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Pop culture as an inspiration in the modern architecture. Chosen issues

Introduction. Mass culture in relation to architecture

The beginnings of mass culture¹ are connected with the industrial revolution. They also have direct connections with urbanization processes that started in the 19th century, the indirect effect of which was the unification and popularization of societies and consequently, the ways of land development.

In the research conducted on the development of mass culture, from which pop culture has been evolving since the 1960s, the meaning of information popularisation (the influence of the mass media) and the consequences of progressing globalization are emphasized. The aspect of pop culture that still requires an analysis is its impact on the modern architecture and the feedback relation of this process, i.e. the influence of the modern architecture on other aspects of pop culture.

Researchers of culture emphasize the existence of stages in the development of mass culture. According to Antonina Kłoskowska, the first stage of popularisation takes place after World War I (the development of film and radio, the peak point of the press development), the second stage is in the middle of the 20th century (development of TV)² [2]. Another stage is marked by the appearance of the Internet and further progress of globalization processes.

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¹ There are many definitions of the term mass culture. Most of them refer to numerous problems connected with the development of urbanized societies (which appeared in the 19th century) and the mass media existing in these societies. As the most important mass media, the following means are mentioned: press, radio, film, television and most recently the Internet.

² These notions are introduced by A. Kłoskowska in her book *Kultura masowa*, which is considered to be a classic position in the sociology of culture.

The 1960s and 1970s are the time of the evolution of mass culture into pop culture, which is connected with a new position of rock music, cinema and television. Fascination of pop culture can also be observed in art, which is manifested by the creation of pop art or the beginnings of American architectural post-modernism³. Linking mass culture with architecture gives opportunities for a new original perspective on the history of culture and architecture of the last two hundred years. We can distinguish three phases of mutual relations between mass culture and architecture:

- Phase 1 – 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (beginnings of mass culture and the 19th century town development). This phase was connected with the concept of a new modern city (from circa 1850), demolition of defence fortifications and creating a new unlimited spatial perspective of city land development based on the industrial development as well as popularisation of the employed spatial forms (among other, a tenement house, factory).

- Phase 2 – the time of modernist culture which takes place throughout most of the 20th century (from 1920s to 1970s). In this period, we can observe further popularization of the ways of architectural implementations and also a considerable influence of the international style which can be perceived as a manifestation of the global culture. Modernism, as an aesthetic concept, dissociated itself from eclectic ideas by suggesting a new formal language which did not approve of popular (folk) culture and tried to create its own elitist character. At the same time in the architecture and urban planning, such terms as

³ Compare: D. Strinati, *Wprowadzenie do kultury popularnej*, Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, Poznań, 1998.

repeatability, prefabrication, unification and others were emphasized.

- Phase 3 – introduction of elements of pop culture into the area of high culture, which is started in the 1960s and takes on a new shape from the beginning of the 1990s.

Post-modernist breakthrough, pop culture and architecture

For many years, an intellectual opposition was created between popular culture and high (elitist) culture. Popular culture was ascribed low values, frequent lack of original ideas, anti-intellectualism, commercialization and putting the emphasis mainly on mercantilist values and satisfying the lowest instincts.

We can assume that this division existed in the culture until the revolution of the 1960s, particularly until the development of pop art and postmodernism. These trends introduced a significant change in the interpretation of popular culture by involving some attributes of popular culture in a sort of an intellectual game, thus turning them into high culture attributes, which in practical terms meant that the boundaries between these two cultures blurred⁴ [1].

United States of America

Emergence of postmodernism in the USA is connected with the appearance of new theories and publication of such books as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* – by Jane Jacobs and *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* – by Robert Venturi. Particularly important was the fascination with the popular products of culture and kitsch, which was analyzed by R. Venturi along with D.S. Brown and S. Izenour in – *Learning from Las Vegas*. This book contains examples of advertisements and ludic architectural forms into the space of a specific metropolis



Fig. 1. *Dolphin and Swan Hotels* in Walt Disney World, Orlando 1990. Architect Michaela Graves

Introduction of the forms, so far associated with popular culture, into the area of architectural avant-garde resulted in blurring boundaries between popular architecture and high architecture.

which is the capital of world gambling – Las Vegas. The observations made by R. Venturi in practice had a broader dimension and described the spatial reality in which the pop attributes were an integral part of the iconosphere of the city of the 1960s and 1970s [4].

A different interpretation of pop was proposed by Ch.W. Moore in the design of the town square Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans. This public design executed in 1978 was addressed to the local community of Italian origins. It employed traditional elements of classic architecture (columns, porticos and presentable stairs) for the purposes of playing with the spectator and it was realized with the use of modern materials (stainless steel, neon).

Among other examples of connections of the American postmodernism with pop cultural forms, we can mention the projects of SITE workshop for the chain of markets Best, where typical rectangular façades of great supermarkets were enriched by the motives of walls which fall off and apart or they used lettering as a decorative



Fig. 2. The cover of *Amazing Archigram 4* in a convention of comics

⁴ Symptoms which anticipated this process were the concept of ready mades, started by M. Duchamp and his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *Bottle dryer* (1915) and the famous *Fountain* (1917).

element⁵; also, designs by Michael Graves, with a project that was radical as regards its references to pop culture *Dolphin and Swan Hotels* in Walt Disney World complex in Orlando from 1990 (Fig. 1), in which he employed figures of dolphins and swans from Walt Disney stories as sculptures forming the building's façade.

Europe

In Europe, the influences of pop culture on architecture in the 1960s and at the beginnings of the 1970s had a slightly less direct character.

The achievements of Archigram (ARCHitecture TeleGRAM) group are very characteristic here. The group consisted of six architects⁶ who were fascinated with new and futuristic visions of architecture. Their designs had a theoretical character, the aim of which was to stimulate reflections on new architectural possibilities. The most famous are the following: *Walking city* – a design of the city which transfers like a steel creature; *Suitation* – a city clothes or a mega-structure design – *Plug-in-City*. The group significantly contributed to the form of presenta-

⁵ The most popular SITE project from this period is a Huston market from 1974.

⁶ The Archigram was created by David Greene, Peter Cook, Mike "Spider" Webb, Warren Chalk, Dennis Crompton and Ron Herron.

tion of the architectonic idea which strayed away from the pompous and serious approach presented by modernists and suggested the usage of comics and posters (Fig. 2) imitated on pop culture heroes (superman, Spiderman).

Among experienced architects, there were no such radical creators in Europe who would derive their visions from pop culture. The book by R. Rossi *L'architettura della città* turned out to be very important for the European post-modernism; however, it was a serious essay which presented the reasons of the modernist city crisis and attempts to get out of it.

Nevertheless, there were also European experienced architects who took advantage of pop motives in their creative activity. Hans Hollein, an Austrian architect, in the first stage of his creative activity was the author of several fine-scale solutions, mainly interiors, in which he used pop iconography in a specific way. For example, he designed the interiors in form of steel palms and cash desk windows with the motives of Rolls-Royce dummy bars in the Austrian Travel Agency in Vienna. He is also the author of ideological designs in which sea ships were to be placed in the interior. On the European ground, Venice Biennale in 1980 turned out to be a breakthrough event, in which functionalistic architecture was replaced by narrative architecture.

Artists in architecture

The design presence of artists connected with pop in architecture may constitute an interesting thread of relations between architecture and popular culture.

Frank O. Gehry is an architect who in his early works used some particular ideas – ready made – the example of which can be his own house in Santa Monica (California) built in the 1970s. He is also a co-author of the office complex Chiat/Day/Mojo in Venice (California) built in the years 1975–1991. The co-authors of this concept are the artists connected with pop art: Claesem Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. The central part of the structure constitutes a several-storey sculpture by Claesem Oldenburg, which presents binoculars. Gehry himself also used the contours of objects in his later designs, the example

of which can be a fish figure motive used in Fish Dance Restaurant in Kobe (1987); Lewis House in Lyndhurstw in Ohio (1989–1995) and Villa Olimpica in Barcelona (1992).

An original combination of art and architecture was suggested by Friedensreich Hunderwasser – an Austrian painter, sculptor and performer. He is the author of the architectural manifest *Verschimmelungs-manifest gegen den Rationalismus in der Architektur* (1957) in which he criticized functionalism in architecture. Hunderwasser's suggestions do not directly derive from pop iconography but they are examples of a radically different approach to architecture from the ideological and fine arts point of view.

Architecture as film inspiration

In the 1960s, it was possible to observe the specific feedback in which other activities in the range of pop culture were inspired by architecture, in particular, the film. A good example of this phenomenon can be the film by the classic of the new French nouvelle vague – Jean-Luc Godard *Alphaville*⁷; the film describes a vision of the dehumanised

world, which can be understood as an indirect accusation of modernism in architecture. Apart from Godard, the influences of postmodernist iconography can be observed in Antonioni's films and first of all in Fellini's films (*Eight and a Half* (1963), *Satiricon* (1969), *Amarcord* (1973)). In his films, Fellini used architectural space giving it symbolic and ambiguous values in a way that was characteristic for architectural postmodernism.

For architectonic creative activity, a science-fiction trend turned out to be the most significant; in this trend, set designs were created which were supposed to represent the future.

⁷ The full title of the film is as follows: *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*. It combines science-fiction and noir cinema by presenting a story about the society managed by Alpha 60 electronic brain. The location of the film was in Paris.

An important film for this trend was *2001 – A Space Odyssey* directed by Stanley Kubrick in 1968, in which a new kind of spatial aesthetics representing the future was created.

A contemporary director who is mentioned by architects and architecture critics as a person inspiring their

creative activity is Ridley Scott and his two films in particular: *Alien* 1979 and *Blade Runner* 1982. Impressions of the suggested aesthetic solutions included in these films can be found in contemporary designs by Z. Hadid and F.O. Gehry [3].

Participation, hippies and ‘do-it-yourself’

Equalization of the achievements of pop culture and high architecture resulted in the appearance of a new trend of architecture created by its users⁸ as well as in the residents’ participation in professional architectural designs.

The works of a Belgian architect Lucien Kroll can constitute an example of participation in creating architecture. After students’ manifests in 1969, Kroll started work on his most famous design of La Merne town for the students of Medicine at Louvain University. Students participated in the process of designing actively and the result of the work was a controversial design which strayed away from a modernist and ascetic form; however, the design was enriched with different extensions as regards

the formal aspect, which emphasized the meaning of architecture and greens.

Another famous design from this period is the housing estate ‘Byker Wall’ by Ralph Erskine. The author opened his office for social consultations⁹ and created a different housing sub-estate which took into consideration the remarks and suggestions of the future residents in the design process.

A similar approach characterized also other initiatives, among which the most famous is the activity of ARCAU group from Brussels founded in 1969 or the works by Ivo Waldhor.

⁸ This phenomenon was described in 1964 by Bernard Rudofsky in *Architecture without architects. A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*.

⁹ In order to encourage people to visit him, he connected the function of the design office, which was adapted from the old funeral parlor, with the function of the lost property office as well as garden advice and plants sale point.

New situation in the days of globalization. Cyber culture and architecture

Since the 1990s along with the development of the computer studies society, in particular, the development of computerization, the way of spreading products of culture

has been modified, which has also created a new situation of the relation between culture and modern architecture. Inspirations of mass culture products such as traditional history of art or cinema – characteristic of postmodernism époque – were replaced by inspirations in the area of new media. Virtual reality and the appearance of the so called cyber culture became particularly significant¹⁰. Forms derived from computer graphics or virtual reality entered the sphere of architecture¹¹.

A good example of the project which used cyber culture inspiration can be Victoria University Online Training Center in Saint Albans in Australia (2001–2002). The author of the project is Studio Lyons from Melbourne whose creative activity is characterized by *irony in the digital times*¹². In this design, a part of the building façade was covered by computer graphics, which constitutes a reference to the function of the building. The usage of façades



Fig. 3. Silodam of MVRDV group in Amsterdam

¹⁰ A computer studies dictionary gives two basic definitions of cyber culture: 1. *subculture of the Internet users playing computer games*; and 2. *a new face of pop culture using the multi-media, including mainly computers and the net of computer connections and links*. Source: A computer studies dictionary: www.i-slownik.pl

¹¹ A separate issue constitutes the existence of structures in the virtual space only. The example of such activities can be Guggenheim Virtual Museum design by Asymptote group.

¹² *10.10_2.100 Architects.10 Critics*, Phaidon, London 2005, p. 208.

as a media carrier¹³ became also a kind of identification of Herzog de Meuron group which should be regarded as one of the most influential groups in modern architecture.

The project of a transformer station in Utrecht made by NL ARCHITECTS group is also inspiring. It was changed into a sort of sculpture with façades, which have grips for climbing and a basket for playing basketball. This building in its stylistics refers to virtual reality, computer games graphics, representing in this way a wider trend of the architectonic quest.

¹³ Herzog de Meuron used façade motives-overprints (among other, in the design of the University Library in Cottbus) and changeable light façades (among other, the design of Munich Stadium).

A uniquely interesting thread of architectonic quests is represented by Dutch MVRDV studio. Their designs derive from Dutch structuralism trend and refer to the classic forms of Aldo van Eyck; however, they give them a postmodernist code – a kind of a formal play which is characteristic of postmodernism. In the design of *Silodam* building in Amsterdam, the façade of the cuboidal building, which stands on water, was divided into fragments which can be associated with building-blocks LEGO or heaps of port containers (Fig. 3). A similar motive of elements and structure was also applied in *WoZoCo* design (residential home) in Amsterdam or a Dutch Pavilion at Expo Exhibition 2000 in Hanover.

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Popkultura jako inspiracja w architekturze współczesnej. Wybrane zagadnienia

W artykule opisano związki między kulturą masową i architekturą współczesną. Związki te podzielono na trzy podstawowe okresy: faza 1 – to wiek XIX i początek XX wieku (początek kultury masowej i XIX-wiecznego rozwoju miast); faza 2 – to czas trwania kultury modernistycznej, obejmujący znaczną część wieku XX (od lat 20. do lat 70. XX wieku); faza 3 – to wciągnięcie elementów kultury popularnej w obszar kultury wysokiej na początku lat 60. XX wieku.

Szerzej opisano okres przełomu postmodernistycznego, kiedy to została zniesiona opozycja intelektualna pomiędzy kulturą popularną i kulturą wysoką (elitarną). Kulturze popularnej przypisywano niskie wartości, częsty brak oryginalnych idei, antyintelektualizm, komercjalizację oraz nastawienie w głównej mierze na wartości merkantylne, zaspokajające

najniższe instynkty. Podział ten można uznać za istniejący w kulturze do czasów rewolucji lat 60. XX wieku, a szczególnie do rozwoju pop-artu i postmodernizmu, kiedy został unieważniony, a pop stał się częścią kultury wysokiej. W artykule opisano różne przykłady styku kultury masowej i architektury tego okresu w USA i Europie.

Zaprezentowano także przykłady działań artystów pop-artu w architekturze, inspiracje architektoniczne w kulturze popularnej (filmie), nurt partycypacji architektonicznej z lat 70. XX wieku, jako przejaw umasowienia dostępu do architektury współczesnej, oraz przykłady realizacji inspirowanych kulturą popularną (głównie cyberkulturą) z ostatniego dziesięciolecia.

Key words: pop culture, modern architecture

Słowa kluczowe: popkultura, architektura współczesna