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## ON UGLINESS AND WAYS OF ITS PRESERVATION

The paper presents a reflection on ugliness in architecture. The inspiration for reflections contained in it are studies of Umberto Eco, Karl Berger and Witold Gombrowicz. In particular, it contains reflections on ugliness as an attribute of change in architecture, typical for an era of media society. According to the author, presented considerations may have inspirational value.

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The notions of ugliness and beauty are fixed in their social and cultural context.

Not so long (250 years) ago – till the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, beauty was guarded by the patronage of the main social institutions – the Church and the secular authorities which defined the assignments of architecture. It was expected to satisfy the patrons' needs and be easy on the eye. It served to build prestige, emphasize social status and recognition as well as realize educational objectives. Those functions were somehow imposed on architecture from the outside. The profits it gave referred to the patron's needs instead of the creator's ambitions. Its message related to the patron's interest had to be socially understood and esthetically accepted. Thus, it was difficult to imagine a possibility of expressing architects' own preferences – their ambitions were subordinate to the patron's taste. He had to be certain that his message would reach the addressee and be interpreted correctly. The social significance of such a message imposed a legible style which was supposed to beautify the patron in the eyes of the recipients of architecture (common people). The contemporary comprehension of architecture as the unimpeded expression of architects' ideas did not really exist [1].

Contrary to those old rules, modern architecture is created according to different principles. What really counts is an architect's individuality, innovativeness, attentiveness bound with creative freedom, liberation from stereotypes. The architect-client relation has changed significantly. Instead of expressing his client's ideological message, an architect creates it himself to a large extent. In this range, he is much more independent, he can leave the stamp of his own individuality, talent and skill on the surroundings, create an original and unique object. In many architects' consciousness, such comprehension of creative freedom is a pass to fame and esteem.

A question arises here about the effects of such an attitude, about the directions of changes in the appearance of our surroundings. Surroundings created by architects may please us or condemn us to look at ugly landscapes which reflect lacking talent, morbid preferences, pathological longings, excessive ambitions, twisted tastes. In human communities, in the so-called social space, this kind of pathology is quite effectively diagnosed and stigmatized. The society can defend itself against characters whose inclinations

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threaten social order. Protection from such behaviours consists in isolating such dangerous individuals. Unfortunately, in the real space, we have not developed a similar system of protecting spatial order. We can be condemned to existence in atrocious surroundings with impunity, shocked by ugly buildings which result from the corruptive ambitions of psychopathic creators who do not suffer any consequences of their destructive impact on the surroundings.

Obviously, ugliness and eyesores appear beyond architecture as well [2]. It is said that ugliness allows us to recognize beauty. Every notion may exist if it can be compared with its opposite. If everything was beautiful, the notion of beauty would not make any sense as a determinant of a characteristic feature of architecture. In some domains of art – in film for instance – evoking disgust, fear or horror is a proven method of artistic actions. However, there is one elementary condition which justifies this kind of artistic acts. Watching monstrosities, feeling terrified and disgusted, we must be sure that they are fiction, they do not concern us in reality. We call it safe ugliness. Architecture differs from painting, film and theatre in the fact that the reception of a work takes place in the real world. We cannot leave this world just like we leave the cinema after watching a horror film. We are condemned to experience a nightmare involuntarily over and over again.

However, we should follow some significant changes in social preferences resulting from the increasing importance of the global media (advertising, television, the Internet). Cultural changes, characteristic of *he media society*, reevaluated expectations related to the message of architecture and the requirements for its creators. A quest for fashions, sensations and modern styling created by the media is more and more important.

In their nature, the media concern two worlds – the way it is and the way it is created in media

broadcasting. In the media society, reality is rendered unreal through some characteristic processes. The media – a powerful instrument of creating reality – transform our sense of reality. What we receive from media transmissions is expected to interest or shock us, to attract our attention – unnoticed information is valueless.

A participant in the media society functions in non-reality which filters in the real surroundings from computer monitors and TV screens. This process spreads *cheap* estheticism which verges on ugliness. Ugliness sweeps across vaster and vaster areas of our surroundings.

We can present two interpretations of this phenomenon.

1. Ugliness which is not the opposite of beauty but an expression of its lack. Thus, it is not a negative state but a lack of positive values, just like zero is not the opposite of one. Therefore, we often say that people who create this kind of ugly architecture lack talent and creative inventiveness. We indicate their lack of predispositions to create beauty. The effect of their activities is *clumsy beauty*, kitsch, trash, camp.

2. Ugliness which is a separate esthetical value, in some respects opposed to beauty. In this interpretation, it possesses its own confirming features. If they cannot be called canons of ugliness, they can surely be described with specific stylistic determinants. They result from a creative attitude related to a strong need for self-creation combined with the will to manifest excessive ambitions. It is about creating architecture which would shock or influence experiences in another way, by contradicting what has been acknowledged as beautiful for ages.

In such comprehension of ugliness, we can distinguish the following trends:

- programmatic contradiction, negation, rejection,
- purposeful disharmony,
- planned illegibility, spatial disorder,

- intentional pseudo-estheticism (described with the “fashionable” word styling),
- infantilism serving to sweeten the surroundings,
- evoking distaste, atrocity,
- evoking terror, fear.

Thus, we can enumerate the following stylistic trends within ugliness: the architecture of kitsch, disorder, disharmony and rejection, the architecture of fear and distaste, the architecture of sweetening and superficial styling.

The abridged form of this article does not allow me to discuss these trends and related architects’ portfolios more thoroughly. Nevertheless, we ought to notice increasing ugliness in architectural creation which can be proved by the quality of new architecture filling many city centres and the phenomenon of urban sprawl. Social acceptance for this situation is related to contemporary cultural transformations and the impact of the media on esthetical preferences.

On the other hand, it is supported by the creative attitude of architects whose desire for individualism at any price usually results in ugliness. Weirdly enough, ugliness is more and more fascinating, attractive and often identified with the expression of personality.

The cause of such a situation is fantastically rendered by an excerpt from “Ivona, Princess of Burgundia” by Witold Gombrowicz [3] with the author’s introduction:

*Prince Phillip is getting engaged to the uninviting Yvonne because his dignity is offended by her unfor-*

*tunate appearance, and – as a free spirit – he does not want to surrender to the natural aversion the poor girl arouses in him (...) Prince: Why should I like pretty ones only? Could I not fancy an ugly one? Where is it written? Where is a law I would be subject to as a soulless organ, not as a free man?*

Rem Koolhaas [4] has got a similar opinion of the charm of ugliness: *Ugliness has the right to live, too... if something is ugly but important, it is worth preserving... Is it not characteristic? When we talk about beauty, we soon get bored; when ugliness appears, the atmosphere livens up at once.*

We should also notice that, in the media society, the creators of architecture become celebrities to a certain degree. They gain prominence owing to the same abilities which change an average vocalist into someone who is *known for being known*. So, an ability to scandalize, shock, attract attention is much more important for popularity (and money) than genuine learning and creative potential. The more so because beauty and spatial order are not always noticed. If we want to be noticed, we should attract attention – shocking ugliness is irreplaceable in this respect. This situation resembles the front pages of tabloids where goodness, beauty and truth do not attract as much attention as misdemeanor, evilness, falsehood and atrocity.

## ENDNOTES

- [1] K. Berger, *Potęga smaku, Słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2008.
- [2] U. Eco, *Historia brzydoty*, Rebis, Poznań 2007.
- [3] W. Gombrowicz, *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda*, Skamander XII, Warsaw 1938.
- [4] R. Koolhaas, *Diabeł może być piękny*, [w:] *Sztuka architektury* ([http://www.sztuka-architektury.pl/index.php?ID\\_PAGE=5317](http://www.sztuka-architektury.pl/index.php?ID_PAGE=5317)).

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