ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN THE SPIRIT OF PLACE AND THE SPIRIT OF TIME

There is an opinion that architecture does not exist today. However, oeuvres of architecture do exist. Even contemporary architects use notions which define architecture in categories of style. In more general categories, today’s architecture may participate in the civilization of death or the civilization of love. It may create places in the dimensions of the spirit of eternal time.

Keywords: architecture today, spirit of place, spirit of time, form, style

The Spirit of Time

Dedicated to Agnieszka Holland

Those who thought that He would be tamed
Who were tamed by Him so easily:
He swallowed the bait, disarmed the pipes,
Cracked the whip around the room.

Those who thought that He would be deceived
Had already been deceived.
He didn’t even knock on their door
To shake the cuffed hands.

Those who thought that He would be persuaded -
Ask his official shadows today.
He – the Ear to them hence humility in the voice;
They – roadside stones to Him.

Those who thought that they were like Him,
Are suddenly just like themselves.
The faces of the Almighty who wanted to be unable,
Like crumpled cloths used in need.

Those who thought that He would be defeated
Dwell in hells and mounds these days.
Until their last star dies
The end of His power is written somewhere

Jacek Kaczmarski, 9 December 1982

Architecture today is the architecture which was, is and will be. To many of us, architecture only exists today. What was yesterday is unimportant. What will be tomorrow is unimportant but we do not know what will be tomorrow so today’s architecture should keep up with the spirit of time. The times are soulless and architecture is soulless. We will see what happens tomorrow. The most radical thesis was put forward by Stefan Muller [1]. Now there is no architecture, only construction, but once, for a short moment, it was the emanation of life whose beauty and power intensified the non-animal part of being in the pursuit of higher values (...). We are left with NOTHING, absolutely NOTHING! [2] Today, there is no architecture. This statement reminds me of a question that Stefan Szyller asked almost one hundred years ago: Have

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we got Polish architecture? [3] And he answered it: we have already had it. There is only one answer to the question Have we got architecture today?: yes, we have because it was here. The fact that what architects do is often non-architecture does not matter. Numerous buildings designed by architects today are not architecture but there are many other things in the world which do not aspire to this notion, either. We have got Gothic cathedrals, pyramids, Baroque palaces, Renaissance castles as well as wooden huts. Taking everything we consider as architecture today into account, we may ponder on what is architecture as well as what is not but seems to be architecture. The Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw is not architecture – it is sculpture. Christian Kerez defined this building in this way during an après-competition discussion at the Museum of Contemporary Art. He was astonished when he discovered the relations between its body and its interior. According to Kerez, such a building should at least have a suitably spacious interior regardless of the compatibility or incompatibility of what is outside with what is inside. We could say that corridors and chambers inside pyramids are even smaller with respect to their external volume. However, there is a principal difference: pyramids speak of immortality and eternal life. The PoCaS is accepted these days because its significance is reduced to a signpost. Its original meanings were unacceptable because they referred to the violation of people, societies, countries and nations and their enslavement to the communist system. Without them, the building stands defenceless and reduced to a form which is not so pure. Its design kept up with the spirit of time; pyramids keep up with the spirit of eternity, the spirit of place. Today, it is difficult to state if pyramids create the spirit of place or grow from it. Motionless pyramids still transfer the disturbing message of the wish and existence of immortality. The PoCaS talks about nothingness, the civilization of death which moved away leaving ethical, aesthetic, emotional and semantic destruction. Searching for the newest solutions, we often turn our attention to the Biennial of Architecture in Venice. A few years ago, Jarosław Kozakiewicz presented a transfer in transparent tubes above the roofs of Warsaw. This year, a design presenting the issues of teleportation was selected for the Polish pavilion. Under such circumstances, the Venice trail is misleading – no architecture can be found there. Coming back to pyramids, we may notice that an architect who wants to be the best is designing his own pyramid. At present, it is often made of glass and metal. More and more flexible materials and constructions help to break a form, to escape from a form, to get away completely. Today’s architecture has lost the arche, the principle of being, its source; what remains is just cardboard, a wrapping which may be attractive but often covers emptiness – not metaphysical emptiness, simply nothing. A parade of forms in Dubai does not bring anything to architecture.

Architecture is a phenomenon appearing in a given place and at a given time but authentic architecture which appears today is rooted in the past and reaches into the future. It is a material, sensual and spiritual phenomenon. Architecture with genius loci, with the spirit is immortal. People change but their thoughts and feelings remain. A place is formed by the logic of thoughts but also by the depth of feelings. Consciously or unconsciously, intuitively, man who shapes his space reveals his wishes, hopes, faith and values. Values are the strongest imperative for activities. They help us to put our world in order. We measure the world in which we really exist with our feelings defined by our spiritual dimension of authenticity and full existence. Contemporary, utilitarian realism despises manifested feelings, reduces them to emotions which it considers unneeded and
impractical. It produces false appearances which do not build the identity of architecture. The awareness of the uniqueness of a place is deepened by knowing its tradition, by memory and includes a vision of the future which discovers its potential. The spirit of place unites the past, the present and the future, creates the state of equilibrium between nature and culture. The slogan of sustainable development requires a skillful combination of the material and the spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical. Feelings for a place will remain enchanted in the created space. The wish to make a better world real has got its share in the shaping of spaces and turns architecture into a virtual gallery of feelings [4]. The spirit of time passes by. Architecture which wants to become architecture must free itself from immediateness, use time for speaking of what is imperishable. Today, people call outstanding works “icons of architecture” without thinking about the consequences of such a notion. An icon is a flat representation which reduces space, the representation of an invisible world moving away from the real world. A work of architecture connects the visible with the invisible, makes the invisible touchable and existent directly in our lives.

The architecture of the last half-century has got a series of architectural works which speak clearly and make an inexhaustible repertoire of meanings: the Church of the Holy Spirit in Wrocław [5] opening with seven flames of stained glass Godsend to the external space adjusted to the interior; the Monument to the Shipyard Workers [6] in the form of Three Crosses establishing a dialogue with the wharf cranes and giving directions to its blurred space; the seminary, church and monastery of the Community of the Resurrection in Kraków [7] with complex narration and a skyward tower as its dominant feature on the Wawel-Tyniec axis; a church at Łaźienkowska Route in Warsaw [8] characterized by the texture of brick and the form of unfinished or endless accumulation inside and outside; the Library of Warsaw University [9], the most frequented building in Warsaw with many layers of interpretation leading to landscapes, nature and the absolute [10]. We could give many more examples.

The abovementioned as well following examples make the basis for more general reflections on today’s architecture and an imaginary illustration for the situation of a more frequent escape from architecture. The elusive spirit of time requires a continuous chase where the form gets lost. However, the meaning escaped first and it turned out that a form without a meaning ceased to be a form. Barcelona makes an excellent example. Sagrada Familia by Antonio Gaudi, full of meanings and values, has been recently confronted with a cucumber-like office high-riser designed by Jean Nouvel [11].

Thus, the recognition of the spirit of time requires as much concentration as a quest for the spirit of place. It is not quite as it seems at first glance. As invention has been lacking lately, people are speaking of post-postmodernism. Postmodernism is long gone but there are still voices that Poland is old-fashioned and should be modernized. The question of style seemed out-of-date under modernism – the more so under postmodernism and pluralism.

Referring to the continuity of classical experience, the contemporary Italian architect Antonio Monestiroli writes that style is a necessary requirement of making a work a promise of happiness [12]. Every style comprises a whole world in a work, defined by itself, recognizable through a durable, unchangeable and generally accepted form. We can see a better world, revealed feelings, a promise of happiness in it. Accidental forms lack style. We can see a contradiction between the pursuit of the spirit of time and the pursuit of the spirit of place. When we are looking for a style, we create the spirit of a place. The result is the state of equilibrium, an unchanging form recalling the character of a place where a com-
Community recognizes itself, its culture and is proud of it. In reality, it is the necessity of a style in architecture: to make city dwellers aware of the fact that they are citizens. Developing this thought, we might say that temporariness, the desire to keep up with the spirit of time or even stay ahead of it causes strangeness, alienation and “homelessness”. In linguistic terms, a style is a generally comprehensible language which forms a community of values.

Transferring an architectural experience onto a wider ground, we could recall Albert Chmielowski’s words quoted by John Paul II: *The essence of art is the soul expressed by a style* [13]. The soul is expressed by art owing to one of the most important values – freedom understood as regaining a religious and metaphysical vision of man and things which defines the only suitable measure of a human being and its relationships with its neighbours and surroundings [14]. For this objective, the ecology of the spirit which will serve man is necessary [15]. It assumes that man(...) is not a prefabricate. He must create himself with his hands in accordance with a model of culture which will not be able to resign from giving predominance to the spiritual dimension which refers to growing up in existence rather than in possession [16]. Art is a special expression of man’s kindness towards his neighbour and love which refers to the deepest humanism. A world without art will shut out love [17].

Back in the field of architecture, let me remind you that Antonio Monestioli’s lectures evoke the division of Italian architecture into those who look at it from the perspective of tradition and history or from the viewpoint of construction and technology as references to “the world of natural, technical and historical forms”. When these systems are separated, an obstacle appears on the way to a style. The significance of the statement that architectural culture of the entire twentieth century [SUSTAINED] the division between these frames of reference or even conflicted them [18] is current up to this day.

Looking from a distance at the perspective of the place of architecture in today’s world, we know that it can choose from two civilizations: of love or of death. In the latter, it becomes nothingness; in the former, it combines the creative spirit of place with the imperishable spirit of eternal time. Exemplification of this thesis would require a longer paper, a detailed survey of categories and criteria which needs more time and space. However, we may suppose that such a study would explain numerous phenomena of architecture today.

ENDNOTES

[2] S. J. Muller, *Nic*, [in:] op.cit. pp. 244-245. Justifying his theses, Muller writes earlier that what distinguishes a man from an animal is a need for exaltation and aesthetic sensitivity (p. 241). Developing his conclusion, he claims, *Do we – so-called architects – really not understand that our time is prehistory? It is gone like the time of farmers who dug potatoes with a hoe, mowed with a scythe, collected crop with their bare hands, tied it in sheaves, carried them to barns and flailed seed there. Dosta! – as our Czech neighbours would say. Let us do something else and think a little about what is not here* (p. 245).


[6] The monument was designed by Bogdan Pietruszka, Wiesław Szydlak, Wojciech Mokwiński and Jacek Krenz. It was unveiled on 16 December 1980, on the 10th anniversary of the tragedy, in Solidarności Sq. in Gdańsk.

[7] Four Gates Road – Initiation, Hope, Knowledge and Faith; church, monastery and seminary of the Community of the Resurrection in Kraków. Des. Dariusz Kozłowski, Maria Misiągiewicz, Waclaw Stefański with a team. Awarded and published, e.g. in: Przemysław Trzeciak, Wojciech Włodarczyk, Józef Mrozek, Sztuka świata Vol. 10, Arkady, Warsaw 2001, cf. also photos 9–12 pp. 14–15 by Wojciech Kosiński in his publication, Wprowadzenie do seminarium WIARA – NAUKA – TECHNIKA: Wiara jako inspiracja twórcza, [in:] Seminar materials 5 November 2009 at Cracow University of Technology edited by Wojciech Kosiński, op.cit., p. 7–18. Kosiński writes, In the field of creative inspiration through faith, a historic example is the Catalan architect Antonio Gaudi, his godly life and attitude, unusual poetic edifices derived from the unique climate of the architectural tradition of Barcelona, his opus magnum: the Church of Sagrada Familia – Basilica of the Holy Family. For 100 years, this well-known and admired object was undisturbed in its beauty and status of the dominant feature in the city. We must emphasize that Barcelona – which hardly ever happens in metropolises – preserved the historical limiting outlines of its buildings. The only impressive dominant feature was Sagrada Familia. However, the monstrous and vulgar Aquabar office tower, designed by the French archistar Jean Nouvel and opened by the King of Spain, rose nearby in 2005. This cultural damage can be compared to the Civil War in 1936 when communist revolutionaries destroyed a large part of the basilica. It was not repaired until 1954; extension is still in progress, p. 15.


[9] Des. Marek Budzyński and Zbigniew Badowski. LWU was implemented in 1999. The complex symbolism of the edifice begins in the facade with a plate with music notation including a fragment of Etude B-minor op. 4 No. 3 by Karol Szymanowski, a plate with mathematical notation including the pattern of a function with one variable describing normal probability, digital extension of the number pi, a sequence of homological groups for a couple of topological spaces, a fragment of the chemical structure of the nucleotide chain of nucleic acid, Pascal computer program, Maxwell equations describing the relations between electric and magnetic phenomena, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arab, Greek, Old Russian and Old Polish texts.

[10] We could give many more examples which disproves the thesis of the nonexistence of architecture today.