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Holism as a determinant of culture in architecture

Culture and holism; place of culture in the holistic world system

The phenomenon of *culture* formation takes place as a result of sociological reaction of ‘double feedback’: natural environment impinges on Man, Man – in the process of civilization building – processes and creates the environment, while the environment, in turn, as cultural reality, surrounds and forms Man by improving Man’s personality.

Originally, the notion of *cultura* was connected with land cultivation and it referred to transforming the natural state of the environment through human work into a state that was more useful for man. In the ancient times, the meaning of *culture* changed to refer more to man, his mentality and environmental interdependence¹. In the Middle Ages, *culture* had a more universal character, however, because of the significance of religion (i.e. Christianity) in human life, its particularistic aspect was emphasized. The meaning of *culture* as a motivator of all conscious efforts aimed at developing and assessing the quality of a given object, talking about for instance ‘culture of wheat’ or ‘culture of trades’ was in use at the beginning of the 16th century.

Some symptoms of connecting culture with the intellectual sphere of human development referring to ancient philosophies appear in history in the 17th century when Voltaire uses the word *culture* in the context of process of human mind formation and improvement by enlarging the scope of acquired skills with various domains of science, art and knowledge of conventions and manners. In

the subsequent periods of history in the 18th and 19th centuries, *culture* is associated with improvement of an individual as ‘a whole’, with qualifications and skills, including both technology and the intellectual side of life as part of these achievements. A new domain of science appears, ‘Anthropology of culture’, which slowly aims to separate civilization achievements from culture by humanizing the latter through a range of research on human life environment, in particular with regard to customs, beliefs, art, family and social life, talents and habits, laws and even morality of a given community.

Division of the notions of *civilization* and *culture*, as well as an analysis of cultural phenomena are dealt with contemporarily by many scientific domains; the most significant ones are research in the scope of sociology and cultural anthropology as well as social ethnology.

During the last 100 years of human history, the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural studies’ underwent significant evolution or even ‘paraphrasing’ – because of many important and profound social changes, transformations in the way of valuating phenomena and behaviours, as a result and simultaneous effect of political, economical, social and civilization globalizing universalizing processes. In the contemporary reality there is a visible *cultural dissonance* brought about by a universal trend of unification of principles and phenomena, their ephemerality caused by the creation of ‘hybrid cultural structures’ – and the need to accept distinctness and uniqueness of cultural community.

The notion of culture presents a dichotomy as regards expressions and meanings:

– culture, with regard to symbols of meanings or behaviours; collection of elements and synthesis of phenomena, signs, skills adapted or created anew by perception and its reference to conscious actions directed at creating new ideological and model values in the social human environment; and

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¹ Cicero (106–43 BC) used the word *cultura*, to define philosophy and emphasized moral and intellectual education of an individual which elevates a human being to a higher level (quoted from: Hartman, *Słownik filozofii*). The following types were distinguished: *Cultura animi* – culture of farming; *cultura mentis* – culture of mind, because: *cultura animi philosophia est* – philosophy is farming, formation of spirit (quoted from: Landowski, Woś, *Słownik cytatów łacińskich*).

– culture as a social phenomenon, but basically referring to an individual or a social group; it is a collection of formulas of the so called ‘cultural lifestyle and being human’ – resulting from ethnical conditions marked by history that determines the course of political and social changes [7]².

² There are numerous definitions of the idea, notion, phenomenon and entry of ‘culture’, depending on the accepted criteria resulting from their authors’ range of interests, time of their formulation and purpose

By a ‘statistical’ person, *culture* is usually understood as follows: lifestyle of an individual within a social group, determined by history and ethnical conditions and apart from that, synthesis of phenomena, signs, skills adapted or created through perception and its reflection in form of creating new esthetical values in the existing social environment.

of usage. In the present work, the author introduces her own laconic, popularized and somewhat paraphrased interpretation of the notion of ‘culture’ for the purpose of this essay.

Culture and architecture

Culture is *de facto* a notion/phenomenon which is abstract as such and does not refer to any particular being or thing, yet, it actually effects the concepts of development of phenomena and interpersonal relations. When defining *culture* from the philosophical viewpoint, in the most laconic way, it is best to perceive it as ...*a mobile significant element which allows discussing human activity in various manners*³. Many factors influence the process of culture formation, of which nowadays the most expressive and significant ones appear to be ethnical, political and social factors [1].

However, human history undergoes evolution and it is determined by system, economic and social transformations and each era brings new values into social culture, its form and content. Fascination with ‘the new’, discovering new spheres of spiritual development and material civilization goods have always been – as a psychological and sociological phenomenon – logical consequences of man’s permanent search and aspirations to improve living conditions, to perfect the form of the surrounding space and to subjugate the forces of nature.

Architecture is understood as the things which are built, shaped by talent and knowledge, things which serve man and possess esthetic features. Lack of these features excludes ‘thing / work’ from being part of architecture. According to *the Vitruvian canon*, architecture is characterized by: *being solid, useful and beautiful*⁴. We can ask whether this canon also marks the limits of architecture. Variety of definitions of *architecture* as a work which is

³ Quoted from: Barker Ch., *Studia kulturowe*, p. 516.

⁴ Vitruvius (Marcus Vitruvius Pollio), 1st century BC; Treaty *De architectura*. Vitruvian triad: *firmitas, utilitas and venustas*, i.e. – *being solid, useful/usable and beautiful*.

real and completed, presented by fine and humanistic arts authors allows us to formulate the most adequate and concise definition which says that *Architecture is an organization and art of space formation*⁵. In theory, things from beyond the definition scope do not belong to architecture (for instance, engineering constructions), however, they do complement it as regards ideas, structures, landscape.

Is architecture art? The answer seems to be simple as throughout the centuries, especially during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, architecture was regarded as *the queen of fine arts* and although historically their mutual connotations were perceived variably, we must admit that *art and architecture originate from the same ‘cultural root’*. It is logic that fine arts are an indispensable part or even the basis of each type of culture (culture of being, social culture, symbolic culture) and they determine culture.

Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that architecture is a significant part of culture as it is social, universal and it ‘touches’ almost every being, every figure.

Nowadays, however, the abovementioned rule is understood in a broader sense – the importance of the space which surrounds, complements and so to speak promotes the architectural work is emphasized⁶.

Therefore, from the axiological point of view, in order to maintain or upgrade the cultural value of places and space, at the time of permanent uniformity, *it becomes significant to combine the architectural structure with its natural and cultural context as regards ideas, functions and even forms*.

⁵ This is also the main assumption of the idea of habitat (author’s footnote).

⁶ Quoted from: Krakowski P., *O sztuce nowej i najnowszej*, PWN, Warszawa 1984.

Symbiosis or partnership; Holistic relationship of architecture with art and environment

The notions of value and assessment have always existed in architecture. Man, while transforming Nature for the needs of his own existence, interfered in the surrounding environment in consent and harmony with it – or not, protecting nature and cultural goods – or not, anyway, he

always introduced new content, forms and structures into the environment, he introduced a new quality which was not always positive. *These new forms brought in civilization values and by forming places of worship, work and social contacts, man created the cultural value of a place*



Fig. 1. The problem which is discussed in the essay with regard to connections of *culture* and *architecture*, their ideological, mental, historical, social, architectonic, spatial and esthetical connotations is multi-dimensional, broad and inter-disciplinary. It was merely outlined here by presenting for discussion (non-verbal) its significant aspects. The illustration is a type of author's graphic recapitulation, synthesis – referring to symbols of the alphabetical Greek letters: α – ω from the Greek alphabet, between which 'a diverse reality' is contained, not only graphic, linguistic, cultural – referring to one culture. α – ω this is the symbol of beginning and end, but first of all of stages. Culture also has its beginning, perhaps its end, but it certainly has the stage of philosophical, social and esthetic reflections. And similarly – architecture, too. While Vitruvius defined the canon, Plato – principles of beauty, Corbusier – the topic of economical exploitation, Wright – organicity, Zaha Hadid – extravagance and expression, etc., so we can conclude that in architecture almost everything has been said. Well, but architecture in itself can be nothing more but '...a collection of stones' (quote)...

with an appropriate dimension – local, regional or national.

As architecture is created for a community, it is only the architecture accepted by the community that can become assimilated with the natural, or cultural environment, thus forming a *symbiotic work*. This mainly refers to architecture of residence, which should have ‘certificate of social acceptance’ as a whole.

Uniform, unified and modern technical and technological solutions, which are used in the scope of improvement of the human environment quality (pro-ecological system solutions as regards usage of natural sources of energy or recycling), have a civilization character. By combining technological achievements with architecture as a domain of art, we can achieve two goals for civilization and culture. *This operation humanizes architecture, it is accepted by its recipients, provides framework for unique architecture in places and spaces which are culturally transparent and ideologically and esthetically readable.* More and more frequently, we can observe the employment of spatial solutions in urban planning and architecture which combine totally different and characteristic trends of building the contemporary esthetics: modernistic elements/motifs combined with organic ones; bound by ideas and structures and expressing connection with the context by means of form and content/function.

In the modern world, culture is subject to economization and becomes a product, the source of ubiquitous commerce⁷. This phenomenon generates social and cultural transformations which are based on the necessity to improve the daily life organization, to make forms of consumption and relaxation more attractive, including entertainment, which can particularly be seen in cities and their public, social, sports and relaxation spheres.

Similarly to the unique architecture that ‘celebrates’ the cultural environment determining the place and space – we can perceive the universalism propelled by the market situation and inclusion of green areas as a dangerous symptom, perhaps an equally dangerous phenomenon is – although apparently socially ‘pro-educational’ – inclusion of name/entry defining the idea of architecture for commercial products and services.

Let us have a look at the following examples: *architecture* – meaning organization of place (symposium, meeting, social event), *architecture* – ‘of the subject matter’ (concept of arranging a matter), *architecture* – of light (shop with lamps), *architecture* – of space (ordinary, utility space, e.g. backyard, store area), *architecture* – of figure (physiognomic appearance), *architecture* – as a name adapted for cosmetics of a popular company: ‘Skin Architect’ (facial cream and other products)⁸. Linguists could certainly provide us with some more of such ‘pompous’ phrases.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002, French sociologist of culture, anthropologist and philosopher) names the modern process of commercialization of culture as ‘symbolic goods market’ in which we can observe a synergy effect between market, technology and affluence of the society. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu

⁸ These are only some of the examples that the author could spot.

According to this essay’s author – *apparently, when we familiarize the society with a notion, we deprive it of its ideological superstructure which is reserved for one culturally important domain of science and art and which forms the space and society’s sense of esthetics.* Culture has a time dimension, it has its own history, it undergoes development, i.e. it flourishes or it declines depending on political and economical conditions of the society⁹.

Architecture as an integral part of culture is a material result of many generations’ work, structural transformations of societies, evolution and diffusion of forms ‘shaped’ by ideas, fashions and civilization innovativeness [8]. Architecture, similarly to culture, refers to organization of places and space, but, since it is not a place itself, it can only create a system¹⁰.

This elaboration is not aimed at conducting an analysis of criteria used when comparing elements and characteristic features of the phenomena of culture and architecture; we only wish to signal the existence of a connection, a symbolic one, between Culture – Architecture and human Environment as regards ideological and psychological spheres as well as behavioural and material ones.

Knowledge is built on facts, like a house is built of stone; however, a collection of facts is not knowledge, like a pile of stones is not a house – Jules Henri Poincaré (1854–1912, mathematician, physicist, philosopher).

Holism is defined as a philosophical, pragmatic and pro-ecologic idea of symbiosis. This superior ecumenical idea and mechanism combine all the complexes of the sustainable development system. It acts in the natural ecosystem space and in creating urban premises of cultural space: historical, ethnical, multi-cultural, public, social; mental or verbal.

Architecture as a plane/bridge/element of an agreement between a widely understood environment and man is contained in this holistic cultural ecosystem and it ecumenically cooperates with it in the following scopes:

- locating/residing,
- formation of social space connected with professional and educational activity,
- formation of public and recreation space (sports and relaxation).

These various types of space and places are marked by codes, symbols, utility architecture and narration, which distinguish residential architecture and utility architecture from ‘the big one’ of theatres, concert halls, office blocks etc. – creating a specific climate of places, zones, public and social space, in which *architecture occurs as the area and image of civilization and cultural transformations.*

The connection of architecture with culture is indisputable, similarly to the connection of architecture with art¹¹. We can observe cultural feedback between these

⁹ Quoted from: A. Kłosowska, *Socjologia kultury*.

¹⁰ Ibidem; referring to characteristic qualities of culture as a philosophical and social phenomenon / complex of phenomena.

¹¹ For more about connections of fine arts with architecture in modern culture, see: Piotr Krakowski in: *O sztuce nowej i najnowszej*, PWN, Warszawa 1984.

three domains: culture – architecture – art. Art, of which architecture is an integral part – because as a whole it is an expression, testimony and motivation of culture.

Nowadays, culture is discussed in the context of the two particularly expressive social phenomena: information and mutual interpersonal communication [6]. However, it seems that the theory of creating culture according to individualism and full voluntariness, which is extremely promoted in our times, is controversial from the viewpoint of the social order. 'Individualized voluntariness' gives rise to ephemerality of actions and relativism of assessments. As a consequence, there is no place for the modern universalism of culture which is supposed to form the basis for the modern character of architecture in order to accomplish its idea and mission at the same time and outline a perspective of development.

In relation to the problem which is the topic of the conference, namely, mutual connotations of architecture and culture, we ought to focus our attention on time and space of the modern (end of the first decade of the 21st century) environment of Man's life and outline a sphere of recipient's needs (an individual being or a community) by dividing it into two groups as follows. One is a demand for utility architecture which takes into account basic functions connected with the environment of living and recreation, while the other deals with access to the so called higher social and cultural values, connected with *great* architecture, but also with *small* one of public and social spaces as well as *green landscape architecture*.

All the types of architecture are *de facto* extremely significant for symbiosis of Nature and Culture through Man who, by his creative activity, complements and executes **holistic system of environmental and cultural ecumene**.

An attempt to 'answer' the second part the question which is formulated in the topic of the conference is not simple and the problem itself is ambiguous. We can only venture to say that the level defining the content of (contemporary) 'culture in architecture' is directly proportional to the intellectual level of the society, financial possibilities, creative predispositions, knowledge, respect for the existing, laboured by generations values – connecting

humbleness towards Nature and distancing oneself from periodic fashions, with *transforming the creative designer's ego into a creative – pro-ecologically and esthetically – organization of space*.

We can ask the following question: where is the place and intellectual space for innovativeness – experiment, formal expression of a newly created work of art, or even a formal test awaiting social acceptance? *The choice of place and formula, innovative in content, form and meaning of the architectural work, must result from versatile studies in the domains of urban planning, architecture and environment, employment of timeless canon of order and harmony in space, which is formulated in the Vitruvius principles¹² as well as the contemporary principles of sustainable and permanent environment development, contained in the entire idea of 'New Green Deal'¹³ – with the principal holistic statement¹⁴.*

The traditional view on culture was expressed in the holistic permanent moral and axiological order referring to the cultural and natural environment; according to the contemporary one, this spatial order and harmony ought to be 'enriched' by an economy which gives possibilities of realization of modern architecture as innovative, modern, unconventional, however, with a 'note' of organic stylistics which provides conditions for the formation of environmental empathy.

¹² Vitruvian triad: *firmitas, utilitas and venustas*, i.e. – being solid, useful and beautiful contains an ideological creed for architecture and it is reflected in the modern principles of sustainable development, particularly with regard to: *dispositio* (appropriate arrangement of elements of a building), *symmetry* (harmonious conformity between elements and the entire work) or *distributio* (appropriate attitude towards economy of the building process)

¹³ Initiator of building and employment of the new formula is the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon; this policy allows stimulating economical growth and concurrently restrains the climate changes.

¹⁴ In the documents on establishing 'Principles of sustainable development' there is no explicit reference to the role of *culture* in the creation of a new architectural structure or its revitalization; lack of a doctrine gives rise to liberty, freedom of interpretation; excess of liberty – gives rise to chaos. Only the principle of *holism* can determine the direction of culture and of cultural activity (author's footnote).

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Holizm jako wyznacznik kultury w architekturze

Idea holizmu w kategorii filozoficzno-estetycznej i proekologicznej jest kierunkiem realizacji wszelkich zadań i działań na rzecz KULTURY.

Architektura i kultura, to dwie damy kroczące w równym rytmie dziejowego korowodu przez szlak życia, góry, doliny, salony i rozstaje społeczeństw w kolejnych okresach epok dziejów ludzkości.

Architektura jest bowiem rzeczywistym i trwałym obrazem kultury duchowej oraz dorobku cywilizacyjnego i materialnego społeczeństwa i epoki.

Czy jednak we współczesnym multikulturowym świecie architektura nadal zachowuje pozycję 'mentora' i świadka dziejów? Czy jest w stanie podtrzymać, bądź wskrzesić unikatowość miejsc i przestrzeni?

Czy współczesna architektura, którą cechuje uniwersalizm formalny, a nowoczesne rozwiązania techniczne i technologiczne stają się jej domeną, nadal utrzymuje status *królowej sztuk*?

Keywords: sustainable development – holism, culture – architecture, universalism and symbiosis

Sama nazwa ARCHITEKTURA – symbol kreatywności – uległa pauperyzacji i zawłaszczeniu przez najprzeróżniejsze dziedziny wytwórczości i logistyki.

Czy owa wulgaryzacja nazwy służy właściwemu odbiorowi architektury, jej idei, celebry w przestrzeni kulturowej i jej związku ze środowiskiem życia Człowieka?

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój – holizm, kultura – architektura, uniwersalizm a symbioza