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ON COMIC QUALITY IN ARCHITECTURE

O KOMIZMIE W ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

The article presents the results of a search for aesthetically comic elements in contemporary architecture, based on the aesthetics of Mieczysław Wallis and Henri Bergson's theory of humour.

Keywords: aesthetically comic elements, Mieczysław Wallis, Henri Bergson, FAT Architecture, Erwin Wurm, John Körmeling, Rem Koolhaas

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi wynik poszukiwań w architekturze współczesnej elementów estetycznie komicznych w myśl estetyki Mieczysława Wallisa oraz teorii komizmu Henri Bergsona.

Słowa kluczowe: przedmioty estetycznie komiczne, Mieczysław Wallis, Henri Bergson, FAT Architecture, Erwin Wurm, John Körmeling, Rem Koolhaas

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Leon Chwistek in *Zabawa i sztuka bawienia się*¹ defined the art of playing as “one of the finest arts” but not one of the easiest. Its mission is to improve reality (causing an “inflammation of imagination” and “breaking out of the daily course of thoughts”). [2, p. 149] Chwistek recognized creative activity as the greatest form of fun – strenuous work on an idea adopted by an artist. He presented the pursuit of organizing play as the primal reason for the development of the fine arts. One of the manifestations of the art of playing is the spectacle, to which Chwistek assigns architecture as decoration. A real architectural thing thus becomes a form of fun. Understood in such manner, it is deprived of “conventional restraints”, introducing originality and breaking patterns.

A space for play and fun with observers (along with an admiration as an aesthetic experience) is therefore present among aesthetic objects; among which architectural works are also undoubtedly assigned. Mieczysław Wallis associated the abovementioned processes with objects causing intense, partly discordant aesthetic reactions. “Extracting aesthetic values from characteristic and expressive ugliness, from humour, from the sublime, from tragedy, is however something as common and as momentous as extracting aesthetic values from beauty (in the literal sense of the word)” [6, p. 22]. Wallis’s systematics comprises four types of aesthetic objects among which two play a game with the viewers – characteristic, expressive objects and comical objects (in the case of beautiful, sublime and tragic objects it is difficult to speak about fun). The group of comical objects constitute “not beautiful” but also “not ugly” objects, initially arousing a feeling of alienation; causing a surprise and then an aesthetic pleasure. Their character (which may be called “amusement” although the experience of humour is not always accompanied by laughter) rests on one of four theories of comicality enumerated by Wallis: a pretence of high values, absurdities, a triumph of mechanism, and a disclosure of powerlessness. The theories, which (apart from unplanned ridiculous accents in architecture – accidental events) introduce jokes are deeply thought through by their creators, serving a particular purpose.

Charles Jencks presented the comic qualities in architecture in *Late-Modern Architecture* and *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. This is unintended humour (*mal-à-propos*) as a result of combining procedures of reduction and hyperbole, forming: a “rooster” (New Sky Building No. 5, proj. Y. Watanabe, Tokyo 1971), “a calculator with a travertine printer” (the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, proj. G. Bunschaft and SOM, Austin 1971), or “a whale eating a chocolate bar” (the Ingalls Ice Hockey Stadium, proj. E. Saarinen, 1957 and the Kline Science Center, proj. p. Johnson, New Haven 1864). These are also metaphorical forms of autonomous Japanese symbolism with a grotesque tone – the “houses-faces” of Takefumi Aida (Nirvana House, 1972) and Kazuma Yamashita (1974) – the contemporary, appalling examples of the anthropomorphism of architecture. These are also literal metaphors of a hotdog kiosk in the shape of a sausage or an antique bookshop in the form of a building-dinosaur. This is Philip Johnson playing with viewers and Bruce Goff, the author of “houses – umbrellas”, “houses – turkeys” and “houses – mantis”. Goff’s words, cited by Jencks, in which the architect justifies the social perception of the aesthetics of his projects are consistent with Wallis’s definition of comic objects: “someone once said that the perception of beauty is always accompanied by the feeling of strangeness... it is part of recognizing beauty.” [5, p. 165]

¹ *The Play and the Art of Playing.*

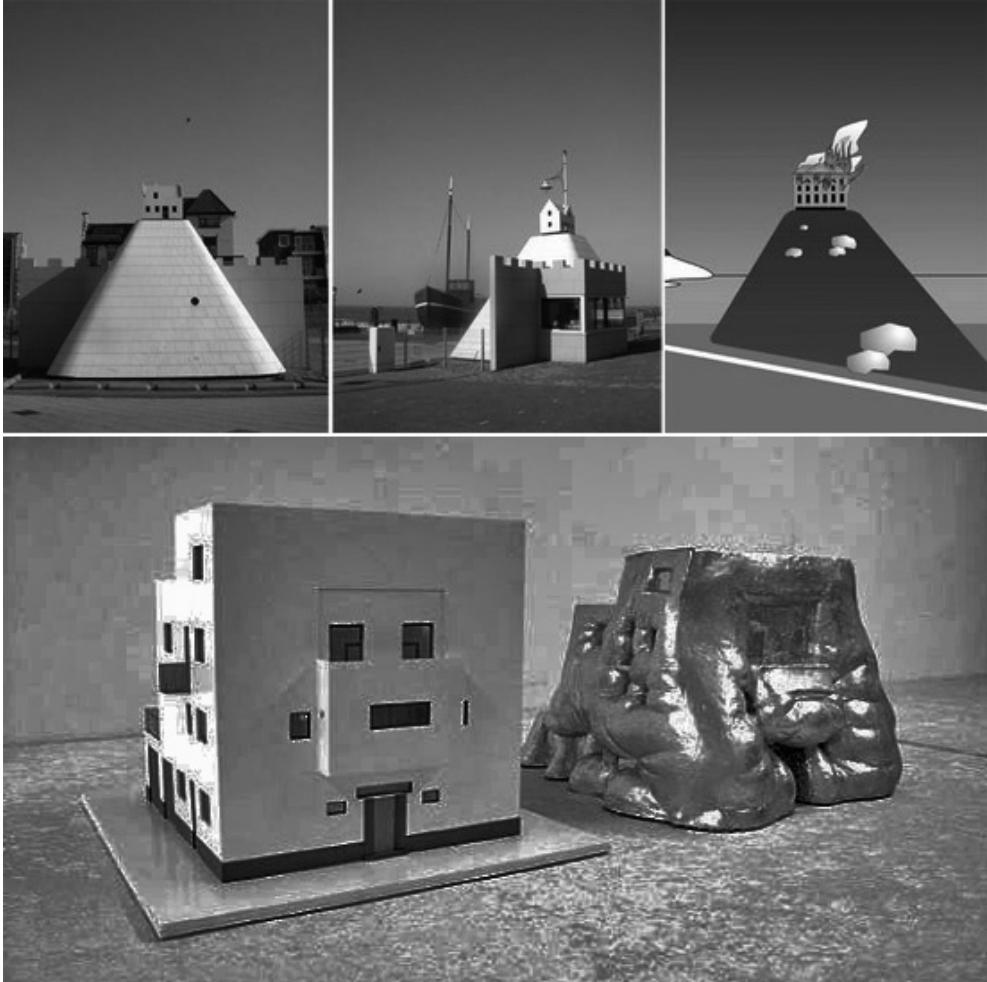
Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown, “the lawyers of ugliness and mediocrity” – not described by Jencks in terms of comicality – admit to quoting in their buildings such everyday items as tablecloths or telephone booths – in the name of contradiction, paradox and ambiguity. Their first building, a McDonald’s restaurant in Buena Vista, looked more like a commercial sign than an architectural object. Adjoined to it were a spatial company logo nearly two times higher than the building, and such high figures of a happy meal box, and an animated hamburger, a shake, and a packet of French fries.² The building corresponded to one of the theories of comic, aesthetic objects cited by Wallis, according to which comical are elements pointless and ridiculous, details artificially separated from their context and thus deprived of sense. The more noticeable the nonsense of situation is and also the greater the surprise, the more humorous the situation is. When a recipient becomes accustomed to the situation, the comic element disappears. The absurd is seen as something fantastic, unreal, but not funny. Jencks defined a comic building on the example of the Sydney Opera House (proj. J. Utzon, 1974) as a “superabundance of metaphorical responses”, which suggests unusual but convincing associations. The great number of created meanings of the building’s metaphors – such as “a scrum of nuns” or “turtles making love” [4, p. 43] due to the popularity of the opera as an interpretative material is a result of the fact that its particular form had never been used before in architecture. It produces, however, numerous associations with other objects. In this case, the element of surprise appeared again, presenting itself as parallel to the level of comicality.

According to Henri Bergson’s theory of humour (contained in his essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*), also invoked by Wallis, comical is a victory of mechanism – a triumph of matter over spirit. In terms of inanimate objects it is a disguise – a costume denying the “logic of imagination”. According to Bergson, comic is a similarity between nature and artificiality (“improvements of landscape”)³. The procedure that the FAT Architecture group used for creating architecture in the costume of drama scenography, imitating both the built world and animated reality. “Copying, appropriation, collage, juxtaposition and rescaling are used to develop narratives of image, materiality and space” – to play with observers. [3, p. 79] The created objects in colourful facades of numerous planes combine architectural elements drawn from history and spatial context, and an iconographic reflection of the natural elements in simplified, “comic” shapes, letters, and flattened patterns.

The frenetic buildings of FAT result from the openness of the group to a wide range of influences and sources (in contrast to the commonly emerging “boring” architecture, devoid of enthusiasm). “Monument” created in Schrevenige near The Hague (2002) is a small pavilion in a bike park, a guard kiosk and simultaneously an element of street art, “inscribing” itself into the context of theatrical architecture and spatial character of the seaside resort. The building is formed of a pavilion with a glass vitrine, a flanked theatrical “wall” on the axis of the object, and a pyramidal pedestal (hiding a storage room), atop of which a small model of a typical Dutch house has been placed. The elements of different scales falsify perception – merged forms of fortifications, lighthouse architecture, and artificial landscape, with

² Comic elements in architecture are sometimes close to aesthetical, ugly objects, which – according to Wallis – also have their particular function.

³ From the introduction of Stefan Morawski: “Humour is the result of the opposition of spirit and matter, content and form, dynamic life forces and automatisms, which manifests itself in the victorious resistance of the first element to the mechanical inertia (stiffening) of body or mind” [1, p. 11].



Ill. 1, 2, 3. Monument, proj. FAT Architecture, Schrevenige, 2002

Ill. 4. Fat House Moller / Adolf Loos, Erwin Wurm, 2003

reference to a war monument nearby. The theatrical decorations of FAT are accompanied by special effects. Every half an hour the model house on the top of the Monument “catches fire” with lighting effects and smoke.

The architect John Körmeling creates interdisciplinary works on the verge of architecture, sculpture and *street art*. The designer presents an ironic approach to the issues of form and space of the city, such as his proposal to transform the Museumplein in Amsterdam into the shortest and widest Dutch motorway (*The shortest and widest motorway of the Netherlands; a relief for cars*, 1988) – a comment about relations between vehicles and crowded space of cities – or rotating house. The “Rotating House” (2008) is a model of typical, Dutch house of a natural size (about 40sqm, 10m high), with a sloping roof covered with tiles and brick

walls. The “building”, however, is not intended for habitation. The Körmeling’s house, located on a roundabout in Hasselt, moves on rails around the junction (along with its terrace and an entrance platform). At night the building is illuminated from the inside, while during the day, one can look into its interior through a large window. Körmeling’s intention was to “reverse” reality – set its fixed components in motion, thereby arousing feelings of alienation and awkwardness for drivers who are usually the only moving elements in the constant built and natural environment around them. However, “the anomaly” planned by the architect is not immediately visible. The house moves slowly, making a full circle in 20 hours. Moving in the direction of the traffic on the roundabout, it sometimes shifts faster than drivers stopped in traffic congestion. Each 24 hours, the “Rotating House” is constantly changing place, creating “gaps” in the reality. It also has another, hidden meaning. It shows a breach, caused by the construction of the roundabout in the historical fabric of the city of Hasselt which has destroyed its integrity.

Comical might be associated with human reality – hence the amusing (while frightening) building in the shape of a human face (the animated world) by Yamashita, and the restaurant-duck in Riverhead, immortalized in *Learning From Las Vegas*. That principle, recognized by Henri Bergson as an irrevocable basis of humour, has been used by the sculptor Erwin Wurm to create *Fat House* (2003), *Fat house Moller/Adolf Loos* (2003), or *Guggenheim – Melting* (2005) – swelling models of realized or (arche)typical architectural objects. Wurm’s sculptures are buildings which have obtained human characteristics, exhibited in still or animated forms (registered in video art). *Fat House* swallows a man entering through his door and speculates: “Am I a house and a piece of art, or am I just a piece of art?” “The house can not be fat,” he continues. “A work of art can not be fat too. But wait a moment. Maybe being fat is an art.” The expression of its powerlessness, but not spurring pity or disgust (this is a building – devoid of emotion) corresponds to the third theory of comic elements described by Mieczysław Wallis. Simultaneously, the architecture used in Wurm’s sculptures presents disintegration of the prevailing order and is designed to criticize excessive consumerism; it is a caricature of the theory that if something eats and swells, it means that this thing / body has an inside. The comical sculptures of Wurm also serve to criticize Austrian society and its view of architecture – the lack of knowledge and taste. The adoption of comic costume allows the artist to refer to important issues without an unnecessary pathos or gloomy tone; with direct statements, rejecting the status quo of social norms. To put the observer in the position where he can easily challenge the relationship with the environment.

Leon Chwistek noted that in the past the art of playing was closely linked with religious cults (Chwistek gives the epochs of antiquity and Middle Ages as examples) and now it fulfils important social functions. Humour likewise. Bergson recognizes three main functions of humour: correcting social deviations, punishing stiffness (although these two functions are mutually exclusive), and enabling intellectual fun and relaxation related with it. Comicality is a product of cold observation, stigmatizing flagrant irregularities of social coexistence. Disadvantages stiffen the nature and an *idée fixe* dulls the mind [1, p. 57]. By manipulating on the verge of the comical, Rem Koolhaas refreshes his projects and theoretical works. He often spices up his ideas supported by scientific theories with some absurdity and humour. The *Elements* exhibition at the Venetian Biennale of Architecture (2014) was planned in this manner – a collection of elements continuously present in historical and modern buildings; the results of research (sometimes obsessive), materializing

the current state of the art of building. Among the objects exhibited there were steel elements of mechanical ventilation protruding under a painted vaulted ceiling; a collection of WCs over the centuries; dozens of handles without doors mounted on a wall and a ceiling; a drug detector and a blue latex glove of an airport security as architecture. The humorous colouring there was based on the artificial separation of the elements from the entity; from the comparison in which they make sense, resulting in the loss of purpose. This time, however, the intervention had an educational function – the rejection of the architects' personalities, presenting the micronarrations of the elements, developing in their own independent cycles.

A similar impression of lack of purpose occurred in the realization of the Prada Transformer – a temporary pavilion in Seoul, designed by OMA (2009), with a steel construction and a pneumatic, polyurethane coating. After choosing a suitable shape for each function of the pavilion (the gallery, the theatre, the fashion show, and special events), Koolhaas proposed a tetrahedral block with each wall of a different geometric shape. When after rotating the solid, the right partition was transformed into the ground, the rest of the partitions of the pavilion turned into its walls, with elements of the interior jutting into the space from the steel construction; the observation was highlighted by elements of the exposition attached to them, that turned upside down over the heads of observers, clearly indicating the procedure of transforming the floor into the wall. Koolhaas called the design “antiblob”. Its illusory absurdity resulted from the simulated mechanization of the pavilion's interior – somebody has planned the elements of the interior upside down, hanging from the ceiling.

The search for comical objects in architecture may continue: Will Alsop's Spiky Pods, Shin Takamatsu's mechanistic solids resembling Transformers, the golden torch or giant toilet bowl of Philippe Starck, and the collages of Morphosis and Coop Himmelb(l)au. Architecture is occasionally a comical game, when its humour is intentional. In other cases, still ridiculous for the audience, for its creator it finishes the game. In that case it corresponds to the fourth comical theory evoked by Mieczyslaw Wallis, according to which elements are comic if they are of seemingly great value; nothingness pretending greatness and a significant effort is put into a project whose result is mediocre. Ridiculousness is based on illusion, haze and nothingness after a time of strenuous expectations. Unintended humour in architecture corresponds to the words of Kant: “Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” [6, p. 51].

References

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