LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE BASED ON A BACKWARD OUTLOOK – TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY, OR: IS THE PRESENT STILL RELEVANT? – A USELESS DEBATE?

Architecture of place, tradition, the spirit of time and sense... a critical look at the present condition of our beloved architecture and urban planning.

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Today’s architecture is trying to be especially vanguard or sometimes particularly traditional. At times, it tries to go in both directions. Reaching for the forms of the past as well as predicting the future often leads to cacophony. The worst result is when architecture gains a highly technical solution but is unsuccessful in an urban context or gets intoxicated with height thinking that a masterpiece of human creativity has been produced.

A discussion on architecture is often conducted on the basis of the external expression. But, as we know, quality, utility and durability are always crucial. The diversity of use and the receptivity to changes, semi-open and open spaces guarantee the value of real property.

We must say that buildings in the past presented a particularly solid reality whose assumption was the durability of a symbolic reality. It interpreted the compactness of the world with a culture and a style. Architecture was the leading force which reflected the Faith and Purpose of a certain culture with their characteristic symbols. Apart from usability, architecture has always had another objective and been the expression of social conventions.

Let us notice that builders have been trying to enliven the disappearing images of architecture since the Renaissance. A search for something new has always been the most important moment of the greatest deeds – modernity. A forward outlook was justified by its social, emancipating and critical contents.

Spiritual progress moves from Myth to Logos – as Modernism claims – from charm/fascination to a fiasco. Unfortunately, the progressing capitalistic system liquidated this radical principle of modernity. Today’s architecture is becoming a signature and an icon created by a team of talented businessmen. The weak expression of new architecture is caused by ignorance and superficial education which reflects the fast course of our lives and perhaps globalization. This dynamics of behaviour is a part of the dilemma.

Let us approach it philosophically: classical Modernism was characterized by the timelessness and unchanging state of ideal architecture. Unfortunately, the experiments of Modernism practically aimed at the fast process of disintegration which can be seen in today’s condition of architecture, first of all in today’s condition of our cities!
The historical and cultural awareness of the development of architecture has got a lower and lower position; it is more and more forgotten or ridiculed. We need empirical knowledge developing out of experience and observation which is very important in the design and implementation of buildings — the necessary consciousness of a need for knowledge and an ability to apply it in a deep discussion so that the terms intended use and use are considered sensibly and applied correctly.

These days, we are not astonished when we encounter the phenomenon of the downfall of urban planning — once called the Art of Building Cities — more and more often. Buildings are more of an event in architecture and have nothing to do with urban design. But we were students a long time ago and we know that “every new design prepared in the context of a city ought to be subordinate to the entire structure of the city, while its shape should give a formal answer to the found space of the surroundings.”

In the world of the present, absolutely everything is DESIGN. We watch pretty things for pleasure and forget to look at them from a purely material point of view. We cannot see that a thing without its contents is senseless. “To blow and to foam at the mouth”, says the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk — these are the forms of the present general state of our spirit; this is a constant transitory state of the plunging farewell to rational modernism. What is built is created by us — architects. We, not the so-called investors, are responsible for this state of affairs. With suitable professional and educational involvement, the investors may sometimes be persuaded.

It is not about a useless debate on architecture which contrasts the old generation with the new one, conservative with progressive, brick with natural stone, steel with glass, transparency with … etc. It does not lead to any conclusions in the discussion concerning good architecture. As we know, Architecture is Architecture, everything else is everything else. Buildings are always formed on the foundations of tradition, are implemented today and aim — if it is possible — at the future! This is the aspiration of good architecture. Everything else is the matter of faith.

Finally, I must ask the following question: does the creation of Architecture Today still mean the creation of works of art or is it just a “service”? Someone who criticizes the present state of architecture is immediately defined as a jealous guy or a person who has never built anything. Having read what I wrote above, somebody might think that the author of this paper is frustrated by the profession of an architect. It is not true. The writer looks with pleasure at his almost 45-year effective work as a freelance architect running his own office with his partners. Most of his implementations were derived from competitions. The author took the first steps in Kraków, a city with an untouched compact urban layout and good traditions, a inspiration base developed later in Italy and Berlin. We are speaking of a certain historical space where generations built and left a cultural space.

Form follows function — that was the slogan of the 20th century; now we have the impression that form follows fiction — is it the slogan of the 21st century? This article aims at initiating a discussion at universities where apprentices are prepared for the creation of new architecture. However, frequent glances in the rearview mirror are risky because we always experience progress looking forward!
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