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ABOUT BEAUTY IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

O PIĘKNIE ARCHITEKTURY WSPÓŁCZESNEJ

„Piękno” nie jest kryterium dla „ważenia” jakości architektury, ponieważ nie jest obiektywną wartością. Piękno jest dostrzegalne wtedy, gdy spełnione zostają oczekiwania obserwatora. Zależą one od indywidualnych doświadczeń, z których jednym jest edukacja. „Piękno” trudno zdefiniować. Jego postrzeganie jest subiektywne. Nie zamierzam wypowiadać się na temat mojego własnego pojęcia piękna w architekturze współczesnej. Mogłoby ono nie być przekonujące dla nikogo poza mną. Podobnie w dydaktyce, wypowiedzianie się na temat gustów nie powinno mieć miejsca.

Tak czy inaczej: architekci ciągle próbują tworzyć rzeczy piękne i takie przykłady pojawiają się w architekturze, także współczesnej. Jednak piękno wydaje się być coraz płytsze, nastawione na chwilowy efekt. „Cliche” piękno nie jest zauważane – doceniają je ludzie kultury i edukacji.

After 30 years of research and reflection about what architecture could be and what it could mean, I have certainly developed a deep passion and commitment for the subject. And still, as I read the question that is going to be discussed in this year's theoretical conference at the Kraków Politechnika, I notice and I have to admit that the question of beauty of architecture, contemporary or not, is a question that has never very much interested me. Of course there is architecture that I find beautiful, and certainly I have tried to do my best to make my own architecture as beautiful as possible. But at the end of the day, I think I have learned and understood that „beauty” is not a valid criterion to measure quality in architecture. It is not a valid criterion because it is not objective; one can not grasp it as a „hard” criterion because it is subjective and differs from beholder to beholder.

They say that beauty lays in the eye of the beholder. Of course it lays not in the beholder's eye; beauty just passes through the eye, but just as well through the ears, the nose, the mouth, reaching and touching something inside the person, meeting there with expectations of beauty. Those expectations,

however, are as individually diverse as the personal experiences that have formed and shaped them.

We perceive beauty when something meets our expectations of beauty, just as we perceive something as ugly when it meets our expectations of ugliness. However, we have to recognize for a fact that not two individuals have the same expectations, because not two individuals share the same experiences. They might share some of them or even many of them, but they will never share all of them. Since the judgement of beauty or ugliness depends on the expectations that in turn depend from the individual experiences, not two people can have the same perception of beauty. The agreement on beauty can never be greater than the similarity of experiences.

Education is, of course, one of these experiences. Having enjoyed an education similar or identical to others, be it at home as a child or in school or somewhere else in life, will inevitably lead to similar assessments regarding beauty or ugliness. But it still remains a fact that beauty is a fugitive criterion. It is not absolute.

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Of course I can find out what is beautiful for my own self, according to my expectations of beauty; at the same time, however, I will have to acknowledge that this most likely does not mean anything for anybody else, other than the information that I see beauty in that case. In the same way, anybody else's perception of beauty will not mean more for me than the information about the fact that that person finds that thing beautiful. This information might be useful for me in the sense that I might find the other person's assessment interesting to the point that I try to understand the reasons, going in this way through a learning process that will shift my own set of expectations, so that I will see things differently from that moment on.

So, really I don't know what to answer when I am being asked about the beauty in today's architecture. Of course I could name examples of contemporary architecture that I find beautiful, but I should not be expected to bore the reader with my own personal opinions. I will not reveal my own personal likes and dislikes regarding contemporary architecture. They don't mean anything to anybody, other than offering a deep look into my own personal set of expectations and experiences. This someone may find curious, but other than that it has no meaning for anybody else, and I certainly have the right to refuse to offer this insight.

Things are different when I speak to students as a teacher. Then it will be my job to shift their set of expectations, by providing them with the experience of my explanations. But these are explanations, as rational and objective as ever possible, and as much as ever possible free of my own personal opinions. As a teacher, I can not and I must not pretend to transfer my own personal opinions onto the students. While I explain architecture and its effects, I have to be as far away as possible from my own personal set of likes and dislikes. Anything else

would be very unfair. It would be a manipulation, and there is a big difference between teaching and manipulating.

After all, this text is not written as a script for students. I have nothing to teach to the reader of this text. Rather I am learning myself through these reflections.

Coming back to the topic question of this conference (What about the beauty in contemporary architecture?), all I can say that architects try, as they have always done, to produce beauty, that is, things that they expect to be perceived as beautiful by as many beholders as possible. I think that the search for beauty is receiving the same attention that it has always received, maybe more so today than in certain other periods when functionality or the expression of some ideological message were much more pushed into the foreground.

There have always existed things and certainly architectures that could be perceived as beautiful, and they have been perceived as beautiful whenever they met the beholders' expectations of beauty, and I think nothing has ever changed in this regard. Today as ever, architecture is being made to be beautiful, to meet the beholders' expectations of beauty. You can see that in any serious work of architecture. All real architecture is just crying out: „Find me beautiful!”

It would be a scientific research – which I have no means to do – to find out if the percentage of architectural production that is found to be beautiful has changed over time, and why that has happened, and how the perception of beauty is being manipulated today compared to other times. But that is not the question we are asking ourselves during this conference.

What about beauty in today's architecture? It is there, just as it has always been, wherever it is seen as such. It might be true that beauty has become more superficial, more connected to the immediate effect on the eye. Sadly very often the effect of surprise, of „the unusual” is regarded as beauty; beauty is less seen in the intellect's effort behind a work; today, the question of „what” is more important than the question of „how” and „why”; there is less patience to notice and observe „silent” beauty, beauty that takes an effort to discover. Hardly anybody has time for that and takes time for that. Today, beauty has to come quickly; they want it right here and now, and then they turn to the next thing. Beauty has become more and more ephemeral, and is very often hardly more than a tickle to the eye.

This of course is generally speaking; obviously there are those who look behind the things, those who want to know more, those who have the sensibility, the patience and the education to see and enjoy hidden beauty, even though they, too, as I said

before, filter beauty through their individual expectations, just as anybody else.

Is there such thing as absolute beauty? I am interested in the absolute things in architecture, and I know for sure these things exist. All my interest and search is just for those absolute things, for „truth” in architecture. Is beauty among those things? Does it enter the category of „truth”? Does it have a general validity?

I am very sorry if this time I do not really feel to be in a position to offer any satisfying answer or even a suggestion of an answer regarding the topic question of this year's scientific conference. I can only hope that somebody else will do – but I doubt it will be possible without talking just about personal likes and dislikes. To return to more objective and absolute matters, in future editions of this conference: That would be, for me, beautiful.

But in the end, as I tried to explain before, that does not have to be true for everybody either.