Architecture and Mass Culture

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Abstract—The dialogue between architecture and the society has always been of mutual importance. Today, in the age of globalization, and in the heyday of mass culture, this dialogue has its own peculiarities. Architecture as a kind of creative activity and architectural objects as a result of this activity has acquired characteristics of a commercial product which is evaluated mainly according to its consumer-oriented qualities. It has a great impact on the forms of architecture and the means of arrangement of the architectural environment.

Keywords—globalization; consumer society; architectural environment; mass culture; aesthetic climate; time factor

I. INTRODUCTION

The formation of human habitat has always implied the existence of an active dialogue between creators and users. Construction provided functional spatial conditions of life, work, defense, observation of religious rites. At the same time, these conditions dynamically and consistently influenced human conscience, collective and individual psychology both of the society and an individual. This dual function contributed to the development of architecture as a system of construction based on aesthetic principles, which incorporate and develop a spiritual component of human existence. This acquired and improved, based on technology system has become art, as well as design, which is based on handicrafts.

II. ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY

Due to its universal character, architecture was one of the important tools of social organization, which combined social, economic and cultural factors and needed regulatory approach.

Thus, a question about the language of architecture arose, its understanding by a person, comprehension of the ideas, which the architect and the customer put in an architectural object. The main components of this language were spatial relapses and material forms, i.e. abstract concepts, which made it difficult for an untrained person to understand them. This caused the necessity to involve other arts into architecture, e.g. sculpture, painting, decorative arts. Thus a synthesis appeared, in which architecture was "decorated" with images of people, animals, and plants.

Undoubtedly, a social model influenced material, spiritual and aesthetic components of architecture, which included such notions as forms of property, means of regulatory activity, and interrelations of social groups. Herewith, secular and religious powers, which were directly interested in social regulatory activity, often acted as customers and tried to control the creation and visual implementation of architectural objects, as well as their influence on the people. Therefore specific formal ways could be used for the construction of secular and religious objects, such as monumentality (as a synonym to excessive dimensions), exuberant décor etc. For them the most prominent landscape points were selected, special sacred architectural zones were created. The British writer and thinker Gilbert Keith Chesterton once said: "Whenever and wherever we created a palace, a gallery, a statue, a column, we address a crowd like a street orator." [1].

III. HISTORICAL PARADOXES OF ARCHITECTURE

A great paradox of architecture has always been a complex character of comprehension of this kind of art, which is created by the "enlightened" but is addressed to masses of people. The great N.V. Gogol used to write about a similar situation, meaning a complexity of understanding a spiritual component of such a social institution as religion and thus appealing to bodily forms: "…people are unable to understand religion in the same purity and ungodliness as those who got higher education; people are mostly impressed by visual objects." [2]. But long time before N.V. Gogol the same paradox was mentioned by Polybius: "…nowadays in history as well as in other arts and activities truth and morality are not respected; on the contrary, an object of praise and imitation is everything ostentatious and amazing…" [Historiae, XVI, 20:3]. That is why architects in their desire to have a dialogue with all the members of the society, were forced to appeal to "ostentatious and amazing".

Another great paradox of architecture is that any changes in social, political, economic, cultural and religious spheres of this or that society caused the necessity to change the language of architecture. New requirements to the spatial arrangement appeared, architectural forms and their external interpretation changed. These changes were united by the notion "architectural style". According to D.S. Likhachov, it is this particular artistic style that expresses an "aesthetic climate of the epoch" [3]. It is also important that in the existence and development of any universal architectural style, which appeared in a certain area, there was always a national aspect and the promotion of the style was a matter

of cultural exchange. A complex process of mutual enrichment and convergence of cultures was taking place as a phenomenon of human civilizational development. Suffice it to recall the spread of the ideas of Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian architecture, almost universal character of Antique architecture. The same can be said about architecture of Baroque, Classicism, Modern and Avant‑garde. Within the national borders these styles acquired their unique character, which was formed by different traditions and mentality. In fact, the spread of different architectural ideas in different countries can be characterized from a historical point of views as a factor of "globalization", which appeared in ancient times.

Military campaigns and trade contributed to this global architectural process. But still for many centuries it was limited by informational resources. With the beginning of the industrial revolution and later with the appearance of printing, the phenomenon of globalization and spread of mass culture started to widen and deepen. It influenced not only extra- but also inter-territorial state of culture and peculiarities of a national artist — society dialogue. That is what a wonderful Russian writer and philosopher V.V. Rozanov wrote about it: "…since the beginning of the XIXth century everything has been uncovering, hurrying to the crowd, seeking for attention and appraisal" [4]. The "attention and appraisal" characterize, on the one hand, a factor of strong market influence, i.e. the necessity of an act of purchase and sale of art objects, but on the other hand, the development of such a phenomenon as "collective consciousness", about which Marshall McLuhan wrote in the XXth century [5]. Undoubtedly, collective consciousness as a unity of psychological reactions of people to a certain phenomenon was known in the early periods of the development of civilization, as well as an elitist opposition to this process. That is what Lucius Annaeus Seneca wrote about it in his "Lucilium Epistulae Morales": " Everything the mob amuse themselves with, brings weak and shallow enjoyment, any joy which comes from outside is deprived of its solid basis… put aside and tread down everything that has outside glittering and can be received from alien hands..." [Epist. morales, 23, 5-6].

IV. MODERN TENDENCIES

A contemporary period of architectural development is characterized not only by the progress of technology but also by a total domination of the ideals of consumerism with its obsessive idea that everything around us is a product and, consequently, as Seneca said, must "glitter outside". This process is aggravated by the electronic informational revolution which has become an important tool for mass brainwashing, supporting the total idea — obeying the rules of the consumerist society and becoming rich. Another peculiarity of the contemporary period of social development is a loss of previous ideological, religious, moral ideals, which are now associated with the idea of totalitarianism.

But as many centuries ago, the society needs regulation and arrangement. At the same time regulatory means have become more complicated, less primitive and obvious. The orders are replaced by manipulation of human needs, ideals and tastes. These tendencies find their reflection in aesthetic characteristics of modern architecture.

How can we describe the main peculiarities and features of modern architecture, which reflect our contemporary "spiritual climate"? The main tendencies of architecture are:

The following examples show the popularity of architectural clichés, which make an architectural image recognizable, but at the same time attractive and eye-catching. Sometimes, architectural form becomes aggressive and threatening ("Fig. 1").

Fig. 1.   Aggressive architectural form. Minsk.

- "Virtual" character of architectural forms, lack of external manifestation of a constructive bearer, dematerialization. Emphasized disharmony, violation of compositional balance, creation of spatial misbalance ("Fig. 2").

Fig. 2.   Architectural misbalance. Minsk.

- Rejection of everything old, covered by time-patina. An "architectural product" must look new even if it is an architectural monument. Therefore, modern technologies and materials are used for the restoration of buildings. In fact, it is a defiant denial of the past, loss of "time-factor" as an important component of culture ("Fig. 3").

Fig. 3.   Brain-new exterior of historical palace. Versailles.

- Frequent use of references to architectural styles of the past. Architectural techniques and forms become a part of a consumer, market game. An architectural element is treated as a "vintage component" of a building ("Fig. 4").

Fig. 4.   Citation of historical architectural forms. Minsk.

- One of the most urgent problems is planning disharmony, a chaotic character of housing development. There is lack of an ensemble character, which is negatively associated with the totalitarian past (styles of Louis, Alexander, Stalin, etc.) ("Fig. 5").
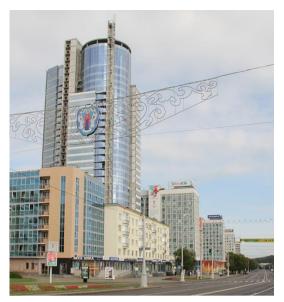

Fig. 5.   Violation of ensemble. Minsk.

- One of the most prominent trends of modern architecture is the denial of a sacred character of architectural spaces. The space, which used to be treated as a "zone of worship" can now be used as a hockey field or a trading place.

- We can also observe disappearance of public spaces, which is caused by compaction of housing development in city-centers or unwillingness to socialize in cottage communities ("Fig. 6").

Fig. 6.   Lack of common spaces at dwelling village. Near Minsk.

In general, it is possible to specify the loss of such humanistic characteristics of the architectural environment as following traditions, replacement of individual creative approach by stereotyped spectacular effects. Even in the smallest architectural communities there appears resistance to this process, which is expressed, for example, in the creation on the walls of non- or semi-professional paintings (graffiti, murals).

V. CONCLUSION

This is our contemporary architectural reality with its problems, which science and practice face. Even such an "anti-totalitarian" writer as Vladimir Nabokov warned against dangers of mass culture for the society: "…the consummate happiness can be bought if one follows advertising and the platitude of advertising is especially strong and malicious when falseness is not openly expressed, and the things which are legally or illegally faked are treated as masterpieces of art, thought or feeling" [6].

While describing our contemporary existence we should not forget the quotation of Sigfried Giedion, an outstanding theorist: "Architecture gives an unmistakable idea about what really happened in a certain period of time" [7].

Undoubtedly, while solving many social and architectural problems one should refrain from revolutionary slogans "we are going to build a new world". Positive changes can appear only with the rise of professionalism and personal responsibility of an architect. At the same time, in the least architectural environment the level of culture must be raised through understanding the importance of traditions and time-factor.

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