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GAMES OF ARCHITECTURE
IN THE RECENT PAST

ZABAWY W ARCHITEKTURĘ
W NIEODLEGŁEJ PRZESZŁOŚCI

Abstract

Architectural design takes place in a certain cultural space. If the space is not expressive enough for the artist, observer or passer-by, architects create their individual worlds where original artworks shaping space appear. And the audience accepts it with understanding.

Keywords: architectural pretext, symbolism, postmodern architecture

Streszczenie

Projektowanie architektoniczne odbywa się w pewnej przestrzeni kulturowej. Jeśli nie jest to obszar dostatecznie wyrazisty dla twórcy, obserwatora lub przechodnia, architekci tworzą osobiste światy, w których jawią się oryginalne dzieła sztuki kształtowania przestrzeni. A widzowie przyjmują je ze zrozumieniem.

Słowa kluczowe: pretekst architektoniczny, symbolika, architektura postmodernistyczna

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1. Constructing worlds or the need for a pretext

Francesco di Giorgio Martini gave detailed dimensions of the church of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice based on the Greek musical scale and compared the chapel in the chancel to the human head. The perfection of this ideal church, whose design is shown in a plan preserved to this day, is substantiated with a human figure with outstretched arms embedded in the building plan. Presenting reactions to these concepts of – painter, architect and humanist – Titian, Serlio and Spira, who did not show their surprise in the face of such symbolism and mysticism of numbers, Mario Praz concludes that this esoteric doctrine was widespread at that time (sixteenth century). The example shows that architecture, perhaps more than any other art, needs a pretext: justification, theory, idea or ideology legitimizing the creator's actions in their own eyes and in the eyes of the public. If it is a prevailing broadly understood and accepted idea, moving within its confines absolves one, to a large extent, from responsibility for their artistic actions. Supplemented with a certain repertory of ready aesthetic forms, it enables an architect, or any other artist, to move freely and undoubtedly calmly in this world. Otherwise, as Eco writes in *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*: "to tell a story you must first of all construct a world, furnished as much as possible, down to the slightest details. [...] The invented world dictates the rest of the story itself [...]". [2] In the postscript, the author of the postmodern work revealed the elaborate and deep structure of his work to the reader, the ambiguous and multifaceted world firmly rooted in the writer's literary erudition and historiosophy, which constituted the basis for the novel's construction and – an intellectual maze – game for the reader.

In the past history of architecture we repeatedly find attempts to construct mythical or real worlds – "dictating the rest of the story". History confirms the need for support in ideology, finding a reference point in the idea. In the Middle Ages this consisted in Christian mysticism with its symbolism; in the Renaissance – Platonic metaphysics; the twentieth century had its faith in the aesthetics of the machine and the progress of civilization, the aesthetics of technology, but also totalitarian ideas pleasing societies and their superstructures in the form of appropriate arts realistically illustrating the validity of the idea.

2. Cont. of architectural pretexts or the past of the game of symbolism

Let us stop at symbolism. Many a time its worlds were the cornerstone of the shape of architecture in the history of time. From the early Christian times, the shape of the church, its elements, location in relation to the cardinal directions, the entire building, its interior, and even the stones used to erect the walls and the binding material connecting them possessed a fixed symbolic meaning.

Symbolism was revived anew in the period of classicism. Challenging the liquidity of the previous period's intricacies, the art turned in a conscious way to Rome, and then to Greece. After the discoveries of archaeologists, the shocked observers discovered the antique; it was given meanings. The Doric style was seen as the creation of unspoilt people who lived close to nature – the equivalent of Homer's poetry – and thus the ideal architecture. Attention was turned to the aesthetics of Paestum rather than to the Parthenon, looking for dramatically simple things in the stones of buildings stripped of all decorations (how many times was there a rebellion against decoration). Further simplification stripped the columns from flutes and

architecture discovered the world of elementary solids, which was announced half a century later by Du Fourny: "l'architecture doit se régénérer par la géométrie" ("Architecture must regenerate itself through geometry."). Geometric solids seemed more beautiful than others. Also, symbolic power was attributed to them. [4, p. 141–161] *The Altar of Agathe Tyche* designed by Goethe (1777) combines the symbolism of a sphere and a cube. Two symbols: the rolling ball of restless desires on top of the motionless cubic block of virtue; the thing occurs in an artificially/naturally idealized landscape. Maintaining that all poetry and art is an unfathomable symbol – *ein unergründliches Symbol* – Goethe presented a complex idea, using ostentatiously sophisticated/elementary geometry.

Architects also favoured simple geometric forms owing to their beauty and significance. An extreme was offered by – the sphere; the perfect form, the ideal of an architectural form, a shape completely useless to the user and impossible to create, but one that could be a proto-type for ideas and designs for both a small residential house (C.-N. Ledoux) and symbolism of an insanely monumental monument to Isaac Newton (E.-L. Boullée).

Different games of meanings flourished during the Romantic era. Since the middle of the 18th century, when the notion of architecture *parlante* appeared, the expressive programme becomes the dominant category. From then on, the shape of a brothel, known esoterically as a temple, had to resemble phallic shapes on the plan, a freemason's house assumed the shape of a trowel, a cooper's house was designed as a building in the shape of a hoop and the river inspectorate in the form of a bridge over a waterfall. Also, a prison building needs to look grim while a church – lofty. The value of architecture perceived in this way lies in its contemplative qualities and is finalized only by the respective associations inferred from the observer's experience. [6, p. 49] The introduction of measures for specific content, emotions, moods from the inventory of historical styles to the architectural language broadened the scope of the symbolic impact.

Nineteenth-century architecture developed schemes to assign specific historical styles to specific content. Piotr Krakowski reviewed the semantic motifs of nineteenth-century archi-tecture. He refers to Lücer's overview of architectural styles and the associations they evoked in the period of Romantic historicism: "The forms of ancient Egyptian architecture – the use of pyramids, pylons, obelisks, sphinxes, etc. suited the mood of mystery, and in the case of the pyramids: of eternity, permanence. Greek architecture was associated with notions of male beauty, divine perfection, and unaffectedness and naturalness. Ancient Roman architecture expressed military connotations as well as magnificence, splendour, emperorship… Early Christian architecture was to express "a sincere declaration of Christian faith; the austere face of Christian life". Gothic architecture was regarded as a symbol of Christianity, it some-times connoted the national-conservative attitude, fidelity and devotion, virtuous integrity… Renaissance and neoclassical architecture revealed a more precise connoisseurship of art, regular in the classic way, expressing the characteristics of humanistic education." [6, p. 50]

The popularity and usefulness of the language of specific styles changed over time. About 1800 the use of Gothic style was promoted. Its usefulness was explained in different, often contradictory, ways by various theorists. The relationship of this style and nationalism in many countries draws the attention. However, the most striking is the generally recognized need for Gothic forms in sacred architecture. "The Gothic Cathedral became the symbol of western Christian-mediaeval unity as conceived Romantically"; a truly Romantic compari-son between a Gothic cathedral and the forest causes Forster to see a symbolic image of the infinitude of space in nature in it. [6, p. 52] This trend lasted until the early twentieth century.

Churches were also built in neo-Romanesque style; designs were sought in Byzantium; Sacré-Coeur in Paris imitates the old Syriac style – yet, the content attributed to those styles was always similar to that of the Gothic.

The prototypes of styles were thus used very freely – a single coherent aesthetic theory was not created. This arbitrariness sometimes resulted in novelty; the so called castellated style became such a phenomenon – an afterimage of Romanesque, Gothic, Byzantine styles, it symbolized a certain past – ancient architecture.

For a brief period in the 1840s Renaissance style reigned anew, even in sacred architecture, and the historicity of styles reached archaeological sterility in the years of 1860–1880. Architects reject the subjectivism of the Romantic period, refrain from attempts to create novelty based on the historical tradition. The new doctrine required the application of style in its purest form. Painstaking research determining its essence served this purpose.

Specifically Polish symbolism was represented by the architecture of the Polish manor. For many years classicist followed by eclectic form retained local meaning as a symbol of permanence and patriotism. It could not do so without the help of literature and the whole insurgent mythology. Later, in the early decades of the 20th century, the Romantic power of the manor-symbol revived, giving a pretext for attempts to resolve housing problems. [8, p. 67–70]

The architecture of palaces flourished for the last time at the end of the steam locomotive century. To emphasize its genealogy models of Renaissance and Baroque buildings were used. The tenement remained Baroque; its outer layer – façade – took the entire burden of the symbol, hiding the usually more ordinary interiors of the houses; not much attention was devoted to the internal elevation, facing the courtyard, while courtyards themselves dwindled with time, giving way to new developments.

Despite the arbitrariness of interpretation of the semantics of nineteenth-century architecture, it was not airtight, as was previously the case. Symbolisms in the past were sometimes legible, but at the same time inconclusive, differently perceived, variable in time and notoriously forgotten; dedicated to – those "who knew" – e.g. the art of mannerist emblems, they still constitute a secret knowledge and reading them requires great expertise.

3. Returns of the games of meaning

The semantics of the traditional urban space seems interesting for the player-designer, too. The significance of its elements (and functions) was transformed, and they received it anew through a kind of mythology: to name – "street", "square", "courtyard", "gate".

In the symbolic formation of structures, the explanation of construction artworks by means of symbols, the assignment of meanings to space, including those created spontaneously and naturally, it is impossible not to notice the game that has lasted since the beginning of civilization.

In 1980, Riccardo Bofill said: "[...] It is very important to be able to use a dictionary and architectural elements from the past. [...] prior to the development of the new symbolism possible only in the genuinely modern society of the future". [11]

This lengthy (and superficial) description of pretexts that calm the creator and the observer, concerning the symbolism of architecture can be complemented by others: theories of ideal cities, sociological and aesthetic theories of architecture, ideological assumptions set by architects, Architecture Cards… and finally purely political ideologies.

The reason for the description of the symbolisms of architecture is the need to create a setting for considerations relating to representing architecture and pro-aesthetic attitudes within the architecture of the post-functionalist era, related to the return of previously anathematic, unwanted or forgotten meanings, to the need to explore the reality of representational architecture, and the rejection of the nonchalant agnosticism of the definition of architecture offered by Le Corbusier. Or at least its modification: architecture can be the play of forms assembled in light, and in the dusk, in the fog, in the dark – architecture is the play of forms in the imagination.

The genie did not escape from the bottle immediately. Charles Jencks thoroughly discusses the architectural facts that paved the way for postmodern architecture, [5, p. 81 and further] in the sense of one that speaks. The beginnings of a different thinking should be sought in buildings with certain historical allusions disclosed, among which Franco Albini's Torre Velasca (1957) in Milan, and perhaps Paolo Portoghesi and Vittorio Gigliotti's Casa del Girasole (1952) in Rome are the most expressive. In America one can find traces of historicism – in the 60s – in the work of Philip Johnson, Minoru Yamasaki, Ed Stone, and Wallace Harrison. Johnson's statement in 1961, when nothing foreshadowed the direction architecture was heading towards, undermines the fundamental pillars of modernism: "Mies is such a genius! But I grew old! And bored! My direction is clear: eclectic tradition. This is not academic revivalism. There are no Classic orders or Gothic finials. I try to pick up what I like throughout history. We cannot not know history."

Yet, it seems the demon was only freed by Robert Venturi. After the first experiences with the new architecture, which included the construction of the building of the North Penn Visiting Nurses Headquarters in Pennsylvania (1960 – Venturi, Short), where historical decoration was used in a recognizable and symbolic way, he presented his dialogue with the functionalist modernism in the book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). He juxtaposed the titular complexity and contradiction with – unity and simplification; ambiguity and tension – directness; he preferred double functional elements rather than those which acted individually; he favoured a hybrid to purity of form; he contrasted messy vitality with unity.

The era starts with the first postmodern work: Franklin Square in Philadelphia. originally it was meant as a tribute to the president on the bicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was conceived as a peculiar museum of non-existent things and structures: houses-ghosts, contours of once existing buildings made of stainless steel; inside, underground excavations visible through the cracks; the garden was set up according to the guidelines of Franklin himself. It was the first architectural work that spoke after years of the architecture of silence. It stood in opposition to an earlier era – silent, insignificant architecture, or speaking with slurred and unintelligibly at its peak. Venturi confirmed the words of Gilbert Durand: "[…] Despite the offensive by the entirety of civilization, the symbol is doing well, and [that] mere attempts of common Western thought, willy-nilly, must under the threat of alienation methodically take into account the 'symbolic facts'". [1, p. 29] The main organizer of the Venice Biennale in 1980 – Paolo Portoghesi – spoke in the same vein during the opening of the exhibition: "…The title of the exhibition 'The presence of the past' will help us, hopefully, to capture a phenomenon whose signs were already visible in the fifties, in […] the enterprises of the masters of modernist architecture, and which lasted and developed in a slow rhythm to finally become a radical and decisive movement in recent years […]. The ideologues of modernist architecture thought that a single hand movement got rid of all languages, institutions and conventions invented by people, and announced that they were outdated. However, they lived in human memory and continued to renew because they were

fed with the 'presence of the past', the handover having its source in what we call historical heritage […]. The return of architecture to the bosom of history and the survival of traditional forms in a new context is one of the symptoms of the phenomenon, which caused the emergence of a significant "otherness" in a number of works and designs from recent years, and which was dubbed by some critics with the ambiguous, but useful term 'postmodernism'". Thus spoke the generation that rejected the pride and mania of false clarity of our predecessors. The future showed that the past is a very capacious concept.

Having acquired his ideas, the successors and followers of Venturi are already using his formal language, freely creating their own worlds.

To restore the right mood, after such fundamental and serious statements, it would be appropriate to recall the aphorism from Multatuli's collection *Ideas*: "What played the role that we attribute to classicism for the ancient Greeks? Could it be that they became a model for us because they did not have predecessors themselves who they could imitate and were thus forced to be themselves in some way?"

And so it began. Today, the World Museum of Imagination remains wide open – for everyone. We can discover important collections of pretexts for games, fun, and architectural trifles. Also the Borgesian library has opened up its resources, where we can find the ways to apply these pretexts. How mistaken was the Argentine master when he claimed that the Immortals stopped the construction of the City.

The quest for further absurd forms of architecture still goes on; after all *architecture consists in constructing fictitious things in such a way that they look real*. Yet, we shouldn't forget that the said Multatuli also wrote: "Maybe nothing is completely true, and not even that."

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