Attempt to Continue the Modernist Trend Presented on the Example of Multi-Family Housing

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Abstract. While trying to understand the current need for continuity of thoughts and ideas derived directly from the modernist trend with regard to multi-family housing, it is doubtlessly necessary that we need to make a synthetic assessment of the quality of Polish architecture over the last several decades. This period was characterized by an extremely diverse, multi-directional and multifaceted way of a building’s creation. In the face of a generally noticeable regression, the past several years, recognized so far as indisputable paradigms of culture, brought an inconsistent mix of independently consecutive different tendencies and aesthetic needs. The specific state of permutation, peculiar intellectual vacuum created by rejection of the existing rules and shortage of new ones, must have led to anarchy in architecture manifesting in the omnipresent "all-ism". Against this background, it is difficult but possible, to find a clearly defined style, direction or the need to continue modernist thought on the example of modern housing. Dating back to the seventies of the twentieth century, we can observe activity of the generation of architects, where we can find the attempts to think about architecture on the basis of patterns of contemporary avant-garde world’s architecture. So-called "modernism", which was in fashion at that time, resulted in frequent borrowings of formal and functional ideas, yet it brought a number of successful realizations of timeless architectural values, expressed in a clear idea and clearly defined form. The second half of the seventies was dominated by the omnipresent classification and prefabrication based on "the systems of industrialized buildings", which defined the character of the housing architecture. This gave rise to a gradual limitation of individual creativity for the benefit of use and reproduction of typical projects adapted to the needs of particular locations. The economic crisis of the 1980s, as a result of decline of the socialist economy, also resulted in the stagnation of construction activity. An example of the existence of any design process remained the urban design of large housing estates based on the consistently simplified and limited construction systems of multi-family buildings. Thus, monotony and repetition became a ubiquitous standard and the only aesthetic criterion that defined the architectural space of cities at that time. The political and economic transformations that took place after 1989 as well as a strong feeling of freedom, regained after years, triggered off revolutionary changes in thinking that resulted in a multitude of events taking place in architecture, and consequently in the diversity and variability of aesthetic tendencies. Therefore, it is difficult to believe that the buildings constructed at that time were a direct indicator of a post-modernism idea, which, locally, were a sort of specific alibi, resulting from the momentary, deep need to rebuild the times of modernism, unfairly reduced in our reality only down to the criticism and negation of a ubiquitous residential large-panel housing. Luckily, the end of the nineties brought a noticeable reassurance of these tendencies. Uncertainty and indecisiveness, and hence the multitude of ideas and stylistic themes that provoked safe passivity and aesthetic borrowings, have been replaced by escapism from "eclectic postmodernism" towards "neo-
modernism" as a more sophisticated form of convention. As a consequence, there appeared objects with a balanced form, not giving in the need to draw directly from classical patterns and not succumbing to the intrusive and chaotic need to recover from the past. Despite the fact that the possibilities of a designer’s creative expressions have become apparently expanded in new, modern economic realities, the designer’s creation has at the same time been very limited. His freedom and free expression were additionally determined by the investor, whose opinion on the social and economic expectations, and thus on the architecture and purely aesthetic issues, has in many cases become superior. However, numerous examples of contemporary multi-family buildings, which are also the result of their own professional experience, offer prospects that the stage of total abandonment of the idea of modernism turned out to be apparent and was provoked by rather temporary emergence of various aesthetic tendencies, which are the result of views denying the architecture, commonly regarded as impersonal.

1. Introduction

While trying to understand the current need for continuity of thoughts and ideas derived directly from the modernist trend with regard to multi-family housing, it is doubtlessly necessary that we need to make a synthetic assessment of the quality of Polish architecture over the last several decades. This period was characterized by an extremely diverse, multi-directional and multifaceted way of a building’s creation. In the face of a generally noticeable regression, the past several years, recognized so far as indisputable paradigms of culture, brought an inconsistent mix of independently consecutive different tendencies and aesthetic needs. The specific state of permutation, peculiar intellectual vacuum created by rejection of the existing rules and shortage of new ones, must have led to anarchy in architecture manifesting in the omnipresent "all-ism". Against this background, it is difficult but possible, to find a clearly defined style, direction or the need to continue modernist thought on the example of modern housing.

2. Historical overview and design realities

Dating back to the seventies of the twentieth century, we can observe activity of the generation of architects, where we can find the attempts to think about architecture on the basis of patterns of contemporary avant-garde world’s architecture. So-called "modernism", which was in fashion at that time, resulted in frequent borrowings of formal and functional ideas, yet it brought a number of successful realizations of timeless architectural values, expressed in a clear idea and clearly defined form. The designs of that time, which invariably impressed by the scale, were still created in large, state-owned design offices. These institutionalized structures limited the designer's individuality, mainly due to the fact that the implementation of plans, imposed by state authorities, was a priority. However, numerous examples from this period show how simple methods used to compose cubic solids made it possible to create facilities with original artwork and clearly defined form1, which was distinctive for modernist patterns. Unfortunately, the designs of residential buildings, became less and less often positive examples of designers’ creativity over time.

The second half of the seventies was dominated by the omnipresent classification and prefabrication based on "the systems of industrialized buildings", which defined the character of the housing architecture. This gave rise to a gradual limitation of individual creativity for the benefit of use and reproduction of typical projects adapted to the needs of particular locations. The economic crisis of the 1980s, as a result of decline of the socialist economy, also resulted in the stagnation of construction activity. An example of the existence of any design process remained the urban design of large housing estates based on the consistently simplified and limited construction systems of multi-family buildings. Thus, monotony and repetition became a ubiquitous standard and the only aesthetic criterion that defined the architectural space of cities at that time.

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1 This issue was discussed in detail in the work by W.Bal, R.Dawidowski, M.Raczyński, M.Sietnicki, A.M.Szymski” Polish architecture between 1961-1975 in West Pomeranian region”. Szczecin 2007
However, according to some theories, the time was not lost altogether because this state of affairs became the starting point for theoretical and intellectual preparation for the breakthrough in Polish architecture, mainly as a result of criticism of the concept of modernism. It was born on the basis of post-modern architecture that developed in the early 1960s in Western Europe, which according to Charles Jencks ... was a dialectic reaction to modernist architecture resulting from the problems of people living in large anonymous settlements in the cities destroyed by war or by various modern urban theories.

The political and economic transformations that took place after 1989 as well as a strong feeling of freedom, regained after years, triggered off revolutionary changes in thinking that resulted in a multitude of events taking place in architecture, and consequently in the diversity and variability of aesthetic tendencies. The direction of changes in this field might have been deeply rooted in the theories and slogans proclaimed by theoreticians and creators of broadly defined post-modernism. Not taking away sincere intentions related to the need to repair a "destroyed" space, in many cases we have to point out that euphoria is over-exaggerated and their understanding is too literal, which results in freedom and even frivolity of their interpretation. However, the sense of freedom, regained after years, has undoubtedly brought revolutionary changes in the way of thinking in terms of the investigated issue. Thus, after years of ubiquitous, never-ending dullness dominated mainly by "large panel" housing estates, the designers' creativity could finally yield.

In addition, at the end of the twentieth century, numerous real-estate developers began to emerge on the market, for which the obvious priority was market success. This in turn was associated with the need to provide an attractive location and, consequently, also "interesting" architecture characterized by appropriate quality and form meeting the needs of potential customers. A new phenomenon at the sociological borderline emerged, i.e. the need to meet individual expectations of a potential user. Unfortunately, these expectations were reduced to imaginations of ideal surroundings, built on the basis of own observations or information from publicly available media. Thanks to television coverage, supplements in daily press, advertising leaflets, available to all or catalogues of "ready-made solutions", everybody could find out, among others, that: ... pre-war houses look nice both, in terms of structure and detail, if they are not depressed and in a bad shape; the 60s, 70s and 80s represent aesthetic regress, ... the 60s and 70s represent the dominance of simple box shapes ... what is more, these buildings often have small windows, which makes them compellingly associated with bunkers; ... plus arcs were the must-have. It is hard to say why this form, brought from Bulgaria, has become so successful in our country; ... The good thing is that damage from previous years is being repaired. The walls on most blocks, which looked dull until recently, alongside the insulation, are being painted with vivid colours. ... Finally, after many years, the bunker-looking box-shaped houses from the 1960s more and more often receive decent, tiled roofs.

From the present perspective it is difficult to believe that the buildings constructed at that time were a direct indicator of a post-modernism idea, which, locally, were a sort of specific alibi, resulting from the momentary, deep need to rebuild the times of modernism, unfairly reduced in our reality only down to the criticism and negation of a ubiquitous residential large-panel housing. In terms of numerous newly built housing estates we witnessed that the concept of architecture was limited to purely small changes, i.e. changed individual parts on the building's layout plan, over-styled entrances to staircases, use of...

2 Charles Jencks „Pluralism is good for everything” — an interview with Ch. Jencks; Architecture no. 2, 1982, p.20.

... Preference for decorating and looking for links with classicism, which was characteristic of postmodernist architects, was to provide houses for everyone, to a greater extent than modernism, which was called the "architecture of good intentions". The intentions were probably excellent. However, their realizations were much worse, as Charles Jencks believed, who also claimed that ... architecture of postmodernist architects was supposed to change the world into happier places. At the same time it referred to cultural traditions of a given society. It resembled a "big sack with lots of different things". Postmodernist housing construction (including mass housing) was supposed to stick to people's imagination about what a house should look like and what it should be like.

3 Gazeta Targowa supplement to Gazeta Wyborcza, dated 15 March 2001.
fancy color and formal treatments referring to the land of fairy tales, rather than the actual need for implementation of postmodernist ideas, to which the reference was quite common 4.

In addition, together with necessity resulting from the decision on building provisions or existing local spatial development plans, steep roofs were used virtually on all newly designed buildings in this area. Recognizing this simplified preconceived notion as the only one that is correct has led to the fact that the omnipresent and obligatory form of the steep roof has become standard. The use of this roof has become a necessary condition for the emergence of new architecture, believed to be hypothetically better. This limitation of the design process has led to a new phenomenon, in no case less than comprehensible. Here are clear urban planning assumptions made in the 1960s based on the mutual spatial relations of tower blocks, which were complete in their assumptions according to their authors, were "densificated" with new buildings in the 1990s. One cannot resist the impression that the view of the new, pseudo-postmodernist structure covered by obligatory steep roof against the background of ten-story blocks is in no case less than curious. The structures with classical influences, including those that were most pointless used and taken out of their proper context, were more popular due to the fact that so-called modernistic developments were so numerous in previous years. The reception of these buildings did not require any additional effort to understand their relationship with the environment; they just existed. This shows that a sense of general boredom with simplified modernist forms must have been very strong. The fact that grotesque compositional solutions were chosen as part of the search for genuineness at all costs also shows that the determination to remove modernistic predomination had to be very strong.

Against this background one may venture to say that in many cases the temporary sense of attractive design and taste has been lost. This resulted directly from an unquestionable escape from the rectangular forms with a simultaneous need to satisfy social expectations, in line with the principle of "the more things it involves the nicer it looks." As a result, the design process was limited to issues related purely to colour and pseudo-formalities, which satisfied the simplest and unsublime aesthetic and functional needs, and what is worse, often with no need to respect the existing architecture 5.

Luckily, the end of the nineties brought a noticeable reassurance of these tendencies. Uncertainty and indecisiveness, and hence the multitude of ideas and stylistic themes that provoked safe passivity and aesthetic borrowings, have been replaced by escapism from "eclectic postmodernism" towards "neo-modernism" as a more sophisticated form of convention. It should not be forgotten that real postmodernists grew out of modernism. First, they learned it and luckily they have not rejected it in full. That is probably why, it was noticeable at the end of the 20th century to re-create a clearly defined architecture, subjected to strict rules of geometry 6. As a consequence, there appeared objects with a balanced form, not giving in the need to draw directly from classical patterns and not succumbing to the intrusive and chaotic need to recover from the past.

4 Charles Jencks „Pluralism is good for everything” – an interview with Ch.Jencks; Architecture no. 2, 1982

As opposed to an architect of modernism who showed the residents the living conditions, the role of an architect of postmodernism was not limited to finding the only right solution. Postmodernists first asked people what they would like to get closer to their lives and perceptions. A postmodernist thinks that in order to choose ornaments and symbols well, one has to know exactly the people. If architecture does not come closer to people's reality, the architects will not know how to design. They have to build a house, which must be beautiful. If the house cannot be beautiful, it must be at least likeable and pleasing the eye. An architect must talk to his customers who might sometimes have a different opinion. An architect faces a problem - what symbols shall be expressed and how. Ongoing consultations with people can give the answer and the architect's role is to extract it from them their sub-consciousness and cultural past.

5 Charles Jencks „Pluralism is good for everything” – an interview with Ch.Jencks; Architecture no. 2, 1982

Both modernism and postmodernism claimed that residents should be allowed and even encouraged to change their environment and express themselves. However, there is a difference. Modernists built their houses in a "cleaned" environment, so that they often looked like factories or hospitals. These are buildings that do not change easily. What is more, they do reject these changes. On the other hand, it is possible to change them without destruction, on the condition a rich language of postmodernism is used.

Charles Jencks „Pluralism is good for everything” – an interview with Ch.Jencks; Architecture no. 2, 1982

6 On the basis of magazine "Architektura Murator"; no. 10/2010, p. 34.
Clarity of the proposed formal and spatial solutions for the buildings from this period is still true. Therefore, the stage of total abandonment of modernism was probably purely apparent and triggered more likely by a series of different aesthetic tendencies, which are only the result of views negating architecture that was considered colloquially as "impersonal". The more so because minimalism came to the prominence at the end of the twentieth century in its diversity, which was peculiar to pseudo postmodernism. The form has become simplified, optimized. Thus, it gives the chance for something that has been unnoticeable so far, i.e. the interior, to exist. By limiting the construction of the building only to necessary and final parts, internal spatial relations begin to dominate in architectural creation. A process of elimination of unnecessary factors and irrelevant forms by getting rid of ornaments and unnecessary decorations on the walls begins to take place. Minimal architecture tries to be simple and unpretentious.

3. Modern times
We also need to remember that in new, modern commercial realities despite the fact that the possibilities of a designer’s creative expressions have become apparently expanded in new, modern economic realities, the designer’s creation has at the same time been very limited. His freedom and free expression were additionally determined by the investor, whose opinion on the social and economic expectations, and thus on the architecture and purely aesthetic issues, has in many cases become superior. However, numerous examples of contemporary multi-family buildings, which are also the result of their own professional experience, offer prospects that the stage of total abandonment of the idea of modernism turned out to be apparent and was provoked by rather temporary emergence of various aesthetic tendencies, which are the result of views denying the architecture, commonly regarded as impersonal.

4. Own projects
My own projects try to respect the defined aesthetic values derived from the modernist trend. The designs of two housing estates completed over the past few years in Szczecin can serve as an example of a consistent implementation of a target reached on my own conviction that it was worth it.

4.1. Multi-family buildings "NAUTICA"
Author: Mellon Architects Miłosz Raczyński, Marek Sietnicki (stage I)

The project involved the construction of four multi-family buildings "NAUTICA", implemented in four stages, i.e. stage I (Nautica I), stage II (Nautica II), stage III (Nautica III), stage IV (Nautica IV), figure 1, 2. The composition of the whole complex is based on the principle of development of buildings from north to south, which was set in the local development plan and resulted from topography.

Figure 1. Multi-family buildings "NAUTICA" - photos from the archive mellon architects
The body of the buildings starts from 5-story blocks, which correspond to the development heights at the intersection with Emili Plater and Gontyny streets, through six-or seven-story blocks and finishes in the form of three eleven- and twelve-story towers located in the southern part of the plot.

The buildings were designed in such a way that a spacious interior for recreational purposes was created inside the complex. It was terraced, gently levelling the height difference of more than 12m between the southern and northern part of the plot.

Terraced topography was emphasized by introduction of an amphitheatrical playground and a water cascade with a water reservoir on the axis of the interior of the complex. The north-south axis is not only main compositional but also the communication axis.

The design of buildings was inspired by the forms of modernist and art-deco buildings from the thirties of the 20th century.

Long balconies with a lowered full balustrade, banded windows and vertical projections at the top of the buildings constitute the main parts, which build up the form and emphasize the assumed dynamics.

The drawing of the façade was emphasized by long lines of window cornices and balustrade parts.

The entire investment consisted of 319 apartments with an area of 20 610.00 square meters.

4.2. Multi-family buildings "CHABROWE"
Author: Mellon Architects Miłosz Raczyński

A multi-family residential complex consisting of seven single-frame buildings called A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6 and one two-story building B, was designed in order to make most of the location and landscape
values resulting in particular from the fact it is slightly angled towards the west where there is a natural pond.

Therefore, medium-intensity buildings, (figure 3, 4), based on a clear east-west compositional axis and isolation of the designed complex from the circular communication areas located on the eastern side were proposed on purpose.

![Figure 4. Multi-family buildings "CHABROWE" - photos from the archive SGI sp. z o.o.](image)

All designed buildings, the character of which refers to modernist patterns, consist of three full residential stories. The most important value of the designed complex is the interior with its park nature, based on east-west compositional axis, finished with a recreational area located around the pond, as well as medium intensity buildings designed consciously to emphasize the values and character of the place. The entire investment consisted of 166 apartments with an area of over 7890 00 square meters.

5. Conclusions

In the case of two housing estates described hereinabove, the awareness of the design decisions was expressed by precise and stylistic tendencies, implemented in a consistent way, with a reference to clear architectural patterns at the same time. Design decisions, which are consistent with our conscience seem to be the essence of the design process. An architect is obliged to design on the basis of these values. Completed buildings themselves should determine if these decisions were right or wrong. Builders are entitled to present, explain the genesis or show the process of their creation. On the other hand, the recipients have an unlimited right to public assessment.

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