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Ethical implications of architect's new roles in postmodern times

Introduction. Broadening the scope of the architect's role in investment processes

The architect's profession in its separate modern form appeared in Renaissance Italy (circa 1450), in France (circa 1550) and in England (circa 1650 r.)¹. However, since ancient times, the Vitruvian ideal of an architect-scientist has been developed, namely, as a person with two basic characteristics: interdisciplinary knowledge and high moral virtues. According to Vitruvius, it is not possible to become an architect without meeting the moral standards criteria that serve the community in which a person lives and works².

The problem of defining what architecture is constitutes a separate issue. In spite of the fact that there are several thousand definitions, there is hardly any unanimity among them, which seems to point to the multidimensional character of architecture itself rather than the necessity and possibility to coin a universal definition.

Bruno Zevi, when ordering definitions of architecture according to problem and chronological systematics, distinguished the three following groups³:

- definitions from cultural, psychological and symbolical viewpoints;
- definitions from functional and technical viewpoints: intended use and material;
- definitions from a technique-oriented viewpoint, such as forms and ordering systems.

However, it seems that the above definitions refer mostly to the reality which existed before the era of globalisation. Since the beginning of the 1990s we can observe processes which profoundly re-evaluate many traditional definitions within the scope of social sciences and economy. Architecture, as a domain which exists at the meeting point of these two fields of action, also changed its range of influences.

As the essence of these changes we must consider the fact that nowadays the domain of architect's activities is no longer the investment process itself (designing, implementation). An architect has become an element of a broader commercial process of which an investment (building process) is only a fragment and its real aims are broader⁴. An extreme form of these changes in the attitude towards the architect's role is the creation of the class of architectural 'celebrities' also called *starchitects*, who are mainly employed as faces of campaigns, while the product of their work (assumed ideal and esthetic concept) fades into insignificance. This rule is also applied – on an adequately smaller scale – in local communities in which investors employ architects not on the basis of their working techniques or design achievements, but taking into account their business and marketing position.

As a consequence, architects themselves changed the scope of their activities. In Spain it has become a common practice that some architecture design studios represent a group of investors and one of the most important tasks of an architect is to carry out a capital merger and search for a group of business partners for a given investment⁵. These changes bring about a new approach to the archi-

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¹ On ways of defining the architect's profession, see: M. Leśniakowska, [in:] *Co to jest architektura?* [3, p. 13].

² Vitruvius defines the architect's duties in the following way: *Philosophy instills generosity into an architect and teaches him not to be conceited, but rather easy to deal with, just and most importantly without greed because no work can be done reliably without conscientiousness or righteousness. An architect should not be greedy or think exclusively about gifts, but guard his dignity in earnest and take care of a good opinion as this is what philosophy recommends.* [7, pp. 25–26].

³ This distinction was made by Bruno Zevi in entry 'architecture' for *Encyclopedia of World Art* (1959). More on this subject, see: M. Leśniakowska, [in:] *Co to jest architektura?* [3, p. 9].

⁴ These aims are as follows: financial, connected with *public relations*, social, ecological and many others.

⁵ The essence of the specifically Spanish solution is the creation of individual business groups in order to implement only one design. In such systems the architect's role is broadened by a significant scope of business duties.

tect's social role which becomes more distant from designing functions for the good of the functions of catalyzing investments processes. Consequently, the scope of responsibility of an architect, as a representative of a public trust profession, is broadened.

A separate problem which complicates these mutual relations in the architect's profession is the relation of ethics and aesthetics. The concept of the architectural leading trend was replaced by a number of incomplete original definitions. As a result, aesthetic choices should be referred to ethical choices because they are connected with choices of value systems represented by given trends

(regionalism, historicism, modernism, ecological trends, deconstruction and others).

In this context, the question concerning the architect's professional ethics in post-modern times is still open. However, this re-definition has not been anything new in the history of architecture if we quote at least its scope as defined by Vitruvius: *Architecture comprises three domains: building engineering, construction of clocks and machines construction* [7, p. 32]. A changing scope of architecture proves the connection of theory and architectural practice and imposes an update of the architect's ethical responsibility scope depending on practice.

Traditional scope of relations

P. Gossel and G. Leuthauser in the prologue of their book *Architecture in the Twentieth Century* describe the state of architecture around the year 1800 emphasizing the significance of the fact that architectural education was partly moved from academies of art to newly established departments of universities of technology⁶. Since the beginnings of the 19th century, the position of architecture in the modern society has been changing, which is first of all connected with the process of industrialisation. This process was taking place in various forms up to the 1990s.

It is not an accident that up to the beginnings of the 19th century, the so called military engineers enjoyed a greater esteem than the so called civil architects and already in the 19th century the engineers designing roads and bridges received a more significant social respect, which was connected with their deeper technical knowledge in comparison with architects designing housing estates.

To a large extent, the 19th century represented a period of eclectic architecture. John Ruskin, the author of *The*

Seven Lamps of Architecture, in the middle of the 19th century rekindled the thinking about the concept of architectural form in ideological categories and consequently, in political and ethical ones. Neoclassicism symbolizes references to the Classical tradition on the one hand and it is the embodiment of social welfare of the privileged classes on the other hand. Neo-Gothic, which becomes the opposition to Neoclassicism, grows out of the working class people and its followers see in architecture an opportunity to cause a social revolt (Viollet-le-Duc, William Morris). Development of modern architecture, particularly in its first decades, contributed to politicizing and sharpening of the ethical choices which are made⁷. After the end of World War II, when modernism became an actual winner in the battle for the spatial shape of the reconstructed world, the architects' ethical choices were more concerned with details because general lines of the development of architecture were very similar throughout several decades independently of geographical and cultural context.

⁶ P. Gossel and G. Leuthauser describe the significance of the fact that architectural education was moved to departments of universities of technology by quoting, inter alia, Sigfried Giedion opinion [2, p. 12].

⁷ The first period of modernism was of key importance here (interwar period) when the choice of the new order (modernism) or the old order (various forms of historicism) was often conditioned by political or ethical views.

Relations in post-modern times

A departure from this type of thinking became the post-modernistic architectural revolution. One of its basic ideas was restoring the architecture to the status of art from which it had departed. An architect was supposed to become again, perhaps even for the first time in history, a person who makes choices out of so many possibilities. It was then that culture embarked on the times of post-politics, post-art and post-architecture.

Jacques Rancière, a French philosopher who dealt with philosophy of politics and historical contexts of art, summarizes his own views on the relations of art and politics in this way: *Art is not politics considering the messages or feelings it delivers with regard to the world order. It is not politics either if we take into account the way in which it represents the social structure, conflicts or iden-*

tity of social groups. Art is politics through the distance itself it assumes towards its functions, through the type of time and space it introduces, through the way it divides that time and populates that space [5, p. 24].

It seems that Rancière's opinions are accurate in describing the condition of modern architecture and the distance it maintains to the world. Architecture changed its role from initiating⁸ to 'journalistic position', not intending to change *the status quo* but rather trying to *fill and populate the space*.

⁸ An extreme example 'the initiating role of architecture' can be seen in Soviet concepts of constructivism where architecture was supposed 'to construct man'.

From 'carpenter's disciple' to 'starchitect'

It seems that the key issue in understanding the new role of an architect is to notice the evolution in the way this profession is perceived by investors and recipients of architecture as well as by architects themselves. On the ground of the Polish architectural literature, a professor of the Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology, Lech Niemojewski, carried out perhaps the most comprehensive summary of the traditional architect's role and ethics originating as early as from ancient times. In his book *Carpenter's disciples. Reflections upon the architect's profession* [4] he outlined a great humanistic parable connecting the architect's profession with a social mission that representatives of this profession ought to complete⁹.

⁹ It is symptomatic that the book *Uczniowie cieśli. Rozważania nad zawodem architekta* in the times of soc-realism became the reason of a political campaign against its author which is an indication of the fact that the totalitarian system interpreted 'architect's duties' differently from their classic form.

However, these considerations do not include the model that is represented in our times by such authors as Daniel Libeskind, Frank O. Gehry or Zaha Hadid. Each of these *starchitects* tries to create an extremely individual form of his architecture by dissociating himself or at least by not emphasizing any significant connections with the continuity of the architectural concepts.

Therefore, we can ask whether assuming such individual attitudes is only the architects' choice or the fact that they are encouraged does not result from the fundamentals of the modern world of recipients of architecture. The mass media, which to a large extent define the public opinion, including the way of understanding architecture, search for 'personality' and 'originality'. In fact, the mass media are interested in this type of attitudes and are mainly responsible for this state of affairs.

Ethics and aesthetics in postmodern architecture

However, this attitude has a historical tradition. The issues of individualistic aesthetics (form) and the choices connected with it have been present in reflections on art and architecture for ages. These problems were discussed by the Austrian art historian Ernst Gombrich in his essay *Norm and Form* and in the book *On art* [1], in which the author emphasized the role of an artist-individual towards the world. It contains a famous maxim (*As a matter of fact, there is no such thing as art. There are only artists.*), which became part of the history of art and it seems to accurately define the contemporary state of architecture and occurrence of fragmentary stylistic concepts in it resulting from individual attitudes of architects.

In the reality constructed along these lines, the choice of a particular architectural aesthetics becomes the choice of a particular ethics. This thread of thought was followed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* [8], where he considers ethics and aesthetics as equal, adding transcendental values to these two concepts.

Post-modernistic architectural thinking reduced this problem in practice to a vision of life in a specific 'museum of form' and 'museum of ethics' connected with a given form, whereas there was no universal architectural ethics and aesthetical choices were equivalent to the choices of values representing particular architectural styles.

Summary

Summing up these reflections, the author emphasises the existence of two new characteristics which appeared in the architectural practice and theory in the last twenty years and had some impact on assessments of the ethical behaviour of architects. They are:

- broadening the scope of duties of architects' work resulting from globalisation processes which have become intensified since the 1990s.;
- connecting ethical and aesthetic choices in postmodern architectural culture.

Ref. 1 The architect's profession involves today a different scope of duties and another range of social expectations. The designer's role as a person who is only responsible for the best possible performance of technical works is a thing of the past. An architect is often expected to be engaged in the business process, to perform in advertising campaigns and to be 'the face' of the investment (*starchi-*

sects). Also on a local level, architects are businesspeople who are treated by investors as persons who have appropriate relations with a local community. Consequently, in our times the architect's ethical responsibility ought to be assessed in a wider context.

Ref. 2 Post-modernist revolution resulted in equivalence of architectural movements by creating a specific 'museum of form'. In the case of architecture, aesthetic choices are also connected with choices of ethical values which are represented by the styles from this 'museum'. In this perspective each design choice (aesthetical, conceptual) becomes an ethical choice.

The consequence of these processes must be the change of scope of the ethical opinion of the architect's work which undergoes historical evolution and should be adapted to professional practice.

Translated by B. Setkowicz

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Implikacje etyczne nowych ról architekta w czasach ponowoczesnych

Od lat 90. XX wieku obserwować można szerokie zmiany społeczne i polityczne, związane z procesami globalizacji, które wpływają na przedmiot i sposób uprawiania zawodu architekta. Jako dwie z ważniejszych cech uznać można: (1) poszerzenie zakresu obowiązków pracy architektonicznej, w ramach których architekt odchodzi od tradycyjnej roli architekta-projektanta, na

rzecz relacji architekt-współtwórca procesu marketingowo-biznesowego; oraz (2) powiązanie wyborów etycznych z wyborami estetycznymi, rozpoczęte od przełomu postmodernistycznego. Konsekwencją tych procesów stać się musi zmiana zakresu oceny etycznej pracy architekta, która ulega ewolucji historycznej i dopasowana być powinna do praktyki zawodowej.

Key words: globalization, social change, relationship between ethics and aesthetics

Słowa kluczowe: globalizacja, zmiany społeczne, powiązanie etyki i estetyki