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## *‘High’ architecture*

*A given object belongs to culture if it has existed longer than any function which it fulfilled at the moment of its creation*

Z. Bauman [2, p. 249]

Architecture in culture has existed for ages and it is needless to propagate it in a special way because it has always been perceived as prominent among other arts. It has often been described in literature as well. Interesting literary texts can easily be confronted with descriptions of various buildings, sometimes also paintings, sculptures, monuments and this provides a unique possibility of perception of architecture as a field of art which is distant from constructional or functional issues. On the one hand the poetic opinion inspires us to enrich our knowledge as regards architecture, while on the other hand it can make us search for wise and good literature.

Literary descriptions of architectural structures are created by non-architects and are addressed to non-specialists. They describe impressions of a spectator as well as feelings and experiences caused by the direct contact with an architectural structure which is outstanding and significant. There are also architectural structures which are quite common and only their different perception through a unique personality allows us to see ‘their hidden beauty’.

Out of the ancient *seven wonders of architecture*, only the Pyramid of Cheops survived until the present times. The rest was lost throughout the ages. We are informed about their size, beauty and existence mainly by literature, which in some fragments is now confirmed by archeology. Therefore, we put our trust in the ancient descriptions which extol their unique beauty. Callimachus of Cyrene is considered to be the greatest poet of the so called Alexandrian period and the author of the first history of literature – a productive writer indeed. In 220 BC he made one of the lists of *seven wonders of the world*, probably the old-

est one. For the ancient Greeks, this was a peculiar guide which constituted an affirmation of the architecture that was significant and remarkable and which is particularly valuable for us today as most of it is now lost.

Zbigniew Herbert sensed the beauty emanating from architecture in a very profound way. In a peculiar manner he perceived Italy with the colours of the particular towns *...Assisi is pink, as long as this banal word can express the tone of reddish sandstone; Rome is fixed in your memory as terracotta against the green background* [3, pp. 66–67]. He analysed in detail the constructions of Gothic cathedrals, dealt with their architects by dispelling the myth that their builders were anonymous. He analysed historical materials about *...workers-bricklayers, stone-masons and architects and not about what happened in their souls when they were building the cathedral but what materials, tools and methods they used and also how much they earned* [3, p. 125]. He was especially interested in the cathedral in Orvieto, the town which is gold and brown with a façade in the painterly and sculptural convention. *The cathedral is standing (as long as this motionless verb is adequate to describe something that tears the space apart and makes you dizzy) on a large square and the surrounding several storey buildings fade away after a moment and you no longer see them. The first impression does not differ from the last one and there is a prevailing feeling that it is impossible to get accustomed to this architecture. (...) You can wander around the town for a long time but you never lose this feeling that the cathedral is behind you and its overwhelming presence supersedes all the other impressions* [3, pp. 63–67]. A literary work and an architectural image are similar visualizations. They both create a fictitious reality for the spectator and this reality in both of the spheres is contaminated with subjective impressions. The Z. Herbert’s description is an affirmation of architecture in ideal conditions, the architecture which

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is abstracted from climatic weather changes, similarly to a perfect photograph whose author must have spent many hours waiting for proper light. However, for each type of architecture its perception or subjective feelings are of key importance. Therefore, one's own reflection on architecture which is *experienced* and seen is extremely significant. At this point, a certain comment seems necessary. The notion of *experienced* architecture is of utmost importance here. It is not enough merely to read about a building, its creator, see the plans, designs, perhaps a photograph in order to start writing about it. An image created in this way is a hoax. It may give an impression of truth, but it is only *half-truth*. Each object must be experienced. You must feel its atmosphere, climate, smell, see the people who are there, recognise the surroundings, its elements and structure. Architecture is more than a costume or a shell in which some interiors are closed. It is an integral entirety of the urban context which is one of the most significant reasons why it was created as well as the composition of masses, its form, function, light, inherent idea and first of all subjective perception of the work of art. Only after we have had a taste of such architecture, can we attempt to write about it, try to be objective or rely upon our own feelings and emotions. Zbigniew Herbert's poetic language is very adequate here, while the emotions depicted in the poem Architecture constitute the synthesis of truly individual perception.

*Above a light arch –  
eyebrow of stone  
on the wall's  
undisturbed front  
in windows joyful and open  
where faces instead of geraniums  
where rectangles very compact  
next to a dreaming perspective  
where woken by an ornament  
stream on a quiet field of planes  
where movement with stillness, line with scream  
uncertainty trembling, straight brightness  
you are there  
architecture  
art made of fantasy and stone  
you are there, beauty residing  
above a light arch  
like sighing  
on the wall  
pale with height  
and in the window  
tearful with a window pane  
an exile of obvious shapes  
I promulgate your motionless dance [4]*

In the contemporary world, there are many opinions that due to the globalisation processes, towns are transformed from places which protect their inhabitants into the areas ...*which are characterised by rules of terror*

*and ubiquitous fear* [1, p. 115]. Remaining in the sphere of reflections upon dangers connected with the analysis of the modern urban tendencies, Zygmunt Bauman wrote: *The place called La Defense, a great square on the right bank of the River Seine which was designed and executed as a permanent monument to François Mitterrand's presidency – in which the greatness and dignity of the office was carefully separated from the personal weaknesses and faults of the person who held it – it contains all the features (...) of the category of public but inhospitable town space. (...) a visitor is struck by the fact how repulsive this place is: all the things around here gain the visitor's respect at the same time discouraging everybody from staying. The fantastically shaped buildings surrounding the big and empty square seem to be erected in order to be admired and not in order to be used. Completely glassed mirror like façade sheets seem to be windowless and not to have entrance doors which gives the impression that they turn their backs on the square on which they are standing. They are imperious and indifferent – imperious because indifferent – and both of these features complement and reinforce each other* [1, pp. 149–150]. It comes as no surprise that the perfect asceticism of the place and lack of the attributes of traditionally understood space made Z. Bauman comment as follows: *...it exists only to be traversed quickly and left behind* [1, p. 158].

Throughout the decades, assessment criteria of architecture do change and the permanent works which were once perceived as kitsch can grow infinitely valuable. Globally admired, they will last until their last days or until another reevaluation. Such changes, defined by Zygmunt Bauman as 'liquid modernity' [1, p. 158], are nothing unusual although when confronted with a radical change in valuation they can surprise.

In 1973 Jan Zakrzewski a postwar journalist, writer and translator wrote: *...many have a grudge against Catalans (...) for not destroying, at a moment of anarchist excitement, the structure created by Gaudi under the name 'Sagrada Familia'. It is hard to encounter something equally hideous. This is an example of employing secession for building a cormorant's nest, next hybridizing the whole thing with a coral reef, a dirty sponge after washing a car and pouring the whole thing with a mixture of clay and water. The Gaudi's structure is gigantic, its ghastly figure makes your hair stand on end, faith evaporates from even the most faithful ones. It just stands there and, surprisingly, the Catalans still do not lose their sense of humour...* [6, p. 242].

Already then J. Zakrzewski stated that crowds visit and after forty years it is even difficult to draw near towards the Gaudi's work. The church faces the destruction by 'trampling'. The church architecture has existed in culture for a long time and it is needless to promulgate it in a special way, similarly to hundreds of other places around the world. We can ask the following question: is it real admiration for a work of art, place, its creator that make people admire it? Perhaps it is just a part of a designated tourist track and the splendour of good holidays, and maybe they really think that *...Gaudi is a priest of architecture who*



Fig. 1. La Défense.  
Photo by M.J. Żychowska

*respects the laws given by God and turns our attention to His great work – nature. Turning streams, bird's nests, anthills, stalactites, mountains and plants into towers, vaults, domes, columns and pilasters. Gaudi would say that originality is nothing but a return to sources and that beauty is a light of truth [5, p. 187].*

The definition of 'culture' itself was shaped in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as *...a shortened term describing the process of managing human thinking and behaviour [2, p. 239]* and according to the definition, it referred to learning and accumulating information. On the whole, we can say that this phenomenon is dependent upon external determinants within the framework of division into those who are managed and those who manage. The former ones, those who are managed are creators of art the immanent feature of which is freedom. It is

*...the most developed part of culture – fights reconnaissance battles in order to discover the roads to follow and lay out new routes for (...) human culture... [2, p. 243].* On the other hand, those who manage are the people who form standards and administer cultural processes. They create a normative order which evolves in time and in accordance with needs for searching or experimenting. However, all avant-garde actions always caused social fears and were treated with reserve.

Between these two antagonistic parts, we do not see symbiotic cooperation because their interests seem to be different as well. Nevertheless, culture, independently of its shape is a phenomenon which dominates our existence. Architecture as one of the most permanent elements of art is an object belonging to culture because it has existed longer than any other objet d'art.

### References

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### Architektura „wysoka”

Architektura w kulturze istniała od zawsze i jej specjalne propagowanie jest zbędne, bo zajmowała poczesne miejsce wśród innych sztuk. Często też była opisywana w literaturze. Ciekawie teksty można z łatwością zestawiać z opisami różnych budowli, czasami także obrazów, rzeźb, pomników, co tworzy unikatową możliwość percepcji architektury jako

dziedziny sztuki odległej od zagadnień konstrukcyjnych czy funkcjonalnych. Z jednej strony poetycka opinia inspiruje do pogłębiania wiedzy z zakresu architektury, ale też skłaniać może do poszukiwań literatury mądrej i dobrej.

**Key words:** "high" architecture

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