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STRENGTH OF ARCHITECTURE

In this essay strength of architecture is treated not only in the physical meaning. We observe it also from the intellectual point of view. More important here is the symbol and the significance of architecture than the strength of building itself.

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The notion of the durability of architecture was already preserved in its theory by the persistent and indestructible antiquity. We owe this consciousness to Vitruvius with his well-known and broadly-applied triad of notions: venustas, utilitas and firmitas – the beauty, utility and firmness of a building or, more widely, an edifice. I am going to return to this feature of matter which enables it to control time. Right now, however, I will explain that we are dealing with this broadly understood feature of architecture, in its full value – not just material but also utilitarian, esthetic, symbolic, in its full reception. It ought to interest us in our using it, in serving the body (soma), in satisfying our elementary needs or functions as well as in serving the spirit (psyche), satisfying architecture with an esthetical value, form, beauty. What about symbols and meanings? Architecture should mean, should call: I am what I am – a flat, a temple, a school, a hospital, a court of law or a factory – as well as symbolize, make the quintessence of the features of the value it represents: seriousness, stateliness, relax, intimacy, friendliness, quiet, fun instead of pretending to be something else or meaning nothing at all: what we cannot identify or name seems unable to exist for us.

The durability of architecture. This theme is very broad so let us demarcate its borders, define the time and place of our ruminations. Without widening the field of penetration excessively, we will dwell on the Polish arena with its specificity and architecture which remains recorded with the naked eye.

In the consciousness of many – how many? – generations, architecture was considered as eternal or lasting for ages. What sort of architecture? We might think that we are dealing with a myth, one of many hypocrisies which tag along with us but we do not want to get rid of them. We know that the perception of the notion of architecture has always been diversified – even today we do not fully agree on what it really is. I mean situations when only its usual wonders are acknowledged as architecture: the Pyramids, the Parthenon or the Cathedrals are eternal. They last with the durability of matter. When they fall apart, they are often still alive – supported and repaired, treated with medicines and prostheses – just like some of us. Not much of their tradition, esteem, reliability remains; it is usually replaced with an imitation. The durability of a symbol means more to us than matter – few people, except for specialists, are interested in whether a sample of matter is authentic or not. In fact, we do not know which period or style dominated a given work because it is a symbol that counts – not necessarily a symbol of architecture itself but of a place preserved by historical education.

by the awareness of its impact on us. The example of Wawel comes up here: the sacred is mixed with the profane, Motherland and God are sanctified (or Motherland gets sanctified, while God is secularized). It does not matter that there were centuries of adding architecture to architecture and then subtracting, where even Nazi Germany threw something in within the six-year-long existence of the capital city of the General-Gouvernement. Architecture comes and goes. A sacred place remains.

Thus, we may assume that its durability fulfills itself mainly in a place of cult, in a temple. Obviously, material is an important factor here, while the durability of a symbol is coupled with the durability of matter. Not always, though. Wooden churches caught fire and vanished more often than brick ones, irreversibly; those more significant were rebuilt on site, new ones appeared, sometimes alike, similarly shaped because it was hard or even impossible to imagine completely different ones. These days, a historic, even wooden church, if it does not go down in flames and pass away with dignity, waits to be replaced with a different and bigger one which will prove the power of the sacred (?) more vividly, often with a change of place, perhaps within a short physical distance from its predecessor, so a place itself is not always essential, either. Sometimes sacral places gained material durability owing to the magic of a symbol: they were spared, e.g. in the Allies’ carpet bombings of Germany during World War II, even though all around was razed to the ground. Even totalitarian systems, which fought against the Church, sometimes saved such places or facilitated the construction of new holy ones.

What about function, what about form? Dwelling on the contemporary Polish Church, remaining under the spell of the past and consequently preserved, we may notice that its function lived as invariable depending strictly on liturgy. Some changes were introduced by the Reformation – not in our country, though, where its antagonist, the Counter Reformation, ruled – but it was the post-conciliar architecture of the second half of the 20th century, especially in the traditional Polish Catholic Church, that allowed strong and spectacular arbitrariness (which led to anarchy in architectonic form rather than to freedom). By the way, the impermanence of function coupled with form, while deformation became the rule. Function itself in changes other than those resulting from alterations in liturgy – making an exchange rather than a change, straying off the sacred – is more and more prominent at the church. We can often see a Western temple used as a university hall or another kind of room for human gatherings. The Church itself summarily accepted situations of secular character, especially when they somehow served it, e.g. when “Solidarity” was born twenty-five years ago. Transformation into a hotel (Prague), for instance, may be considered as a much more uncompromising exchange. The demand for the church function in the Czech Republic has been decreasing for a long time – this trend is more and more common. So, even a temple can be apparent in its durability, in all of its aspects. However, from among all the possible functions of architecture, sacral objects seem the most durable.

A residential house, the second oldest kind of architecture, seems to be the least durable in its material form. The commonness of its objects – from relatively few luxury, elite and consequently a little more durable ones, through an average middle-class flat, the unlimited housing tissue, more and more primitive objects, to temporary human shelters, appearing and then disappearing without a trace – does not increase our knowledge and interest in most places we call residential houses. A detached atrium house endured as a find owing to the lava from Vesuvius; multifamily insulae did not leave such stamps (?) unless archeologists have the final say. A dozen hundred years and
palladian villas, this well-known and acknowledged example which exists till now as a sight for sore eyes: living architecture still persists but those four hundred years or more is not so much after all.

The fact that, with the most limited durability of the matter of human residence, its semantic value seems timeless could be regarded as a kind of paradox. It probably result from the structure of man, his soma and psyche together, in the context of several millenniums of the creation of covering, lagging, this -texture, less or more arch-. While referring the features of this structure to the space of man’s functioning, i.e. the features of residence, we must notice how minimal, cosmetic, quantitative not qualitative changes take place here.

Form the perspective of its intended use, architecture can be divided into what is private and what is shared – into the architecture of residence and the architecture of public utility. In such perception of the division, the architecture of cult is useful for everyone. However, the term “usefulness” is not fully adequate, it is awkwardly used here as emotions are too strong, and using it could meet opposition which happens very often in our reality. In my opinion, the logic of incomplete adequacy dominates here. With this conviction, let us proceed to the topic of the usefulness of all the old and brand new objects delivered by the wider and wider cognition of the world.

Contrary to the uniformity – in the discussed context of notions – of both cult and residence, we can talk about the diversity of public utility. The oldest, still enduring, significant, monumental buildings in this domain include medieval town halls and universities. Often brought back to life as a consequence of various devastations, rebuilt, they remain in a more or less probable shape owing to the place and limiting outlines of its plan as well as in relation to the surroundings, similarly to the case of temples. A town hall, a university, nothing more. A noticeable increase in new architectural functions accelerated in the 19th century to explode at its end and flash in the 20th century with new fireworks, adequately to the quick development of science and technology. The birth of new utilities as well as the permanent exchange of their architecture were rising. More and more often, semantic wear, not technical death, is the death of architecture, often apparently of its function, too, but not because of the wear of utilitarian values per se but as a result of fashion – a symbol and a sign. Now, we could keep enumerating various functions of architecture and their receptivity to permanence but we do not have enough space for that and they are not quite relevant in the context of our ruminations.

Time. Its lapse. Even when we are aware of it, we live as if it stood still; we live on the past as if we were eternal. The older we get and the more we live on emotions rather than intellect, the less we accept the new, choosing to linger in the old. It applies to art and everything that comes from culture, not necessarily from civilization or from technology. In architecture, we easily accept new kitchen or bathroom appliances – technical devices do not arouse our reservations, while a new shape of our house and its interior with the entire architectonic form may meet our opposition. Why? In the case of civilization changes, we do not have a choice, we cannot oppose them, fashion restrains us, it is not right. In the case of cultural changes – no way, as a rule nobody can force us to accept novelty, it is safer to stand still, to move back.

Moving back means acting against nature, inconsistently with a structure which favours the front: a river flows forward, not backward, we fall downward, not upward. Excluding some tactical actions, we sometimes move backward for a moment in order to go forward again. The reverse gear in a car functions
for a sporadic manoeuvre only, no-one really moves with its help. An aeroplane does not fly on the reverse gear (for the time being at least).

By the way, the word *reverse* does not sound well and has a questionable connotation.

Let us repeat that the sense of the durability of architecture resides in its sturdiness; just like Vitruvius said: to make something durable means to make it well. We must remember, however, that every phenomenon has its extremes and, as it often happens, the principle of an arch proves correct here – the culminating point is in the middle, between the extremes. A man should use his judgement in order to choose this *optimum*. It also applies to durability: not too less of it, not too much – just right.

Well, perhaps to build something really durable is not such a bad idea. If so, let us erect a genuinely good monument of spirit instead of matter – *aere perennius* (Horace) – more lasting than bronze.

*PS. This paper is an abridged version of a chapter/essay from the author’s new book which is being prepared for printing.*