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BETWEEN IMAGINATION AND REALITY

MIĘDZY WYOBRAŹNIĄ A RZECZYWISTOŚCIĄ

Abstract

The starting point for the discussion concerning the role of drawing and painting in architectural presentation are the works of the Albanian creator Edi Hila, exhibited during the 14th International Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2014. In a series of paintings called *Penthouse*, the artist, using extremely poetic narratives, examines the specific archaeological research on Albanian modernism. Contemporary Albanian cities are full of uncompleted, abandoned buildings. In his paintings, the author transformed such architectural ruins into imaginary monuments. The poetic nature of the images and themes brought up – as a search for identity and cultural heritage - are reminiscent of drawing and painting ideas from the past of the great artist Aldo Rossi.

Keywords: Edi Hilla, Aldo Rossi

Streszczenie

Punktem wyjścia do rozważań na temat roli rysunku i malarstwa w przedstawieniu architektury są prace albańskiego twórcy Ediego Hili, będące częścią wystawy prezentowanej w czasie 14. Międzynarodowego Biennale Architektury w Wenecji. W serii obrazów *Penthouse* artysta, poprzez niezwykle poetycką narrację, prowadzi swoiste badanie archeologiczne modernizmu albańskiego. Współczesne miasta Albanii są pełne nieskończonych, porzuconych budynków. Autor na swoich obrazach takie architektoniczne ruiny przekształca w wymaginowane monumenty. Poetycki charakter obrazów oraz tematy poprzez nie poruszone, jak poszukiwanie tożsamości i dziedzictwa kulturowego współczesnego miasta, przywodzą na myśl rysunkowe i malarskie wyobrażenia wielkiego artysty Aldo Rossiego.

Słowa kluczowe: Edi Hilla, Aldo Rossi

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1. Potential Monuments of Edi Hila

The starting point for the discussion concerning the role of drawing and painting in architectural presentation are the works of Albanian creator Edi Hila – *Potential Monuments of Unrealised Futures*¹ exhibited during the 14th International Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2014.

Edi Hila is an artist whose scope of interests include the urban environment and particularly, its architecture². He uses these subjects as a medium for expressing the heritage and the complex identity of his homeland. Hila especially points out the relation between architecture and social, political and demographic conditions.

In a series of seven paintings entitled *Penthouse*, the artist, through extremely poetic narratives examines specific archaeological research of Albanian modernism. Contemporary Albanian cities, full of unfinished and abandoned buildings, are cities in the state of entropy³. Here, the inspiration for the artist became a semi-structured, unfinished, one-family house. By focusing on one type of building, Hila tried to recognize and reveal the hidden or lost traces of modernism. Giving up the role of an honest documentarist, he rather tried to register anecdotal, unconventional and fictional elements that traversed reality⁴.

Using ruins of houses marked by traces of modernism, the author transformed them into imaginary monuments. Seven buildings are pictured separately in front view or three-quarter view. Two thirds of the bottom parts of the building are left as simple, smooth, blank walls. The last floor concentrates on all ornamental elements⁵. Elevated to the absurd, exaggerated “plinths” of buildings became imagined structures loaded with monumental elements like arches, pediments and pilasters⁶. The use of central perspective gave objects gravity and dignity, clearly indicating a great degree of the author’s admiration for the portrayed subject. The image composition is very narrowed; the buildings fill the greater part of the painting surface. Houses are located in the void, and are “cut off” from the environment. It emphasizes their importance and makes the images less real. Houses have been transformed into weird and absurd objects. Space and time seem to be stilled.

¹ Curators of Albanian exposition is *Beyond Entropy* (the group formed by Jonida Turrani and Stefano Rabolli Pansera from the Balkans). They invited two well-known Albanian artist Edi Hila and Adrian Paci to present their works that were supposed to constitute an answer to biennale’s subject matter: *Fundamentals – Absorbing Modernity: 1914–2014*.

² *Portraits of Houses* is another series of his paintings.

³ Albania, which is in a transition period following the collapse of the totalitarian regime, has faced a phase of tumultuous urbanization. The country stands between a developing, temporary and static world. The traditional architecture, adopted in order to define the national identity, the imposition of Soviet urban plans and finally, the wave of contemporary architectural trends, have produced a chaotic ensemble mostly within the city itself, [in:] http://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2014/06/21/potential_monuments.html (access: 30.01.2015).

⁴ <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/390-edi-hila-qpaysages-transitionnelsq-galerie-jgm-paris-january-15-2009-february-15-2009> (access: 18.01.2015).

⁵ <http://galeriemitterrand.com/cspdocs/exhibition/files/CP%20Edi%20Hila%20ENG.pdf> (access: 01.09.2015).

⁶ http://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2014/06/21/potential_monuments.html (access: 30.01.2015).

Over-exaggerated pedestals indicate the endless process of building, the space for future architectural elements. Hila – clearly leaving space for what could be found, rather than just focusing on what there is – avoids the traditional architectural viewpoint. In the fragmented and uncompleted, he stresses the potentiality considered as a value to be preserved⁷. “Unrealized Futures” are for him the partially realized, suspended, yet not completed promises of modernity.

Hila wishes also to focus the viewer’s attention on ostentation, which is used by houses owners to reveal their social status and distinct individuality. The artist ironically takes a look at aspects that form the quest for identity, resulting from a strong need for identification⁸.

The curators of the pavilion did not want it to be a merely didactic exhibition presenting an encyclopedic catalogue of Albanian architecture. The aim was to show how modernist architecture in Albania is transferred, rejected, modified and absorbed. In search of traces of modernist architecture, the artist “interwove real and constructed reference, past and present, fictional stories and reading of such buildings beyond the traditional lexicon of architectural representation”⁹. Hila emphasizes the role of architecture as a medium of identity, and the fact that its material shape is always determined by a particular ideology of a historical moment.

“Architectures” designed by Edi Hila are commentaries, not representations; not a slavish portrayal of reality. The author’s own explicit references to the vernacular and modernist architecture, “instilled” with something mysterious and supernatural. Phantasmagorical facades encourage us to wonder how much of what we observe is real, where fiction begins and why the creator gave his work such intriguing and ambiguous character. Analyzing his paintings, we realize how much room there is for interpretation.

2. Urban artefacts of Aldo Rossi

The poetic nature of Edi Hila’s paintings and brought up themes – as the search for identity and cultural heritage of the modern city – are reminiscent of the great painting ideas of Aldo Rossi. The Italian architect was, and still is a creator admired both for his artistic ability, architectural design skill, as well as for his theoretical texts. His quick sketches, drawings and elaborate paintings became independent, separate works of art and still arouse great interest, as parts of museum collections and retrospective exhibitions.

Aldo Rossi’s drawings that accompany the architect’s design process illustrated and explained his way of thinking and his strategies of action. Often however, they took him far from the practical effort of executing architectural projects. Both his architecture and the convention of its drawn presentation have never adhered to the principle of obviousness. Rossi’s drawn architecture was a consequence of his wide interests, particularly concerning the relationship of typology and morphology of the city. He tried to express the shape of the modern city, its architecture and society. Observation, memory and repetition were the three important aspects of his work, constantly depicted in his drawings.

⁷ <http://www.beyondentropy.com> (access: 10.02.2015).

⁸ <http://galeriemitterrand.com/cspdocs/exhibition/files/CP%20Edi%20Hila%20ENG.pdf> (access: 01.09.2015).

⁹ <http://www.beyondentropy.com> (access: 10.02.2015).

Rossi was a “diligent” observer. His unusual curiosity yielded numerous sketches filling countless notebooks, scraps of paper and newspapers, commenting and processing the surrounding reality. Rossi seems to have been obsessed with the observations of the relationships between objects, “small” and “great” architecture. His sketches seem to be an attempt to order, control, filter the world around him. In his drawings, he wanted to show the “strict world with only a few objects, the world of intelligible facts”¹⁰.

The forms and shapes of Aldo Rossi’s images are immediately recognizable, legible, evoking well-known associations and references to the past, but at the same time they are puzzling. He made a remarkable fusion of something rediscovered with never-before-seen, of the known with the unknown. He wrote: “I am referring rather to familiar objects, whose form and position are already fixed, but whose meanings may be changed. Barns, stables, sheds, workshops, etc. Archetypal objects whose common emotional appeal reveals timeless concerns. Such objects are situated between inventory and memory”¹¹. Rossi shows us the architecture immersed in Melancholic Space¹², but yet an extremely rational kind, made up of clean lines and simple, timeless elementary shapes. A world composed of memories of architecture and archetypal forms. Rossi understood the concepts of space and time as both specific and universal, connecting them to the principle of analogy: “The time of analogy measures both the history and memory, similarly the place of analogy refers to a historic place and memory associated with it”. Rossi wanted to find the identity of the architecture in the past, in memory¹³.

Rossi was concerned with creating an atmosphere of familiar and recognizable forms infused with unreal qualities. He did it by a number of repetitions, changes of context, scale manipulation and “dramatic” light. He established a vocabulary of forms and ideas which he manipulated and mixed together in endless variations. Motifs such as pyramidal roofs, arched roofs, triangular roofs, the striped cabins, coffee pots, bottles, rows of square windows, columns, lighthouses systematically appeared in his work. Rossi moved objects from one context to another, flexibly changing their scale. He used everyday objects as “miniature architectures”. Flexibility of scale allowed him to conceive of coffee makers, Coca-Cola cans, and blue packs of Gauloises as an inhabited architecture¹⁴. Relativity, the ambiguity of scale often assumed the presence of quite monumental form.

Human figures have been banished from Rossi’s images. In these uninhabited scenes, architectural forms look inward, being as if in meditation. Objects are immersed

¹⁰ P. Porthogesi, *After Modern Architecture*, New York 1982, s. 97 [in:] E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Niezapomniany bunt postmodernistyczny w przedstawieniu architektury*, [in:] *Definiowanie Przestrzeni Architektonicznej – Zapis przestrzeni architektonicznej*, Kraków 2013, p. 196.

¹¹ Rossi, A., *An Analogical Architecture*, [in:] *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965–1995*, red. K. Nesbitt, Princeton 1996, p. 349.

¹² M. Misiągiewicz, *O prezentacji idei architektonicznej*, Kraków 2003, p. 130.

¹³ J. Wojtas-Swoszowska, *Aldo Rossi – architekt i teoretyk. Dylematy architektury po modernizmie*, *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki PAN*, 2/2012, p. 49.

¹⁴ G. Braghieri, *Tower, Coca-Cola and Gauloises. The relationship between Art and Architecture in Aldo Rossi*, [w:] *Architecture & Arts 1900/2004: A Century of Creative Projects in Building, Design, Cinema, Painting, Photography, and Sculpture*, ed. G. Celant, Milan 2004, p. 452.

in architectural landscapes out of time. Silence of elementary forms is sensed. This is reminiscent of the mood established by his Italian predecessors. Rossi made a belated contribution to metaphysical painting – *pittura metafisica* – an artistic movement that emerged on the eve of the First World War. The mood especially brings to mind the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, where Italian squares emanated extraordinary metaphysical essence. Carlo Carrà, another painter who turned to metaphysical painting, wrote that true art is an attempt to “extract from ordinary objects the metaphysical reality that makes things eternal”¹⁵. Just as the works of *pittura metafisica*, Rossi’s paintings are filled with obsessive, melancholy longing for the absolute.

Rossi showed the city as a product of its densely woven interconnections. He had a great feel for urban chaos, but “in his drawings he expressed the search for a ‘leitmotif’, that would be able to make order in the architectural composition and to suggest the continuation of the architectural story”¹⁶. Although Rossi seemed to understand modernity as a void, an immense absence of tradition’s understanding, he did not claim that it had swallowed everything valuable¹⁷. However, he willingly introduced historical and vernacular forms and values to the current world of architecture, and also used modernist and universal references.

Aldo Rossi was the artist, whose drawings and paintings combined his influential buildings and theoretical texts. His architectural projects could be seen, even as a ramifications of the conjectures that flow through his art. “By drawing, Rossi presents at an intimate scale qualities that might elude us when we are faced by grandeur of his buildings or and the elegance of his theories”¹⁸.

3. Conclusions

Gianni Braghieri¹⁹ highlights, with regret, that the drawings and paintings of Aldo Rossi no longer belong to our culture. It seems, however, that continuous interest evoked by his drawn architecture proves its permanent value and the longing of a part of creators and audiences for this specific kind of thinking about architecture embodied in his images. Agreeing with Maria Misiągiewicz, Aldo Rossi could be classified in the extraordinary “group of architects, for whom drawing is not only illustrating, presenting or showing, but becomes the retention and the manifestation of ideas, allowing them to see the intended shape”²⁰.

The work of Edi Hila, a non-architect interested in the subject of urban planning and architecture in the difficult transition of his homeland, may remind us of Rossi’s ‘drawing

¹⁵ C. Ratcliff, *Introduction*, [in:] *Aldo Rossi. Drawings and Paintings*, ed. M. Adjmi, G. Bertolotto, New York 1993, p. 11.

¹⁶ M. Misiągiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁷ C. Ratcliff, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

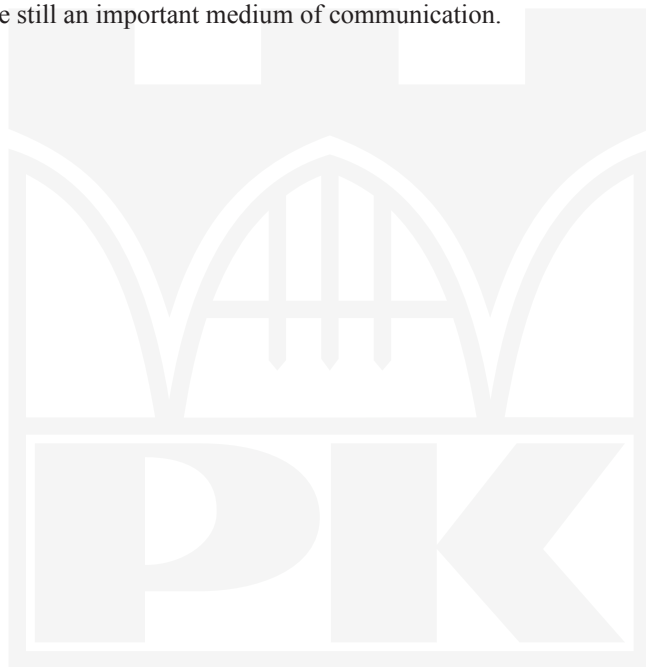
¹⁹ Patrz.: G. Braghieri, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

²⁰ M. Misiągiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

imagery' which analyzed his contemporary world of uncompromising modernism during the post-war years. The world and its problems have not changed so much, and the search for identity will always be up to date, because it gives us a sense of belonging, the awareness of who we are and what our place is in the world.

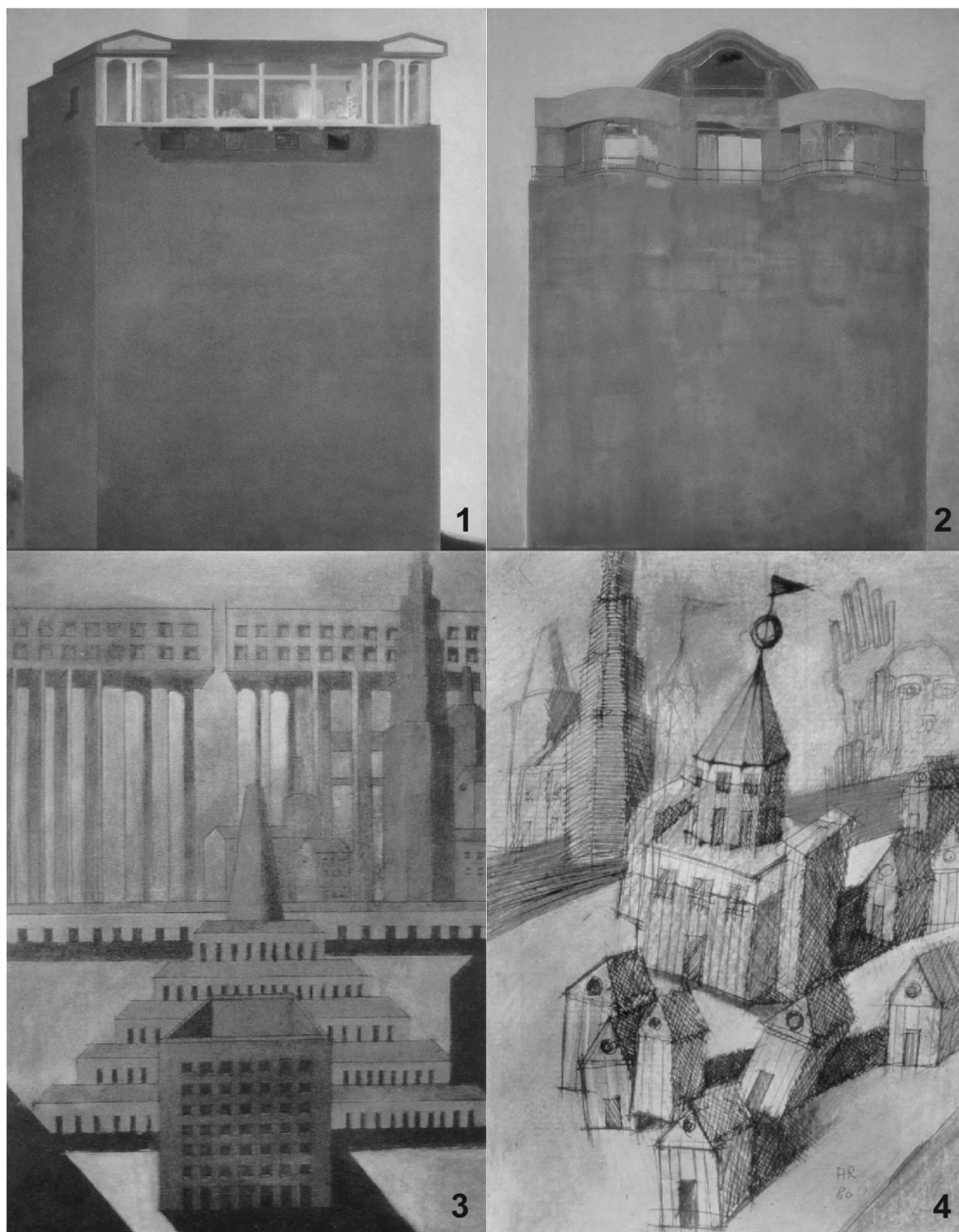
Both artists can be categorized as seeking unfamiliar ways to render familiar objects. Images evoke feelings of anxiety, which in turn stimulate us into reflection. Maybe as Rossi's "analogous city" was not a real, true city, but analogous to the real one²¹, so too should architectural images, like the authors' cited in the text, be similar to real ones, since art should reveal inside realities and eternal truths²².

The images described above provide individually and personally arranged collections of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories of architecture. Although the authors' profession, time and place of their origin is different, they seem to prove that drawing and painting are still an important medium of communication.



²¹ Wojtas-Swoszowska, J, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²² C. Ratcliff, *op. cit.*, p. 12.



III. 1, 2. Edi Hila, *Penthouse* (photo by author, 2014)

III. 3. Aldo Rossi, *Cimitero di San Cataldo a Modena*, 1971–1978 (source [3])

III. 4. Aldo Rossi, *Il teatro del Mondo a Venezia*, 1979 (source [3])

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