

JUSTYNA WOJTAS SWOSZOWSKA*

POSTMODERN FUN AND GAMES.
SOME THOUGHTS IN THE DISCUSSION
ON POLISH ARCHITECTURE

POSTMODERNISTYCZNE GRY I ZABAWY.
PRZYCZYNEK DO DYSKUSJI
O POLSKIEJ ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

The article is a contribution to the discussion on Polish postmodernism viewed against the background of changes in world architecture as well as the political transformations taking place in Poland. Postmodernism is regarded as a trend enriching architecture with elements of freedom, fun, joke – in other words, with the joy of designing as well as those of the use and visual perception – all absent in the modernist dogma. A brief history of the trend has been included along with the selection of literature and the outline of the early Polish postmodernism. Some selected examples of Polish postmodern accomplishments before and after 1989 have been evaluated. The article ends with some thoughts about the essence of postmodernism as expression of joy.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Polish postmodernism, political transformation, pluralism, double coding, context, kitsch

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest przyczynkowy. Dotyczy postmodernizmu polskiego widzianego na tle przeobrażeń w architekturze światowej oraz zmian ustrojowych zachodzących w kraju. Porusza wątek postmodernizmu jako nurtu, który wprowadził do architektury elementy wolności, zabawy, żartu – słowem radości zarówno z projektowania, jak użytkowania i wizualnego odbioru – obce dogmatycznemu modernizmowi. Zwiera krótką genezę ruchu, wybór literatury oraz zarys początków rodzimego postmodernizmu. Analizowane są wybrane przykłady polskich realizacji postmodernistycznych sprzed i po 1989. Artykuł kończą przemyślenia na temat istoty postmodernizmu jako ruchu radości.

Słowa kluczowe: postmodernizm, postmodernizm polski, transformacja ustrojowa, pluralizm, podwójne kodowanie, kontekst, kicz

* Ph.D. Arch. Justyna Wojtas Swoszowska, Department of Design and History of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Silesian University of Technology.

1. Why postmodernism?

Contemporary architecture, understood as a movement of the modernist avant-garde, has been described from a variety of standpoints: morality, social responsibility, rationality, technical solutions, prefabrication, new aesthetics, abstraction, scale, politics, etc. while very rarely has it been referred to in terms of games or playing. Commenting upon architectural accomplishments in this very context evokes no simple or obvious associations which shall undoubtedly result in an original and creative exchange of views.

Speaking of contemporary architecture associated with joy and play I refer to the postmodernism marking the end of avant-garde domination, the return to tradition and the dialogue between an architect and his audience, considered a public one as architecture is the “public art” [6, p. 5]. Understood in this way, postmodernism brought to architecture elements of freedom, fun and joke; in other words, with the joy of designing as well as those of the use and visual perception. In the discussion on “games and play of architecture” I intend to refer to early Polish postmodernism, viewed against the architecture of the West.

2. Postmodernism – the birth of

Valuation of the role of postmodernism in architecture may take into consideration the social, political and economic background of the 1960's. Following the years of the “economic miracle” in Western Europe and in the USA, inflation was growing and the principles of functionalism implemented after World War II had failed to solve the housing problems or transport issues of urban agglomerations. The notion of “international style” was associated with the architecture of concrete suburban estates. An attempt to soften the dogmas of CIAM taken by the young generation of architects incorporated in Team X¹ did not prevent the organization from dissolution (1959). Dissatisfaction with the living conditions resulted in a wave of social protest throughout France, Italy and the USA. Then came the period of the cultural and sexual revolution, negation of social standards and cultural patterns, and growing interest in popular culture. The young generation protested against commercialism and forced changes for the benefit of the citizen society. They demanded reconstruction of the social bonds within small, informal groups. Negation of the principles of the modernist avant-garde resulted in “revolution against revolution” [4, p. 42–45]. This change gave birth to diverse, anti-elite, and populist architecture, on principle deprived of any principles and therefore preventing any explicit definition. After the years of starkness, the superior value, however, was “changing the world into more joyful and happier places referring at the same time to the cultural tradition of a given society” [1, p. 20–21]. Charles Jencks, American theorist of architecture, based in Scotland, borrowed from literature the notion of “postmodernism” to name this very trend and made it popular writing *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* [7]².

¹ The group was formed during X CIAM in Dubrovnik in 1956. The members were: Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, Jacob Bakema, Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, Shadrach Woods, Colin Rowe and others.

² He commented on world postmodernism from the 1960s until the present day in *The Story of Post-Modernism. Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture* [8].

3. Postmodernism – selected literature

The architecture of postmodernism is heterogeneous, populist in its programme, allusive, decorative, and contextual and refers to history literally or conspiratorially. The same is true about its theory and literature. Continuing this thread of thought I shall restrict myself to theoretical studies by Robert Venturi (1925) and Aldo Rossi (1931–1997).

Venturi, American architect, shows an ironic attitude towards the past, joking about historical quotations and applying “double coding” where “each of two different languages is addressed to different audience” [6, p. 5]. He makes fun of design and plays games with the audience winking knowingly. In his creative manifesto – Vanna Venturi (1964) mother’s house – the façade was designed to decorate the building like the set of a Hollywood movie. In his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* [14], written in 1966 he declared his preference for “complexity and contradiction in architecture” where he appreciated “as much as” rather than “or” and “more does not mean less” denying “less means more” by Mies van der Rohe [15, p. 16]. In “Learning from Las Vegas” [5] of 1972, he described the beauty of chaos in the main street of Las Vegas. He introduced the name “duck” to describe the functionalist buildings there and “decorated shed” to describe those where function is advertised by decoration of the façade. In the end he wrote: “The time has come to reassess the once terrifying attitude of John Ruskin stating that architecture is the decoration of structure (...)” [5, p. 162]. The “fun and games in architecture” described by Venturi became the attributes of postmodernism [9, p. 32 – 35]. Rossi, the Italian architect, stood well aloof from the historical heritage. In 1966 he published his manifesto titled “L’architettura della città” [12]³. Following historical principles was more important for him than the form itself. A highly prized value was bringing into general use design principles that complied with the natural development patterns of a city, now taken into consideration when preparing spatial development plans for historical towns.

4. Polish postmodernism – the beginnings of ⁴

The climax of Western postmodernism was the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale showing the exhibition “The Presence of the Past” the motto of which was “We may again learn from tradition and link our tasks with the valuable and beautiful works of the past” [3, p. 25–31]. A year later Charles Jencks visited Warsaw and delivered a lecture to the students of architecture devoted to the 3rd part of *The Language of Post Modern Architecture* [7]. The event was described by Wojciech Kosiński in the “Afterword” to the Polish edition, published in 1987: “when Jencks showed the latest, luxurious designs by Graves and Eisenman, a student stood up from the overcrowded hall and asked ‘what’s the use of architecture understood in this way for us, Poles, in the present situation?’” [6, p. 5.]. This episode is an excellent example of the attitudes among Polish architects in the early 1980’s. So many crowding for the lecture proved curiosity about the changes occurring in the world, yet the deep concern about the issues of architecture. The evidence is also extremely high

³ The book was translated into English in 1982 [13].

⁴ A two volume work on Polish postmodernism (editor, Lidia Klein, historian of architecture) was published in 2013 [10] [11].



- III. 1. 2. Residential estate in Czerwionka Leszczyny, J. Waligóra. Fragment of facade with traditional bay windows and the window frame detail
- III. 3. Gliwice, Rybnicka Street. Typical housing estate of the twenties of the 20th c. Window detail – Inspiration
- III. 4. 5. Residential-commercial complex in Mikołowska Street, Gliwice by M. Gachowski, St. Lessaer and Z. Szubert. Fragment of the facade and crafted detail of the bay window brickwork
- III. 6. The building of the former Notre Dame Holy Mary Sisters High School in Królowej Bony Street, following the trends of German expressionism fall of the twenties and the thirties of the 20th c. Fragment of the entry portal – inspiration
(Photographs by the author)

level of discussions held in the architectural milieu, presented in “Architektura” monthly throughout the eighties. Excellent polemic contributions were delivered by Tadeusz Barucki, Daniel Karpiński, Lech Kłosiewicz, Wojciech Kosiński, Jakub Wujek, Ada Louise Huxtable – American critic of architecture – and Charles Jencks, who gave an interview to the magazine [1]. However, the architects’ commitment was not enough to meet world standards. The

obstacle was the political and economic situation and preferences of the decision makers. Kosiński, quoted above, commented upon the image of architecture of the 80's in the following way: "Postmodernism is for us a chance for healthy recovery of building; it is a healing nutrient for the investors and creators. Of course, if taken seriously. We cannot afford the eccentricities of the Western snobs (...) Postmodernism is inevitable and any attempts to ban it are useless (...) it is a peak of a giant mountain of retreat from the aberrations of modernism (...) It is the logical sequence on the sinusoid of architectural styles. There is no way back; however, common sense is needed when interpreting it for our conditions and needs. Jencks will not do it for us. He made his job and he made it great giving us the momentum; the rest is up to us" [6, p. 171].

5. Polish postmodernism – before 1989

In the early eighties any spectacular postmodern accomplishments were scarce⁵. Nevertheless, postmodernism was a joyful alternative to the dull, concrete, socialist housing, which then began to be decorated with gabled roofs and traditional details. An attempt to "humanize" the residential estates of the mid-eighties was a small housing cooperative design in Czerwionka Leszczyny by Janusz Waligóra. The architect achieved the "local colour" of the estate by designing the internal space accessed through the gate passage and making use of dominant gable roofs. As suggested by Venturi, he reached for the fun of "decorating" the concrete structure with "double-coded" elements taken from local tradition, like: wooden balustrades, bay windows, bowers and corner band windows. The estates were more "joyful and happier" than functional apartment blocks, amusing all, architects, inhabitants and the "audience".

Another example is the residential-commercial project in Mikołowska Street, Gliwice, by Marek Gachowski, Stanisław Lessaer and Zygmunt Szubert, designed in 1985 for a Gliwice company. Following Rossi's theory the architects, designing for the centre of a historical city, decided that it was most important to fit into the urban planning context. They argued: "(...) the process of reconstruction of the urban system takes place in the degraded urban space, which is, to a greater extent, creation of the modernist era (...) Any attempt to restore the lost continuity (...) of the urban system must base upon the historical and cultural origins of development of particular cities (...). Reference to tradition means no eclecticism or lack of own concepts or ideas but, first of all, is a manifestation of the search for permanent national and family identity, i.e. traits which on principle were abandoned in modernism." [2, p. 29]. Facing the lack of any spatial development plan, the authors based on an analysis of the historical code of the city in developing a regulation plan. Following the conclusions drawn from this analysis a multi-variance design was prepared. The one they accomplished comprised two built-up lines, parallel to the street and to each other. The first was to form the building along the street, while the latter closed the semi-private space and generated the second built-up line. From the viewpoint of architecture and the detail, the authors followed Waligóra and made use of "double coding", "winking at the audience" and playing with it.

⁵ For limitations of this manuscript and considering the wealth of the contents included I omit the icon of Polish postmodernism: High Theological Seminary of the Congregation of Resurrection Priests by Dariusz Kozłowski et al. (designed 1984–88).

The decorative façade details are prefabricated concrete window lintels, triangular projections and crafted brick ornaments, all quotations from the expressionist architecture of pre-war Gliwice. The dominating small chapel, located along the axis of a small historical church is actually a transformer station. This very joke, however, was not ‘decoded’ by the “audience”. The first line was completed before the political transformation, while the second was built as high as the first floor. Then the company gave up on financing the workers’ housing, the prices of land and apartments rocketed, the subsequent owners changed while eventually the estate has never been completed and part of the apartments were turned into offices. Evaluating the architecture of the building after a few decades it has to be noted without any doubt that it matched excellently the urban context and gained some timeless dimension. Nevertheless, the authors are disappointed. The project has never been completed and they failed to arrange the whole quarter while there are still no ideas how to solve the problem of an unfinished building⁶.

6. Case two – after 1989

The period of political transformation brought true economic liberty, the joy of consumption and the urge to catch up with Western countries. The dull reality of the socialist decades was ending, sweeping away the street traders’ display camp beds and collapsible tin stalls, symbols of early transformation. Yet, new times called for new architecture. Postmodernism, with all its attributes proposed by Venturi, proved just perfect to meet such needs. An excellent example is the “Solpol” department store built in 1992 in Wrocław to order placed by a businessman, Zygmunt Solorz. The design was commissioned to Wojciech Jarzabek who faced the challenge and together with his team took only a few days to design a purple-turquoise “decorated shed”, in an eclectic manner introduced into the historical context of Świdnicka Street. The architectural and conservation authorities declared no objections, though from the very beginning the building evoked some opposed opinions – from admiration to indignation. By today’s standards “Solpol” is kitschy and tacky, just like the spirit of those years; but then it matched the postmodern pattern very well. In 2013 the owner decided to demolish the building which could not compete any more with modern shopping galleries. His plans resulted in an exciting discussion – to demolish or to classify “Solpol” as a historical building. Which is more important – economic account and contemporary aesthetic standards or historical continuity and emotional values?⁷

7. To conclude with

The restored avant-garde of the mature, late modernism is today on top. Postmodernism went out of date long ago. In Poland, associated with trash, kitsch and the mundanity of transformation, it is not appreciated by the young generation. Generally, it evokes reluctance

⁶ Interview with Stanisław Lessaer in June, 2015.

⁷ The Association of the Beautiful City of Wrocław and Transformator Foundation applied to the Lower Silesian Regional Restorer’s Office to grant the post-modern department store „Solpol” the status of a historical building. The formal procedures are underway.[16].

and is contemptuously called the style of “canopies and additions” or “Gargamel’s Hovel”. However, in any assessment of postmodernism, one should not forget that it concerned numerous spheres of life and is still present as a general philosophy. The freedom of choice, relative valuation, respect for the context and heritage and liberalism are only some of the values it left. My opinion of postmodernism is not based on literature only. I can still remember the enthusiasm we experienced at work in the design office where I took my position after graduation in 1983. We were happy to have choices, to design individual solutions, to incorporate some details borrowed from the past, etc.: as if we “had fun and played with architecture”.

It was postmodernism to bring pluralism, freedom from strict rules – in the way of thinking, behaviour, fashion – simply, in our lives.

References

- [1] Drzewiecki H. Jencks CH., Klosiewicz L., *Pluralizm jest dobry na wszystko*, Architektura (408), 1982.
- [2] Gachowski M., Lessaer St., *Homo urbanicus – czyli projektować tak, by ludzie żyjąc w mieście, mieszkali u siebie*, Architektura, (437), 1987.
- [3] Gadomska A., Gliński A., *Obecność przeszłości*, Architektura (408), 1982.
- [4] Huxtable A., L., *Architektura na rozdrożu*, Architektura (408), 1982 p. 42–45.
- [5] Izenour S., Scott Brown D., Venturi R., *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press, 1972.
- [6] Jencks Ch., *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Arkady, Warszawa 1987.
- [7] Jencks Ch., *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Rizzoli, NY 1977.
- [8] Jencks Ch., *The Story of Post-Modernism. Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture*, Wiley, Londyn 2011.
- [9] Karpiński D., *Nazajutrz po modernizmie*, Architektura (408), 1982.
- [10] Klein L., red., *Postmodernizm polski. Architektura i urbanistyka*, t. 1, Wydawnictwo 40 000 Malarzy, Warszawa 2013.
- [11] Gzowska A., Klein L., *Postmodernizm polski. Architektura i urbanistyka*, t. 2, Wydawnictwo 40 000 Malarzy, Warszawa 2013.
- [12] Rossi A., *L’architettura della città*, Marsilio, Padova, 1966.
- [13] Rossi A., *The Architecture of the City*, The Mit Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London 1992.
- [14] Venturi R., *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, MOMA, NY 1966.
- [15] Venturi R., *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, wydanie 2, MOMA, NY 1977.
- [16] <http://www.mmwroclaw.pl/artukul/zdaniem-tumw-solpol-jest-symbolem-wroclawia-budynek-bedzie,3298249,art,t,id,tm.html>. (data pobrania 02.03.2015)