

WIOLETTA KOZŁOWSKA*

ARCHITECTURE'S DREAMS OF IRRATIONALITY

MARZENIA ARCHITEKTURY O NIERACJONALNOŚCI

Abstract

Originally, art was created according to precise rules. The same theories also concerned architecture. We still remember Vitruvius' words about building. However, his triad is no longer literal. Perhaps more useful today may be the words of Herbert Read who claims that art is not an artistic expression of any particular ideal – it is an expression of every ideal. Art has always been created according to precise rules. Subsequent styles followed one after the other. Subsequent ones negated the thoughts of their predecessors. That lasted until the Great Avant-garde, when everything – even art – was denied. This may lead us to suppose that art should break away from the memorized theories and habits and become an expression of an ideal that can only be created by a unique rebellious artist who breaks with the rationality and commonness of everyday life.

Keywords: purpose of art, architecture, novelty

Streszczenie

Pierwotnie sztuka tworzona była według precyzyjnych reguł. Te same teorie dotyczyły także architektury. Dalej w pamięci mamy słowa Witruwiusza o budowaniu. Jednak jego triada traci już dosłowność. Może bardziej przydatne mogą być dziś słowa Herberta Reada, że sztuka, nie jest wyrażaniem w formie plastycznej jakiegoś określonego ideału – jest wyrażaniem każdego ideału. Kolejne style następowały po sobie. Kolejne negowały myśl poprzedników. Tak działo się do momentu Wielkiej Awangardy, kiedy to zanegowano wszystko – nawet sztukę. To może prowadzić nas do przypuszczenia, że sztuka powinna oderwać się od zapamiętanych teorii i przyzwyczajaje i stać się wyrazem ideału, który może stworzyć tylko niepowtarzalny, zbuntowany artysta zrywający z racjonalnością i pospolicnością dnia codziennego.

Słowa kluczowe: cel sztuki, architektura, nowość

* M.Sc. Arch. Wioletta Kozłowska, Institute of Structural Design, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

1. The beginning

Some say that Vitruvius' teachings are still remembered. However, modernity no longer refers to them in the literal sense. Despite the changes in styles and fashions, the postmodern world tries to dissociate itself from imitation, even though contemporary man cannot break away from the surrounding technical repetitive machines. Architecture in the period of a constantly changing approach to creation, cannot forget Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. His influence on posterity is indisputable and timeless. The rationality of the definition of architecture, which he created, influenced not only the creators of neoclassicism or socialist realism. The Greek and Roman orders he described are present in the world of art to this day and constitute an expression of unsurpassed canons of beauty.

One of the classic assumptions is the Aristotelian principle of the harmony between content and form. Bonawentura Maciej Pawlicki writes about it in his book *Megaron*, where he describes *prepon – aptum – decorum*. It is an expression of the need for harmony between all elements of the work. It is perfectly suited for translating into the language of architecture. Once, the principle was applied only in rhetoric, with time and interest in classical art, it began to encompass other fields of art. Today, the classic approach is denied or at least invisible. Pawlicki writes about the metaphor of the transformation of a megaron – from a one-room structure into the shape of an ancient temple. It may be a reference to any changes in the art. Both functional and aesthetic ones. The needs for changes arise among the creators from time to time. This also carries a message about the need for changes for contemporary architects. Classical art was created according to rules so as to (...) *use different structures and forms depending on the type of building, so that they become more beautiful, more sublime and more alluring*¹. This was related to the Vitruvius' assumptions. In his work *The Ten Books on Architecture*, he described the orders necessary to build an architectural form. He also proclaimed three qualities for architecture that would accompany it for the next millennia. For Vitruvius, the most important features that are assigned to building are: *utilitas, firmitas, venustas*, translated as *utility, durability, beauty*. These were indispensable qualities connected, as it seems, with the rational character of building. Consequently, the correct function necessary to create a work of art became indispensable. Such a rational search in the past in the approach to design may be consistent with the words of the philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz, who wrote: *Beauty is the manifestation of ideas in things... manifestation of the "archetype", eternal pattern, supreme perfection, absolute*². Today there is one more problem with modernity, mainly the detachment of a work of art from beauty. Such a search for archetype in architecture has been associated with the concept of style for years. Such building has strived for perfection through some kind of repeatability and thus a rational explanation of form.

The sense of search for uniqueness in the art of architects may be annotated with the text the text of *Architecture* by the philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This essay may still be relevant. Like Vitruvius, Goethe looked in it for three goals for architecture. They have a different tone, but are suitable as a complement to *utility, durability and beauty*. Goethe proposed *the most immediate, the higher, and the highest purpose*³.

¹ B. M. Pawlicki, *Transformacja i eskalacja przekształceń zabytkowych miast (Tożsamość – degradacja – przyszłość)*, [in:] *Megaron*, Kraków – Zamość, 2011, p. 109–110.

² W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć*, Warszawa 1988, p. 156–158

³ Goethe, *Architektura*, [in:] *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Warszawa 1981, p. 131.

2. The immediate purpose

The first of them is a utilitarian goal associated with the artisanal treatment of architecture. It was: *The most immediate, if it is simply a necessity, can be achieved appreciably by a crude botching-up of nature; if this need is more ramified, for what we call usefulness, it already requires some practice in craftsmanship to attain it; but this immediate purpose and the assessment of it can be left to more or less cultivated common sense, and the need can be easily met*⁴. This is a pioneering approach as for modernists striving for repetition and functionalist approach to design.

It might be a description of Corbusier's "machine for living in". One example of such architecture is *Unité d'Habitation of Berlin*. It came into being as a result of the creator's desire to describe his architecture in the most precise mathematical way. The basis for Le Corbusier's calculations was to create a conventional human figure. He was to measure 183 cm tall, and his raised hand was to reach 226 cm. He wanted to create a new, more perfect pattern of human proportions. It was to become the way to a better functional architecture and to build new relations between the height and area of rooms in the building. One of the units, the one in Berlin was constructed in 1957. This truly monstrous building, consisting of 557 apartments, was supposed to be a remedy for the housing problems of society after the Second World War. It measures 17 floors, it is an expression of *Concrete Architecture*, but it is not merely monochromatic. Its concrete walls are supplemented with colourful additions. The use of colours gives lightness to the body of the building, if one may say so in the case of such a high structure. It is also the architect's game with the proclamations of the lack of ornamentation.

Le Corbusier's proposition was supposed to be a response to the problems of the world. Copying it thoughtlessly, architects built large and extensive housing estates. They did not seem to quite understand his thought. The unit stands alone amidst greenery, it is a game of a solid in the light. However, such construction is already over. The demolition of another icon of modernism in St. Louis, the *Pruitt-Igoe* complex designed by Minoru Yamasaki with 33 high-rise blocks, shook the world of architecture. It was a symbolic end to Le Corbusier's idea and his contribution to urban planning as well as the concept of contemporary architecture. To this day, the date of July 15, 1972 is remembered by some with sadness, by others with joy. As we can see, the lowest purpose of architecture has not stood the test of time.

3. The high purpose

As we can see, common functionality is not part of the world of art. What is comfortable will not be found in museums and galleries. "But if the practice of building aspires to the name of art, it must, besides the necessary and the useful, produce objects harmonious to the senses. This sensible harmony is different in, and conditioned by, each art, and it can only be judged within the framework of these conditions. They arise from the material, from the purpose and from the nature of the sense to which the whole must be harmonious"⁵. Here the

⁴ Goethe, *Architektura*, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 132.



philosopher is still rational in his description. We do not know what this harmonious architecture means, but it can denote – a classical one, and if so, it is consistent with Vitruvius' assumptions. Thus, Goethe presents subsequent purposes aiming at introducing construction into the world of art this time. However, we have a picture of functional art again. Further the philosopher writes: *It might well be thought that, as a fine art, architecture works for the eye alone, but it ought primarily – and very little attention is paid to this – to work for the sense of movement in the human body. When in dancing, we move according to certain rules, we feel a pleasant sensation, and we ought to be able to arouse similar sensations in a person whom we lead blindfold through a well-built house. The difficult and complicated doctrine of proportion, which enables the building and its various parts to have character, comes into play here*⁶. The approach is truly modernist and functional. One can find a trace of the Great Theory here. Władysław Tatarkiewicz describes it in the following way: *This Great Theory was initiated by Pythagoreans. According to them, the beauty of an object consisted in a perfect structure, and that, in turn, in the proportion of parts. And hence, in something that can be determined: strictly numerically. Thus, they initiated the Great Theory in its narrow form*⁷. Here we can have confirmation of the mathematical character of architecture. This classicist one arose, based on symmetry, the composition was balanced, and the columns remembered from antiquity were built in a harmonized rhythm. Nowadays, architecture can also be built from repeatable modules that make it easier for designers to construct a project and for builders to do their job. However, this is not a way to interest the recipient, at least not the one from widely-read books.

Here the thought of Friedrich Schiller immediately comes to mind: *The beautiful product may, even must, be in accordance with a rule, but it must appear rule-free*⁸. Such a slow approach to irregularities can be seen in the building that fights with gravity in Vienna. This is where we can find a place for the work of the “rebels” from the Coop Himmelb(l)au group. The body of the building called *Gasometer B*, which is being referred to here, is a combination of the historical body of the old gas tank and the new one of the element bent from the vertical. Despite the appearance, the architecture is still built according to the rules. The whole of the larger complex included four large cylindrical gas containers used by residents from 1899 to 1984.

The building at the gasometer in Vienna was designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au in 1999. Despite its “modesty”, it becomes an expression of the architecture of deconstructivism. Rudolf Arnheim claimed that: *Every thing has some independence and completeness of its own, but at the same time is a part of larger contexts. It may acknowledge very little of this dependence, but it can never be wholly self-contained. There is much closure in an apple's symmetry, yet its shape recognizes its dependence upon the system from which it grew. A building may be designed without regard to its neighbours, but almost always it at least shows its subservience*

⁶ Goethe, *Architektura*, [in:] *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Warszawa 1981, p. 132.

⁷ W. Tatarkiewicz, *O filozofii i sztuce*, Warszawa 1986, p. 179–180, *This theory was a generalization of the Pythagorean observation concerning the harmony of sounds: the strings resonate harmoniously, if the ratio of their length is the ratio of simple numbers.*

⁸ F. Schiller, *Kallias, czyli o pięknie*, Kęty 2006, p. 48.



to the force of gravity, and it commonly provides entrances and exits and adapts its shape to the intake of air and light. Such modification of the object's intrinsic order by its interaction with the environment is not only indispensable to its functioning, but also desirable for its form and appearance. An object that behaves as though it were independent while being in fact dependent, harbors a discrepancy that may be experienced as self-contradiction and therefore as disturbing. Untruth interferes with functioning⁹. However, the building was to be revolutionary, although the nature of utility imposed economic and functional requirements on designers. This is a student dormitory, and in such a building the function becomes priority. Therefore, it consists of small, repetitive useful elements and in its intended use it should be deprived of glamour. However, the body of the building was created as a contrast to the surrounding brick buildings. The old gas tanks used to illuminate the streets have become the background for architects' game of ultra-modernity. It is not a revalorization of monuments, the whole becomes more visible from a distance. However, the historical form does not lose anything of its attractiveness. The Coop Himmelb(l)au group creates a new body as a struggle with the stereotype of its function. A small disruption in the regularity of the body creates – decomposition. It does not destroy the picture of the whole, because: *Deconstruction is not demolition, or dissimulation. While it diagnoses certain structural problem within apparently stable structures, these flaws do not lead to the structures' collapse. On the contrary, deconstruction gains all its forces by challenging the very values of harmony, unity, and stability and proposing instead a different view of structure: the view that flaws are intrinsic to the structure. (...) A deconstructivist architect is therefore not one who dismantles buildings, but one who locates the inherent dilemmas within buildings. The deconstructive architect puts the pure forms of the architectural tradition on the couch and identifies the symptoms of a repressed impurity. The impurity is drawn to the surface by a combination of gentle coaxing and violent torture: the form is interrogated (...). Irregular geometry is (...) understood as a structural condition rather than as a dynamic formal aesthetic. It is no longer produced simply by the conflict between pure forms. It is now produced within those forms. The forms themselves are infiltrated with the characteristic skewed geometry, and distorted. In this way, the traditional condition of the architectural object is radically disturbed*¹⁰. Here we do not see a conflict of forms, the historical one is supplemented by a new one and vice versa. The delicate instability of the form and its departure from the vertical is still timid, it may seem infinite now. Its motto may be Ernst Fischer's words concerning the work of art, who wrote that, *The work of art must grip the audience not through passive identification but through an appeal to reason which demands action and decision*¹¹. Here, it also forces the viewer to move away and pay attention to whether the building is not accidentally “flying” towards them.

⁹ R. Arnheim, *Dynamika formy architektonicznej*, Łódź 2016, p. 178.

¹⁰ M. Wigley, *Architektura dekonstrukcji*, [in:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Warszawa 2013, p. 237.

¹¹ E. Fischer, *O potrzebie sztuki*, Warszawa 1962, p. 10.

III. 2. Coop Himmelb(l)au, *Apartment Building Gasometer B*, Vienna, 1995–2001



Ill. 3. Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, 1997, source: pixabay.com

4. The highest purpose

Eventually, we reach the highest goal. Here, finally, we are moving towards the pure form and the futility of art. Goethe writes: *But here, too, appears the observation of the highest purpose of architecture, which undertakes, if we may be allowed the expression, the super-satisfaction of the sense, and raises the cultivated mind to astonishment and rapture. This can only be effected by genius, which has mastered all the other demands, and this is the poetic part of architecture, the proper realm of invention. Architecture is not an art of imitation, but rather an autonomous art; yet at the highest level it cannot do without imitation. It carries over the qualities and appearance of one material into another: every order of columns, for example, imitates building in wood; it carries over the characteristics of one building into another: for example by the union of columns and pilasters with walls; and it does this for variety and richness. And just as it is for the artist to know whether he is doing the right thing here, so it is difficult for the connoisseur to know whether the right thing has been done*¹².

The *Guggenheim Museum* in Bilbao aims exactly to “raise the cultivated mind to astonishment and rapture”. It arose from a seemingly mundane reason. In 1991, the government of the Basque Country contacted the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. The aim of the activities was to help the region recover from an economic crisis. Thus a building with an exhibition space

¹² Goethe, *Architektura*, *op.cit.*, p. 132–133.

covering 11,000 m² was erected. It houses works by such artists as Eduardo Chillida, Andy Warhol or Willem de Kooning. The deconstructed building is made of titanium sheet and glass. Its form is fully modern. The dynamics of form is created by a lack of horizontal and vertical elements. Everything is bent, the wavy lines create smooth transitions of individual parts of the building. The body looks like created by a great gust of wind. The whole is reflected in the river, creating an additional impression of the unreality of this architecture. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao designed by Frank Gehry has changed the world of contemporary architecture. The success of this uncompromising art has created new thinking about the shape of such buildings. As expected, it also contributed to economic growth. The whole activity even received the name – the “Bilbao effect”. The amazing success, conscious transformation of the city is now admired throughout the world. It also becomes the expression of the dream of Mark Wigley, who is one of the theoreticians of deconstructivism. He envisioned such architecture already in 1988. He described the advent of decomposed forms: *The more carefully we look the more unclear it becomes where the perfect form ends and its imperfection begins, they are found to be inseparably entangled. A line cannot be drawn between them. No surgical technique can free the form; no clean incision can be made. To remove the parasite would be to kill the host. They comprise one symbiotic entity. This produces a feeling of unease, of disquiet, because it challenges the sense of stable, coherent identity that we associate with pure form. It is as if perfection had always harboured imperfection, that it always had certain undiagnosed congenital flaws which are only now becoming visible. Perfection is secretly monstrous. Tortured from within, the seemingly perfect form confesses its crime, its imperfection*¹³. Breaking away with the memorized forms of buildings, such imperfection creates a new aesthetic of intuitive architecture. After more than twenty years since its construction, the museum is still a determinant of modernity and its form, detached from its function, is still the undisputable symbol of a disinterested work of art. Such architecture was probably postulated by Goethe to achieve the “the highest purpose”. The building was declared one of the buildings of the century. It joined such works as Le Corbusier’s Chapel in Ronchamp or the Sydney Opera House by Jorn Utzon.

5. Revolution

Once again the philosopher. In his essay *Architecture*, Goethe tries to organize the meaning of architecture. The philosopher writes that (...) *the peculiarity of invention and the appropriate manner of imitation, have rarely been understood when they have been needed most, in that what was alone appropriate to temples and public buildings was now transferred to private dwellings in order to give them a magnificent appearance. It might be said that in modern times this has produced a double fiction and a twofold imitation, which demand intelligence and sensitivity both to use and to assess them. In this no one has surpassed Palladio; none moved in this direction more freely than he, and if he overstepped the mark, nonetheless even when he is criticized, he can always be forgiven. It is necessary to confront certain purists with this doctrine of invention and its intellectual principles, for they would like to turn everything in architecture into prose*¹⁴. This double fiction, as he calls such exchanges of

¹³ M. Wigley, *Architektura dekonstrukcji*, op.cit., p. 327.

¹⁴ Goethe, *Architektura*, op.cit., p. 134.

memorized meanings of architecture, was even historically needed. They brought with them the intellectual play of the architect with the recipient of art. The question may be asked if the philosopher would like the 20th-century deconstructivist buildings. However, such games with the past do not suit everyone today. After modernism, there came the death of postmodernism along with its historical references. Perhaps that is the reason why Palladio, one of the greatest architects in history, and so admired by Goethe, is so hated by artists heading for the avant-garde. That is why Coop Himmelb(l)au deals with the memory of his work quite brutally and without respect. Architects still seem to believe that they can start a revolution and that their construction will be eternal. The statement of the group's creators, from 1980, can be taken as an artistic manifesto of 20th century architecture. Futurists, expressionists, and even rational modernists would certainly be able to endorse it. Perhaps that is why Wolf D. Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky are far from subtle when they say: *We are fed up with seeing Palladio and other historical masks*¹⁵. When they wrote these words, they were young, and as befits the young, they were uncompromising. It is interesting to know whether and when the next generations of "young savages", as it was with expressionists, will negate their work as old and degenerated. Their art will also fade one day

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