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ARCHITECTURE – A RATIONAL OR INTUITIVE DEFINITION?

ARCHITEKTURA – DEFINICJA RACJONALNA CZY INTUICYJNA?

Abstract

Architects, poets and philosophers have tried to create a definition of architecture for a number of years. As happens in the world of art, subsequent epochs ruthlessly negate the work and theories of their predecessors. After a period of rationality and peace, the avant-garde bursts, after functionalism, total expansion. The same applies to the definitions created. Architects are happy to create them and try to prove them rationally. However, it is not always successful, sometimes great creators compromise themselves with trivial definitions. Some are far from reason and science. However, these unusual ones may be the most interesting for us. An example of this is the words of Wolf Prix, the great creator of deconstructivism, who explains our problem simply and incomprehensibly: “Architecture is YES!”. One may have some remarks about his words, but one should remember that the works by Coop Himmelb(l)au are definitely “YES!”.

Keywords: architecture, avant-garde, definition, theory

Streszczenie

Architekci, poeci i filozofowie od wielu lat starają się stworzyć definicję architektury. Kolejne epoki, jak to w świecie sztuki bywa, negują bezpardonowo prace i teorie poprzedników. Po okresie racjonalności i spokoju następuje wybuch awangardowości, po funkcjonalizmie – całkowite rozprężenie. To samo dotyczy formułowanych definicji. Architekci chętnie je tworzą i starają się racjonalnie udowodniać. Jednak nie zawsze im się to udaje, czasem wielcy twórcy kompromitują się błahymi definicjami, a niektóre dalekie są od rozsądku i naukowości. Jednak te niecodzienne mogą być dla nas najbardziej interesujące. Takim przykładem są słowa, które wypowiedział Wolf Prix, wielki twórca dekonstruktywizmu, objaśniając nasz problem prosto i niezrozumiale: „Architecture is YES!”. Można mieć pewne uwagi co do jego słów, jednak należy pamiętać, że zbudowane dzieła Coop Himmelblau na pewno są „YES!”.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, awangarda, definicja, teoria

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1. The beginning of building

The attempt to answer the question about the *rational or intuitive path to architecture* should be preceded by an attempt to answer another question: what exactly is architecture? Such an attempt must begin with architectural beginnings, with *ab ovo* architecture, with Vitruvius' definition. His three principles have become an inspiration for future generations of architects and theoreticians. He wrote about the adherence to three principles: durability, utility and beauty. Today, this approach is probably a bit outdated. However, that was not so obvious in the 1970s. Following Vitruvius' idea, Piotr Biegański puts it in a more modern way: *Thus, architecture combines two elements, having several forms of their existence in the process of concretization of form, out of which the final and universally communicative one is the real shape of the work, corresponding to the aesthetic, functional and technical requirements as well as reasonably adopted economic assumptions*¹. However, does durability or utility in building still exist and can we still talk about beauty? Furthermore, can modern architecture, whose main purpose has become its advertising function, still be built economically and is it an argument for a sophisticated investor? After all, even banks that are a pillar of conservatism must build their headquarters without concern for the costs and this fact no longer deters customers or shareholders.

2. An attempt at definition

Historically there have appeared definitions derived from various premises. For Adolf Loos, such a concept is associated with purpose, not the shape of architectural things. The architect convinces us that: *Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfils a function is to be excluded from the domain of art*². Then he tries to make a classification that is already associated with its function. He divides it into five groups related to the purpose of buildings. Thus, we have (...) *devotional, memorial (monuments and tombs), civil, military and domestic*³ architecture. Although unequivocal, such an approach, cannot be completely indisputable to us, although obviously one cannot disagree with it. Looking at *Looshaus*, the building of the Goldman & Salatsch department store, we see the upcoming ideas of modernism and we can notice the nucleus of his ideas and understand what architecture was for this great artist.

Following the definition proposed by Loos, contemporary architecture is full of striving to build monuments, but already without looking at their function. Sometimes these monuments are small, if such can exist at all. For Hans Hollein, architecture is something simple. He pronounces colloquial words without sublimity which, unfortunately, mean both everything and nothing: "Everything is Architecture"⁴. Luckily, however, there comes a sobering up and the architect tries to refine his definition. He does it by finding a broader meaning and getting rid of banality: *Architecture is cultic; it is mark, symbol,*

¹ P. Biegański, *Architektura sztuka kształtowania przestrzeni*, Warszawa 1974, p. 29.

² A. Loos, *Architektura*, [in:] *Ornament i zbrodnia – eseje wybrane*, Warszawa 2013, p. 153.

³ J. Ruskin, *Siedem lamp architektury*, Architekt No. 11, 1903.

⁴ H. Hollein, *Everything is Architecture*, Bau, No. 1/2, 1968.

sign, expression. Architecture is control of bodily heat – protective shelter. Architecture is determination – establishment – of space, environment. Architecture is conditioning of a psychological state. He combines the utilitarian character of architecture, its importance as a shelter for man, with the perception of it as an expression of worship, sign, symbol. The creator expresses his interest in art and emphasizes that something more than functionality is needed for real architecture – mainly sublimity. Such metaphorical terms deny the way to its simple reception. They can be an expression of the need to treat it as a work of art. They also deny the functional approach to design. It seems that Hollein does not pursue its corporeality or obviousness in its description. The definition itself directs us towards poetry or philosophy rather than towards building. We can now try to create the antithesis of Hollein's definition, which the architect would surely also agree with, stating that *not everything is architecture* or that not everything can be architecture. Or even more precisely, that not everything should be called architecture.

We can find a perfect example for this beautiful definition among the works by Hans Hollein. The façade of a jewelry store in Vienna – *Schullin I* – can be seen as such a small monument. Here, Hollein stands on the heights of his architectural art. Despite the small size, the work's shape attracts the attention of not just the passer-by who is experienced with art. The most striking element is the torn polished stone lintel. And here again the question about the canons of building arises. This element can be considered a reminiscence of the "modern" ancient ruin. The reception of the work is similar to that of Igor Mitoraj's works. We do not know if it is a trace of a cannonball from the time of the war, deliberately unrepaired for years, or the natural break-up of the stone created during construction. It is 1972 and architecture slowly breaks with a boring modernist approach to building. Here, the sense of artistic destruction can be explained by the need for a sophisticated contrast with the interior of the shop and its precious jewelry. It seems, however, that the judgment: *It seems that only the Viennese can combine the commercial aspect with the sensual one so subtly*⁵ – is true.

This is not the only store designed by Hollein in Vienna. *Retti* – a candle shop from 1965 – has a similar small form. All of these works give us a picture of what the real architecture meant for this great artist. One can hope or rather be certain that the phrase "Everything is Architecture" was just an artistic provocation for this great artist. I think it is supposed to force us to intellectual play with the creator and lead to negation of his words. It might be an expression of an attempt at a creative discussion about the sense of modern architecture. The difference of these two works, however, leads us to believe in the intuitive way to the artist's true architecture. In turn, Otto Wagner's opinion: *Wiener haben keine geschmack* seems at least exaggerated in this part of Vienna.

Fortunately, this was not the only one of Hollein's statements about the meaning of the sense of architecture. Sometimes his words are even more poetic. The creator tries to assign a number of epithets to the definition. He writes that *Architecture is elemental, sensual, primitive, brutal, terrible, mighty, dominating. But it is also the embodiment of the most subtle emotions, a sensitive record of the most refined sensations*⁶. Finally, he adds that it should be *a materialization of the spiritual*⁷. This sounds poetic and gives sense to an intuitive approach

⁵ Ch. A. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Warszawa 1987, p. 32.

⁶ M. Marek Skwara, *Ogród wyobraźni*. Architektura, November-December No. 6, 1986, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibidem*.



to building a form. However, Hollein's works show us the architect's deadly serious attitude to creation. Even the smallest of his designs are small works of art, refined in the smallest elements. Looking at the shops in Vienna, we feel that his approach brings us closer to the thought of the need to treat architecture as an art rather than a science of crude rational building.

Unfortunately, the creators of architecture, as it happens with artists, are always better at presenting their thoughts with drawings and designs than at writing about them. Any theories about art are, unfortunately, better presented by philosophers or poets. And indeed the pursuit of architecture is most beautifully described by Paul Valéry. He creates his own, obviously fully poetic definition. In the dialogue *Eupalinos Or The Architect*, he explains it to us: *Listen, then. Buildings that neither speak nor sing, deserve only contempt; they are dead objects, standing lower in the hierarchy than these stacks of stones thrown randomly from carts, stones that can at least entertain a keen eye looking at the random shape that they assume while falling down*⁸. Thus, there appears a whole new definition of architecture as the "song" of buildings. A metaphor worthy of a great poet; the architects themselves are not capable of such sublimity. Their definitions are seldom detached from the function and purpose of the building. Fortunately, owing to the poet, we have the possibility of a complete detachment from the memorized language of building. However, one must also remember that music is built according to precise rules. Harmonics – one of the elements of a musical work defines the way of combining sounds in a rational way. We know that major scales are merry and the minor ones – sad. This may be treated similarly to the historical way of building architecture according to the assumed patterns. Giving the architecture the epithet "singing" builds a new non-structural poetics. Such poetics does not contradict other definitions and can complement them. You should also emphasize its ambiguity, as not everyone can sing, which can lead us to think that not everything can be called architecture. However, it can be concluded that if we can hear, or perhaps see, the singing of buildings, then it is real architecture.

As one can see, architects and theoreticians of architecture always disagree about the unambiguous definition of architecture. Nor can they agree on what can be called this way. Definitions are usually too precise or quite the contrary. In their statements, architects cannot agree whether to deal with form or function as the most important element of creation. Auguste Perret, the precursor of the use of concrete in architecture, regarded it as the art of construction. We do not know whether he meant the linkage between form and construction or literal building. As happens with general definitions, we should agree with him. After all, one sometimes talks about constructing a shape or says that a body of the building is constructed of small elements. George Gilbert Scott, an architect in Victorian England, convinces us to seek architecture and distinguish it from ordinary building in decorating the structure. This view was also continued later, and its expression can be seen in Art Deco and its ornamental decorated architecture. A similar definition is presented to us by the art

⁸ P. Valéry, *Eupalinos, czyli architekt*, [in:] *Antologia współczesnej estetyki francuskiej*, Warszawa 1980, p. 230.



historian John Ruskin. In his opinion, architecture is an ornament added to the building. Thus, one can talk about ornateness or perhaps about decorating buildings. This approach is still from the nineteenth century, resulting from the reminiscence of the Vitruvian approach to design. We may therefore equate it with the words of Perret and Scott. Despite the different terms, the definition cannot detach architecture from the construction of the building or building as such. Architecture becomes something added to the body of the building. However, functionalist definitions of architecture should not be denied. After all, we can be convinced of such a functional approach with the words of the poet and writer Oscar Wilde who was not associated with building. He emphasized that *Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. [...] If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture.* Thus, for real architecture, we need “body heat control”, as in the case of Hollein, or at least it has to be a shelter, i.e. something functional.

This conceptualization about the need to invent architecture may encourage us to continue to look for its sense or meaning. Piotr Biegański, the architect and conservator of monuments known for the post-war reconstruction of Polish cities, perceives architecture as “one of the manifestations of conscious human activity in the field of shaping and organizing space”⁹. After this urbanistic definition, he recalls that originally architecture also included astrology and astronomy. In these words he tries to convince us of the rational expression of building. This may be confirmed by a similar quote from Bruno Zevi’s words that architecture is the art of space. Fortunately, Biegański claims that this term *consists of two inseparable and complementary manifestations of human culture – one is art, the other is resource of skills that allow expressing the achievements of this art in real forms and further, that architecture is art and skill which enables the organization and shaping of spatial elements that serve to satisfy the material and spiritual needs of people. Since architecture is a manifestation of culture in which art occupies a special place, it becomes obvious that the main task of architecture is the search for beauty*¹⁰. Such a definition that combines art and a scientific approach to building seems entirely contemporary. It is probably acceptable even for supporters of an intuitive and rational way of building in the modern world. Although the beauty we remember, created according to the rules of classical art, no longer exists. The design theories proclaimed by modernists also died. Today, the main need of architecture is “madness”. What times!

Although it seems that architecture is associated with the creation of buildings, it may be something more complex. Étienne-Louis Boullée notices such duality. For him, it consists of a technical and artistic factor. Only a great creator can afford a polemic with Vitruvius. He utters words that only few will get away with: *What is architecture? Shall I join Vitruvius in defining it as the art of building? Indeed, no, for there is a flagrant error in this definition. Vitruvius mistakes the effect for the cause. In order to execute, it is first necessary to conceive. Our earliest ancestors built their huts only when they had a picture of them in their minds. It is this product of the mind, this process of creation,*

⁹ P. Biegański, *Architektura sztuka kształtowania przestrzeni*, Warszawa 1974, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 28.



*that constitutes architecture and which can consequently be defined as the art of designing and bringing to perfection any building whatsoever. Thus, the art of construction is merely an auxiliary art which, in our opinion could appropriately be called the scientific side of architecture*¹¹. Thus, architecture must be not a merely technical creation resulting from its scientific foundations, but it should also be a work of art. We are not sure whether it was to be a work of art created in accordance with the thought of the creators from Coop Himmelb(l)au, or rather that of Adolf Loos. Determining what art is in the modern world is even more complicated than thinking about the meaning of the word architecture.

Fortunately for the author of these considerations, there are also definitions detached from the purpose of the buildings. Edwin Lutyens, an English architect, a representative of historicism, argued that architecture begins where the function ends. What prophetic words in times when even technically good buildings which do not fulfil their initial functions are simply demolished. Over time, their place is taken up by new ones, but their fate may become similar in a few years. After all, nothing lasts forever in art.

3. Lack of canons

Modernity breaks with simple canons of building. An expression of this fact may be Daniel Libeskind's work. Presenting his approach to the meaning of architecture, the great creator describes it in the following way: "I see the world as something open. It has a mystery that will never be solved by any science. Architecture is very crucial to understanding many things because it provides space to see the sky, to see the street, to see others as they enter through the door". Perhaps it is the magic of the sky that can be the answer to the question of what architecture is. The sky becomes the background for a large, intuitively created, expressive monocrystal embedded in the body of a classic, rational historical building. The project tries to combine these two trends of design. One – historical built for the creation of beauty and the modern advertising-deconstructive one. The whole complex is the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr. The museum was built in Dresden, and is an extension of the existing museum building of the former armoury from 1873–1877. Originally, the complex was erected in a stately palace form with a corpus and two rear wings forming a kind of a courtyard. The main element of the expansion is a powerful wedge cutting or perhaps emerging from the original structure of the building. The wedge pierces the old part, filling the rear courtyard and decomposing the entirety of the complex. It reveals itself by cutting the façade and becoming a visible sign of the beginning of the structure starting at the back of the building. Elevations, if they can be called like this here, are covered with metal, perforated, semi-transparent elements. They do not hide the construction and function of the structure. Their transparency allows one to look inside and reflect on the uselessness of form. Perhaps it is the shape of a geometric window that provides light to the interior of the rooms. However, as it often happens in Libeskind's work,

¹¹ É. L. Boullée, *Architecture, Essay on Art*, transl. Helen Rosenau.

Ill. 3. Daniel Libeskind, Military History Museum, Dresden, 2001–2011



Ill. 4. Daniel Libeskind, Military History Museum, Dresden, 2001–2011, retrieved at: www.libeskind.com

the function is not the most important thing here. We know the other works of the architect and we can be certain that it was supposed to be a pure form or even pure art. And what is most important and consistent with the description of the architecture by the great artist, we can see the whole of it only from the sky. The classic axial assumption is completely decomposed. The wedge visible from the front reveals itself to us as a slightly damaged letter V. The shape is no longer visible like a crystal, we see it in its entirety. However, this view is unavailable to an ordinary observer. Only birds in the sky will get to know everything. Despite the extreme difference in the aesthetics of the bodies coming from different architectural epochs and other meanings of architecture, their unusual symbiosis persists. The work is fully expressionistically consistent. Looking from below or from above, however, we have the impression that intuition wins with the rationality of architecture and that Libeskind did not aspire to the assumptions of classical composition. We cannot see symmetry, rhythm or beauty here. Yet, this is a single new form and we cannot imagine another shape of it.

4. Building following fashion

The contemporary world breaks away from the rules. Yet, at least in architecture, this is an apparent action. Architects are not able to break away from all the rules and forms that restrict them in their works. Cinema halls must be rectangular and windows

must provide light to the inside of buildings. It is enough to look around to see that the works of great architects are similar to each other. This is obviously not an impertinent criticism. Watching the museums by Daniel Libeskind or the buildings by Frank Gehry, we can notice that they were created according to the personal canons imposed on us by the creators and their individuality. This individuality makes us think of an intuitive approach to creation. Despite the variety of forms, their works create a certain unforgettable specific style. This is not a style in the sense we know from the history of architecture. Today, it can be likened to some kind of fashion. After all, these are unique works, each one different. Yet, we see that they arose according to the rules imposed on us by the great masters.

Contemporary architecture is constructed in accordance with Charles Jencks' idea of its advertising purpose. Buildings are also an expression of Nikolaus Pevsner's thoughts. For this architectural historian: *A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal*¹². Here, we arrive at the problem of contemporary architecture and its apparent detachment from the memorized canons of building again. After the period of modernism, in which building was connected with rationalism, and after post-modernism, when the principle was to imitate the memorized rules, the modernity tries to strive towards apparent avant-garde. Obviously, if it is avant-garde, it is associated with the dream of creating perfect advertising. Unfortunately, this is no longer a revolutionary action as was the case with the predecessors. It is to be hoped that everything that surrounds us was designed with the "aesthetic expression" in mind. If still not everything appeals to us, we can draw a positive assumption that such beauty of contemporary architecture will be discovered by successive generations. As it previously happened in the history of architecture or art. Let us remember that the nose of the Great Sphinx of Giza was reportedly shot off by French soldiers, as the sculpture was not of greater value to them. It is to be hoped that modern buildings will stand the test of time, if they are not pulled down to make room for new, more functional ones obviously.

One can conclude with the thought of Denis Diderot, the French writer of the Enlightenment period. He wrote that *architecture is so rich in its own soil, it provides so much material that clearly distinguishes it from other arts, it covers an issue so specific and proper only to itself, that it should be presented separately and remain within its own domain*. However, Diderot as a philosopher dealt with architecture and he could not leave it to itself, and especially to the architects themselves. The latter do not want or cannot reach a consensus on what real architecture should be. Their definitions are usually too metaphorical or, on the contrary, technical and functional. This makes it difficult to recognize them as genuine unambiguously and they still cannot prove their claims. They cannot decide whether to pursue a rational or intuitive path to architecture. Yet, this dualism of contemporary art is perhaps the most appropriate approach. And in conclusion, we can intuitively shout along with Wolf Prix from the Coop Himmelb(l)au group – "Architecture is YES!".

¹² N. Pevsner, *Historia architektury europejskiej*, Warszawa 1976, p. 11.

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