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THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT – TO SAVE OR TO PLAY?

ARCHITEKT (Z)BAWI?

Abstract

The 20th century was a period of many revolutions, including in architecture. On the one hand, public engagement with the second search for a new aesthetic led to a social experiment with all its consequences and subsequent criticism. During this experiment the Demiurge architect, the artist, the practical joker, and many other roles appeared. Now the question is whether the role of the architect is to save or to play.

Keywords: Theory of Architecture, Modernism, Post-Modernism

Streszczenie

XX wiek był okresem wielu rewolucji, m.in. w architekturze. Z jednej strony zaangażowanie społeczne z drugiej poszukiwania nowej estetyki doprowadziły do eksperymentu społecznego ze wszystkimi jego konsekwencjami oraz późniejszą krytyką. W czasie tego eksperymentu zaistniał architekt demiurg, artysta, żartowniś i wiele innych. Nasuwa się pytanie czy rolę architekta jest zbawić czy bawić.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria architektury, modernizm, postmodernizm

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The architect (and also the urban planner) as a creator creates in the cultural space of their time. And so their thought, words and form should be considered in context. There have always been currents, dogmas, and trends in which the creator created, discussed, or against which they rebelled. This paper aims to draw attention to the form of selected works in the literature of the theory of architecture, an indication of the role that marked the creator. The research material included in the paper covers example extracts of architectural manifestos. The form of these texts and the literary means employed are inscribed in the cultural context of a given period and at the stage of literary works become part of the accepted canons.

In the first half of the 20th century there was a need for a cultural change and for the existing patterns to be replaced. The political situation in Europe favoured revolutionary movements, and the next stage of the industrial revolution focused on technological progress. The then avant-garde creators were eager to use these new techniques. The atmosphere of the era favoured the Futurists, who were focused on the future and building new revolutionary utopias. The Modernist movement, whose leading representative was Le Corbusier, created the avant-garde movement in architecture in the 1920s. Le Corbusier's urban and architectural work, as well as his texts, are part of this trend briefly described above. The text to be considered are excerpts from the book "Towards architecture" as the leading manifesto of the era on architecture and urbanism, as well as one of the most outstanding works of the genre¹. During my studies, not only the content of the book interested me, but also the manner of its writing and the methods of transmission it used. The material and conclusions will serve in confrontation with the analogously conducted analysis of selected passages that followed modernism, although these are not only postmodern.

In his book "Towards architecture", Le Corbusier "plays" with form. The very structure of the book is non-linear, consisting of a single stand-alone chapters. The absence of linearity permeated many contemporary avant-garde works, including cinema. The book also presents images, and an additional treatment includes its unusual statements. The chapters deal with academic issues, but also issues related to those technical achievements which lead to further considerations². Le Corbusier used the latest mnemonic techniques, played with the form of expression, and changed the person of the narrator to create a sense of connectedness with the reader. The form of the manifesto enabled the use of equivalent sentences, which makes the text more "mechanistic". The text contains the bare minimum of content, especially in the titles. The slogans the reader will remember will not necessarily be understood. There are of course more academic parts, but the author still maintains a peremptory tone leaving no room for controversy. At the same time he creates a new architect on a mission of revolution, to overthrow the old system and build a new better world. This type of narrative is on the one hand very evocative, while on the other its form does not leave much room for independent thinking, and assumes one correct view.

An interesting characteristic in the form of a manifesto was created by Krzysztof Sołoducha in the introduction to the book *Theories and manifestos of modern architecture* [2], yielding an attractive manifesto: "A proneness to intellectual violence, religious fervour, the military strategy of a jealous god who wants to be alone in the arena, to sweep away all opponents, to win souls, to build an order of followers, a sect of fanatical supporters by

¹ After Reyner Banham *Toward a new architecture* is the only book about architecture being the great work of twentieth-century literature. After Leśniak A., *Nota edytorska do wydania polskiego*. [3, p. 5].

² M. Leśniakowska, *Oczy Le Corbusiera* [3, p. 28].

reducing and mocking the enemy”³. And the author of the article would attribute these characteristics to Le Corbusier’s manifesto while at the same time appreciating his artistry.

The first half of the 20th century saw the formation of new moves to improve living conditions in cities, whose ideas were incorporated into the work of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in the 1930s, while combining it with the postulates of the avant-garde movement in architecture. The postulates for healing were put forward by socially engaged activists: doctors, hygienists, social workers – and finally architects dominated the final debate. CIAM mimicked the structure of the Communist Party, with its chief committee (CIRPAC), responsible for propaganda activities, imitating solutions from the revolutionary Soviet Union, although directed towards activities within capitalist societies [4, p. 26–27]. The increasing impact on the organization of the Swiss-French group in the 30’s and 40’s marginalized architects from Germany and Great Britain, and aided the creation of local centres of modernist thought in the UK and Scandinavia [4, p. 163–168]. The space for pluralism grew ever smaller, as was noticed by some activists. The international influence of CIAM in the postwar period led to the formation, as defined by Charles Jencks, of the “mechanicist modernist church”. During this period, the architects received legal instruments for the realization of the principles of “healing” towns and constructing new projects, especially housing, regardless of the authorities. The scale of these projects, their mass character, was worthy of the architect demiurge. In contrast, the architect as “saviour” was defeated, especially criticized in terms of modernist urban planning and socialist and modernist dehumanized housing estates.

The directions that emerged in the period after modernism lasted in a “relationship” with modernism, or criticized and opposing it, whether continuing or expanding it. The multitude of architectural directions makes it difficult to formulate an unambiguous position. But Jencks saw architecture, in the pluralism which arose after the departure of modernist, as a new force corresponding to today’s society. In this part will be presented extracts from two texts by Robert Venturi and Coop Himmelblau.

Robert Venturi in his text “Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture” directly refers to his manifesto as mild. It is a manifesto in which he confronts his vision of architecture appearing in the first person (“I understand”, “I strive”, “I prefer”, “I’m for”) with the state described. He creates a whole string of slogans – antonyms relating to the forms which determine his relationship to the “purist language of orthodox Modernist architecture. In the passage, “I’d rather mixed forms than *purist*, compromise than *pure*, distorted from *straightforward*, *ambiguous* rather than *understandable*, perverse and impersonal, boring and *interesting*, rather standard than *designed*, including, and not *excluding*, exaggerated rather than simple, rudimentary and innovative, rather ambiguous and inconsistent than simple and clear...” the author expressed his views on the principle of confrontation of his ideas in relation to the demands of the modernists. Knowledge of modernist postulates in this case allows Venturi’s assumptions to be understood, it is a text that is based on a polemic with the current state. The internal contradiction is housed in the adopted direction – architectural complexity, based also on the context of cultural transformations. Venturi’s text is in its own way perverse, and expresses the fundamental idea of his time taking into account the richness and complexity of the modern world; it indicates a new plane of intellectual inquiry (concepts

³ K. Sołoducha, *Od Wydawcy*, [2, p. 15–16].

like ambiguity, complexity, contradiction and compromise and at the same time limiting order)⁴. The architecture of this period is the opposite of the purism of modernist architecture, and without understanding one it is impossible to fully know the other and appreciate its intellectual achievements.

Opposed to the peaceful tone of Venturi is a fragment of the “fiery” manifesto of Coop Himmelblau. This short text from the 1980s, which is difficult to treat as a set program, but rather in the category of artistic happening, which it actually accompanied⁵. It evokes emotions, but besides the slogan it is difficult to define any direction. According to the manifesto architecture should be “*cavernous, fiery, smooth, hard, angular, brutal, round, delicately colourful, obscene, sensual, idealistic, charming, repulsive, wet, dry, and pulsing.*” The use of so many contradictory but radically formulated epithets, in many places relating to sexuality, and contradictory meanings, is meant to arouse emotions in the audience. The form of the happening precludes the need to understand, “pointless expediency” is an assumption in itself. The author of the text ends with the sentence “architecture must burn”⁶.

Nobody expects any longer the idealistic vision of the architect saviour who would change the world. The last half-century has revealed a remarkable diversity of creators’ research fields corresponding to a pluralistic society. Each of these texts was created in its time and used the “language” of recipients of that period. Le Corbusier’s text, despite its craftsmanship, is now exclusively associated with an agitator’s style. Venturi’s text does not arouse as much emotion as it did during the uprising and polemics of the 70s, as with Coop Himmelblau’s happening from the 80s.

But precisely therein lies the fun. The architect “plays” not only in designing, but also in describing his intellectual exploration and presenting his way of seeing to others, thereby enabling controversy in space.

References

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⁴ R. Venturi, *Złożoność i sprzeczność w architekturze*, [2, p. 57–60].

⁵ The text was accompanied by a Coop Himmelblau architectural happening in Graz. Its main element was a blazing wing steel frame with a nozzle suspended in the air from which flaming gas jets burned.

⁶ Coop Himmelblau, *Architektua musi płonąć*, [2, p. 313].