied forms and esthetics is probably related to the influence of the phenomena which come up in contemporary art. This diversity results from the increasingly careful observation of the complicated world which surrounds us where the forms of nature and botany are mixed and intermingled with omnipresent geometry that changes and modifies things. Herzog & de Meuron’s architecture is based upon an idea itself, often very daring and fresh, facilitating the implementation of apparently impossible concepts. Now it is time for another stage of resistance.

New forms located in European cities, which often assume surprising and extravagant shapes, are adjusted to the tradition and spatial context of a place. An interpretation of the place of implementation must be understood very individually and unconventionally. An architect must talk his surroundings into accepting his reasons and ideas. The changing functions of an urban space stay in its inhabitants’ memory. How to maintain them? How to preserve memories of events and shapes which once could be found in these places? It can be done in the simplest and most legible manner. The proposition of the huge ship lying at anchor in Europe’s second biggest port after Rotterdam should not be surprising in the revitalized area of HafenCity which has been fulfilling port and industrial functions for more than one hundred years. Perhaps the body of the Philharmonic Hall will become a new landmark, just like the Opera House in Sydney, Oslo, Copenhagen... Crowning such a body with sea waves instead of sails was the artist’s decision inspired by the art of New Reality. Or maybe they are sails. The reception of contemporary art depends on its recipient’s imagination as well. And imagination is unlimited.

ENDNOTES

[9] Cf. e.g. the designs of Forum 2004 in Barcelona, a dance school in London, a library in Cottbus, the facades of infill constructions in Paris, Munich etc.