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NON-MODERN MODERNITY? NEOMODERN ARCHITECTURE

Abstract: Neo-modernism, as both a philosophical and an architectural current, evolved as a critical response to postmodernism, the movement described by Agnes Heller as “neither conservative, nor revolutionary, nor progressive”. At the same time, neo-modernism adopted some post-modernist assumptions, resulting from the criticism of the modernist movement. Rem Koolhaas emphasized that although contemporary architecture is clearly inspired by modernist aesthetics, it has little in common with the two major attributes of the modern movement – opposition towards context and towards history. Thus, neo-modernism can be described as “unmodern modernity”. According to Jürgen Habermas, being modern is closely related to being free of external axioms. Neo-modernism appears rather to be another form of eclecticism or “a strategy without an aim”, than a new modern movement.

Keywords: architecture, modernism, neo-modern architecture, modernity, eclecticism, Jürgen Habermas.

In a diversified pluralistic landscape of current architecture, we may notice a distinctive return to modernism. It primarily shows in the esthetic aspect of the newly-erected buildings whose creators draw inspiration from the construction industry of the 1920's and 30's. At the same time, the limited scope of those references triggers the question as to what the nature of neo-modernism in architecture truly is. To what degree is it a new and innovative phenomenon? Does it constitute a continuation of modernism or should we rather refer to it as a neo-style that has little in common with the original ideas of the modern movement? Finally, what is the relation of neo-modernism to the modernity?

When did modernism end?

Neo-modernism, as both a philosophical and an architectural current, evolved as a critical response to postmodernism, the movement described by Agnes Heller as “neither conservative, nor revolutionary, nor progressive”¹. Instead of “excessive pluralism”, it promoted a return to formal orderliness and designing by rules. At the same time, it adopted some premises resulting directly from postmodernist criticism of the modern movement.

Victor A. Grauer has described neo-modernism as a return to the formalistic doctrine of modernism². This formulation seems very close to the common manner of talking about neo-modernist architecture. Popular definitions place the origins of the current at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Its characteristic features are claimed to include references to the forms typical of modernist architecture with the simultaneous rejection of any political and social content. A quick analysis of the history of the 20th century architecture clearly shows that those tendencies are nothing new. A progressive marginalization of the ideological aspects in favor of esthetics can be easily noticed in pre Word War II architecture. Leonardo Benevolo described the 1930s as the time when “the modern movement was reduced to the collection of formal rules”³.

Modernism in architecture had ceased to be associated with the revolution at the end of the 1920s. It was not only accepted by the privileged groups of society, but was also adopted as the so called “official style” in the countries with utterly conservative political and social systems. In the mid-1930s, tenement houses featuring luxurious modernist style were being built in numerous European metropolises, including Warsaw. The juxtaposition (although debatable) of the words “modernism” and “luxurious” itself already suggests that the social program promoted by the creators of modernism had been abandoned. In fact, they had created an architectural reinforcement of the “ancient regime” in a modern guise. Instead of cheap mass production, they offered high quality craftsmanship; instead of egalitarianism – the feeling of elitism. All that was clad in a glamorous modern costume based on Le Corbusier’s five points of architecture.

At the end of the 1930s, the tense political situation in Europe forced many avant-garde artists and architects to emigrate to America. This is how Euro-

¹ M. Hopenhayn, *No Apocalypse, No Integration: Modernism and Postmodernism in Latin America*, Duke University Press, Durham 2002, p. 92.

² V.A. Grauer, “Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism”, *Downtown Review* 1981, vol. 3, no 1-2, p. 3.

³ L. Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*, vol. 2, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, p. 552.

pean modernism reached the United States. At the same time, it underwent a transformation – the “modern movement” transformed into an “international style” and its extensive social program was replaced by the commercialized style of large corporations. The subsequent attempts to revive the movement did not bring the expected results⁴.

When did modernism end then? Did this happen with the reduction of the movement to a collection of formal rules, as described by Benevolo? Or did modernist architecture “die” in St. Louis on 15 July 1972 when the Pruitt Igoe housing project was demolished, as was claimed by Charles Jencks?⁵ Or else, has it not ended at all, but has only undergone some transformations, as argued by many authors? It all depends on whether the concept “modernism” itself is given a narrower or broader interpretation⁶.

The criterion of modernity

We must remember that the term “modern” has a double meaning in the Polish language and can be translated as both “modernist” and “up-to-date”. Choosing one translation over the other automatically changes its interpretation and meaning (“narrower” or “broader”). The reason why this is important is that one of the founding myths of the modernist movement was centered on the cult of modernity, progress. In his tellingly entitled book *Myths and Utopias of the 20th Century*, in the chapter “The Myth of Modernity”, Jakub Wujek cites the founders of the Polish architectural avant-garde of the 1920s as claiming that “The closer will the work be adjusted to the time in which we live [...] the more [the minds – B.C.] shall be modern, more filled with modernism”⁸. Therefore, modernism could only be implemented in modern times.

It should be also stressed that it was not originally a future-oriented movement. “Modernism is the present moment”, wrote Szymon Syrkus in 1926⁹. The aim of the modernists was to solve the current problems of the “here and now”. On numerous occasions this was related to the “temporariness” of the chosen solutions and methods which, after being used to solve a given problem, lost their *raison d'être*. The sanatorium Zonnestraal in Hilversum for people

⁴ J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie architektury XX wieku*, Arkady, Warszawa 1986, p. 75-81.

⁵ Ch. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Academy Editions, London 1984, p. 23.

⁶ J. Tarnowski, „Czy powrót modernizmu w architekturze?”, in: *Powrót modernizmu*, ed. T. Pękala, Lublin 2013, pp. 223-246.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 241.

⁸ J. Wujek, *Mity...*, p. 221.

⁹ Ibidem.

suffering from tuberculosis was designed by the Dutch architect Jan Duiker in 1926. The designer assumed that tuberculosis, being a civilization disease, would be almost completely eliminated in 30 to 40 years, which is why he implemented rather non-permanent solutions, contradicting the Vitruvian principle of “firmitas”.

According to Jürgen Habermas, modernity equals the search and rejection of the external elements taken for granted. When modernism ceased to question and reconfigure itself, it reached a certain level of stagnation, thus becoming non-modern. As observed by Zygmunt Borawski, “Being modern means being non-dogmatic, versatile, and creative, but not forgetting one’s roots”¹⁰. Modernization projects carried out as part of the modernist philosophy reached far beyond modern esthetics. The avant-garde questioned the autonomy of a work of art understood as lacking the connection with “praxis”, with human life¹¹. Habermas expressly stated that the interwar modernism was the first, and so far the last, movement that had such an effect on our everyday lives¹².

Postmodernism, along with the subsequent postmodern movements, was not able to offer a program that would be equally powerful in its impact. Diana Ghirardo explicitly says that despite the bold attacks against its predecessors and its own delight over historical style, the designers responsible for a number of new buildings were not able to offer a richer theory, i.e. something other than anti-modernism, in order to give foundation to their activities¹³.

Modernity vs. eclecticism?

Maciej Miłobędzki from the JEMS Architects studio sees the roots of neo-modernism in Polish architecture in the crisis of the late 1980s and in “yet another renaissance of modernism”¹⁴. However, as modernism is a closed period in history, the tradition of the interwar architecture has been reduced to the role of decorum. Therefore, neo-modernism can be perceived as yet another neo-style implemented in reference to a certain image of the symbolic aspect of the original.

¹⁰ Z. Borawski, *Neoburżuazyjny anarchokonserwatyzm*, „Rzut” 2016, no 1, p. 56.

¹¹ P. Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2011, p. 129.

¹² J. Habermas, “Modern and post-modern architecture”, in: J. Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and Historians’ Debate*, transl. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, p. 419.

¹³ D. Ghirardo, *Architecture after Modernism*, Thames and Hudson, New York 1996, p. 28.

¹⁴ „W poszukiwaniu rzeczywistej wartości – rozmowa z Maciejem Miłobędzkim”, Rzut 2016, no 1, p. 43.

Walter Benjamin wrote that at the time of the French Revolution, France perceived itself as a recurrence of Rome. “It cited ancient Rome exactly the way the fashion cites the bygone mode of dress”¹⁵. Similarly, modernist forms transposed in such a way have become the background for the activities of the modern society of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. At the same time, it should be emphasized that smooth facades, cubic forms, and horizontal lines of windows are not necessarily the result of an underlying modernization program. Modernity has been reduced to the role of mere decoration.

If we take a closer look at two designs prepared by the JEMS Architects studio, we will be able to see that neo-modernist forms can convey a diversified message as well as enter the multi-faceted dialogue with the ideas of the modern movement. The complexes of office buildings – Platinum Business Park (Warsaw 2008) and Pixel (Poznań 2013), according to the assumptions of the designers, represent peripheral architecture. Their forms constitute a clear reference to the achievements of the avant-garde modernism, while the interiors are an example of homogeneous functional space. The concept of the headquarters of the AGORA SA media company (Warsaw 2002), a couple of years older, was primarily to be a symbol of a modern company, open to the world. The designers gave up monofunctionality in favor of a flexible, easily adjustable space (rational space, according to the distinction made by Adolf Boehne). This is how the building, whose concept was close to the modern movement, came to life, despite a completely unorthodox approach of the designers to modernist aesthetics.

Mies van der Rohe used to say that “architecture is not about inventing something new”¹⁶. Indeed, if we take a look at his designs from the time of his stay in the United States, we may conclude that what was considered as modern was not really modern at all. Van der Rohe and his followers (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, among others) perfected framing and glass curtain walls. So called “glass boxes” became the hallmark of the progressive tendencies in the construction industry, even though they were not progressive as such. Thus, mature modernism brought about a particular kind of eclecticism, “different than the former one. It was a formal and functional eclecticism of any types of modernity”¹⁷. On the one hand, in the second half of the 20th century we may observe modernist (modern) eclecticism, while on the other hand, we are dealing with the phenomenon that came to function as its opposition. Charles

¹⁵ W. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, in: W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4 1938-1940*, ed. H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 2003, p. 395.

¹⁶ P. Trzeciak, *Przygody architektury XX wieku*, Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1974, p. 214.

¹⁷ K. Nawratek, *Ideologie w przestrzeni. Próby demystyfikacji*, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 111.

Jencks defined postmodernism as “radical eclecticism”, at the same time pointing out certain analogies between the current architecture and that of the 1870-1910 period, when “numerous styles and ideologies”¹⁸ were developing simultaneously.

As noted by Douglas Crimp, contemporary eclecticism reaches for the tools and methods once used by the eclectics, such as referencing or transforming already existing motifs. At the same time, their theory is intentionally avoided¹⁹. The lack of the “ultimate purpose” noticed by Jacques Derrida additionally indicates the crucial element of doubt. It was already mentioned by Charles Baudelaire who believed doubt was the basis of the 19th century eclecticism²⁰. Regarding the architecture of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the lack of axioms and the inability to identify permanent values are very clear.

Modernism en vogue

In the light of the above deliberations, neo-modernism in architecture should be regarded as one of the variants of contemporary eclecticism and a particular approach towards modernism.

In his lecture “Modernity’s Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance” Jürgen Habermas cited Baudelaire, for whom modernity in a work of art is manifested in the union of “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” and “the eternal and the immutable” at the same time²¹. The quoted reference to fashion and the somewhat diluted motif of imitation that it contains, as Habermas writes, seems to have particular significance²². Neo-modernism is then the effect of modernism being in fashion. “Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past”, wrote Walter Benjamin²³. However, “topical” does not have to mean “modern”.

The Cosmopolitan office building in Warsaw (2013) designed by Helmut Jahn’s studio is an example of neo-modernist esthetics based on the achievements of the international style. The composition of the glass boxes and the shiny

¹⁸ C. Jencks, *The Language ...*, p. 7.

¹⁹ G. Sztabiński, „Eklektyzm dawny i współczesny”, in: *Eklektyzm i eklektyzmy. Materiały ogólnopolskiego seminarium naukowego*. Muzeum Historii Miasta Łodzi, listopad 1992, Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki Oddział w Łodzi, Łódź 1993, p. 44.

²⁰ Idem, p. 45.

²¹ Ch. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in: Ch. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. J. Mayne, Phaidon Press, London 1964, p. 13.

²² J. Habermas, *Nowoczesność: świadomość czasów i szukanie pewności w samej sobie*, in: J. Habermas, *Filozoficzny dyskurs nowoczesności*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, Universitas, Kraków 2000, p. 20.

²³ W. Benjamin, *On the Concept...*, p. 160.

surfaces of the glass curtain walls bring to mind the American designs of Mies van der Rohe. Even the marble panels with the characteristic veining used in the reception wall, seem to be taken straight out of the German Pavilion in Barcelona or the Tugendhat Villa in Brno! Helmut Jahn himself referred to himself as a creative continuator of the modernist movement, for whom there are no boundaries between the “local” and “global”, while architecture and engineering form an inseparable whole.

There is more to find in the fashion for modernism, however, than just a rational affirmation of the esthetics based on geometrical rules. It becomes a disguise, a curtain whose seemingly modern (therefore, relevant to modern times) form hides the non-permanent nature of contemporary architecture. The modernist disguise of steel, concrete, and glass has been mindlessly associated with modernity for years. Because of that, despite their ever quicker changing functions, we associate the buildings with the function and rank given to them by the investors and architects. In fact, however, the functional needs and technical capacity, and often also economy, would suggest using non-traditional solutions. Buildings could be perfectly non-permanent and quick changes of function should be made possible.

Meanwhile, modernism has become yet another historical costume. In 2014, the LIBIDO Architects design studio designed a villa near Łódź that features clear references to the 1920s modernism from Gdynia. The references here are not only related to a certain period in the history of architecture, but also to its specific local variety. The neo-modernist costume in which architects dress contemporary architecture is in reality no different from other neo-styles, and their approach no different from the attitude of those who in the 19th century were hiding the then modern reinforced-iron structure under the pseudo-historical stucco-work.

Epigones and imitators

Is neo-modernism an unoriginal and imitative phenomenon then? Numerous examples demonstrate that just as with any kind of eclecticism, borrowings and references may lead to interesting effects that contain a strong creative element.

Wilfried Wang perceives the architectural works of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron as a search for the intensity characteristic of minimalistic modernism of Mies van der Rohe or the purist works of Le Corbusier²⁴. He

²⁴ W. Wang, *Herzog & de Meuron*, Basel-Boston-Berlin 2000, p.9.

stresses their conscious affinity with the work of both Karl Moser and Hannes Meyer. However, from the moment when Wang analyzed the achievements of the Swiss designer duo over two decades ago, his words have not lost their significance. “Herzog & de Meuron do not seek to invent a new language, instead, they are looking to state clearly that which remains to be said with utter clarity”²⁵. Wang has found a balance between idea and form in the works of Herzog & de Meuron and he contrasts them with the formalistic approach associated with the “modernist baroque” of Richard Meier²⁶.

Meier’s sterile, white, glass buildings are reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe or Richard Neuter’s works. Seeking the essence of modernist architecture, Meier develops modernist methods of shaping the space inside a building. This does not, however, breach the fixed boundaries of the movement. It functions within it, using a set collection of elements it combines, thus forming ever more complicated compositions. Unlike Meier, Herzog and de Meuron openly admit using traditional solutions and construction materials in an unconventional manner: “Their traditional character disappears. Glass isn’t glass anymore, it’s solid and stable as stone or concrete. Conversely, by printing on concrete, it suddenly becomes porous or shiny like glass”²⁷. The Swiss designers assign new roles to materials. They also engage in dialogue with seemingly inviolable architectural laws. Rusty sheet-metal plates and abundant vegetation on the walls of the Caixa Forum (Madrid, 2008) imply transience and perishability. The construction of the Olympic stadium in Beijing (2008) seemingly negates the rules of statics, while the maze of reinforced concrete beams and columns looks like a “dark and enchanted forest from close up and giant bird’s nest from afar”²⁸. It is no wonder that Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker called them neo-romantics, remaining somewhat in opposition to neo-rationalists.

The Polish architect Robert Konieczny performs similar feats using traditional typologies that have been present in architecture for hundreds of years as well as our concept of the building that results from them. His Atrial House (2006) is a reversal of a residential building centered on an internal patio. The Auto-Family House (2012), however, stands in contrast to the use of traditional functional zones in a residential building. At the same time, Konieczny willingly reaches for minimalistic, neo-modernist esthetics. White, simple solid structures are torn by enormous glazed surfaces while being based on perfectly balanced proportions and details limited to the minimum. However,

²⁵ Idem., p. 13.

²⁵ Idem., p. 15.

²⁷ T. Vermeulen, R. van den Akker, “Notes on metamodernism”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2010, vol. 2.

²⁸ W. Wang, *Herzog...*, p. 194.

also in this aspect, the architect is not a dogmatist, as his Dialogue Center Przełomy (Szczecin 2016) evidences a much more crude aesthetics dependent on the specifics of the context. The object simultaneously functions as a building and a town square.

The redefinition of traditional elements, assigning to them new, sometimes perverse meanings, seems to be far distanced from the sincerity-and-truth-loving modernism, but rather close to postmodernism. The element of surprise, the intellectual game played with the recipient with the use of a system of codes and signs were also characteristic of 16th century mannerism. The artists of that time were distinguished by their eclectic approach. They strived for a harmonious combination of the experiences of their predecessors into one homogenous whole²⁹. The complexity and contradiction found in postmodern architecture seems to be close to the mannerist attitude and therefore also to the eclectic approach. In this sense, neo-modernism is closer to them than it was to its 20th century prototype.

Paradoxically, we may find the continuation of the modern movement in the works of the artists who are not basically associated with modernist aesthetics. Each subsequent design of Rem Koolhaas is an answer to a different intellectual challenge. “The future is here, it just hasn’t been evenly distributed (yet)”, he claims. In turn, Alejandro Aravena, the 2016 Pritzker prize winner, focuses on the architect’s social mission, as both a representative of the profession, and an individual. Aravena criticizes the buildings that have an excessively glamorous, unique form. His complaint that “They cannot be copied so in the context of serving many people, their value is close to zero”, resembles the manifestos of the socially committed avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century.

In the light of the above deliberations, neo-modernism, as one of the contemporary architectural movements using the means characteristic of the avant-garde architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, is an example of contemporary eclecticism. Stemming out of doubt, deprived of the “ultimate purpose”, it becomes a costume, a decorum resulting from the “fashion for modernism”. At the same time, neo-modernism is full of contradictions. It is perceived as a continuation of modernism, while contradicting its fundamental premises. It is associated with modernity, but it is not modern. It is a non-modern modernity or a postmodern modernism³⁰.

²⁹ G. Sztabiński, *Eklektyzm...*, p. 34-35.

³⁰ W. Welsch, *Nasza postmodernistyczna moderna*, transl. R. Kubicki, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Wydawnictwo Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 1998, p. 23.

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NIENOWOCZESNA NOWOCZESNOŚĆ? NEOMODERNIZM W ARCHITEKTURZE (streszczenie)

Neomodernizm, zarówno jako kierunek filozoficzny, jak i nurt w architekturze, zrodził się jako krytyczna odpowiedź na postmodernizm, zdefiniowany jako ruch nadmiernie pluralistyczny, który sam w sobie nie jest „ani konserwatywny, ani rewolucyjny, ani postępowy”. Jednocześnie przyjął niektóre z postmodernistycznych założeń wynikających bezpośrednio z krytyki ruchu nowoczesnego.

Rem Koolhaas słusznie zwracał uwagę, że współcześni architekci chętnie sięgają ku modernistycznym wzorcom zapominając jednocześnie o dwóch immanentnych cechach ruchu nowoczesnego w architekturze – akonstekualności i ahistoryczności. Neomodernizm może zatem być określony mianem „nienowoczesnej nowoczesności”. Zgodnie z koncepcją Jürgena Habermasa, bycie nowoczesnym jest ściśle związane z odrzuceniem zewnętrznych pewników. Neomodernizm jawi się raczej jako kolejne oblicze eklektyzmu, „strategia bez ostatecznego celu”, niż nowy ruch nowoczesny.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, modernizm, neomodernizm, nowoczesność, eklektyzm, Jürgen Habermas.