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GAMES AND PLAY OF ARCHITECTURE WITH CULTURE AND NATURE

GRY I ZABAWY ARCHITEKTURY Z KULTURĄ I NATURĄ

Abstract

Games and plays of architecture occur in the urban space and in the natural landscape. They are presented based on examples of architecture from the last three decades of the twentieth century, through the prism of doctrines and individual creative attitudes.

Keywords: modernism, postmodernism, high-tech., organic architecture, nature, culture

Streszczenie

Gry i zabawy architektury mają miejsce w przestrzeni miast i w krajobrazie naturalnym. Przedstawiono je przez pryzmat doktryn oraz indywidualnych postaw twórczych, na wybranych przykładach architektury z ostatnich trzech dekad XX wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, postmodernizm, high-tech., architektura organiczna, natura, kultura

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1. Introduction

The subject of *Games and Play of architecture* – seemingly “not serious” – in fact forces us to serious reflection. Actually, the whole history of architecture, in particular contemporary, proves that it participates in a variety of games: *about space* and *with space*, *with the society*, for which it is designed, with heritage and *with the challenges of the future*. Entangled in a variety of compounds and conditions, it has never been an absolutely free art. It was subject to the influences of various ideologies: political, social, aesthetic, and at the same time had to respect the expectations of investors as well as technological and economic constraints. This game on different fields also accompanied the ethical aspect, that is – remaining in the convention – *fair play*. And this means that architects, representing a profession with public trust, should first and foremost be guided by the common good and not yield to narcissistic temptations.

Creating architecture is the art of shaping space. But because of the way we do it, in some sense it is a game within the rules set by existing paradigms.

2. Changing paradigms of twentieth century architecture – the changing rules of the game

In the twentieth century in architecture and, more broadly, in culture, there were two serious turns and changes in paradigms. The first, truly revolutionary, was caused by the modernist movement, that convinced the world that humanistic and modern architecture must be: democratic and egalitarian, rational and logical, primarily serving the needs of utility, purist and neutral in form, definitely distinguishable from history and tradition.

After more than three decades designing in the International Style, as thousands of similar, inexpressive buildings have begun to change the spatial and cultural image of cities, threatening the destruction of their identity, the first criticism of modernist doctrine and demands for a change in paradigms have appeared. It was believed that purist modernism had exhausted its possibilities of expressing reality and communication with the recipient. In the famous manifesto *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) Robert Venturi proclaimed that the time had come to restore architectural richness and joy. He advocated the ambiguity and disorderly exuberance of architecture [2, p. 198]

But the second turn in architecture, involving moving away from modernism, was gradual and evolutionary. In the ‘70s and ‘80s modernism underwent a phase of mannerism, which variously manifested “the release of forms” [1, p. 370]. On the basis of contestation of modernism three new trends grew: postmodernism, high-tech, and later deconstruction: There has been change of paradigm from the “only correct” modernist to the pluralist.

2.1. Beauty of technology

In the 70s, the move away from the strict rules of modernism was characterized by a humorous use of elements hitherto treated very seriously. In the Centre Pompidou in Paris, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, the idea of emphasizing “the truth” of structure,

reaching Viollet-le-Duc and cultivated by the modernists, was purposely exaggerated and became the subject of a public joke [8, p. 571]. Structural components and installations, the “working” elements of the building, so far hidden “insides”, were painted in bright colours and placed outside as a decoration. Evidence of defiance against the modernistic principle *forms follow function* was also the Lloyds Building in London. With the exposed pipe installation, and mechanistic facades, finished with glass and stainless steel, it looks more like a petrochemical plant than the seat of a powerful noble institution. The architecture of early high-tech played with technical and industrial elements, and raised them to the rank of decorative arts.

2.2. Postmodern game of double coding

Postmodernists were not radical anti-modernists. They wanted architecture to be purely “for the people”. According to the interpretation of Charles Jencks, postmodern building had a dual code: partly modernistic and partly conventional (it was something else: historical, local, metaphorical, and contextual). Dual coding is also understood in the sense that the architecture speaks simultaneously on two levels: the popular – addressed to the usual recipient, who simply wants to understand and be enjoy it, and the elite – addressed to an interested minority of architects, who note the subtle differences rapidly altering the language [4, p. 6].

This dual encoding opened the door wide to various gaming and amusements architecture. They relied not just on – to paraphrase Venturi – “decorating” a modernist “shack”. Postmodernism struggled with boredom, and therefore joke, irony, allusion, metaphor, casual fun, and icons from world culture were a desirable means of architectural narrative.

Postmodernism liked to play with historical architecture. “The presence of the past” in the design was to be, according to Venturi, a way of restoring a sense of identity and human dignity [8, p. 572–3]. Interest in historical forms not only revived, but took the form of a peculiar, almost provocative demonstrations – deliberately distorted, either grotesque or pathetic [1, p. 372]. Postmodernists drew a handful of architectural motifs from different eras by combining them together in an eclectic collages. The monumental building of the municipal government in Portland, by M. Graves is a model example. Modernism, visible in the cubic shape and large glazing, has been treated as one of several “historic styles”. It is accompanied by decorations in the style of Art Deco and Art Nouveau, motifs from Ledoux, and processed classical elements – pilasters and a giant key [3, p. 860].

In the Piazza d’Italia in New Orleans (1979), Charles Moore joined pop-art style with historicism reflecting Italian tradition by playing with historical forms like the colonnade, portico, arc-serliana, and Baroque fountains. They are connected with elements from the world of pop culture: neon headband for the finals columns, and made of stone contour maps. In other works of postmodernity classic details are humorously scaled, for example a monumental column proudly supports the corner of the building designed by Aldo Rossi in Berlin, or gigantic “half-columns” in the Abraxas building by Ricardo Bofill.

At its best, postmodernism was a “game of high-stakes” (R. Venturi, M. Graves, Ch. Moore, P. Johnson designs), but at its worst it was a foolish game for big kids [2, p. 198].



- III. 1. Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1971–77, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers
- III. 2. Seat Chiat/Day/Mojo, Venice, 1985–91, Frank O.Gehry
- III. 3. Zero Cosmology, 1990, Masaharu Takasaki
- III. 4. lowerTower, Paryż, 2004, Eduard Françoise
- III. 5. House on cliff, Premboke, Walia, 1998, Jan Kaplicky, Futur system
- III. 5. Villa dall'Ava, Paris, 1985–91, Rem Koolhaas

2.3. Allusion and reinterpretation

While postmodernists marked the presence of history in an ostentatious manner, Rem Koolhaas, who often refers to the works of the great modernists, uses discreet allusion. Villa Dall 'Ava in Paris is an intelligent, perverse mutation of Corbusier's Villa Savoy. Similar in form: supported on pillars, with a roof terrace and the band windows, it is full of references

to the original. As Corbusier softened the straightforwardness of the main body with the wavy shape of the solarium on the roof, so Koolhaas does the same thing by placing there an orange mesh fence, normally used to protect road works. The walls – instead of Corbusier’s white, are covered with corrugated sheet. Some photographers of the Villa Dall’Ava playfully wove in the image a small, strolling giraffe, referring to the picture *Zebra and Parachute* (painted by Christopher Wood in 1930), showing the Villa Savoy with a zebra [7, 207–8]. Although Villa Dall’Ava has a strong structure – after all, it bears the swimming pool located on the roof – it optically looks very light. The walls of lightweight aluminium seem to have low mass. The supports carrying the swimming pool are hidden inside and invisible. But then, the slender seemingly chaotically arranged bars, which perform a secondary role were visually highlighted. Koolhaas did not stop at historical allusions, his work is also full of structural illusion.

2.4. Jokes intended and unintended

There are architectural works that shock the viewer, and are perceived as a joke, despite the real intentions of their creator. These include Frank Gehry’s first Californian realizations. His own house in Santa Monica met with total criticism from the neighbours. Meanwhile, Gehry says that his concept was influenced by careful observation of the environment and the habits of the inhabitants [5, p. 139] it is simply a reflection of the urban and cultural chaos in Los Angeles. While the ad hoc architecture of his house, as well as the Norton house in Venice, defends its ideology, it cannot be assessed other than as a joke, situating giant binoculars as the entrance to the headquarters of Chiat/Day in Venice. Jokes that were intended are certainly anthropomorphic buildings such as the House-Face from Kyoto (Kazamasu Yamashita).

3. Game in green: culture in nature and nature in culture

Culture in nature. The majority of architects relate to nature in a respectful, almost reverent way. No wonder, after all, nature is the work of God, and therefore axiomatically good and beautiful. It is reflected in the attitudes of creative architects in situations where they design objects in the natural landscape.

One of these approaches involves a mimetic assimilation into the environment (we can call it “the game of imitating the forms of nature”), the other – minimization of the visibility of the building by masking, hiding (we can call it a “game of hide and seek”). In both cases, the game is not competition between architecture and nature, but rather an interplay, symbiosis, and even subordination to nature.

In creating architecture that mimics nature, unmatched are the representatives of the American school of organic architecture. For example: Ken Kellogg, designing the building of Rancho Mirage restaurants on a rocky desert in Palm Spring, gave it the form of rock strata. Low, one-storey, curving around the hill, so it perfectly integrates with the configuration and colour of the terrain, and is noted only as a subtle outline on the slope.

An extreme way of “playing hide and seek” in the landscape is burying the architecture under the ground, sliding in the slope, or covering with a artificial embankment. Tadao Ando did this when designing the Chichu Art Museum on the island of Naoshima. His aim was to

promote art in touch with nature. When Ando met the severe environment of the bare peninsula, he decided that it would be the perfect setting for singular installations, but he hid the essential building underground, providing lighting from above through courtyards and galleries [6]. A well-known example of the perfect combination of architecture with the natural landscape is the house on the Pembroke coast in Wales designed by Future System. It acts as an “eye” out over the sea. The exclusiveness here comes from a combination of secrecy and perfect siting [7, p. 242]

Nature in culture. Another board of “game in green” is the city and its cultural context. Here, much more, greenery is a complement and supplement to architecture, planned together. Green terraces, roofs and walls, increasingly used in contemporary urban architecture. They are not – as in the previous examples – an attempt to camouflage the building in the environment. They play a different role – they are rather a manifesto of an environmentally friendly attitude and a symbol of equivalence between nature and culture in human life. This is exemplified by Marek Budzyński’s realizations over the last two decades. The greenery has become an important component of building forms and significant architectural details. A great example of this philosophy is the Building of the Podlasie Opera in Białystok, built into the wooded St. Mary Magdalene Hill. The landscaped roofs of the lower parts of the building are designed as walking areas. The majestic, front colonnade represents the “relationship between nature and culture”, just as in the building of the Supreme Court in Warsaw, and is crowned by a beam-pot with planted willows. Budzyński continues the friendly marriage between architecture and nature on the campus of the University of Białystok.

Edouard Françoise has for years been playing original games with greenery and architecture. The Chateau le-Lez in Montpellier is a “Building that Grows”. The exterior walls were covered with steel mesh holding loosely placed stones among which plants may take root. Even so, the most interesting are terraces-rooms supported on thin supports, connected by footbridges with apartments. Over several years they became surrounded by a canopy of trees. The spectacular success brought the author the Flower Tower building in Paris, also called the “Feathery”. On balconies entangling the 9-storey tower-building, bamboo is planted in identical pots. This is a fast growing plant, creating every year a natural green screen. The advantage of Françoise’s projects is their simplicity and effectiveness, as well as the relatively low cost of maintenance [9].

4. Summary

According to the modernist doctrine, architecture was designed to be utilitarian and rational, of simple form, reflecting function and structure. “It played” with the quality of space, but not its meaning. The contestation of modernism has brought interest in complexity and contradiction. Architecture regained the right to express emotions and ideas, to communicate using familiar cultural codes, for example by reference to history, traditions, or popular art. It “played” with the feelings of the recipient, and wanted space to become “the place”. Also attitude to nature changed. The paradigm that Man is the most important was replaced by the paradigm of sustainable development. The full affirmation of the aesthetic value of nature is reflected in the relationship between architecture and nature, different in the cultural context of the cities from in the natural landscape.

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