THE ARTISTIC NEIGHBORHOOD OF ARCHITECTURE

Fine arts have got traditional relations with architecture. Sculptors like D. Karavan and H. Voth play with architectural forms. Others like T. Kawamata and L. Ogorzelec connect new structures with live architectural and urban spaces. The activity of contemporary artists offers a new outlook on space and architecture today.

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A question about the identity of architecture is always related to a question about the limits of a suggested definition, while defining the limits of a notion divides various cultural phenomena into these inside and those outside the definition. Various related phenomena appear on the external side of the border close to a defined term. Some are derivative, the others aspire to enter the definition. It happens so with the definition of architecture. The neighbourhood of architecture is filled with various kinds of spatial objects, spontaneous products of man’s activity or the products of building, economic or – more broadly – cultural activities.

The natural and historical neighbourhood of architectural creativity includes fine arts. Painting and sculpture have been adjusted to the spatial frames of edifices, urban interiors and parks for ages. These classical relationships may be observed contemporarily, too. It may concern painting which refers to historical trompe l’oeil, the Mexican tradition of murals etc.

Especially sculpture pretends to be the main partner in the architectural game for space. These days, it also includes diverse kinds of spatial actions: from installations and environments to happenings or ephemeral actions which build an artistic and aesthetic relationship with an urban environment and architectural objects. Sometimes they look “almost like architecture”. Sometimes the space of art leaves unnoticed, sometimes it enters the space of architecture ostentatiously; in a similar way, the space of architecture turns into the space of art [1].

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Being aware of the artistic quality of their works, architects suggest solutions which make works of “the art of shaping space” themselves. Just like Le Corbusier’s chapel in Ronchamp in the past, Z. Hadid or F. Gehry’s edifices reveal the possibilities of satisfying utilitarian needs in spatial forms which go far beyond typical architectural shapes. They are associated with an experimental search for sculptural forms of architectural objects in the 20th century (e.g. H. Finsterlin, F. Kiesler, P. Szekely or H. Hollein). Architects also design objects being more of sculptural compositions than edifices (e.g. B. Tschumi’s red architectons – folies in Park La Villette, Paris, 1982–1998) or even create sculptural spaces (P. Eisenman’s Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, 1998–2005).
Not only designers’ artistic aspirations but also their effective cooperation with artists lead to the creation of works with a distinguishable form. It may be exemplified by: a complex of streets in St. Gallen, Switzerland transformed into an urban salon with a unique artistic form – red fitted carpets on the floor, eccentric furniture, elements of set design (designed by architect C. Martinez and artist P. Rist, 2005) [2], and the Remembrance Museum in Belżec as an intermingling sculptural and architectural space (designed by sculptors A. Solyga, Z. Pidek and M. Roszczyk in collaboration with DDJM Architectural Bureau in Kraków, 2004) [3].

Architecture as sculpture, sculpture as architecture. Strange, unusual, expressive forms of edifices become the icons of contemporary architecture in the media. This artistic game concerns spaces in various scales. Decorative structures and building details in public spaces are often sophisticated sculptural forms themselves, e.g. benches in Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City or the details of the floor in the small town of Arles-sur-Tech in France. However, contemporary urban public spaces – squares, streets, parks – are becoming spaces of art because of the general concept of organizing and forming spaces rather than the fact of gathering elements with high artistic values. A good example is Exchange Square in Manchester designed by landscape architect M. Schwartz (1998–2000) which forms a utilitarian public space as well as a work of applied art [4]. The formal solutions of implemented objects, including the colours and choice of materials and details, and the incorporation of works of art to a compositional game determine the integrality of thinking about a space.

Analyzing the artistic neighbourhood of architecture – contemporary sculptural creativity referring to architecture, we can distinguish three areas of activity:

- artistic creation inspired by architectural forms or problems (e.g. the works of A. Aycock, A. Goldsworthy, M. Kurak);
- artistic creation located in an architectural space – autonomous products addressed to specific spatial situations (e.g. sculptures by A. Calder, L. Bourgeois, C. Bury);
- artistic creation actively adjusted to the real space of an edifice or a city.

With reference to the third area, K. Szymanowska draws our attention to contemporary artists’ interest in architectural matter. Architecture as a place does not build (...) a physical framework for a sculpture as it used to do. First of all, it functions as a pretext, often as an element, usually as a context for art which penetrates, extends and crosses it [5]. In this case, she is talking about circumarchitectural objects inserted to a given spatial situation. Artistic actions are often taken according to J. Lerner’s concept called “the acupuncture of a city” [6]. The realization of an artistic work in a suitably chosen place with the help of suitably chosen means of expression may produce the effect of “pressure” with some long-term spatial, aesthetical and social consequences. Ephemeral actions do not leave any permanent material traces but once noticed in the context of the space of a city, they may change the spatial perception of the surroundings and the manner of thinking about them.

Referring to the examples in the first area of activity, we may recall the portfolio of the Austrian sculptor Walter Pichler on account of his strong relationships with the architectural vanguard. He is a consequent artist who has been creating spatial visions and forms at the meeting point of architecture and sculpture for years [7]. His collaboration with R. Abraham and H. Hollein in the 1960s and 1970s was an example of strong mutual inspiration between architecture and fine arts [8].
1. J. Miró’s sculptures, La Defence, Paris
2. B. Tschumi’s architecton, Park La Villette, Paris
3. Sculptures in a swimming pool in a square near Pompidou Centre, Y. Tingyely and N. de Saint Phalle, Paris
4. “Sculptural Space”, M. Goeritz, Mexico City
5. “Satellite Towers”, M. Goeritz, Mexico City
6. Benches in Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City
7. Benches in Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City
8. Courtyard of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, R. Legoretta, Mexico City
9. “Camino Real” Hotel, R. Legoretta, Mexico City (all photographs by L. Maluga)
Dani Karavan, a sculptor from Israel, addresses most of his works to a specific urban space. He uses spatial forms which resemble architectural forms: pyramids, domes, towers, walls, stairs, amphitheatres etc. They can be exemplified by two installations Environment for Peace (1978): in Forte di Belvedere in Florence – a composition adjusted to the fort terraces, visually related to the dome of Florence basilica by a beam of laser light; and in Castello dell’Imperatore in Prato where the composition corresponds with the interior of the castle courtyard. One of the earliest works which made him famous was the implementation of a monument commemorating the conflict between Israel and Egypt in 1947 on the Negev Desert (1963–68). A combination of concrete forms with a dominating tower resembles an architectural complex (a castle?, a temple?) or a defensive settlement on a hill in its scale and compositional layout [9]. In one of Karavan’s latest implementations, some elements of the landscape complex Murou Art Forest in Murou, Japan (2006) arouse a reminiscence of architectural forms, too [10].

The German painter and sculptor Hannsjörg Voth similarly uses forms referring to architectural forms in his designs and implementations, e.g. a stone house (Steinhaus mit Seelenloch, Berlin, 1984). Works implemented on a desert in Morocco: Stairway to Heaven (1980–87), Golden Spiral (1992–97) and Orion City (1997–2003) are especially expressive. In the last case, a complex of seven watchtowers related to seven stars in the constellation of Orion, whose form resembles a fortified Arab city on the desert, came into being [11].

However, the ultimate confrontation between contemporary sculpture and architecture takes place in direct spatial contact: not in museum halls or in the desert but in actual architectural spaces, in the streets, squares, often in degraded, postindustrial areas, in the slums etc.

The Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata’s works are uniquely expressive. Spatial structures constructed of planks, boxes, chairs fill interiors, cross architectural divisions, occupy the elevations (Pompidou Centre in Paris, 2010), spaces between buildings (Toronto Project, 1989), trees in parks (Tree Huts in Madison Square Park, New York, 2008), form independent entities (an observatory in Lavau-sur-Loire, France, 2007) [12]. Kawamata says, What I do is visual terrorism. A city usually reduces undesirable noise. My constructions resemble this turmoil, they are not politically aggressive (...) I create something which professes different order. A city is based upon a very limited structure and an artist must oppose it [13].

Numerous Polish artists also place their works in the context of a city and architecture. They do not treat an urban environment as an exhibition space but play an intellectual and artistic game with this phenomenon: from Magdalena Abakanowicz’s arboreal architecture to Jacek Damięcki’s installations [14].

Sculptor Ludwika Ogorzelec uses spatial structures to fill architectural interiors and public spaces, e.g. a wooden spatial tissue of the series Space Crystalization at Edinburgh Art College (2002) or a structure of the same series made of cellophane at the symposium of art “Floating Land” in Noosa (Queensland, Australia, 2005) [15].

Hannsjörg Voth’s formal search resembles Massimo Scolari’s mythic architectural landscapes and Rajmund Abraham’s drawn objects; structures growing from the facades of Tadashi Kawamata’s buildings bring Lebbeus Woods’s anarchitecture to mind [16]. Whether it is a reference to the archetypes of spatial culture or a game of simple compositional effects, such as a clash of order and chaos, we may notice a lot of resemblances between formal effects in architects and artists’ works even if the motifs or pretexts differ. In the range of spatial layouts, archi-
tecture and art refer to the same elementary notions and phenomena.

The Bauhaus traditions of integrated thinking about space and art seem worth recalling here. However, the whole thing is based on returning questions instead of settled answers. The present day gives many new answers but, unfortunately, architects and architects rarely listen to one another being infatuated with their own visions.

The activity of contemporary artists related to the exploration of architectural spaces – interiors and public spaces – proves the timeliness of relationships between architecture and art. It may also suggest some answers to the question: what is this ARCHITECTURE like TODAY? Like a chronicle, sometimes a lampoon. That is why we must watch this area of intermingling architectural and artistic ideas carefully. It is a testing ground for experiences and experiments which may inspire and supply both architecture and art with new ideas of shaping spaces in a continuous and surprising manner. Sure thing, however, it imposes a periodical revision of the manner of perceiving and understanding the phenomenon of a cultural space – architecture.

ENDNOTES