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ANATOMIES OF ORDER

ANATOMIE PORZĄDKU

Architekci od wieków wykorzystują fascynację porządkiem geometrycznym definiując figuratywność i abstrakcję przestrzeni. Istotą poniższych myśli jest stwierdzenie, że złudzenie piękna czy smaku opiera się zarówno na regułach porządku, jak i na zmienności stymulacji, a wyznaczniki estetyczne są kształtowane przez dominujące w historii czynniki kulturowe z pomocą dostępnych środków technologicznych.

Ask a toad what is beauty... he will answer that it is a female with two great round eyes coming out of her little head, a large flat mouth, a yellow belly and a brown back.

Voltaire

Is the word *beauty* an absurdity in relation to architectural criticism and would aesthetic analysis provide a more rational basis for the study of visual expression and emotion? Questions might also be asked as to the relationship between natural beauty and man-made beauty, and consensus as to how beauty is perceived within similar or differing cultures and over time. The philosopher Nicholas Humphrey¹ asserts that there is no clear consensus amongst individuals within a group as to what features constitute beauty and that individual taste plays a significant part. This stance rhymes with the familiar saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Humphrey uses the methods of structuralism to argue that beauty in nature, in human form and in the liberal arts is reliant upon the classification of the likeness between things for purposes of recognition and of the differences that sets certain features of things within a group apart, an argument that beauty lies with the relationship of the parts to each other; or that familiarity breeds contempt or is boring and that the stimulus of novelty to minor variations within an order gives pleasure.

Order in nature is given and it is we who confer the status of beauty upon it. But what might constitute the ordering systems of man-made beauty and on what basis is it founded? This paper aims to illustrate the historical and contemporary significance of proportion, geometry and interval, as opposed to the form of the object, to cultural conceptions of beauty or taste in the liberal arts. This historical journey begins with the ancient Greeks and develops through the Renaissance, to the Modernist tradition and to contemporary western cultural circumstances described as the condition of post-modernity. The relationship between order and difference at any particular point in time and under specific cultural conditions is critical to the illusion of beauty as an objective truth in art and architecture. Church and state in ancient times contrived to link the harmonic relationships in music to cosmological order and in turn to symbolise these relationships in architectural form, truth and beauty being synonymous. Modernists in a more secular society have manipulated the illusion of the perfection of harmonic relationships to the point of abstraction and even irony whereas in a contemporary consumerist and fashion-driven society, aided by technology, difference has become a classification of beauty in its own right. However illusory the relationship between numeric relationships and beauty might be, it remains a fascination.

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Fig.1. Giorgio Morandi, Landscape, 1943, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 53 cm, Private Collection, Banca Toscana



Fig. 1a. - 2:3

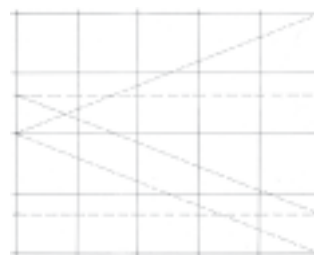


Fig. 1b. - 2:5

Fig. 2. Giorgio Morandi, Still Life, 1955, oil on canvas, 36.5 x 40.5 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 2a. - 9:16

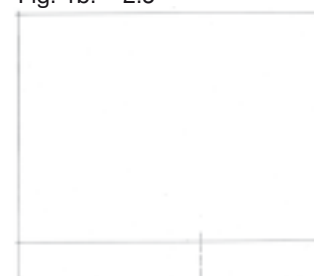


Fig. 2b. - 2:3 line, 3:4 plane

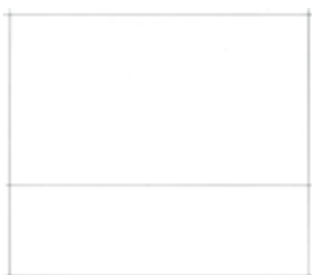


Fig. 2 c. - root 3:1



Fig 2 d. - 2:3

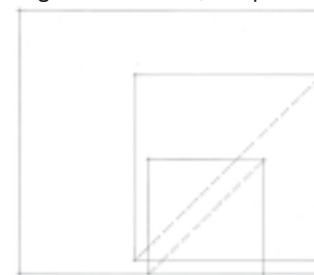


Fig. 2e. - 1:1



Fig. 3 Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion



Fig. 4. Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao

A good place to start is in the middle and the art of the Italian Painter Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) can usefully describe a hybrid alliance between an ancient tradition and a modern Italian aesthetic during the turbulent inter-war period of Italian fascism. As Bruno Latour states, ‘We have never moved either forward or backward. We have always actively sorted out elements belonging to different times... *It is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting...* Modernism – like its anti- and post modernism corollaries – was only the provisional result of a selection made by a small number of agents [or critics] in the name of all’. [2] If the classical tradition can be considered as the birth of modernist thinking from a philosophical standpoint then this might also be true for art and architecture. It was Pythagoras who declared that ‘number is all’ as a basis for truth and beauty and the Renaissance artists who developed theoretical foundations in art based on a revival of the classical enquiry into spatial composition. Alberti, so central to Renaissance theory, is the key influential figure to Morandi’s organisation of spatial geometry and to the way he sees and reconstructs the world and its objects. Morandi deploys Alberti’s ratios based on the Greek musical scale not for reasons of harmony but in pursuit of visual tension and multiple optical readings (fig. 1, fig. 2). Alberti’s ratios comprise 1:1, 2:3 and 3:4 for short areas, 1:2, 4:9 and 9:16 for middle areas and 1:3, 3:8 and 1:4 for long areas. Cézanne, so influential to Morandi’s early work, Morandi’s contemporaries Carlo Carrá and Giorgio de Chirico and the British artist David Hockney are but a few artists that adopt spatial diagrams that precede the act of painting and if the figurative elements of these artists’ works were to be removed and reconstituted as constructed geometry their paintings would indeed be considered abstract, much like the work of Mondrian. Morandi’s paintings are both traditional and modern and if the task of modernism is to question what is

“real” or “true” then his move towards abstraction is a legitimate process as it still is for all contemporary artists. Morandi’s struggle can be seen as an attempt to break free from the classical aesthetic rules of state and church in his native Italy and yet at the same time to be shackled by them by his own will, a trained and conforming servant to a sovereign state whose cultural influences date back 2500 years to Greco-Roman antiquity. Yet was the modernist architecture of Western Europe and the USA fundamentally any different?

It would be irrational to contend that classical spatial composition was the preponderant influence for modernist spatial organisation but not necessarily that it provided a point of departure for exploration and abstraction. Nor should it be argued that geometry is the hegemony of the ancients, for the manipulation of simple geometric forms such as the square have offered themselves so readily to both the subdivision, extension and ordering of architectural space across all ages and cultures. Modernist architecture however has gone some way in destabilising the illusion of beauty in classical spatial order and has developed its own direction away from figurative representation and towards abstraction, helped in great measure by the increasing freedom of the arts from state and church control and also by developments in technology. In art and architecture, as with philosophy, the shift from a classical tradition to modernism was never an abrupt severance with the past, nor necessarily a denial, rather a gradual erosion of historical influences or a hybridization of ideas.

Peter Zumthor writes that ‘Geometry is about the laws of lines, plane surfaces and three-dimensional bodies in space. Geometry can help us understand how to handle space in architecture. In architecture, there are two basic possibilities of spatial composition: the closed architectural body which isolates [and

orders] space within itself, and the open body which embraces an area of space that is connected with the endless continuum. The extension of space can be made visible through bodies such as slabs or poles placed freely in rows in the spatial expanse of a room' [3]. Zumthor recognises the figurative nature of classical freestanding masonry architecture with its interior space expressed as the void within its architectural structure and form and contrasts this with Cartesian geometry that can define centred space and its extension within volumetric boundaries or extended landscapes. Mies van der Rohe fully understood the architectural opportunities for exploring direct or ambiguous relationships between bounded and extended geometric space. His pavilion for the Barcelona Exhibition of 1929 sits within a boundary as does a picture within a frame – a little bit of Germany alongside but independent of other exhibiting nations (fig. 3).

The plan is fluid, non-bounded and non-centred in contrast to the figurative and cellular composition of classical architecture. All compositional elements – floor, roof, walls and columns provide multiple and interconnected two-dimensional and volumetric spatial geometries based around the square with a blurred distinction between what is inside and what is outside. Mies's Brick Country House Project, 1923, differs only inasmuch as there is no conceptual physical boundary to the house, the walls as objects extend the landscape of the house in Cartesian fashion to infinity. The work of Mies van der Rohe is probably admired but not liked by the architect Michael Graves who argues that the 'amorphic or continuous space, as understood in the Barcelona Pavilion... contributes to a feeling of alienation... [4]' Graves dismisses the modern movement not as a break but as an appendage to a cultural continuum in architecture. For this he might be right as we navigate through the period of post-modernity but it is arrogant and anti-intellectual to claim that all architecture should follow a pluralist and hybrid position.

Culture has been touched upon in relation to aesthetics in architecture, but not the significance of the commissioner of buildings or of technology which is the instrumental means by which architecture is realised. All these considerations need further consideration in relation to the aesthetics of contemporary architectural production. Deleuze describes history as a perversion stating 'it is identical to the "degeneration of culture." Instead of species activity, history presents us with races, peoples, classes, Churches and States.' [5] Aesthetic prejudice has been prescribed by the most active forces in European history and their models adopted as the "correct" code of expression for art and architecture. We now, by and large in the western world, live in a secular and urban society where, to the dilution of the culture of the masses, capitalism and technology is driving a mass culture obsessed with consumerism and fashion and the outward expression of confidence. The architectural objects of mass culture continually vie against each other for symbolic dominance and recognition, proliferating a classification of architecture founded on uniqueness and difference where 'the strategy used to manage most of the stuff we're shown – where there's usually nothing to see in any event – serves precisely to convert that worthlessness into spectacle, into aesthetic, into market value, into a complete unconsciousness, the collective syndrome of aestheticization known as culture.' [6] If there was a familiarity, calmness and certainty of aesthetic emotion in the continuum of the classical tradition then this has now been opposed by an economic regime that embraces shock, desire and loathing in equal measure, to animate the masses to economic activity.

Iconic architecture testifies to the disintegration of the organic nature of our cities yet at the same time is hailed as a remedy for regeneration in times of crisis. 'We want something beautiful and distinctive that will be a statement of confidence' [7] is

a typical objective of a cultural design project. The city of Bilbao, like so many other European cities, commissioned a famous architect to produce a landmark building as a symbol of confidence and progress and to develop the cultural tourism industry. Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Museum (fig. 4) succeeds on all counts as an icon; it is different and tourist flock to Bilbao to see it! Its difference relies on technology to realise its form, in this instance CATIA computer software developed for the aviation industry. The museum's form and space are interlinked as with most classical architecture, figural void within a materially defined figural form. Technology allows Gehry's spatial and formal composition to develop from topological relationships in space inherent in abstract models rather than abstract form and space being determined from complex but preconceived geometric relationships. The Museum's attraction is its form and whilst visitors may comment on the artworks, few people attach any significance to its interior space.

Materiality, light, colour, texture and ornament, and the motion of the human body in space have been

intentionally, if neglectfully, disassociated from an appreciation of architectural form and space defined by geometry. The structural frame and Cartesian geometry has enabled architects to break out of the bounded space of classical architecture and of the iconic objects of post-modernity. Geometry as a basis for formal and spatial organisation has culturally shifted from the illusion of cosmological order, to possibilities of complex and abstract spatial associations and away from manual constructions to digital simulations. Whilst culture drives technology and technology drives culture, we have forgotten that order is not just an architectural fascination but also a requisite for survival. Perhaps we need to ask what it is to have a cosmos in the first place, and what the ordering of nature, including humans and their objects means in that system. In an uncertain and secular world there can be no man-made beauty, only a joyful calmness of an architecture at rest and complete or aesthetic emotion that evokes reflex action of the nervous system. There can of course be good architecture that is developed through ethics, ideas, intuition, argument and process.

NOTE

[1] N. Humphrey, *Consciousness Regained*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983. Ch. 9.

[2] B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, New York: Harvard University Press, 1993. p.76.

[3] Peter Zumthor, *Architecture and Urbanism*, February 1998 Extra Edition, Tokyo: a+u Publishing, 1998 p. 20.

[4] Michael Graves *Buildings and Projects 1966–1981*, Eds. Wheeler, Arnell and Bickford, London: The Architectural Press Ltd., 1983, p. 13.

[5] *The Deleuze Reader*, Ed. Constantin V. Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 250.

[6] J. Baudrillard, *Mass Identity Architecture*, Ed. Proto, R., Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2003, p. 33.

[7] Peter Bishop, Director, Design for London, regarding a competition to redesign London's 12,000 bus shelters, quoted in *Building Design*, September 14th, 2007

