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POST-STRUCTURAL GAMES
OF ARCHITECTURE

POSTRUKTURALNE
GRY ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

The play of architectural emblems that is cited in the conference thesis often seems to lead to a revaluation of the visual realm of architecture. This text therefore deliberately manipulates the concept of post-structuralism as a general cultural trend, avoiding reference to any architectural styles. The author, however, attempts to draw up a classification of post-structural architectural games, including the interdisciplinary.

Keywords: symbol, form, post-structuralism, phenomenology, syntax

Streszczenie

Przywołana w tezach konferencyjnych architektoniczna zabawa w emblematy często zdaje się prowadzić do przewartościowania wizualnej sfery architektury. Niniejszy tekst zatem celowo operuje pojęciem postrukturalizmu, rozumianego jako szeroki front ogólnokulturowy, unikając powoływania się na jakiekolwiek style architektoniczne. Autor podejmuje natomiast próbę zarysowania systematyki gier, także interdyscyplinarnych, w jakie uwikłana jest architektura o podłożu postrukturalnym.

Słowa kluczowe: symbol, forma, postrukturalizm, fenomenologia, syntaktyka

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1. Introduction

Contemporary architecture seems to be overly focused on its own visual expression, as emphasized by Juhani Pallasmaa [9, p. 74]. This point of view often leads designers towards phenomenological concepts. These, in fact, have to create a mental communication between a building and its visitor. This type of game is proposed, for example, by Peter Zumthor, because of the reference to reminiscences of impressions, feelings, and sensations that are associated with the architect's projects [18, p. 35–45]. Phenomenology defined as the opposite of structuralism [4 p. 13] focuses on emotional interactions. The game that takes place on the basis of the general cultural trend towards post-structuralism, which is the second mainstream opposition to structuralism, however, has a conceptual base. In both cases, the observer is entangled in the play with the object.

The games of contemporary architecture are not only play within the field of the branch, but mainly cover interdisciplinary interaction. The study focused on the theme of play in which architecture is embroiled leads to a juxtaposition of three essential approaches to this phenomenon, and therefore relationships: 'language-writing-architecture' (J-P-A), 'art-spectacle-architecture' (Sz-Sp-A) and 'architecture-architecture' (A-A).

2. Playing the syntax (J-P-A)

Architects Caroline Bos and Ben van Berkel ask: "Does architecture means language? And, if so, does it follow from the fact that the architecture is subject to the same tests as critically as language; that architecture, as a language, is nothing more than a casual and culturally-formed system of characters whose apparent meaning you can always question" [16, p. 31]. The adoption of an intertextual orientation in architecture allows you to formulate a thesis that any architectural works cannot be parsed without taking into account the participation of foregoing works. Also, the analysis of the building or another object without the recognition of the wider cultural and social context seems to be unjustified. According to this approach, the constitution of the architectural work's interpretation is established by a syntactic game in which work is involved. However, it should be noticed that semiotics is a kind of language ritual [13, p. 157]. The following syntax must be considered in this case as an opposition in relation to the semantics, which entails another chapter of semiotics – the theory of signs and meanings.

Syntax appears to be an appropriate background for the intellectual media in the process of formation and perception of post-structural architecture. However, it should be pointed out that the wrong conclusions in this respect may lead to the adoption of an archaic definition of syntax, perceived as 'language decoration' [6, p. 17]. The difference between the concepts of 'signs' and the 'symbol' in the field of architecture [17, p. 259] seems to be important. So the post-structural architects replaced the traditional semantic game – the expression of a dependency between the architectural entity (the sign) and what it symbolizes (the signifier) – with syntax. This focuses on the relationship between the characters in isolation from what they mean.

The key at this point seems to be the attitude adopted by Jacques Derrida, the author of the theory, who had such a large effect on the contemporary architecture of the Western world. Derrida wrote that "'rationality' (...) that rules the extended and radical writing, it does not come from the logos any more and it starts (...) de-stratification and de-construction of any meanings that have their source in the logos" [3, p. 34]. Derrida extends this scheme to other

disciplines of reaching the truth, including architecture. Wolfgang Dieter Prix, the general designer of the Coop Himmelb(l)au group, concluded that on the basis of Derrida's theory the revolt in architecture has been carried out against rationalism [2, p. 190]. Referring to the questions raised by a number of Dutch architects, it seems, therefore, that it is not possible to equate the terms 'language' and 'architecture'. Instead, it is possible to speak of architectural play perceived through the theory of writing and language.

3. Spatial games (Sz-Sp-A)

The play between art and architecture takes place in the area of ever-changing borders of [14, p. 553]. Artistic experiments carried out in the 1960s tend to extended reflection on defining and receiving space, according to the area that seemed to have already been sufficiently understood. These projects can be termed 'the art of space'. Although they are temporary and topically overlap with Viennese Actionism, the outlook issues in this case are not the main point of interest. The projects have become a prelude to a post-structural "art of building". The launch of new circumstances each time contributed to a new perception of space. For example, there are the actions of both 'Haus-Rucker-Co' – Laurids Ortner, Günter Zamp Kelp, and Klaus Pinter – and the aforementioned 'Coop Himmelb(l)au' – Wolfgang Dieter Prix, Helmut Swiczinsky, and Michael Holzer. The Viennese projects, such as "Pulsating yellow heart" by 'Haus-Rucker-Co' [Ill. 1] or "Hard space" and "Soft space" by 'Coop Himmelb(l)au', were intended to create a new exposure to the sensations. The last of these projects attempted a short-lived redefinition of the territory [12, p. 157]. Although the inspiration in each of these cases was different, they are all engraved in contemporary culture as games 'in space' and 'with space'.

The nature of these projects is close to the 'happening', which is constituted as a kind of artistic game that takes place between the artist and the recipient. The happening is in fact inherently turned toward the external world, and it tends to transformation [10, p. 243]. On the contrary, these spatial games are devoid of any element of improvisation. They are a carefully programmed and produced spectacle, reminiscent of Oscar Schlemer's constructivist theatre in the Bauhaus [Ill. 2].

Against the backdrop of these experiments, Hans Hollein and Walter Pichler also tried to entangle architecture in a kind of game. The method of their actions entailed the presentation of many utopian architectural designs, which were a kind of bluff, according to Hollein's declaration: "form does not follow function. Form does not arise in harmony with itself" [11, p. 182]. Charles Jencks stated that it is difficult to decide whether the statements of the artists are sophisticated jokes or serious declarations [5, p. 66]. All the above initiatives and speculation had an effect on real architecture, especially in German-speaking areas. The temporary object "Mini Opera Space" in Munich designed by Prix with his team, mentioned in the conference thesis, could be considered as a modern continuation of this trend, the 'Viennese school', especially in the context of the games played by its creators.

4. Playing in the pleasant and the unpleasant architecture (A-A)

Reminiscences of the positivist realist philosophy are particularly evident in the architecture from the time of the modernist avant-garde. Therefore, the desire follows to create

Ill. 1.   Project of „Pulsating yellow heart" by Haus-Rucker-Co (source: http://www.austria-architectu-re.com/ortner; access: 10.04.2015r.)
Ill. 2.   Performance by Oskar Schlemer (redraw. after: Droste M., Bauhaus, Köln 2006)
Ill. 3.   Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden, the detail of the connection between the an-nex building and the historic facade in the context of "the clash of idea and experience" (source: phot. Aleksander Serafin)

architecture programmatically 'human friendly' instead of 'preserving canons'. One of the consequences of this choice is the development of the trend which can briefly be termed the 'architecture of pleasure'. The work of William Alsop can be recalled at this point, when he claims that "the building should be a celebration both in the design process, and later at the time of construction. The experimentation of the building should raise the human spirit. […] Within the framework of these objectives, it is neither possible nor desirable to be a slave

to philosophy, style or a specific procedure. Instead it is more important to treat yourself as a consumer of the products of architecture, before the world is dominated by the products of architectural debate led by architects" [1, p. 339]. This point of view seems to be quite different from Bernard Tschumi's conception, when he wrote: "The architecture of pleasure is situated where an idea suddenly converges on an experience of space (…). In this way the work of architecture is architectural not because it meets any utilitarian features, but because it starts the process of the subconscious" [15, p. 304–305]. The idea and the experience of space were crashed into each other by Daniel Libeskind, the designer of the Militärhistorische Museum der Bundeswehr in Dresden [Ill. 3]. The author played with the revision of the traditional standard of the museum. The metal structure intersects the composition of the historical façade, which seems to be result of the idea of the architect, who declared that "the differences represent the harmony" [7, p. 150]. An extreme opinion is represented by Lebbeus Woods, whose architecture can be interpreted as "a war game" or rather, in this case the conflict is able to determine the architecture. Projects by Woods that could be interpreted on the level of formal fun, however, assumed a specific expression. This is because the game of presentation of the utopian vision representing steel structures invading the concrete ruins of Sarajevo – destroyed during the war – affect the public, rather than a number of cool media relations interrupted by ads [19, p. 671]. The play at architecture that was implemented only on a 'piece of paper' may therefore have significant social overtones.

5. Conclusion

Architecture often means the form of social games. Stefan Müller wrote that nowadays architecture has overstepped the bounds of individual buildings, estates and urban layouts [8, p. 187]. The proposed classification is aimed primarily at drawing attention to the inter-disciplinary dimension of architecture in the background of post-structuralism.

Architecture that aspires to be the determinant of cultural heritage always uses symbols. The post-structural vision of reality entails that the stress is moved from semantics to syntax. The main issue is no longer the intellectual play of transmission made by the symbol. It is replaced by games and the relationships between these visual signs.

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