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TRUSTING INTUITION
– THE INTERNAL STRUGGLE
OF THE DESIGNER IN THE PROCESS
OF CREATING ARCHITECTURE

ZAWIERZENIE INTUICJI
– WEWNĘTRZNE ZMAGANIA PROJEKTANTA
PODCZAS PROCESU
POWSTAWANIA ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Architecture is understood as one of the fields of art that requires knowledge, but also sensitivity and natural endowment. It combines two aspects: the rational and the intuitive. It is a constant struggle between two extremes: materiality and spirituality. Intuitions, understood as “considerations/explorations” (Latin *intuitus*), are born in association with reason and may accompany designers at three stages during the process of creating architecture: on-site visit (i.e. listening to “the sound” of a particular site; when apart from a rational analysis the first intuitions appear), in the act of designing, and during construction, when a real verification of earlier designing decisions takes place (including both rational and intuitive decisions) that may be accompanied by new intuitions. Trusting intuition, while also accompanying it with rational discernment, does not guarantee success. Masters may be fallible.

Keywords: trust, struggle, inspiration, Pawson, Zumthor; master; intuition

Streszczenie

Architektura rozumiana jako jedna z dziedzin sztuki wymaga od twórcy wiedzy, ale także wrażliwości i talentu, a zatem łączy w sobie aspekty: racjonalistyczny oraz intuicyjny. Jest ciągłym zmaganiem pomiędzy dwoma skrajnościami: materialnością i duchowością. Intuicje rozumiane jako rozważanie/zgłębianie (łac. *intuitus*) rodzą się przy współdziałaniu rozumu oraz mogą towarzyszyć architektom na trzech etapach procesu powstawania architektury: wizji lokalnej (tj. wsłuchiwanie się w brzmienie miejsca, kiedy poza racjonalną analizą pojawiają się pierwsze intuicje), w trakcie aktu samego projektowania oraz podczas budowy, kiedy następuje realna weryfikacja wcześniejszych decyzji projektowych (racjonalnych i intuicyjnych), a co za tym idzie, towarzyszyć temu mogą nowe intuicje. Zawierzenie intuicji, także przy racjonalnym rozeznaniu, nie jest gwarantem powodzenia. Mistrzowie bywają omylni.

Słowa kluczowe: zawierzenie, zmaganie, natchnienie, Pawson, Zumthor, mistrz, intuicja

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It seems obvious and indisputable that designing a building requires extensive knowledge from a designer. It is enough to mention only a few skills that have to be mastered: a basic knowledge of the typology of buildings and their purposes (for whom and why they are built), a general knowledge of the laws of statics and gravity and their influence on a construction, awareness of the properties of building materials, awareness of the functioning of indispensable fittings and knowledge and effortless use of applicable law. Assuming that architecture is composed solely of material elements and practical components meant to satisfy purely rational human behaviour, such knowledge would be sufficient. According to this way of thinking reason, and what follows, a rational way to architecture would suffice to erect structures. And that is probably the way it is. It works for structures, but is it enough for architecture to be understood as one of the fields of art? Such a point of view would undoubtedly be insufficient and unfair. Designing, the result of which may create a masterpiece, calls for sensibility and talent that can not be simply learnt and acquired by means of reason. Talent should be constantly developed (also by means of reason), whereas sensitivity should be protected and cherished in the face of the “battlefields” of the artist-designer, which are, inter alia, negotiations with investors, formal and legal proceedings, time of construction and struggles for quality and details during supervision.

Sensitivity is a feature that makes the artist aware that architecture is composed of intangible elements, too. Apart from the already mentioned practical and utilitarian aspect it also has a semantic aspect composed of such elements as symbols, reminiscences, the identity of the place, historical conditions, the artist’s motivations, etc., and its users may have irrational needs. How to understand rationally such endeavours like Chanar Bagh Gardens in Iran, the majestic mausoleum of Taj Mahal built “only” to commemorate the premature death of a beloved wife, or the symbolism of a mediaeval cathedral on the plan of a Latin cross, or the humble graveyard of the Brion family in San Vito di Altivole designed by Carlo Scarpa? How do you explain to a rationalist that the most holy place in an Orthodox church is designed as the most beautiful one but at the same time remains hidden from the sight of believers? How do you understand rationally the behaviour of Trappists – monks living according to one of the strictest rules of the Catholic Church, who willingly decide to live in isolation from the world and make vows of poverty and silence dedicating themselves to fasting, praying and physical work?

During the opening speech of the “London Architecture Biennale” in 2006, an important event in the world of architecture, the Italian designer Renzo Piano compared architecture to spiritual life. Speaking from the wooden pulpit of Southwark Cathedral he explained: *It is not that far away [architecture and Christian life], because in some way architecture is the same struggle. It is the same struggle between the materiality and spirituality. (...) Architecture is probably the most spiritual art and also the most material art*”. Piano notices that this is material art, because it has to erect a solid and durable building, whereas *“at the same time, of course, it is very spiritual. It is a struggle about people, about society, about a better community, about solidarity. It is about different vision of the world. It is about utopia, it is about the idea that a man can change the world. It is also spiritual, because it is about beauty, about the search for beauty. Beauty in the sense of looking for transparency, poetry, looking for things impossible to achieve. So in reality architecture is something that you can see from*

*this point of view. It is a kind of constant struggle between those two extremes [materiality and spirituality]*¹.

1. Architecture in the eye of the beholders – domination of intuition and inspiration

Probably among a large part of the society there is the erroneous belief that a work of art is created as a result of a sudden flash of an artist's thought, a spectacular touch of a brush, an unexpected flow of sound of incredible bars in a composer's mind, or a single brilliant idea in an architect's imagination transferred quickly to a paper napkin which happened to be around. In particular, "a popular art" reinforces this belief on pages of books or in films depicting moments of sudden insights. This is far from the truth, and each creative and valuable work (of art as well) always involves enormous effort, titanic work and incredible sacrifice. It does not mean, however, that moments of inspiration and trust in intuitions do not come to artists. They do.

2. Intuitions and inspirations

Various definitions and dictionaries tell us that intuition is an inkling, impression, presupposition, assumption, and even an internal voice. This is an ambiguous and complex notion, because it applies to a hidden reality – human depth and emotions. It is not coincidental that one of the meanings of the Latin word *intuitus*², so similar in terms of its pronunciation, refers us to "consideration" and "exploration". It might mean, that intuition is not merely a matter of sudden insights, visions and internal impressions, but is also rooted somewhere deeper. It is a result of consideration and meditations, so it is born in co-operation with reason.

An intuitive road to architecture may also be composed of moments of inspiration. Each creative profession has a small group of individuals that is blessed with them. As Wisława Szymborska said in her Nobel Prize speech, these are: *those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination*. She continues: *Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous 'I don't know'*³.

In Christianity, inspiration is related to the actions of Holy Spirit. In an apostolic letter of artists, John Paul II says that the word "inspiration" is close to the word "breath – breathing" which appears in the very first sentences of the Scripture in the description of creation of the world. *Ruah* (the Breath) described the Holy Spirit who *was moving over the face of the*

¹ A lecture given by Renzo Piano on 27.02.2006 in Southwark Cathedral in London opening London Architecture Biennale. Compare: *Renzo Piano: Architecture, the material and the spiritual*, YouTube, 7.02.2017 [access: 23.11.2017], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKJIYTL_2Rk.

² J. Pieńkos, *Słownik łacińsko-polski : łacina w nauce i kulturze*, Warszawa 1996, p. 219.

³ W. Szymborska, *Wisława Szymborska – Nobel Lecture: The Poet and the World*, Nobelprize.org, Stockholm 1996 [access: 15.07.2018], <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1996/szymborska-lecture.html>.



III. 1. Abbey of Our Lady of Nový Dvůr, Dobrá Voda, Czech Republic, arch. John Pawson. Photo by autor

waters (1:2). As the pope says: *Every genuine inspiration, however, contains some tremor of that "breath" with which the Creator Spirit suffused the work of creation from the very beginning. (...)*

The divine breath of the Creator Spirit reaches out to human genius and stirs its creative power. He touches it with a kind of inner illumination which brings together the sense of the good and the beautiful, and he awakens energies of mind and heart which enable it to conceive an idea and give it form in a work of art. It is right then to speak, even if only analogically, of "moments of grace", because the human being is able to experience in some way the Absolute who is utterly beyond⁴.

In view of the above statements it can be seen that an intuitive road to architecture does not have to concern only a single moment in a long-term designing process, but trust in intuition may accompany an architect at several stages.

3. Stage one – listening to the sound of the location

Architecture is a discipline that teaches patience. It is one of these fields of art the final effect of which should be awaited with perseverance and which does not depend entirely on the artist. A structure is usually not designed and erected alone within a day. This is a process composed of many stages, during which the designer may open up to the already mentioned mysterious world of intuition.

Architecture depends most of all on location. This is how the American architect Steven Holl describes this feedback: *Contrary to music, painting, sculpture, film and literature an (unmoving) structure is closely linked to an experience of a location. (...) A building transcends physical and functional requirements thanks to merging with a location, absorbing in itself a content of its location⁵.* Holl mentions the experience of a specific space and features of a given location. In order to achieve such an aim the artist has to look carefully at the location before he starts his designing process. An on-site visit is the first step during which apart from a cold and rational analysis such as the location of the plot in relation to the cardinal directions, ground inclination, verification of neighbouring structures, surrounding landmarks, perspective openings, etc. the first intuitions may appear. For a creative designer this is a moment of conscious stopping and careful listening to the sound of the location. Many artists treat it almost like a moral obligation. One of the designers who describes this experience is Peter Zumthor – a Swiss architect awarded in 2009 with the Pritzker Prize, one of the most important prizes in architecture. The abovementioned study is presented in his book entitled *Thinking Architecture: Most of all I am obliged to look carefully at it [landscape]: woods,*

⁴ John Paul II, *Letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*, w2.vatican.va, Vatican 1999 [access: 15.07.2018], < https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

⁵ S. Holl, *Anchoring*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1989, p. 9, [quotation after Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i Manifesty Architektury Współczesnej*, Warszawa 2013, p. 134] (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

*trees, leaves, grass, animated surface of our earth, and then fall in love with what I see. Because we do not do any harm to things we love*⁶.

This obligation mentioned by Zumthor is an example of opening up one's mind to a given area and its characteristic features. It also means listening to the messages given by one's intuition. How do you carve out a new structure into the already existing landscape? With real love, there is always room for trust and a reliance on things we are not able to grasp through reason. Similarly, an artist who is in love with what they see and aware of his responsibilities can trust the intuitions that come from within him. These intuitions will gently point to potential possibilities and new directions for the way to architecture.

A special challenge for the architect is to design a building in a space untouched by human hand. Such a space is often seen as good and beautiful, and "in right balance". A designer has a special responsibility in this case, and when he affects the environment by building without regard to nature, he, as Hassan Fathy puts it, "*commits a crime on architecture and civilisation*".⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright holds a similar opinion on the relationship between architecture and the natural world. During one of a series of lectures at the University of Princeton, he announced that each building *should be like an element, like a thing from the earth, harmonising with its natural environment and related to the landscape on which it is located*⁸.

A British architect called John Pawson, before starting his design on a new monastery in Nový Dvůr (phot. 01), Czech Republic, visited the site of the monks' (Trappists) future living space. What he saw were the ruins of a Baroque farm and a vandalised manor house. While silently familiarising himself with a space that was unknown to him, he remembered the words of the abbot – *even in ruins, it is very beautiful, it has soul, it is true*⁹. Pawson was not impartial to what he saw, and he decided to include the vandalised buildings in the monastery premises, even though they would have to undergo renovation and be rebuilt. He saw a hidden potential in them. He made a decision to add three wings to the already existing design. In this way, he could create an internal courtyard around the monastery. The remaining parts of the monastery were planned in accordance with the Monastic Cistercian Architectural style from the 13th century, which was designed by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Not only did Saint Bernard, in his detailed plan of monastic buildings, describe the location of specific rooms, but he also drew special attention to aesthetic requirements, quality of proportions, amount of light, raw facades, and special transparency. He also talked about the spirit that is supposed to saturate the monastery. The Art of Cistercian Architecture (Trappists

⁶ P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Krakow 2010, p. 96. (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

⁷ H. Fathy, *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture: Principles and Examples with Reference to the Hot Arid Climate*, W. Shearer, Abd-el-rahman A. Sultan (ed.), Chicago 1986, p. 5, [quotation after Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i Manifesty Architektury Współczesnej*, Warszawa 2013, p. 169] (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

⁸ F. L. Wright, *Architektura nowoczesna, Wykłady*, Krakow 2016, p. 196. (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

⁹ J. Pawson, *Monastery of Novy Dvur*, House & Garden (UK), 2003.

are a branch of the Cistercian Order) was supposed to reflect the monastic life in austerity, simplicity, and humbleness.

The first stages of a creative process are the time where an architect can/should(?) open himself up to the messages his intuition is sending to him. Apart from a cold and logical analysis it is important to listen to the intuition because it can point him in the right direction for the designing process. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that designs based on intuition will need to be supported by logic at later stages, and they may prove to be erroneous. Without being revised, the designs may never allow the artist to have a completed project.

4. Stage two – the internal struggle of the architect in the process of designing

There comes a time when architects have to stop designing with only analyses, negotiations, consultations, and considerations of all the possible limitations. Instead, as Wisława Szymborska said in her Nobel Prize speech, they have to *strip off their mantles, fripperies, and other poetic paraphernalia, and confront – silently, patiently awaiting their own selves – the still white sheet of paper. For this is finally what really counts*¹⁰. Mario Botta, while sharing his thoughts on his experience as an architect, says that an architect who is in the process of designing remains in a state of a total silence. This is not because there are no thoughts in his mind, but it is because this is a state of immense concentration and consideration of special relationships, relationships between forms, contrasts, rational and irrational motives, and etc¹¹.

In designing, making decisions about a location, a functional layout, or a choice of building materials evolve slowly in an artist. Because the artist is aware of their importance, he rationally considers the possible consequences of his decisions, and, at the same time, he listens carefully to this internal voice that tells him which step to take next while designing. To give an example, we will look at the design of the Brother Klaus Field Chapel, which was created in Peter Zumthor's atelier. The Swiss architect has worked on the concept of projection for quite a long time. This humble place of prayer took seven years to be designed. Zumthor said this about his work on the project: *It took me many years to find an appropriate interior for a small chapel. (...) As the time went by the project became more clear, composed of basic elements, light and shadow, water and fire, matter and transcendence, earth below and open heaven above*¹².

Brother Klaus Field Chapel was built in a solitary place, among the gently rolling hills of Northern Germany. Like a megalithic structure, in a soft and hilly landscape, it rises up to

¹⁰ W. Szymborska, *op.cit.*

¹¹ A fragment of an interview with Mario Botta conducted by A. Nacci on 27.02.2009 in the designer's studio entitled *L'Arch. Mario Botta per Architetture del silenzio*, "You Tube", Lugano 2009 [access: 08.07.2018], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JK_Z-HIV6T0&frags=pl%2Cwn> (English translation by M. Nolywajka).

¹² P. Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor 1998–2001. Realisations et projets*, t. 3, Zurich 2014, p. 121; (quotation after: B. Stec, *Piękno jako oblicze świętości w kaplicy Brata Klauza Petera Zumthora*, "Architecturae et Artibus" 2017, No. 1, p. 54, [Trans. B. Stec]) (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

the sky. Its shape is the result of a long designing and building process. This process itself is sometimes given a symbolic meaning. Like the biblical kernel of wheat in John 12:24, it had to die first to bring forth fruit. This time the fruit is in the form of a new place of prayer¹³. At the very beginning of the construction process, there was a design plan resembling a running drop of water inside of an irregular pentagon, which would be constructed out of 112 wooden trunks that would narrow towards the top of the structure. The initial structure resembled a ten metre high twisted tent. The space between the wooden form and the geometric outline was gradually filled with hand-compressed sandy, yellow concrete. This is how the concrete mass became a wrap for a wooden interior. The process of compressing twenty-three concrete layers, which eventually resembled tree rings, took twenty-three days. It was performed mainly by members of the investors' family – a married couple living off the land. The next stage in this transformation was to burn up all of the wooden trunks inside the chapel. As if it were in a giant oven, the wood smouldered for three weeks. It penetrated into the concrete structure and formed a dark, peculiar marking on the interior walls of the chapel. In this way, the trunks inside formed an interior that is a small, single-aisle space that narrows towards the top of the structure.

5. Stage Three – Corrections of the Initial Intuition

During this stage, the designer verifies the validity of the intuitive steps he has already taken. After making rational designing decisions, it is time for construction, and eventually, it will be time for the structure to be used. During the previous stage, a supervising designer is still able to make corrections to the design, when it was just a draft on a piece of paper. Sometimes, initial designs are worth correcting before the design comes to life. As a recognised Silesian architect, Stanisław Niemczyk rightly observes: *Space on a construction site surprises, and I have a right to react*¹⁴. Using intuition, along with reason, may prompt an artist not to cling tightly to the design on his piece of paper. Instead, it may cause him to fight one more battle and introduce changes to a design to make it even better. Such possibilities, however, are given only to selected designers, whose work is not limited only to making drawings of walls, roof framework, as well as occasionally supervising on the construction site. Usually, these possibilities accompany those designers who make the construction of the structure, provide drawings on a regular basis, give instructions to builders, and explain the meaning of particular elements.

6. Trusting intuition solely (rejecting reason)

There may be situations when a designer lacks the knowledge and experience needed to design a structure. He may try to base his actions only on his sudden, foggy ideas that flash through his mind. In cases such as these, when the designer creates only from groundless intuition, he is going down a dangerous path that will most likely result in him having no

¹³ B. Stec, *Droga*, Architektura & Biznes 2007, No. 7/8, pp 38–43.

¹⁴ A. Mikulski, *U źródeł budowania*, Stanisław Niemczyk – architekt, Autoportret – pismo o dobrej przestrzeni 2006, No. 3 (16), p. 47 (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

work of art to show. It seems that His Highness Prince Charles hit the nail on the head when he said, (...) *architecture is like a language. You cannot build beautiful sentences in English, unless you have a full command of the grammar rules of this language. If you neglect them, the result will be incoherent and inharmonious*¹⁵. Relying solely on intuition without rational analysis is a mistake. What is more, trusting intuition, even in cooperation with reason, does not guarantee success nor a successful execution.

7. Masters

*My masters are not infallible.
[...] my masters
ask me for advice. In soft
coats put quickly
on dreams, in the morning, when chilly
wind listens to birds, my
masters whisper.
I can hear their voice trembling*¹⁶.

A fragment of a poem by A. Zagajewski, *My masters*.

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¹⁵ A fragment of a statement of His Highness Prince Charles in *A Vision of Britain broadcast by BBC 1* on 28.10.1988; [quotation after Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i Manifesty Architektury Współczesnej*, Warszawa 2013, pp 225–226 (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).

¹⁶ A. Zagajewski, *Wiersze wybrane*, Kraków 2010, p. 73 (English translation from Polish by M. Nolywajka).