ARCHITECTURE REINCARNATED

Architecture is omnipresent but when it is annihilated by time, the forces of nature or man, a memory remains which is also consumed by time. Sometimes nothing is left. However, a work may be reborn in a verbal message which provokes reincarnations in imagination in the form of poetry, music, images or reconstructions. Thus, architecture still persists. Sometimes a monument – a museum of memory – comes into being in its place, like in the case of the World Trade Center.

Keywords: architecture, space-time, tower, monument, poetry, music, photography, reincarnation, museum

If we assume the objectivity – physicality of an architectural work, its persistence is conditioned by numerous factors. Architecture is a multilayered entity where the quality of form and esthetical values are meanings subordinate to time. It is evaluated as time goes by, both in the categories of its usefulness and its formal value. Thus, one can acknowledge its changeability rather than its elusiveness. It may be forgotten but fleetingness concerns a given space and a given time where it can influence its recipients – here and now.

“The effect of irreversible passing is the physical annihilation of an object”, says Dariusz Kozłowski but the notion he recalls – the World Museum of Imagination – arouses hopes for survival through the rebirth of the most significant works of architecture.

Sometimes architecture becomes a hardly noticeable shadow of the past. However, it does not fade away because a moment may come when it awakes and reenters the theatre of space. It goes behind the scenes in order to become known again. Sometimes this awakening comes after ages and is welcomed with open arms. However, both architecture marking its existence with periods of acceptance and architecture existing in the shadow of the power and majesty of some unforgotten works persist and only their meanings fade away. Finally, they can be annihilated by the need for the creation of a brand new work – an edifice which is demanded in a given space-time. They also vanish – not spared by time or cherished by their contemporary users – just like any material entities.

Architecture also fades away as a result of events which its creator – man cannot influence: the forces of nature destroying edifices to the present day. Man, forced to leave his territory and migrate, abandons his immovable work which will be irretrievably destroyed by time. It is not an irreversible process, however – traces found in the present let people’s imagination run riot, stimulate research and the images of bygone architectural forms sleeping underneath the time dust, come alive in the shape of literary works, drawings, paintings or reconstructions of entire spaces once created.

Timeless works of architecture are monuments to man’s aspirations after perfection. Examples of architecture have always been expressions of these aspirations. Sometimes they are works remaining at the stage of a drawn vision, an unrealizable idea,
Memorial Museum, WTC, New York, 09.09.2001
being a testimony to immanent human features: ambition and pride. As a result, there are some unimplemented edifices which persist regardless of their physicality. It also concerns drawings – designs which last as traces of human imagination and provoke questions. They become the source of inspiration for generations (Etienne Luis Boulee, the mausoleum of Isaac Newton) [1].

From time to time we find objects which are not masterpieces of architecture but – considering their peculiar character – deserve our attention. Here they are revived by a pen drawing of McConnell’s Industrial Plant in England (1826) by Karl Friedrich Schinkel [2].

Most objects whose power of persistence defeated time embody aspirations for the perfection of the human mind reaching what used to be regarded as unattainable. If they were not destroyed by the elements of nature or human greed, they survived but their future in the sense of physical being is always unknown.

We can mention several objects whose existence in collective awareness does not fade away – objects which will not sink into oblivion in the nearest future: the tower of Babel, the Gardens of Semiramida, the Alexandrine Library, the World Trade Center.

The tower of Babel exists only in the sphere of the unlimited imagination of archeologists, historians, the researchers of the Bible and the Quran, painters, filmmakers. There are not any uniform theories on its appearance but we know that its main feature was an aspiration for sky-height, just like in the case of many other objects on most continents. The scale with its form is usually the determinant of mightiness! The impact of this legend is unquestionable and extraordinarily stimulating for the creative imagination of painters, writers, composers, poets and filmmakers (Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s number of painting images of the tower of Babel; Jorge Luis Borges’ short story entitled Babel Library, 1941; Igor Stravinsky’s cantata Babel, 1944; Fritz Lang’s film Metropolis, 1924; the Polish Nobel prize winner poetess Wisława Szymborska’s poem inspired by the famous tower Na wieży Babel) [2].

The verbal record of the hanging Gardens of Semiramida by the Greek historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus date from the fifth century BC. They confirm the existence of one of the wonders of the world, whereas further excavations do not contradict them. Any evidence of the existence of this object (also having an incomparable drainage system) stimulate imagination similarly to the tower of Babel.

Following the trace of edifices which disappeared for various reasons and became a legend, we must mention the Alexandrine Library that came into being in the third century BC.

The famous library received another implantation at the end of the 20th century (its current name is Bibliotheca Alexandrina). The new edifice is not a repetition of the legendary object because only its function was copied. It is a genuinely contemporary form but the ancient library still exists through its legend closed in memory. It was revived in 1988 when an architectural competition was announced. The winner was a Norwich team (the formal opening took place in 2002) [3].

Certainly, there many more examples of such reincarnation of architecture but immortality is not measured with reconstructed objects but with the power of memory.

Memory – recalling – may be embodied in so many ways as many languages can express it. For instance, embodiment through a legend is legible for the human senses. Such works always refer to an ancient pattern included in memory and come live – persist in another form, become an incarnation which secures their immortality.
The stronger emotions related to an annihilated object, the more powerful its impact on the descendants’ memory and imagination. Sometimes the rebirth of a work in memory takes ages, sometimes the power of loss produces an on-the-spot reaction. The value of New York in the history of city building is the fast multiplication of skyscrapers on the island of Manhattan. In 1973, when the World Trade Center dominated over the world’s tallest Empire State Building in the race for achieving maximum height, it became the New Yorkers’ pride and joy. From the WTC’s towers, one could see the entire city as well as the neighbouring states up to the horizon.

Unexpectedly, the city, which had a cosmopolitan image and acted as the cultural capital of the world, became a victim.

It was not a hurricane that hit the sky-high towers – another testimony to the power of the human mind – but people consumed with hatred! Within several hours, thousands of people lost their lives and the towers literally disappeared. But was this architectural monument totally annihilated?

The memory of the human victims lasts and will last. A decision to ‘rebuild them’ was not taken but the place of the tragedy is well marked in the space of the city, it is and will be a memorial to the human victims as well as the architectonic victim which, thanks to historical materials, should survive and accompany the next generations in their journeys across this undoubtedly unique, one-of-a-kind city. Even though many metropolises all over the world try to imitate this island city, its climate and history are unique.

The beautiful and graceful Chrysler building glittered above New York in 1931; then the Empire State appeared; the next tallest competitor was the WTC in 1973 but NYC has already been a forest of skyscrapers. Now, in the 21st century, there are so many of them across the world that their exact number does not really matter. Some of them exist and will exist until they are annihilated by a force they will not be able to resist but they will persist in libraries, memory safes, perhaps their renderings will travel to other worlds… who knows?

Memory is the most durable document which will persist together with man, follow the past and waken the future of architecture. The future will bring new qualities which would not come into existence without memory – knowledge!

ENDNOTES

[2] In 1826, the Prussian architect sketched a groups of industrial buildings in Manchester (pen and ink). Quoted comment: “Some are as large as the royal palace in Berlin, with a thousand obelisks steaming from the engines around them”, Hugh Honour, John Fleming A History of the World of Art, p. 646.

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