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PRAGMATISM OR EMOTION? THE SOURCES OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM

PRAGMATYZM CZY EMOJCA? ŹRÓDŁA FORMY ARCHITEKTONICZNEJ

Abstract

1. The question about the sources of architectural form has been asked for decades and the answer differed depending on the period of time. Nowadays the subject seems to be equally important; however, the answer is still vague.

2. In 1997 Charles Jencks held a debate on contemporary architecture. The term 'ecstatic' architecture reflecting expressions and emotions was the result of this debate. The symbol of this architectural sensitivity was the 17th century sculpture The Ecstasy of St. Theresa by Lorenzo Bernini and the essence of such architecture is the impression of movement and dematerialisation of form. After 20 years, The Manifest is still up-to-date. Let us then imagine two icons of architecture: Dream by Norman Foster as the pragmatic one and the sculpture of Bernini as the emotional one. Both groups of examples would be equally numerous and technically perfect. This distinguished dematerialisation of form is currently a frequent autonomic element in a very pragmatically shaped structure of the object.

3. In the process of designing the ability of intuitive transfer of form becomes especially important in the first stage of creating the project – the stage when the idea is born. The picture presenting the creative idea of an architect shows the main idea leading to the implementation of the work. This ability is not given equally to everyone. It is usually called a talent.

Keywords: expressionist architecture, ecstatic architecture, pragmatism, astonishment

Streszczenie

1. Pytanie o źródła formy architektonicznej powtarzało się przez wiele stuleci i w różnych okresach znajdowało różne odpowiedzi. Współcześnie temat wydaje się być równie ważny, a odpowiedź nadal niejednoznaczna.

2. W 1997 roku, w londyńskiej Royal Academy, Charles Jencks prowadził dyskurs na temat współczesnej architektury. Efektem debaty stała się nazwa architektura „ekstatyczna” dla architektury wyrażającej emocjonalność i ekspresję. Symbolem takiej architektonicznej wrażliwości była XVII-wieczna rzeźba Ekstaza świętej Teresy, Lorenco Berniniego, a istotą owej architektury – wrazenie ruchu i dematerializacji formy. Po dwudziestu latach Manifest jest nadal aktualny – wyobraźmy sobie zatem dwie ikony architektury: Ser Normana Fostera po stronie pragmatyzmu i rzeźbę Berniniego po stronie emocji. Obie grupy przykładów byłyby równie liczne i równie technicznie doskonałe. Owa wyróżniona dematerializacja formy współcześnie często jest elementem autonomicznym w bardzo pragmatycznie kształtowanej strukturze obiektu.

3. W procesie projektowania architektury umiejętność intuicyjnego przekazu formy staje się szczególnie ważna w pierwszej fazie powstawania projektu – w fazie powstawania idei obiektu. Rysunek wyrażający ideę twórczą architekta ukazuje główną myśl prowadzącą do realizacji dzieła. Umiejętność ta nie wszystkim dana jest w równym stopniu. Zwykle się nazywa ją talentem.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura ekspresjonistyczna, ekstaza, pragmatyzm, zadziwienie

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1. Introduction

The problem to be considered during the conference is purely Shakespearian in nature, namely – what is more important in life “intellect or beauty”. A similar question may be asked about the creation of form shaping architectural space. Does it arise as a result of arduous analyses and exploration of elements and conditions of the future building or is it the effect of an idea which is born in our head begging us to record it as a picture or sketch to be then changed into the matter.

2. The sources of architectural form

The question about the sources of architectural form has been present in literature for centuries and the answer has differed depending on the period of time. At present the subject seems to be as important as before and the answer is still vague. The theory of design comprises many ideas which constitute a theoretical basis for organizing the principles shaping the form in the history of architecture.

If we expect both technique and art to be the essence of architecture, I would like to recall the papers of Hans-Georg Gadamer. He points out the importance of beauty, which as far as art is concerned is the factor acting independently from time and influence of political and social conditions. Mark Gelernter on the other hand distinguishes five main trends, five concepts which make up the basis for organizing debates about architectural form namely:

- **An architectural form is shaped by the function of the future object.** According to this idea the form serves the needs of an investor/ user. Very often the form arises as a sum of analyses and explorations related to the requirements of the project and legislative bylaws referring to the design. They also include the requirements concerning geographical location. The examples may include atria, concert halls where visibility and good acoustics are usually the basic differentiator in search of formal solutions. There are, however objects which differ in forms among such buildings although they were created in similar period of time and location.
- **Architectural form is generated within the creative imagination of an architect-creator.** The form which arises as a result of explorations is the effect of feelings and intuitions of an architect. Some historians of architecture pay attention to a noticeably greater creativity of abilities of formal shaping among students. It may happen, however, that a very talented team may show solutions which are not the best ones. It usually happens as a result of a sudden ‘financial crisis’ or unexpected location difficulties.
- **Architectural form is shaped by the prevailing Spirit of the Age.** It is not important how far the artistic creation of a designer goes. He is involved in ideas and opinions expressed by the society and environment he lives and works in. No matter what the individual opinions of a designer are, he always depends on tendencies and images of architectural form. Here, the Author (M. G.) recalls the building of Bauhaus in Dessau (W. Gropius, 1926) and the palace of the viceroy in New Delhi, India (Sir E. Lutyens, 1911–1931), both created in the same period of time.

- **Architectural form depends on local social and economic conditions.** Likewise the Spirit of Place, local conditions determine architectural concepts, influence formal solutions and determine the actions of the architect. If, however, as in the first case, they result from the desire to change the traditional way of thinking and aim at introducing formal solutions which are the effect of imagination and the desire to change the existing stereotype, in this case physically existing conditions restrain the creativity of the designer.
- **Architectural form derives from universal laws existing beyond the creation of the architect and independent of the climate and geography.** This theory emphasises that some universal forms like: basilica, atrium, courtyard occurring in many solutions and becoming the basis for architectural concepts independently from culture and designer may undergo certain transformations, the formal relation is significantly visible.

As far as the organizers' question is concerned, the theory in which the leading role is played by the creativity of the architect-designer is the closest to it (NJ). Even if the remaining four points play an important role in the creation of the form, they remain 'at the back' of decisions and imagination of the architect-designer.

3. The debate on modern architecture in the London Royal Academy

In 1997 Charles Jencks held a debate of International Forum in the London Royal Academy on modern architecture. The term 'ecstatic' architecture reflecting emotions and expressions was the result of this debate. The symbol of such architectural sensitivity is the 17th-century sculpture called The Ecstasy of St. Theresa by Lorenzo Bernini from Santa Maria della Vittoria church in Rome. The main issue of such architecture is the impression of movement and dematerialisation of form, the feature present in many works of modern architecture. Architect and theorist Neil Leach noticed some irony in the fact that a sculpture, not a building by one of the eminent Baroque designers, was given such an enormous, timeless applause. Architecture like this may be compared to the expressionism of early Modernism currently. Currently, it heads in the direction of lightness and transience of the form and to associations/relations with biotechnology and computer sciences leading us to reflexion on the versatility of Bernini and his genius/talent. The debate came to the conclusion that this *ecstatic form* may surprise or even shock us when we come across such architectural innovation for the first time.

Dematerialisation of form frequently becomes an autonomic element of a very pragmatically shaped architectural structure of the object. If we look at the architecture of recent years, we could observe that special attention is paid to buildings which externally are solid, simple blocks and the feeling of surprise and innovation is hidden in the internal structure. I would like to concentrate on two examples: the university building known as 41 Union Square in New York and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

The Cooper Union university building by Tom Mayne of MORPHOSIS ARCHITECTS, 2009 is the extension of the university campus of Cooper Union College, existing in New York since 1859. The genesis of the school resembles London AA. The school, comprising 3 colleges: architecture, arts and engineering, was founded in the middle of 19th century. It is still a rather small school with a great number of candidates for one place. Many well-known architects are among its graduates.

The main idea of Tom Mayne from the Morphosis group was to create a place which would be an intellectual link between the cultural and technical society of the University and the surroundings of Lower Manhattan. The architect awarded the Prizker Prize, 2005 and the AIA Gold Medal in 2013, created here in Manhattan an object which resembles a big extravagant sculpture rather than a building. The object of a non-orthogonal and as one might think unstable form, is supported by big poles in the shape of 'V' letter from the entry site as a counterbalance.

Non-standard geometry distinguishes the object from its surrounding. Its outer layer looks like 'torn' skin in some places, which enhances the impression of architectural form. Despite this impression, the sketch of a plane line is concise and organized. The picture of the building in progress (2006–2007) presents a concise nine-storey-high cube with orthogonal divisions inside. The only extravaganza is the middle patio opened onto the whole height of the building. Around the patio open spaces like: schools, galleries, lecture rooms and a staircase which connects the first, fifth and eighth floor in so called 'skip-stop' system are created. This impressively constructed staircase is the main surprise of the interior. The last floor is closed by a terrace and the green roof¹.

The architectural beauty of the building is the effect of the half transparent 'double' building 'skin' which covers the functional and constructive structure of the inner block.

The shape and structure of the cover make up the statuary of the block intensifying impression of expression. At the same time the external, multi-layered panels from glass and aluminium of the cover provide both transparency of important places inside and the comfort of using it. They reduce heat in summer and provide access to sun in winter.

Despite its non-standard architectural beauty the sculpture-like shaped building situated in the outskirts of East Village close to Washington Square Park, Cooper College seems to be in the right place.

A quiet, middle class character of the district buildings with flats, bookshops, coffee shops and galleries constitutes almost perfect academic surrounding and full of expression block of the College seems to be the perfect supplement for the middle class character of the district.

POLIN – The Museum of the History of Polish Jews by Rainer Mahlamaki and Ilmari Lahdelma (2013) is situated in Muranów, one of the city districts of Warsaw, in close neighbourhood of the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto. It serves two functions – to tell people about the contribution of Jews to the history of Poland and to be a centre of culture and education. Its role is not to become a recollection/reminiscence of the Holocaust.

The Museum was built in 3 stages. In 1998 the decision was made for its construction. In 2005 the competition was organised. 245 architects submitted to the competition. Finally an international jury invited 11 teams out of 119 to present their concepts. The Lahdelm and Malamaki team from Finland won the competition. The work was supported by the Association of Polish Jews, The Institute of the History of Jews, Warsaw Town hall and over 500 donors. Looking from the outside, the building resembles a big glass case full of Torah books. Panels creating the cover have the name POLIN/POLAND written on them. The huge architectural box on the layout of a square has its beauty and astonishment hidden inside this pragmatically created structure. The museum consists of 4 above-ground floors and 2 underground ones. Thanks to the geometrical simplicity and the height, it

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/41_Cooper_Square accessed: 08.05.2018.

harmoniously entered into the surrounding of a post-war housing estate. It contains a hidden symbolism in the details of architectural concept, which is not aggressive either to passers-by or visitors.

The keystone of the interior space is a high entry hall. The whole architectural dramatism of the interior is hidden there. The height of the building enables the impression of being 'torn' up to the roof covering to be created. This 'tear' allegorically delivers the history of Jews which may be interpreted in two ways. Either as a historic passage of Jews across the Red Sea or as the break of the history of Polish Jews during the Holocaust. Inside the building it creates a high passage with irregularly creased walls layered with shotcrete. The gorge ends with the light which drips out of glass tiles enhancing the dramaturgy of the interior. The object, very simple or even concise in form, creates a sublime mood inside, which yet enables for the reflexion on time passing. The architecture of the building falls in memory, may be the simplicity of the detail and the conciseness of form is the secret of the creators.

The building has been positively observed by opinion-forming bodies. It was awarded the *Athenaeum Institut Architecture Award* in Chicago, the SARP Design of the Year Prize, 2013 and the victory in the online voting in 2014.

Interestingly enough both buildings, with the structure of right angle geometry, have a hidden surprise inside, namely an autonomic architectural element of curvilinear geometry:

- the interior patio and main staircase of 41 Cooper Square is an autonomic element with the structure different from the whole building
- similarly, the interior of the hall in Polin is an autonomic element of the interior with the curvilinear structure contrary to the whole building.

The opinions of both authors seem extremely interesting:

- Tom Maine began his project with the interior atrium with the staircase around which he created other functions.
- Malamaki on the other hand admits that he creased the walls of the hall when he looked at the ready project as a perfectly organized work².

We might say that the two architects used both pragmatism of organized thinking and emotions which ordered them to introduce curvilinearity to the idea of regularity. They introduced a form with geometry easy to remember, a form which requires more advanced technology of design and realization, which would raise the prestige of both buildings.

Yet, if we classify the two buildings according to Mark Gelernt it seems that:

- the building of Cooper Union serves the needs of modern society meaning that architectural form is the expression of *Spirit of Time* and
- the architectural form of the Museum arouse from the emotional need of the architect. Still, however, the answer is uneven.

4. Summary

Following this astonishment in the context of architectural ideas, one should mention the buildings by Japanese architects: the Rolex learning Centre in Lausanne by Saana (2004) in

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainer_Mahlamäki accessed:09.05.2018.

which the smoothness of interior and the lack of zones are enhanced by the liquidity of the ceiling lines, or the building of the Media Library in Sandai, Japan by Toyo Ito & Associates. The latter is very important. The building, in the form of a cuboidal glazed seven-storey-high box, has a smooth link between floors. This impression of smoothness is made by pliers in the form of spacious tubes which create visual connections between the levels. A very concise sketch of the plane and section shows the subtlety of the architect's ideas, who talks about architecture as a 'slipped on dress'³.

In the process of designing the architecture the ability to intuitively deliver the form becomes especially important in the first stage of creating the project, in the stage of shaping the idea of the building. The sketches expressing the creative idea of an architect show the main idea leading to the realization of the building.

Such ability is not given to everyone equally. It is usually called 'talent'.

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