

The truth of contemporary architecture and aesthetics categories

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Summary: In modern architecture, the issue of the truth and lie can be considered in several aspects (form, idea, material, etc.), also in terms of beauty and aesthetics. The purpose of this article is to analyse some works of architecture in identified categories of aesthetics and to refer them to the issue of the truth. As the research methods the author used the analytical method, critical discussion and the case study. The result of the research is a certain image of contemporary architecture in the context of aesthetics categories, the truth and the matter of idea.

Keywords: architecture, truth, category of aesthetics, beauty, kitsch

Introduction

Truth – content of words and facts consistent with reality, principle proven scientifically or based on experience...

Beauty – a set of such features as the proportion of shapes, harmony of colours, sounds, etc. that make something like it, arouses delight...

Originality – peculiarity, extraordinary character that distinguishes someone or something from the environment

PWN, Great Dictionary of Polish Language

How to understand the concept of the truth in contemporary architecture? This issue is complex and ambiguous. It is not always possible to state in a particular case of an architectural thing that we are dealing with the truth or a lie. There is truth, there are half-truths, and there is also truth not told completely – untold truth is not the same as telling untruth. In turn, lying in good faith can be legitimate. Contemporary architecture is dominated by untruth, in all its diversity with the occurrence of many conflicts between nature and culture, tradition and modernity, form and function, form and structure, form and meaning, universalism and regionalism [Włodarczyk, 2009]. These conflicts occur simultaneously on many levels and significantly impede the understanding of contemporary architectural works, thus hindering finding the truth in architecture. Artists believe in the existence of truth in art, including architecture. In the past, the issue of truth played a significant role, directions in architecture were based on certain ethics, the architectural form resulted from specific ideological assumptions and was associated with the adopted type of aesthetics, with a specific canon of beauty. The truth in architecture can be interpreted as a kind of synthesis of material and ideas [Tokajuk, 2020]. Beauty in architecture today is considered rather as originality, and original forms are created mainly thanks to the sophisticated design methods used by some architects. The search for a sophisticated form is the result of the fact that nowadays the form has become the most important. In this article, the author will undertake a

research attempt to identify categories of aesthetics of contemporary architecture and relate them to the issue of the truth or a lie. The analysis direction formulated in this way will reveal a certain image of contemporary architecture, seen through the prism of the aesthetics categories.

The truth of aesthetics of beauty (form, detail, construction) and originality

In modern times, we can distinguish several aesthetic categories in architecture. According to the author of this text, the most important of them is beauty and originality. Beauty – by definition – is a set of such features that make something like it, arouses admiration. It is a very subjective category and each person defines these characteristics depending on his own artistic taste. There are many definitions of beauty in the literature on the subject, but nowadays most recipients relate beauty primarily to works of architecture and art with features, proportions, details based on classical or antique models, as well as bold engineering structures. At present, beauty is perceived rather as originality and although beauty and originality are not mutually exclusive, originality often does not evoke feelings of beauty. Original forms arise primarily due to the sophisticated and diverse design methods used by some architects. This is particularly evident in the work of postmodern artists and deconstruction artists. For example, Peter Eisenman uses a method known as scaling and displacements, which consists of enlarging, reducing and shifting solid and plane rasters. This procedure is repeated in time and space, and is derived from the design process of G. Rietveld and neoplasticism, subsequent impositions, shifts and repetitions cause blurring of formal relationships. In Bernard Tchumi's outstanding work of architecture – in La Vilette, we find a method of superposition of independent layers of grid points, lines and surfaces [Sietnicki, 2005]. The accomplishments of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron are very different for a change. Each project is a separate route, architects by definition reject all styles and try to give a new meaning to architecture. Their works – contain codes that emanate from the building's structure, its material or facade. These buildings require intellectual effort, and often extensive historical knowledge from the viewer; The project path leads from the first sketches and miniature models of paper or cardboard, through innovative design solutions, to very accurate models with a refined detail [Pastuszka, 2005]. Form in architecture has always been important, even in the modern era, when it seemed to have lost its significance. But it was the contemporary search for the original form by some artists at all costs that caused the form to gain an extremely dominant position in the hierarchy of importance. In the architecture of neo-constructivism and deconstructivism, form is no longer the result of function, while function is the formal result of form; in the search for architectural form and in finding the idea and sense of form, the only architectural goal can be seen. Form is the immanent arising of a specific shape of an idea. Some artists, critics and theorists of architecture give a great role in shaping the form „... phenomenology of the spirit of architectural space“. They claim that idea, sense of idea, comprehensiveness as a spiritual process – these are the steps from idea to form. „Meaning and spirit are closely related, it is only the spirit that gives sense to soulful beauty“ [Durschke, 2005]. They refer to the poet of ancient Greece – Sapho and her maxim that only the spirit creates the right beauty. Deconstructivists, and earlier also architects belonging to the postmodernism trend, are of the opinion that progress is not fostered by learning the truth, but recognizing existing truths as irrelevant. Therefore, when there are no restrictions on the use of formal means (e.g. colour, material or ornament), the way they are used is very important. Kitsch also becomes eligible. One can put forward the thesis that the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century is a period in architecture when the effect of beauty is more important than truth, good and other values. Ethics are less important than aesthetics, content is less important than form. We can observe that from the contemporary stylistic trends in architecture, we can point to a certain global trend – this is a reference to the aesthetics of the sixties, repeating details, proportions and the way buildings are composed, or even forms of buildings. Sometimes it is difficult to find architectural works of art that can be analysed in the criteria of avant-garde or kitsch (the border is often impossible to indicate). To quote Peter Eisenman – „... it has nothing to do with modernism, postmodernism, generally with style, it is connected with the end of the original. Our signature was always original ... Our originality was a form of opposition. Today, young pragmatists believe that we do not need this type of critical potential in architecture. Globalization is an anti-metaphysical force, critical enough...“ [Eisenman, 2001].



Fig. 1. Mirador in Madrid, MVRDV Office – the beauty of form, idea and truth in architecture.

Photo: Andrzej Tokajuk

The truth and a lie of kitsch aesthetics

Kitsch requires a varied assessment, as it is not only an aesthetic but also a social phenomenon, especially in the media. Kitsch as an aesthetic category in architecture seems particularly important when kitsch is considered in the context of self-conscious kitsch. Some contemporary artists raise kitsch to the rank of avant-garde, using the conventionality of the relationship between form and content, form and scale. They give the setting that has so far accompanied art, universal, ugly, grotesque objects. An example of this is the work of Jeff Koons. When analysing the genesis of the kitsch phenomenon, it should be noted that on the one hand – the kitsch convention was consciously adopted, because the possibilities of being original were exhausted, on the other – it was created spontaneously as a kind of mass culture. The term „kitsch” probably arose in the second half of the nineteenth century in Munich referred to repetitive, quick sketches prepared for the order of American tourists. There is a presumption that the term „kitsch” comes from the German words *kitschen* (slide, sweep dirt off the street) or *verkitschen* (sell at a low price). Sketches created massively, in contrast to expensive individual paintings, were considered inauthentic, although they may have authentic qualities. Kitsch later became synonymous with trash and mediocrity. Today, we perceive kitsch not as a feature of an object that can be recognized on the basis of known and recognized criteria, but a feature given to us by us – to be able to get to know and facilitate getting to know others. Such a view was shaped under the influence of, among others works by Richard Rorty, Michael Foucault and Richard Shusterman [Baumann, 2005]. The assessment of uniform and

uniqueness, difference and originality varies over time. In modern times, duplication of patterns and unification is recognized by many artists and recipients as a positive phenomenon. Opinions of critics are divergent here. One group of critics (e.g. Clement Greenberg, Hermann Broch) believe that kitsch is the opposite of the avant-garde, something illusory. The effect of beauty is an end in itself, not real beauty. A different position is taken by critics and artists who claim that kitsch has nothing to do with bad taste, „it does not serve the truth, but is a passionate, violent form of expression, an expression of an eternal pursuit of happiness, a stylized story of reality” [Nerdrum, 1998]. In the history of aesthetics, the notion of self-conscious kitsch deserves attention. Self-conscious kitsch is sometimes called camp (rules defined by Susan Sontag) [Sontag, 1964]. According to the author of this concept, „camp is one of the looks at the aesthetic phenomenon, which is the world not in terms of beauty, but in terms of artificiality and stylization.” It is both a person’s characteristic and a person’s behavior, it is the domination of style over content, irony over tragedy. The self-conscious kitsch (camp) can include library building in Seattle, designed by Rem Koolhaas, museum in Groningen (designed by Aleksandro Mendini, Philippe Starck, Coop Himmelblau), Kunsthaus art center in Graz by Peter Cook and Colin Fourier, etc. The first object is a huge, irregular form, devoid of harmony – an ugly object was created, with strange proportions, as if inappropriate (according to the camp principle – good, because terrible). However, we can consider interior designs as original. At the museum in Groningen, each of the co-authors uses different aesthetic solutions, which ultimately ends in the eclectic shape of the building. The museum is a gateway to the old part of the city and consists of three formally different parts. The first – is a round bastion, the second – a tower with a gold shade, the third part was designed in a deconstructivist way, with characteristically broken spaces, dynamic planes, composition of many directions and walls finished with decorative serigraphy technique. The museum resembles some Egyptian temples, it is located on the water and a pedestrian bridge leads to it. Formal schemes, colours, interior climate, etc. used are very different, you can say that they oppose each other [Jodidio, 1998]. The building is certainly original, but is it beautiful? The Biomorphic Kunsthaus in Graz draws inspiration from the world of nature and evokes associations with organic forms. An amorphous coating was created, smoothly joining the ceiling, wall and roof. Its shiny surface and numerous elements evoking the eyes and nostrils contributed to the residents’ calling the object a friendly intruder.



Fig. 2. Kunsthaus in Graz, arch. P. Cook, C. Fourier – an example of self-conscious kitsch. Contemporary form located in the Old Town district, deliberately breaking with traditional rectangular lines in favour of streamlined shapes and modern facade materials. Originality of the idea.

Photo: Andrzej Tokajuk

As intended by the designers, Kunsthaus has become a friendly institution in its form and manner of operation, and multimedia architecture changes its appearance depending on the content, influences messages and symbols. On an urban scale, the Graz art centre is expected to have a positive impact on the surrounding area, as do the Pompidou Centre in Paris or the Tate Modern in London [Graz Architecture, 2004]. Today, many

architects express the view that modern architecture should also be a carrier of other values than those contained in the Vitruvian Triad – utility, durability, beauty. The object does not have to be beautiful, usability and durability as well as evoking emotions are important [Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, 2007].

Lie of second category aesthetics

In the architecture of the 20th century, another aesthetic category has appeared on a massive scale, which can be defined as aesthetics of the second category. This category includes objects with various functions that lack aesthetic value. The aesthetics of the second category is visible above all in repetitive multi-family residential buildings and in the reproduction of the same type of habitat on a global scale. Examples include numerous buildings with banal, amorphous forms, poor proportions, clichéd repeated patterns and “freaks”, with crooked roofs, walls, and multi-colored details; service and service-commercial (commercial) facilities, cultural facilities. These projects are difficult to classify as architecture – we can call them unconscious kitsch. Here, the designers’ workshop weaknesses, lack of artistic taste prevailed, in many cases the authors did not avoid the so-called „exaggeration effect” by using too many formal ideas (e.g. regarding colours).

The truth of green architecture aesthetics



Fig. 3. Opera in Białystok, arch. M. Budzyński and partners – the beauty of green architecture, the complexity of ideas and truth in architecture. Photo: Andrzej Tokajuk

Pollution and excessive exploitation of the environment is a serious problem in our civilization. Conventional energy sources are depleted, our own rubbish is dumped in us, climate warming is progressing, as a result of which an uncontrolled increase in the human population may face a shortage of drinking water and food. Contemporary adverse climatic phenomena, visible for many years also in urban areas, have become several decades ago the reason for the emergence of the trend of eco-architecture, which with time has evolved into

a term with a broader meaning of sustainable development architecture. At the beginning of this trend, mainly ecological materials and energy-saving technologies were used. Over time, the spectrum of activities to improve the environment of our cities and the microclimate of buildings has significantly expanded. One of such activities aimed at improving the thermal conditions (elimination of heat islands), humidity and air pollution in our cities is the integration of greenery and architecture, and the wide use of various types of vegetation. Promoting green architecture and green spaces in general adopted the idea of a „green city“. The positive impact of a green city and the integration of greenery with architecture performs important functions, including ecological (improving climate and air parameters), technical (covering and isolating buildings), aesthetic (evoking the feeling of beauty), psychological (giving identity to objects and places) [Bartnicka, Ullman, 2009]. As a result of shrinking vacant areas in the city that can be allocated to green areas, solutions for green vertical walls of buildings or designing vertical gardens based on modular systems are becoming increasingly popular. Excellent examples of the integration of nature and architecture can be found, among others in the realizations of the Polish architect prof. Marek Budzyński, in the Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest) project in Milan, the Solaris project in Singapore by the T.R. Hamzah & Yeang office, the Newton Suits project in Singapore, the WOHA office, or the Waldspirale building in Darmstadt by F. Hundertwasser. In these implementations and concepts we will find elements of beauty and originality, but also truth – the truth not only about architecture, but also about the culture of our civilization. On the other hand, green architecture can carry both a message of truth and distortions. Sometimes we find it as ambiguous, multi-threaded, sometimes complex.

Extreme manifestations of ecological architecture are also the concepts of equipping buildings with solar collectors and wind turbines, or recycling construction (constructions using waste, old trailers and containers). The next step is visionary projects showing how architecture, to a company with engineering, can solve ecological problems in the future – projects of cities of the future, among others in China (Habitat 2020), Dubai or a vertical farm project, developed in 1999 by Professor Dicson Despommier's team from Columbia University.

Conclusion

To sum up the above considerations, it seems that among the analysed aesthetic categories and their relation to the truth in architecture, the most interesting architectural objects were created in terms of originality and self-conscious kitsch, and these categories should be considered the most important in the architecture of the turn of the 20th and 21st century. The thesis put forward by the author confirms that at present beauty is perceived rather as originality and although beauty and originality are not mutually exclusive, originality often does not evoke feelings of beauty.

According to the thesis presented at the beginning of the discussion – it is not always possible to state that a work of architecture is characterized by the truth (beauty), because this category can be derived by a different path (through originality, kitsch, green architecture or other values or contradictions). The truth in green architecture can be found when greenery really has a leading role. If this is not the case – it is just a set design, then closer to a lie than to the truth.

And this is contemporary architecture – full of complexity, originality, beauty (truth), but also full of contradictions and untruths – kitsch and aesthetics of the second category. The analysis showed that to determine the existence of truth in architecture, there must be an additional factor characterizing the architectural work – the idea. The idea is closely related to the truth, its lack in space-shaping projects is also a lack of truth, then false solutions and concepts appear. And this applies to most aesthetic categories. Both beauty, originality, integration of greenery with architecture and actions on the border of conscious kitsch are based on certain ideas or concepts. Lack of ideological foundations – caused by the dilettante of the designer, greed and lack of appropriate education and the taste of the investor or developer lead to the creation of objects with aesthetics of the second category, which only fill the space and can hardly be called architecture. The artist's sensitivity to beauty, as well as a certain modesty, should be manifested not only in the desire to dominate in space and the way of articulating form, but in striving to include ideas in the project. For form without ideas will never convey truth or beauty, nor will it be original.

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