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MATERIALIZING THE INTANGIBLE

MATERIALIZUJĄC NIENAMACALNE

Abstract

Architecture should focus on people, adjust to them and respect the context of the place in which it is located. It should be based on rational planning guidelines, serving the intended purpose. However, what distinguishes it from structural engineering is a strong connection with human emotions. Architecture must therefore move its recipients. It has a lot of extensive ways of expression, and hence, it can touch many senses. Combining mathematical rationalism and human intuition, over fulfilling the intended function – to materialize what is intangible.

Keywords: function, atmosphere, feeling, feathering, education, materialization

Streszczenie

Architektura powinna koncentrować się wokół człowieka, dopasowywać się do niego oraz szanować kontekst miejsca, w jakim się znajduje. Powinna opierać się na racjonalnych założeniach planistycznych, służąc zamierzonemu przeznaczeniu. Jednak to, co ją odróżnia od budownictwa, to właśnie silny związek z ludzkimi emocjami. Architektura musi więc poruszać swoich odbiorców. Posiada wiele rozbudowanych środków przekazu, a co za tym idzie, może dotyczyć wielu zmysłów. Łącząc w sobie matematyczny racjonalizm oraz ludzką intuicję, ponad wypełnianiem przeznaczonej funkcji – może materializować to, co nienamacalne.

Słowa kluczowe: funkcja, atmosfera, odczuwanie, wtapianie, edukacja, materializacja

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Over the centuries, the features of a good building, defined by Vitruvius (durability, usability and beauty) remained valid. However, depending on the age and political situation, their order changed. Initially, the durability of buildings was the greatest value, because they functioned primarily as shelter and defence structures. Aesthetic values were not of great importance, giving way to usability. Along with the development of construction and architecture, it also gained a representative meaning, strengthening the rank of beauty, which often became more important than the utility of the building – the function it was supposed to serve. The expression of architecture also began to reflect political and economic ambitions as well as material status. These aspects rarely led to a situation where the object's expression exceeded rational thinking about useful architecture. A noticeable change in the approach to architectural design was summarized by the statement that form follows function. The next evolutions of Louis Sullivan's maxim in the context of the interwar political and economic situation described a gradual way to separate the features of architecture. Continuously growing urbanization and change in the employment structure caused a massive inflow of people to cities. Some of them were severely damaged by war activities. Otherwise, in this situation, the elevation of functionalism to the pedestal resulted in the creation of a hard boundary between beauty and usability in the long run. Over the years, the problem began to affect many areas of everyday life, assuming that the products could be either beautiful or useful. As if both concepts were to be mutually exclusive.

It is worth noting that, according to Le Corbusier's ideas, the industrialization of housing construction was an interesting and promising answer to the needs of the post-war world. In retrospect, many critics began to identify the problems of massive multi-family buildings with Corbusier's erroneous postulates. However, it was not the assumption itself that was a problem, because improved prefabrication methods are nowadays successfully used in many countries – often surpassing technologically conventional building methods. Moreover, it was modernist postulates in architecture that introduced a new standard in housing construction. Private bathrooms, larger windows, air-conditioned and bright apartments were provided. Indisputably, these are the values that definitely increased the average standard of housing in the world. The error was, however, committed by many of the master's successors who were selective in their demands. The first association is the “Za Żelazną Bramą” housing estate in Warsaw. Originally, the buildings were to be modelled after the Marseilles housing unit. In the design process, however, (due to budget cuts) the roof terraces, two-storey apartments, loggias, common spaces for residents, as well as the ground floors were cancelled and the elevations were simplified. Despite these drastic treatments, some of the descriptions of the estate, perhaps jokingly, continue to indicate a strong connection with the indicated prototype. In addition, I think that the attempt to unify people and ignore their scale in the context of entire buildings was wrong. In the case of many architectural realizations, in post-war years, mathematical rationalism dehumanized spaces that were intended to serve precisely people. Fortunately, many fantastic and ambitious housing investments from that period contradicted these assumptions – serving their users perfectly. Unfortunately, they often disappear in the thicket of repetitive buildings, where the superior factor – the meaning of the relationship with a human being – has been forgotten.

It was possible to assume that in Poland, after regaining full freedom, there would be an immediate change in approach. Unfortunately, in the subject of housing construction in

cities, freedom brought an insatiable desire to appropriate private space. The new settlements repeated the mistakes of the past, being only dressed in new flashy elevations, and the whole situation was drastically degraded. Huge spaces of new housing investments have been fenced and given a barbed wire, tightly insulating them and their inhabitants from the realities of the changing world outside. Once again, behind the guards and barriers, in the thicket of wickets and concrete section fences, man disappeared. Despite the passing years and the clearly improving quality of Polish architecture, the flat in a closed and guarded housing estate is still associated with a kind of social promotion.

I believe that people, residents, and users should have free choice and influence on construction. However, I think that first the discussion about architecture requires a new definition of its standards in Poland. Contrary to the generally prevailing opinion, I think that the tastes should be often discussed. In my opinion, architecture should be the subject of public debate, as being in an open space affects everyone equally. I also think that not every new building should aspire to be a work of art. I agree with the postulates of the architect Maciej Maćkow. During the discussion panel, organized as part of the *Łódź Design Festival* in 2016, he spoke about the need for the so-called architecture of background. This does not mean that buildings should be unified or simplified. Investors and architects permanently outdo each other in projects that will attract more attention of individual recipients and the media. It is worth remembering that the overarching task of architecture is to serve the intended purpose, regardless of the scale. It may be a museum as well as a bench in the park. Designed objects should respect the existing context of the place, while not becoming its slave. They should also improve existing local conditions. The relationship with the environment strengthens the meaning of the project and facilitates its rooting and gradual blending in the existing context.

In the era of rapid development, the world is constantly changing. We do not know what requirements the future will set for us. It is important not to fight it, but to be the best possibly prepared – designing to meet its aspirations.

In a short film created by the *Łowicka Center* in Warsaw, the main architects and co-founders of the JEMS studio were presented. They talked about their work and the quality of architecture in Poland. They drew attention to the general problem often occurring in our homeland, which is the predominance of form over content in architecture. I agree with the words of Jerzy Szczepanik Dzikowski, who said that we are creating standards in which we have grown. The sentence applies to both investors and architects, because responsibility and awareness lie on both sides. Since the transformation of the political system in Poland, the flat has become a product. Previous certainties, co-financed by the state, have become difficult to access for people with low income and completely dependent on the conditions prevailing on the free market. The new political system assumed the support of multi-family housing on the current demand and purchasing power of future residents. Lack of state support has led to a massive dominance of housing investments with very small flats. It should be noted, however, that if we are designing construction objects explained only economically, we will lead to a situation much worse than the one before the transformation process began. People who grow up in a small and cramped apartment often have a crippled imagination. When designing, one should think about both present and future, creating as far as aspirations, without designing space below a certain standard. Unfortunately, this bar has been set in Poland, so far, at a very low level. The influence of the space in which the individual is

placed on the recipient is obvious and noticeable. This fact confirms that despite meeting the minimum needs and rational thinking, quality, space and care about the small human scale are essential.

Life cannot be built on refrigerators, politics, loans and crosswords. This is not possible. No one would live long without poetry, without colour and without love¹.

I believe that public architecture should be based on the principle of social participation. In this way, the design concept and rational and economical approach of the municipality must try to find a compromise with the often intuitive and sensible way of thinking of the inhabitants. Individual projects with this type of preparatory work are already successfully implemented in some Polish cities, mainly Warsaw and Poznań. However, a strongly developed democracy in the planning process must go hand in hand with education. Users should have free choice with the possibility of exploring all options. It is only after becoming acquainted with the full range of possible solutions and provided basic aesthetic education you can talk about free choice. The current situation exists, often due to the lack of appropriate patterns and leading examples in urbanized space. A surprising number of people are still unaware of the opportunities open to them in today's architecture. Only after getting to know them, is it worth asking whether they want to use them.

To understand this world with reason, knowledge is needed. Trying to embrace it with intuition – talent is needed².

Many theoreticians of architecture have now tried to formulate and update the features that should describe it. Apart from the obvious context of place, materials, scale or construction, there are also those that are difficult to measure. These include: the atmosphere of the interior, the impact on the surroundings, or the feeling of the surface that is in the building. Peter Zumthor, in his two books: "Thinking architecture" and "Atmospheres", adds to this juxtaposition the blending of the building, taking root in the minds of users and nearby passers-by, as well as the first impression it creates. Both when meeting people and buildings, in a fraction of a second after the performance, you can determine whether they are moving or indifferent.

Quality architecture to me is when a building manages to move me³.

All factors describing architecture boil down to basic human feelings. Valuable architecture requires the commencement of a project path from the human scale and the development of solutions from this perspective. Many architectural realizations have only been accompanied by a discussion on the subject of the expression of the solid and its power, assessing the building on the basis of computer visualizations and bird's eye view. Often, thinking about

¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, [in:] V. Papanek, *Dizajn dla realnego świata*, Rectoverso, 2013. (author's translation)

² One of the thesis of XVII Międzynarodowej Konferencji Naukowej Zakładu Architektury Mieszkaniowej i Kompozycji Architektonicznej, author: prof. dr hab. inż. arch. Dariusz Kozłowski

³ P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, Birkhauser, 2006.

the role of man in architecture was additionally strengthened by the egoism of the architect. I mean, some projects by Santiago Calatrava come to my mind here. For example, confirmation of this thesis is the railway station in the city of Liege, in Belgium. It had, in accordance with the architect's objection, not to be equipped with benches for waiting passengers at the platforms during the first years. According to the architect, they spoiled the expression of the interior. In addition, the same designer, also famous for the design of the bridge in Venice, which due to the materials from which it was made and marginalization of the needs of people with mobility difficulties, has become very problematic and dangerous. Surprisingly, clearly new dogmas of urban and architectural design have become the subject of global discussion relatively recently. The new approach has been summarized and described in the publication of Jan Gehl in 2010. The book "Cities for People" is a textbook containing basic but extremely important tips for design in an urbanized environment. The urbanist must put man in the centre, as the most important unit, to which the other elements have to fit. I think that it is difficult to discuss how a building affects the senses of recipients or users, if it obviously does not serve them; ignoring the needs for which it was created.

The concept of rationalization, which many, without a shadow of hesitation, indicate as the most characteristic feature of the new architecture, plays only a cleansing role in it. Its second face, the satisfaction of the human soul, is just as important as material issues. Both points of view have their counterparts in the unity that life itself represents⁴.

Architecture is present in every place where a person lives, being inseparably connected with human existence. Staying accessible to everyone, it affects the lives of people around you. Every person, consciously or not, experiences it every day and is under its strong influence. The recipient does not have the opportunity to deal with every aspect of the building, often paying attention to the small elements that contribute to its atmosphere.

I remember this period in my life when I was influenced by architecture, without thinking about it. I still have the feeling that I feel a handle in my hand, a piece of metal formed like the back of a spoon. [...] Even today, this handle appears to me as a special sign of entering the world of various moods and smells⁵.

The role of small details in the reception of the whole work strengthens the need to take care of every detail. Minimalism has changed their meaning, but that does not mean that it has reduced their rank. On the contrary – perfect performance, without the possibility of masking errors, is often even more challenging for contractors.

Designing is a conscious and intuitive effort to bring about a meaningful order. The addition 'and at the same time intuitive' seemed to me crucial for my definition of design only in recent years. Consciousness implies intellectualization, brain work, research and analysis. The element of feeling present in the creative process was omitted in my original version.

⁴ W. Gropius, *Pelnia architektury*, Karakter, 2014, (author's translation).

⁵ P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, 2010, (author's translation).

Unfortunately, intuition as such is difficult to define in terms of process or skill. And yet its influence on design is huge⁶.

I think that between the rational and intuitive way to architecture one should put an equals sign, assuming that one does not exist without the other. Both are equally important. Originally, local requirements, aspirations and opportunities have to be defined. Make the facility or place fulfill the intended function best – serving equally well – all its current and future users. Fulfilling basic assumptions requires knowledge and practice. Then, however, the humanization of space is an extremely important step. It requires, in turn, intuition and highly developed design talent.

Architecture is an amazing field. Using tangible and material elements, combined with the work of talented, aware and intelligent people, it is able to create an absolutely new and unique atmosphere, influencing its users. It is worth remembering that some things are not worth reinventing, just to egoistically mark their presence through iconic forms. When creating space, it should be borne in mind that it is then that it shapes the people who are in it. He can then materialize what is intangible.

R e f e r e n c e s

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