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EXPRESSIONISTIC FORM IN THE COSMOPOLITAN
WORKS BY COOP HIMMELB_(L)AU

EKSPRESJONISTYCZNA FORMA
W KOSMOPOLITYCZNYCH REALIZACJACH
COOP HIMMELB_(L)AU

Abstract

This article aims to analyse selected projects by the Coop Himmelb₀au design group in the context of continuation of the expressionistic tradition. As the successor of the Austrian aesthetic culture, this world renowned design team is the creator of visual arrangements of different types of building enterprises in the spirit of a retreat from the classical architectural tradition. The artistic consequence seems to be characteristic of the design, although it balances between apparent deconstruction and fluid dynamic forms.

Keywords: Coop Himmelb₀au, expressionism, poststructuralism, open form, architectural composition

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma na celu dokonanie analizy wybranej części twórczości grupy projektowej Coop Himmelb₀au w kontekście kontynuacji tradycji ekspresjonistycznej. Ten posiadający światową renomę zespół projektowy, będąc sukcesorem austriackiej myśli estetycznej, jest autorem aranżacji wizualnej różnego rodzaju przedsięwzięć budowlanych utrzymanych w duchu odwrotu od klasycznej tradycji architektonicznej. Charakterystyczna wydaje się konsekwencja plastyczna, która jednak balansuje pomiędzy pozorną dekonstrukcją a płynną dynamiką formy.

Słowa kluczowe: Coop Himmelb₀au, ekspresjonizm, poststrukturalizm, forma otwarta, kompozycja architektoniczna

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1. The expressionistic association

The leader of the design group Coop Himmelb(l)au (further abbreviation: “CH” – author’s note) said in 2002: “if we have failed to locate the roots of Expressionism in Austria, then we should hurry to make up for it”¹ [5, p. 500]. An overview of the work of the Austrian design group led by Wolf Dieter Prix leaves no doubt that it forms part of contemporary neo-expressionistic trends. The architecture proposed by CH is a consequence of earlier experiments intended to reinterpret the perception of urban space [7, p. 157]. These references to expressionistic architectural roots seem to justify the global nature of the group’s creative activity, which have resulted in a number of global projects. The works that seem to be the most important from the point of view of formal innovation are primarily located in Austria and Germany. Dynamic expressionism owes a lot of development to the culture of these countries.

2. Disintegrative motives

Contemporary reminiscences of expressionism in architecture are most often manifested through the deconstruction of the compact form, which can be included in a broad cultural concept of poststructuralism. This trend is largely responsible for the disintegrative and dynamic threads. In CH’s output it evolved from an extremely endogenous version, for example the famous Viennese superstructure from 1988, to a more exogenous form. In other words, the decentralized architectural composition is gradually being replaced by forms recognizable as apparent vectors directed inside, or at least remaining in a state of shaky imbalance. This can also be illustrated by using the theory of Oskar Hansen, which uses the concept of “open and democratic forms” and “closed and authoritative forms” [3, p. 7]. Also according to these terms an extremely pluralistic omnidirectional form is gradually gives way to a concentrated form.

3. Between “open form” and “closed form”

A building which is part of architectural poststructuralism is the multiscreen cinema building *UFA Kristallpalast* (Ill. 1) at Saint-Petersburg Street in Dresden. The main aim of a project was land use of a trapezium-shape square which is situated next to the pedestrianized Prague Street. In accordance with the declaration of the author, the building that is the main element of the design was designed in such a way as to withstand the central perspective [4, p. 44], and therefore it opposes the basic doctrine of the renaissance aesthetic. This tenet is equated to the canon of form and the architectural tradition. Prix says the central perspective has lost its importance for humanity, and therefore it should be replaced by a multiplied perspective.

¹ *Opening speech of the steirischer herbst* – speech held by W. D. Prix on October 24, 2002 in Graz.



III. 1. Verena Perius, Tom Wiscombe and the team, Cinema *UFA Kristallpalast*, Dresden, Germany, competition 1993, completion 1998 (photo by A. Serafin)

This was already promoted in the drawings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi according to Prix² [5, p. 200]. In fact the 18th-century utopias of the Italian artist brought visual multithreading of the architectural composition. This appears justified by the relativistic aspirations of classicism.

The lack of any references to classics, as well as the dynamism of shapes defining the architecture of the *UFA Kristallpalast* causes that “the building in Dresden could be regarded as a realization of one of the German expressionists of the early 20th century” [6, p. 353]. From the viewpoint of design, the aim of the project was a predefined structural and visual arrangement, but also, as the author says, a “contribution to a new definition of public space”³ [5, p. 199]. In fact, the project should be seen both as an architectural composition which is dynamic but rather a “closed form”, as well as an urban composition which was to function as an “open form”, according to the statement of the author. Before the construction started, Prix had said: “The design for the Pragerstrasse in Dresden shows how we are able to create dynamics in the public space by twisting a building. Through our analysis of lines of vision and spatial sequences, the element of a cantilevering cloud structure forms: allowing freedom of movement straight across the square yet still creating an entry situation. The square is not closed but open. We will build the Cinema Centre from this design”⁴ [5, p. 447].

² *Architecture at the end of the twentieth century* – lecture by W. D. Prix at the city hall of Vienna in 1998.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *On urbanized landscapes* – statement made by W. D. Prix at the symposium organized by the Westfälischer Kunstverein Münster on November 1993.

The solution adopted was to merge the existing urban space while respecting its key elements, such as the late-modernist building blocks of flats, the main communication artery, and the shopping passage. The architect says: “The misunderstood East German urban development visions of the fifties and sixties went up there (...). From the very beginning, our key concern was the opportunity to create the passageway”⁵ [5, p. 199]. Although the CH design group accumulates architecture in comparison to the earlier deconstructivist objects, in this case they advocate the concept of “open form” focusing on the urban aspects.

4. Dynamics of expressionist form and function

Another important implementation in both urban and architectural point of view, is one of the sectors of the residential estate *Gasometer* (Ill. 2), founded in the Viennese Erdberg district. The composition of the complex consists of four cylindrical forms that are the result of adaptation of the buildings originally incorporating gas tanks. All the segments were built in 1899 and have now been adapted for a new function by different design teams. In addition to CH, the buildings were revitalized by Jean Nouvel, Manfred Wehdorn and Wilhelm Holzbauer. In addition to the adaptation of one module, architects from CH proposed a separate high-rise building, in order to ensure visibility in the silhouette of the city [10]. The new object took the shape of a flat skyscraper sheltering the original segment



Ill. 2. Wolf D. Prix, Josef Weichenberger and the team, Apartment house in the *Gasometer* complex, Vienna, Austria, project 1995, completion 2001 (photo by A. Serafin)

⁵ *Architecture...*, *op. cit.*

of the north-east. Prix explains: “The shield is a part of the *Gasometer* project, which is an important urban design project because as a new centre, it creates a field of tension with the old centre of Vienna, where new architecture can originate. The shield is a symbol of the new content of the *Gasometer*”⁶ [5, p. 377]. The implementation proves that even objects subject to conservation restrictions may become the substrate for a modern expressionism. This trend also confirms the dynamism covering the issues of the aforementioned architecture, ranging from its aesthetic treatments to the functionality-supporting technological solutions. According to the designer’s declaration, the apartments in the *Gasometer* complex represent tendencies of increased mobility, by introducing specific telecommunications solutions⁷ [5, p. 480]. However, the vertical section of the height dominant with its numerous broken lines make the dynamic expression of this architecture as well as symbolically “opening it up” to other urban areas.

5. Art and architecture, as an image of modern society

As far as the arts are an expression of a social voice, Prix delivered the words: “Step by step, architecture is becoming one of the most controversial topics of our time and is beginning to replace the fine arts as the thorn in the flesh of society. This discussion disregards society’s loss of three-dimensional forms of expression through the rejection of contemporary architecture, which not only results in the horrifying destruction of creativity and energy, but also, sooner or later, in the speechlessness of the third dimension”⁸ [5, p. 69].

The extension to the Academy of Fine Arts (Ill. 3) is the design for a new pavilion containing the painting, sculptural, photographic studios, as well as printing and a multimedia room. The project supplemented the plot of land in the Maxvorstadt district of Munich, where the building of the university has been situated since the second half of the 19th century. The massive new bay window references the existing building, although it subtly crosses the original building frontage specified by the west wing. The composition with its distinctive bay window and glass-to-metal panels remain Russian avant-garde architecture from the nineteen twenties. In the same way it differs from the historical form of the pre-existing academy building. Another distinctive element of the building layout are the aisles designed as diagonal ramps located in the atrium. They bridge the different parts of the building. The aim for the designers was to create a kind of energetic space for the varied artistic activity at the academy [9]. The associations of Cubo-Futurism seem to justify the arrangement of architecture in a city where the Expressionist painting signed by “Der Blaue Reiter” group was born.

⁶ *On the added value of form. Wolf D. Prix in conversation with Roland Kanfer* – an interview that first appeared as Stars denken mehr in Bau & Immobilien Report on December 2003.

⁷ *The future of architecture II* – first published in the supplement Freizeit Kurier from the Austrian daily paper Kurier on January 1, 2000 as *Die Zukunft der Architektur II*.

⁸ *The end of space is the beginning of architecture* – one of the programmatic texts from 1993 by W. D. Prix.



Ill. 3. Frank Stepper, Hartmut Hank and the team, extension of the *Academy of Bildenden Künsten*, Munich, Germany, competition 1992, completion 2005 (photo by A. Serafin)

6. “The Cloud” – back to the centralized form

The most recent CH projects most commonly demonstrate the liquidity of form. The shapes of the building “BMW Welt” (Ill. 4) located in Milbertshofen Munich symbolize the final step on a path that the latest architecture has traversed in analogy to the transition from the philosophical thought of Jacques Derrida to Gilles Deleuze. Referring to the theory of “the fold” in terms of Baroque aesthetics, Deleuze writes that it generates an expressive form, a so-called “gestalt”, or infinitely variable line that means the curve with a unique set of parameters [1, p. 39]. Prix himself refers to the theory of “gestalt” perception, which is also associated with Expressionism. The architect draws attention to the fact that “many Viennese architects have a baroque interpretation of gestalt, whereby gestalt is not form, but the imprint of an idea in the material”⁹ [5, p. 489]. Therefore, the building for the Bayerische Motoren

⁹ *Acceptance speech for the Großer Österreichischer Staatspreis* – speech held by W. D. Prix on December 13, 2000 in Vienna.



Ill. 4. Wolf D. Prix, Paul Kath, Tom Wiscombe and the team, commercial museum complex *BMW Welt*, Munich, Germany, competition 2001, completion 2007 (photo by A. Serafin)

Werke is the medium of an idea which is expressed by smooth and dynamic architecture. This is due to the fact that the CH designers reject arbitrary solutions. Prix declares that only complex architectural solutions should be involved for big architectural problems [2, p. 7]. However, in this case, the architectural form is not quite as expansive as in earlier CH structures. This form is more centralized and does not have as recognizable deconstructive elements, and neither does the dynamic Baroque composition.

7. Conclusions

The opinion that “expression in architecture means an emphasis laid on gravity, or its negation” [8, p. 41] seems to be fully reflected in all CH projects. The analysis of the works

of this design group allows us to declare that, being so characteristic for their design activity profile, poststructuralism is the variable. It manifests itself in various forms, depending on factors such as the purpose, location, or conservation in terms of architectural heritage. Review of the long-term activity of the project team, however, exposes a subtle change in the approach to the design over the years. According to Hansen's dialectic, it can be concluded that the form of poststructuralism has gradually lost its dogmatic openness, while gradually neutralizing its expansiveness. The conclusion is that questioning the fundamental assumptions of the classic is no longer a challenge for contemporary architecture. At the same time, the architecture is still able to be expressionistic.

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