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ARCHITECTURE TODAY – ON THE INVISIBLE BORDER BETWEEN THE BOUNDLESS PAST AND THE UNKNOWN FUTURE

Against the background of a concise historical depiction presenting selected masterpieces of architecture and their creators, the author analyzes and assesses architecture created TODAY. He portrays a panorama of styles and architectural personalities as well as formulates his message concerning the nearest future.

keywords: architecture, creation, beauty, time, past, present, future

1. THE ROLE OF TIME. *HISTORIA MAGISTRA VITAE*

Reporting their first harsh experiences, extreme mountain climbers often recall that crossing the most difficult and most exposed spots on the edge of the an abyss, they had a strong psychical impression of acting – as a physicist would say – on the invisible border between the boundless past and the unknown future.

This image may act as an attractive model and is strongly analogous to a depiction of the phenomenon of innovative creativity by an architect presented in the Theses for the Scientific Conference Architecture Today [1]. Such linear comprehension of time, making us realize that we live for the moment, entitles us to sympathize with Goethe's wishful call *Let this moment last forever – it is beautiful!* while designing a work.

The awareness of the fact that *the past begins today* [2] and *we are surrounded by built things... – of today, of yesterday, of the distant past* [3], justifies the historical depiction of research on architecture, even the latest designs. It concerns fact

collecting and stock taking as well as assessing historical phenomena, authors and works which change in time. Jorge Luis Borges wrote an inspiring novella entitled "Pierre Menard, the Author of Don Quixote" [4].

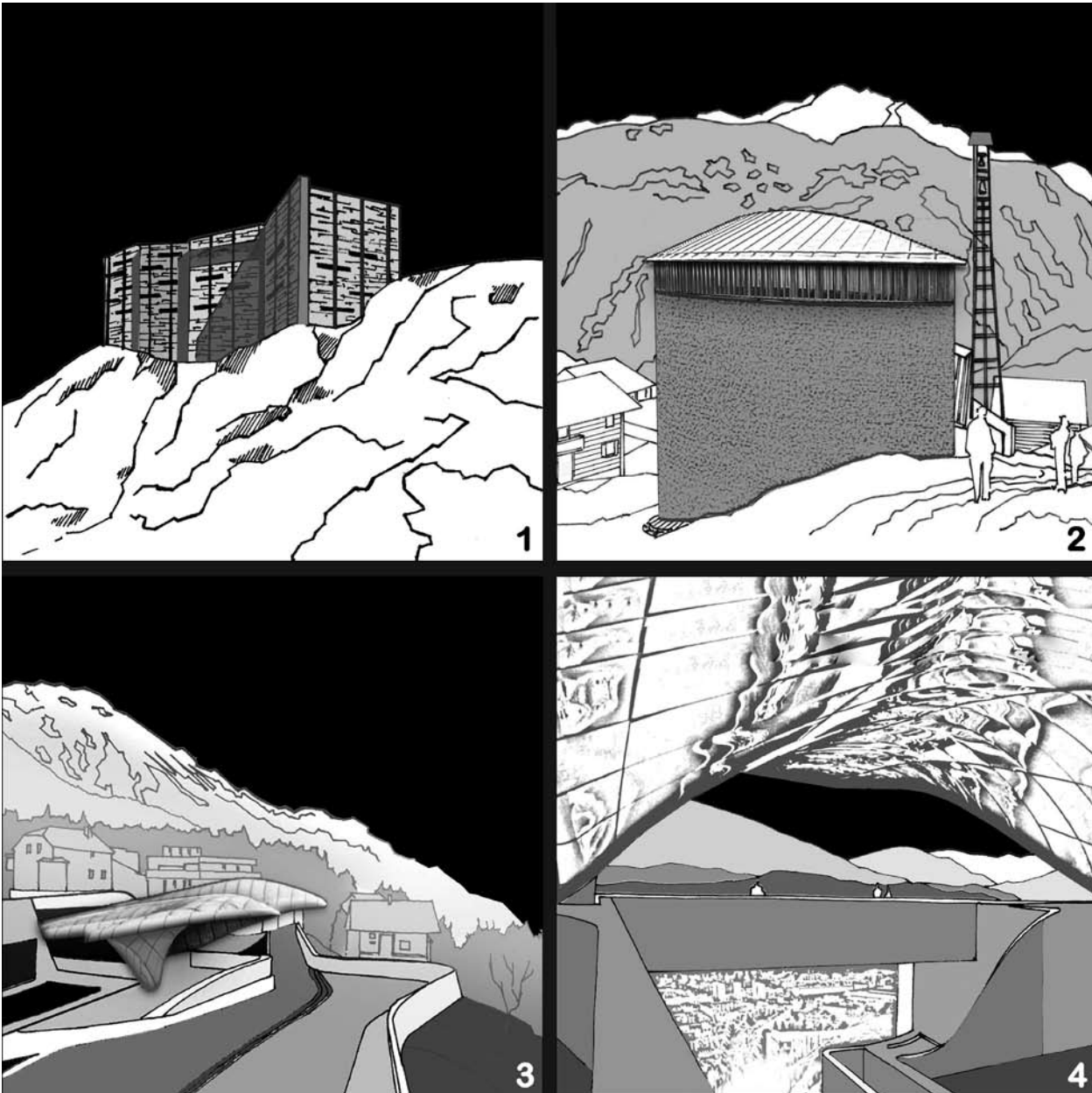
Borges fictitiously "puts" the words of Cervantes (1547–1616) "into the mouth" of the American businessman and politician Menard (1766–1844). He analyzes the durability of the contents but also their radically new meanings under other circumstances, after 200 years which passed between the two "authors" and after another 200 years – when the contemporary recipient reads them. In this measure, the phrase *The truth whose mother is history, a competitor of time, a depository of deeds, a witness of the past, an example and a message for the present and a lesson for the future centuries* is especially important.

2. PRE-MODERNISM – THE TIME OF GENIUSES

Wishing to assess Architecture Today seriously, we must not separate its analyses and assessments

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1. Peter Zumthor. Cable railway station with a restaurant on Rothorn (2,865 m above sea level). Valbella, canton Grisons, Switzerland. 1990. Source: Studio AS Wojciech Kosiński, graphic Dariusz Kronowski, 2010. 2. Peter Zumthor. St Benedict's Chapel, Sumvitg, canton Grisons, Switzerland. 1989. Source: ditto. 3. Zaha Hadid. Cable railway station with a bridge and a visitor centre, Innsbruck, Nordpark, Nordkette (2330 m above sea level), Austria. 2007/2008. Source: ditto. 4. Zaha Hadid. Cable railway station with a bridge and a customer service centre, Innsbruck, Nordpark, Nordkette (2330 m above sea level), Austria. 2007/2008. View from the interior towards the city centre. Source: ditto, graphic Przemysław Kowalski, Dariusz Kronowski, 2010.



from the context of a panorama of ancient masterpieces. Otherwise, only superficial journalism and unremarkable reviews of fashion shows will remain [5]. Masterpieces which give today's observer an objective scale of comparisons are usually stamped with personalism. If researchers have not discovered a specific professional author, at least history mentions an investor whose motivation and strength were the driving force – he replaces an unknown creator in the identification of a work. Excellent edifices were normally incarnations of great ideas: religious, national in the public sense and those related to power, also humanistic, devoted to spiritual and physical culture, collective life, private residences. The leading edifices usually had got an interesting environmental context: the city centre, gardens or dominant features in an open space [6].

Here is their selected sequence helpful in comparisons to Architecture Today: 1. C. 1350 BC, Pharaoh Echnaton, Tutankhamun's father, as the first well-known follower and propagator of a monotheist religion symbolized by the shape of the Sun, abandoned the old capital city and raised a new one known as Tel El Amarna where temples and palaces were recognized by researchers as an incarnation of perfection. 2. C. 1000 BC, Hiram, acknowledged as the greatest constructor in the Middle East, the King of Tyre, at the request of Salomon, the King of Israel, David's son, raised the legendary First Jerusalem Temple of cedar, ivory and gold, also serving the cult of one god – the archetype of the historical Second Temple in the capital of Israel. 3. C. 550 BC, Nabuchodonosor II, the King of Babylon, extended the capital and raised the legendary Tower of Etemenanki (Babel) and the Hanging Gardens to remind his wife about her homeland on the plain of Mesopotamia. 4. C. 440 BC, the Greek architects Iktinos and Kalikrates and the master of sculpture Phidias built the temple of Parthenon on

Acropolis dedicated to the goddess Athena Parthenos, the patroness of the capital and its democracy. 5. C. 125 AD, by the order of Emperor Hadrian, Apollodoros constructs the Pantheon in Rome. This object has a powerful impact and inspiration in the further history of architecture. There are legends that it was conceived by Julius Caesar (+44 BC) ruminating on monotheism and that the concept was outlined by Vitruvius (+c. 20-10 BC). 6. C. 1150, Abbot Suger of St Denise Basilica, wishing to break the monotony of the Roman style, rebuilds it in the Gothic style. Under the influence of some drawings by Villard de Honnecourt (c. 1230), the new aesthetics assumes a ravishing expression in the cathedrals of the Parisian region of Ile de France: in Amiens, Chartres, Reims, Rouen, Notre Dame without any spires in Paris etc. After that, more and more vivid epochs of the Apollonian, rational, classicizing, minimalist styles are intermingled and contrasted with more irrational, hot, subjectivist, Dionysian styles. 7. C. 1320 (Dante, Divine Comedy), there is an especially strong eruption of creative genius – the Renaissance marked by Brunelleschi (Orphanage, 1440) and Bramante (Tempietto, 1500). Leonardo draws the first precise plan of the Town of Imola. A new epoch of the conscious creation of urban space begins. It is completed by Vasari who implements Uffizi with a passageway in Ponte Vecchio above the Arno River to Pallazzo Pitti in 1560. 8. The end of Florentine humanism and the Roman policy of counterreformation (against Luther in 1520, against Protestantism in 1530) influences the transformation of the Renaissance architecture (Michelangelo, St Peter's Basilica and Square, 1550) into the Baroque (Maderna and Bernini, the façade of St Peter's Basilica and Square, 1615, 1670). 9. C. 1700, the sinusoid of styles changes direction again and the late Baroque puts on the classical garments of the Enlightenment (classicist Claude

Perrault's victory over Bernini's Baroque design in a royal competition for the Eastern Façade of the Louvre, 1670; St Paul's Cathedral, Wren, 1710), then, at the brink of the Great Revolution, explicitly gravitates towards rationalism and Boullée's minimalism (a vision of Newton's Mausoleum, 1785). 10. The 19th century closes the era of Old Order with historicism and eclecticism and opens the architecture of the Industrial Revolution and modernity (Louis Henry Sullivan in the USA; Gustav Eiffel in Europe – bridges, railway stations, the Tower for the Exposition in Paris 1890/1900).

3. MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM – PIONEERS AND CELEBRITIES, DIAMOND SEEKERS AND GRINDERS

The 20th century introduced two extremely opposite trends in creativity which rejected the 19th century academic tradition, aspired to the vanguard and referred to modernity. In the Polish terminology, both of them have been called identically – modernism. One of them – Art Nouveau (Jugendstil) – faded with the end of the Great War which buried ostentatious decorativeness. The other – Modern Movement (Mouvement Moderne) – was conceived as a revolution in art, close to left-wing social movements. However, it was doomed to cohabitation with traditionalism which served active conservative circles.

Exactly one hundred years ago, in 1910, three young interns – Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius – met in Peter Behrens's studio near Berlin and began cooperating. After the internship, they started their own creative way: architecture received a strong impulse: from Le Corbusier's purism promoted by the magazine *Esprit Nouveau*, and from Bauhaus. Grand unique objects on one side and bleak housing estates on the other side became their heritage, especially after World War II

when rebuilding and extending were needed. The humanistic modernity of landscapes radiated from the genius works of F.L. Wright, such as the House by a Waterfall and ateliers in the desert in Taliesin, but they only influenced luxury implementations.

A crisis, conceived in the 1950s, broke out in the late 1960s. It was manifested by nostalgic postmodernism resulting from the message of the books: *Quantity and Contradiction in Architecture* by R. Venturi (1966) and *The Architecture of the City* by A. Rossi (1966) as well as by *The Passion of St Luke* by K. Penderecki (1966). These exclusive events were supported by a general academic and social revolt in 1968 which overthrew the postwar modernist epoch. Postmodernism, rarely creative and often kitschy, did not survive as the vanguard – it remained as a conservative workshop of pop-academic character.

In 1988, a nestor of modernism Philip Johnson inaugurated the exhibition and promotion of the album *Deconstructivist Architecture* at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). Modernism was recalled with dignity but in another, postfunctionalist shape [7]. The architecture of such a crystallized, third incarnation of modernism – after prewar and postwar versions – became a full art again [8]. Deconstructivism (neoconstructivism, hyperconstructivism), ideologically derived from “helter-skelter” linguistic analysis (Jacques Derrida “The Truth in Painting”, 1978), became surprisingly expressive in the theoretical and conceptual dimensions and exclusive in terms of implementation. Its expression and individualism were needed after the monotony of bleak estates and the kitsch of postmodernism. Promoted by the popular media, its stars – those professing abstraction (Coop Himmelblau, F. Gehry) and those referring to symbolism and literature (D. Libeskind) [9], became unbearable celebrities very far from the discreet and elegant style of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus professors.

The pretentiousness of deconstructivism and deconstructivists as well as overwhelming spatial chaos became a contribution to the development of minimalist architecture in the last decades. It stands a chance of renewing spatial culture, it is contextual, mentally and spatially unaggressive, timeless. It enjoys great success in the urban context as well as in a peripheral, natural, open landscape. Its programmatic horizontalism, smoothness, the discreet and fine fashion of door and window openings as well as atriums and hospitable “backcrossing” inside the structures – these are just some of the advantages of this architecture. It derives from various historical threads – from early Middle Ages to early modernism – in order to make areas of quiet and peaceful coexistence.

Peter Zumthor [10], the laureate of the Pritzker Award in 2009, is a top-class personality not strictly attributed to this trend. The class of his superb, plain, radiating personality brings the most outstanding, semi-legendary, cult monastic personalities to mind. His work is diverse and – besides the well-known aesthetics of fine minimalism (Bregenz, Vals, Columba) – take advantage of nature, tradition and his own metaphorical poetics (especially Brother Klaus’s Chapel). A less known phenomenal work is a cable railway station with a restaurant (ill. 1) [11]. It could be associated with a fortress or another mysterious organic and structural object. An authorial description renders the unique atmosphere: “Big stone external plates are arranged around the steel framework of the existing station, while the internal plates make the bearing structure of the new building. They face each other and stand on each other. A house of cards. A house of stone plates.” [12] Another extraordinary object is the minimalist, regional and timeless St Benedict’s Chapel (ill. 2). It may be associated with distant history, the alternative architecture of the hippie

period and top-class sacral sophistication in the Alpine context. The materials include shingle, slats, narrow panes and unpretentious concrete applied in the simplest form [13].

Postmodernism at the turn of the Millennium, the emanation of western richness and self-satisfaction and eastern controversial emancipation (Z. Bauman) are manifested in architecture with the cult of artistic beauty and the integration of natural factors as the expression of drive at sustainable development (Alvin Toffler, “Ecospasm”, 1975). The followers of this idea include some excellent authors of “biomorphic” works: Santiago Calatrava and Renzo Piano. An active interest in landscape and nature design from architects formerly associated with a very hard treatment of the architectonic matter makes a comforting phenomenon in the last decade. Owing to the cooperation and influence of the leading landscape architects, such as Patrick Blanc, Michel Desvigne, Kathryn Gustafson or Martha Schwartz, Norman Foster, Jacques Herzog, Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, Dominique Perrault and others involved themselves in nature and landscape design.

Deconstruction – drastic in historic contexts (design of the extension of the Museum of Victoria and Albert, D. Libeskind) – seems to be well adjusted to the natural context in a characteristic, organic version (new Alpine lodge Monte Rosa). This kind of sophistication was presented by Zaha Hadid in the implementation of an Alpine ski-lift [14]. Her study sketches of natural forms transformed into fluid, freely shaped organic architecture are a 21st-century equivalent of the quests of Rudolph Steiner, Alvaro Aalto and other seekers of the organic in authorial, artistic architecture. An object functions perfectly and looks excellent from the outside in a mountainous environment (ill.3) as well as offers unusual impressions from observing the surrounding landscapes from inside a structure (ill. 4).

We must realize the fact that the period of modernity is just a micro-fraction in the history of architecture. The distance between Echnaton and Corbusier's debut is: $1350+1910=3260$ years; between Corbusier's debut and TODAY: $2010-1910=100$ years. Architecture TODAY not only presents unique richness

and pluralism, it also behaves differently from the Apollonian and Dionysian architecture in the past. It does not suffer from atrophy or the breakup of form; it preserves its vigour in spite of frequent decadence. In high standards, proportionally to the richness of numbers and contents, it holds real promise.

ENDNOTES

[1] *Thesis 7. The Future*, [in:] D. Kozłowski, M. Misiągiewicz, *Definiowanie Przestrzeni Architektonicznej – Architektura Dziś*, IAD FACUT, Kraków 2010, PDF, p. 1.

[2] *Ibidem*.

[3] *Thesis 3. Area*. [in:] D. Kozłowski, M. Misiągiewicz, *op.cit.*

[4] J. L. Borges, *Pierre Menard, autor Don Kichota*, [in:] *Opowiadania*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1978, p. 44–46.

[5] *Czas Przestrzeni*. Ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Universitas, Kraków 2008, *passim*.

[6] W. Kosiński, *Twórczość Architektoniczna jako Niezwykłość*. [in:] *Przestrzeń i forma*, Zeszyty Naukowe, 12. Ed. E. Czekiel-Świtalska, Fundacja Edukacji i Rozwoju – Sfera, Szczecin 2009, p. 7–68.

[7] D. Kozłowski, *O pięknie architektury (współczesnej) – uwagi o ułomności rzeczy użytecznych*. Digital Library, Cracow University of Technology, Kraków 2008. PDF, p. 74–77.

[8] M. Misiągiewicz, *Meandry zadziwiania w architekturze nowoczesnej*, Digital Library, Cracow University of Technology, Kraków 2009, PDF, p. 103–108.

[9] D. Kozłowski, *op.cit.*

[10] P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres, Architectural Environments, Surrounding, Objects*, Birkhäuser Architecture, Basel 2008, p. 76.

[11] P. Zumthor, H. Binet, *Peter Zumthor Works. Buildings and Projects. 1979–1997*. Birkhäuser, Basel 1999, p. 320.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] D. Kozłowski, *Trwałość i trwanie architektury (betonowej)*, 17th All-Polish Conference *The Workshop of the Designer of Construction – Ustroń*, Gliwice 2002, PDF, p. 28.

[14] *Nordkettenbahn Cable Railway Stations*, [in:] *Zaha Hadid. Special Issue GA Document 99*. A.D.A. Edita. Tokyo, p. 84–87.

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