Modernity and postmodernity in architectural education

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to present a philosophical education strategy for architecture and interior architecture faculties. The approach is the result of trial and error in lectures and debates with students of philosophical courses in these fields. The presented article is not a result of empirical research, but rather a report on the problems encountered and proposals for their solution. The experience gained from conducting philosophical didactics in architecture faculties allowed the author to note that the main reason for the low interest in philosophical problems is the distance between classically understood philosophy or the history of philosophy and professional issues. Bridging that gap can result in increasing the graduates' ability to solve problems and strengthen their social competencies.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture is an engineering field. The product developed by the architect is an architectural design deployed as a tool for the construction of an engineering object. However, the very sense of creating architecture goes far beyond engineering. A country's culture is shaped through architecture and it communicates important values for the times. Therefore, it can be said that architecture is an engineering field, but the fundamental nature of it is normative. This is evidenced by the susceptibility of architecture to cultural, aesthetic or even civilisational trends and related changes in architecture paradigms: from classical, through modern to postmodern concepts.

Recent debates on the climate crisis deepen the need for reflection on the role of architecture. Architects, being operators of one of the largest industries in the world, i.e. building developments in cities, are responsible for the natural and cultural environment. As Lucyna Nyka observes, the profession of architect is particularly associated with climate change, and therefore is partially responsible for it:

> *Architects and urban planners are in the middle of this process. However, the question arises*: *do architectural studies curricula properly address climate change challenges and are graduates prepared to participate actively in the formation of water-sensitive strategies?* [1].

Although the author addresses the issue of water resources management, this argument can be extended to the entire field of architecture and urban planning. Issues in architecture are related to the philosophical problems of modern civilisation, and architectural education must prepare putative architects to solve these problems. Architectural education related to these issues is becoming an increasingly important part of the humanities education of future architects.

Unfortunately, it should be noted that philosophical education in engineering faculties is often regarded as secondary and philosophical courses are not adapted to the specifics of the future profession of students. The experience in philosophical teaching at architecture faculties leads the author to note that the main reason for the low interest in philosophical problems is the distance between classically understood philosophy or the history of philosophy and professional issues.

The author here sees a solution to this problem by showing students philosophical connotations and the cultural significance of the concepts that the architect employs in professional practice. Few students know that the concept of deconstructivism introduced to the architectural discourse by Daniel Libeskind is a direct reference to the sophisticated philosophical concept of deconstruction of Jacques Derrida. It is similar with the most basic theoretic concepts for architects: modernism and postmodernism. These two concepts define a mind map for contemporary architecture: every architect, regardless of awareness of this fact, defines his or her self in relation to those concepts.

MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

The concept of modernism in architecture results from the 18th and 19th Century European Enlightenment, Positivism and later Logical Positivism. Modernism is the realisation of the Enlightenment ideals to improve the human condition through scientific progress and rationality. The goal of modernist architecture is not just the desire to create white buildings with broad horizontal windows, but a deep desire to improve people's quality of life.

Modern architecture was a tool of social change and not a goal in itself. Postmodernism is anchored in the philosophical concepts of the second half of the 20th Century. The slogan *less is more* - coined by Robert Venturi and which is the motto of postmodern architecture - carries a deep philosophical statement. It is an idea resulting from disappointment with the modern vision of life and longing for the authenticity of lives lost in modernity. Modernism and postmodernism are crucial to understanding architecture as something more than about aesthetic objects. Architecture in both these concepts is primarily a diagnosis of people's needs and an attempt to meet them by changing space.

A very telling example is the relationship between everyday life and the surroundings. In the case of modernism, the movie, High-Rise (Figure 1), a film adaptation of J.G. Ballard's novel, points to the mall as an icon of modern life [2].

Figure 1: A still from the movie, High-Rise (2016), directed by Ben Wheatley (Digital edition: P. Czyż).

This image portrays a fast, effective life and the modern architecture that creates the experience. This contrasts with the image known to every student of architecture: the *Unité d'habitation* by Le Corbusier (Figure 2). The purpose of the comparison is to indicate the impact of architecture on the everyday lives of its users. It is important for students of architecture to recognise the impact of the architectural space that architects design on the experience of users of that space.

Figure 2: *Unité d'habitation*, Le Corbusier, 1945 (Photo: P. Czyż).

Almost every citizen of western civilisation has experienced supermarkets, malls, highways, automated cash machines, and much more. These experiences are connected to a specific vision of human life. Understanding that connection shows modernity as a complex vision of social change that happens through the use of technology. Being modern means embracing that vision and understanding that sometimes it is in conflict with the traditional way of life. Shopping, in this image, is not a cultural experience, but the most effective way of acquiring goods.

Modern inventions, such as wonder bread, instant coffee and, much later, microwaves were designed to improve human lives on a practical level but, at the same time, they are stripping people of traditions that bind everyone together. All of these inventions are part of a modern project in which architecture and urban planning play a major role. That perspective gives architecture students a deeper understanding of modern architecture and architecture itself.

Postmodernism was a reaction to the sterility of modernity strengthened by experience of mature capitalism. Architecture had become a commodity like any other. Innovation was seen by postmodernists not in the social power of architecture, but in the ability of it to communicate symbols.

> *If there is any single objective that unites postmodern concerns, it is the search for architectural communication, the desire to make architecture a vehicle of cultural expression. Postmodern practitioners and critics have tended to seek ideological justification, not in programme, function or structure, but in meaning* [3].

Meaning has become a paradigmatic problem for postmodern architecture and of understanding everyday lives. The aesthetic elitism of modern architecture, the failure of it to deliver social progress and, above all, the increasing prosperity of the United States middle class has generated a need for meaning - a need for something different. Everyday activities are understood in this paradigm as rituals: activities that have a personal meaning for the user. An illustration of this is the return to tradition in many cultures of the world. An example is the custom of dressing in traditional clothes by Japanese during the cherry blossom festival in Tokyo (Figure 3). Residents take pictures of themselves in traditional costumes in a Tokyo city park: an illustration of a postmodern clash of tradition and the digital age.

Figure 3: Tokyo, 2018 (Photo: E. Gromadzka).

The architectural equivalent of this is the postmodern focus on deeper meaning. A good illustration is the design of the Market Hall in Rotterdam by the Dutch studio MVRDV (Figure 4). This project is an illustration of postmodern thinking; a reinterpretation of traditional forms for a European city: a residential building and a marketplace. In this project, digital design tools were applied to shaping a complex engineering construction; something that architects of the first half of the 20th Century would not have dreamt of. But the form of the object is actually a response to a traditional need of place and a sense of community: a meaningful space in which people feel authentic.
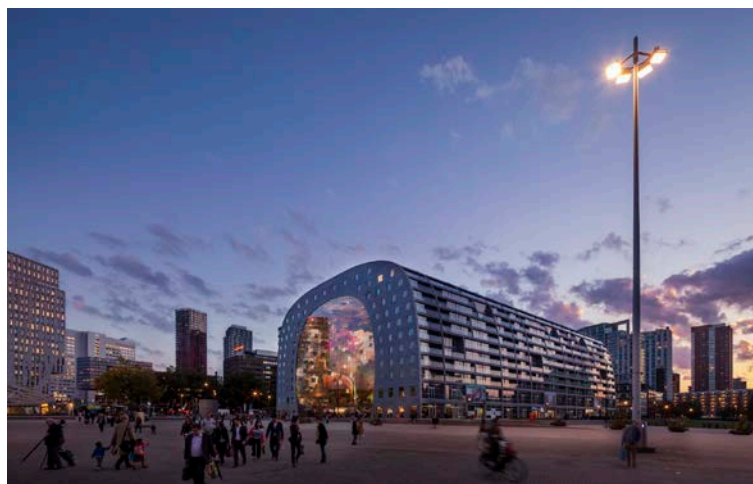

Figure 4: Rotterdam Markthal, MVRDV (Photo: MVRDV press release).

This indicates that architecture, both modernist and postmodernist, is not just an aesthetic approach. The dominance of the visual side of architecture makes architectural students simply forget that the goal of design is to solve problems rather than design visually attractive objects. As Jeremy Till, a British architecture critic and dean of an architecture department in London, points out, architecture should be interpreted as a process and not a (visual) object.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main issue is founded not on architecture as an object, in which the visual presence often overwhelms critical thought, but rather on architecture as an agent. It is time to turn to this agency, to illustrate its operation and identify its potential, not to concentrate on good or bad visual effects [4].

The result of excessive interest in the visual layer of architecture is the lack of orientation of architects and students of architecture in contemporary civilisational problems. The German philosopher and Professor Emeritus Karsten Harries rightly observes that architecture schools have stopped asking the question about the meaning of architecture. The author describes the contemporary situation of architectural theory as follows:

Uncertainty has spilled over into schools of architecture. Thirty years ago, Norwegian architect, author, educator and architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz charged that …the schools have shown themselves incapable of bringing forth architects able to solve the actual tasks. *Things are no different today although it is more likely that challenges would be met in the very notion of* the actual tasks. *Do we know what these tasks are?* [5].

Being lost in contemporary architectural discourse is not caused by a lack of technical possibilities to meet human needs, but the inability to understand these needs. The tasks that architecture should actually carry out cannot be defined. According to Harries, the lack of knowledge about human needs along with subtleties of the kind: the need for intimacy, calmness, openness and contact, makes people turn away from questions about architectural tasks and incline to consider new ways of searching for architectural form. Similarly, Jeremy Till points to the excessive preoccupation of architectural students with the visual. In the following, the final exhibitions of architecture students are described:

The end-of-year exhibitions are often dazzling, quite literally; such is the shininess and freshness of the surface that one is seduced into believing that something genuinely new is happening. But scratch beneath the veneer and one finds a void, a political and ethical void in which the underlying processes and their social detachment are left unexamined [4].

Expectations regarding architecture, both for the architects themselves and for the architectural audience, are often the same: *we want something new, something that has never been before:* this is an attitude that young designers have encountered many times. The result of such desires would be a spatially and socially destabilised environment. What is important, is that experience of post-postmodernist reality goes far beyond the visible. To get that impression simply look at everyday experience of, for example, city life.

Architectural space is not an important aesthetic object of experience for people in Figure 5. What is important goes far beyond aesthetics and is founded in interaction - between users and between user and space.

Figure 5: Seoul, city life, 2018 (Photo: E. Gromadzka).

The normative foundation of paradigms, whether modern or postmodern, is often forgotten in contemporary debate. Architecture is reduced only to its external manifestations, sometimes to photographs and media reception. Because architecture organises the living space of people, it always plays a cultural role, influencing and often shaping human behaviour. The architect, although a participant in engineering processes, is undoubtedly the creator of culture. Realising this is crucial in the humanistic training of architects. Without this understanding, it is difficult to talk of a real change in the approach to contemporary architecture, because it is not supported by ideology. Jeremy Till rightly notes:

Because things look different, from school to school, and from year to year, the assumption is made that the formative educational processes are equally different and equally evolving [4].

Often, they are not. The complexity of technological and social conditions means that the recipient or user of architectural objects is simply unable to assess them. For this reason, an object is chosen that looks innovative. Even the designer believes the object should look innovative, because this is a way to succeed in the marketplace. This situation frees the designer from the need to recognise deep social, economic and, most importantly, environmental conditions affecting the form of the object. The designer is obliged only to meet certain aesthetic requirements; and that is fundamentally false. By illustrating important relationships between the concepts of modernism and postmodernism and their philosophical counterparts, it is possible to exceed aesthetic conditions and draw attention to problem-solving.

The conviction that anything is possible in architecture, although it stimulates the imagination, distracts the designer from what is important for a given community or even a given era. In both modern and postmodern approaches to architecture the aesthetic concept of the era was closely connected to the intellectual values of the time. The lack of clear goals for 21st Century architecture shows the lack of values in contemporary culture and contemporary architects. Gion Caminada, a Swiss architect and architectural theorist notes:

Dealing playfully with any event or occurrence is possible only when certain rules for play exist. By contrast, current playful approaches to completely open spaces reflect the weakness of today's lifestyle. By that I mean the freedom of life in the modern world and the people who have no idea how to deal with this kind of freedom. The classical Modern period generated this freedom but it didn't teach anyone the art of dealing with it once it was attained... [6].

The lack of a clearly defined framework for people's activities seems to be a pressing problem in the context of the climate crisis. Nowadays, the ability of society to manage resources responsibly and to understand the limits of capabilities and conscious self-limitation of needs is one of the key social competencies of contemporary creators of development policies, or urban policies, and planners or architects. That is why it is so important to deepen architectural paradigms of contemporary reality and, with it, philosophical understanding. Without this, the normative power of the remaining engineering skills is lost and with it their culture-forming role.

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