A CLASH OF NEW AND HISTORICAL FORMS

The leading inspirations for new architecture are humility, elegance and economical media with respect to the existing historic substance and the awareness of the delicateness of material in the form of any monument, especially a unique historical stronghold.

Keywords: new architecture, historical castles

Today’s architecture means courage and often unlimited freedom in the creation of new forms which have never been used before. After the geometrical revolution in the 1920s, after the postmodernist, deconstructionist and biomorphic incidents, minimalistic and High-Tech actions appear in the tissues of European cities. Tired of following new vanguard implementations and discussions on the latest stylistics, we eagerly go deep into the historical corners of cities and towns where we can relax and feel the past. Objects which preserved some historical fragments have got values remembered and encoded in the contemporaries’ consciousness and associated with the tradition of a place, a city, a nation. In European cities, we find historical objects with new implementations more and more often. This courage and demonstration of the present exposes the historic context even more clearly. Pronounced separation of authentic historic substance from an introduced new structure becomes important here. It concerns historic objects with unique historical and artistic values. In every case, the basis for activities is an unusually penetrating analysis of potential selection of new contemporary forms which could neighbour on historic substance. Adaptation of historic edifices to the newest needs is becoming the assignment of historical cities. Tourists are attracted by old moods, the texture of a stone or brick wall, smells, remembered events and emotions. Europeans seem burdened with tradition and history. (...) In the future, dealing with the existing edifices will be more and more important in European cities (...) claim the Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron [1].

Creative communities are conducting a discussion on what a new form should look like in a historical context. Rejecting the anonymity and orthodoxy of old repeated shapes, the search is driving at the aesthetical philosophy of an “open work” – ambiguous, using a sequence of frames recorded in motion, referring to the memory of a specific place and accepting equivocal interpretations (...) expecting what we cannot foresee (...) rather than (...) foreseeing what we expect... [2] The nearly unlimited potential of contemporary technology offering sophisticated constructional and material solutions giving total freedom while building an architectonic form in accordance with the requirements of the latest aesthetics suggesting fine light openwork constructions, immaterial...
Courtyard at the Moritzburg Castle in Halle, Germany. Photo by author
frameless glass divisions or reflexive surfaces which absorb applications of reflected bodies and details create completely different possibilities of integrating new architecture with a historical environment. Architecture implemented today is distinguished by the application of the newest building materials and technologies. Aesthetics rejects stereotypes of repetitions and the reestablishment of shapes. A new architectural creation must not destroy or harm an existing historic structure, therefore numerous contemporary solutions incline towards the principle of using simple, smooth bodies without any details which reveal a complicated, shaky historical tissue. Large glass surfaces, acting as a mirror reflecting historic buildings, are introduced, too. Sometimes an entire glazed wall or its fragments disappear because of the reflected trees, clouds, sky. The unreality of the glass background emphasizes the existing historic buildings even more strongly.

Apart from experimentation with the newest kinds of glass, large empty walls of steel or concrete, whose rough texture makes a complementation or set design for filigree and delicate historical substance, are juxtaposed with the historic tissue. Commonplace minimum architecture derives from Zen Buddhism whose elementary idea is “to be relieved from things”. The Japanese word wabi means “poverty” or “voluntary poverty” [3]. The experiences of recent implementations proves that a historic neighbourhood prefers simple, austere, plain forms. The precision and conciseness of the geometrical composition of new elements harmoniously contrasted with the colours and layouts of historical forms gives positive effects. Designers and artists are especially excited by actions in a historical environment where numerous imposed limitations require a sophisticated kind of creativity and intellectual effort [4].

Historical castles – some of them in ruins for hundreds of years – adapted to new needs, begin attracting tourists. The Italian architect Carlo Scarpa presented a recipe for the introduction of new forms in a historic environment [5] by separating simple new elements of concrete, glass or cast-iron from historical ones. His implementations have been model, proven solutions for several decades. Another famous European implementation was presented by the German architect Gottfried Böhm who changed a medieval stronghold, dominating over the small town of Bensberg, into the seat of the municipal authorities[6]. He dared to complement nonexistent buildings with big concrete bodies having horizontal belts of windows. A new staircase acts as an additional tower built like the remaining bodies of concrete in shuttering with a geometrically frayed top. Stone and concrete towers dominating over the stronghold, the indifferent, brutal style of dynamically accumulating bodies excellently render the mood of the past of this place. A restaurant at the Gastelgrande in Bellinzona, southern Switzerland, designed by Aurelio Galfetti, is worth of notice [7]. The mood of a medieval stronghold was produced by joining new elements with the old structure in a very delicate and economical manner and building another, more interesting whole. The architect’s important assignment was to restore the previous view of a hill on which the castle stands. So, it was necessary to remove all the lush greenery growing on a bare inaccessible rock which suddenly rises for several dozen metres from the small-town street level. Another significant decision was to introduce a lift drilled in the rock leading from the foot of the hill to a vast, extended courtyard located on the peak. The leading inspirations are humility, elegance and economical media with respect to the existing historic substance and the awareness of the delicateness of material in the form of any monument, especially a unique historical stronghold [8].
Another new implementation is the adaptation of the ruins of the Moritzburg Castle in Halle, Germany for the Saxony-Anhalt Museum completed in 2008. The authors of the renovation are Nieto & Sobejano of Madrid [9]. Moritzburg is a late medieval episcopal residence raised in 1484–1503 by Archbishop Ernest Wettin. Designed on the projection of a trapeze, situated by the Saale River, the stronghold was burnt down by the Swedes in 1637 – in the middle period of the Thirty-Year War. After that, it was partly in ruins [10]. Various forms and functions accumulated around the courtyard over a span of centuries. After the Second World War, open-air sculpture exhibitions were organized in the ruined western and northern wings. Today, a museum with a collection of German modernism (e.g. the school of Bauhaus) with a theatre, a cabaret, a student club, a university chapel, a restaurant and a wine cellar is located at the castle. Concerts, Shakespeare’s plays and Verdi’s operas are performed in the courtyard. The castle has become the centre of culture. From the outside, from the entrance through the gate tower in the south, nothing foreshadows contemporary intervention. We can observe towers, donjons, red roofs, plastered walls of diverse three-storey edifices transformed and added within centuries. A clash of new and old substances surprises us after entering the courtyard. The suspense is aroused by stone walls contrasted with glass. We will remember contrast between the rough texture of stone walls and the lightness of new structures which turn historical elements into décor. A sunlit aluminium box, courageously set in the courtyard, forms the entrance to the museum in the northern and western wings.

The architecture seen in the sunshine from the courtyard may suggest associations with an unreal dream where a degraded form receives a new function after years. In the Spanish designers’ opinion, the shape of the new aluminium roof with several protruding asymmetrical, bending dormer windows which illuminate the interior resembles Alpine summits covered with snow and twinkling in the sun. The authors also refer to some complicated and expressive forms painted by Lyonel Feininger whose works are exhibited at the museum, too. An additional plain body, simple and austere from the outside and the inside, exposes historical elements. The dormer windows in the roof narrowing upwards make mini-towers, while the downward light in the interiors alters the dynamics of the architecture. The designers’ principal assignment was to deliver the light into the interiors for the exhibition’s sake. Glass balustrades circling the two-storey museum halls, white walls and screens emphasize this brightness even more strongly. The glory of perfection and pompousness surrounds the existing values. Light against shadow, lightness and transparency against the mass of a wall or a screen, aluminium and glass against stone and historical details – this is the game of contrasts applied in this object. Such a creation must arouse emotions and moods because – as Umberto Eco claims – …psychologists keep explaining that dissonances have got the power of stimulation… [11]

In recent years, we have been observing a number of new museums in European countries. They exhibit their collections as well as educate people and develop the aesthetical and emotional sensitiveness of the society because – according to Peter Buchanan – after the industrial, postindustrial and information epochs, “the conceptual epoch” came [12].
ENDNOTES


[10] The object was destroyed, only the chapel was rebuilt in stages in the 18th century. In 1777, a military hospital was constructed between the chapel and the gate tower. These days, the building acts as the museum administration. Karl Friedrich Schinkel got interested in the castle in 1828 – he decided to transform the main building into an object of the Halle University and complement it with some neo-Gothic elements. In 1904, a museum was opened in the southern wing, acc. to: B. Hettlage, *Stiftung Moritzburg*... op.cit. p. 5–8.
