

Contemporary urban environment: the image of the history and the history of the image

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the figurative system of the urban environment and to the actual aspects of common evolution of the city and its inhabitants. The examples of artistic-plastic history of the architectural environment confirming the integral character of its internal processes are analyzed. Architecture is interpreted as an art describing the man's history – new, newest, created every day! Special attention is paid to the problems of memory and imagination, “theatrical” perception and artistic forms of ecological thinking. Tracking penetration of the integral origin in architecture, art and culture as a whole, the author predicts appearance of hybrid, transitional artistic forms on the boundary of everyday life and art, identifies main trends of transformation of the image field of the architectural-artistic environment. By the examples of contemporary architecture and environmental design, several aspects are considered consecutively, which are arranged according to the author's logic: live history and memory of the place, play of contexts, collage of times and “theatre” of history, contradictions of the today's image of the city, architectural image as personal history of the artist, environment without history as probable image of the future. Article is accompanied by the author's photographs.

1. Introduction

The fate of the historic image of the city is contradictory and in many cases morbid: irrevocable losses always happen, traditional values are interpreted differently, the environment changes. It is also important to remember how complex the organism of a modern city is, living with many global and local problems, as well as with destinies of its inhabitants, with their thoughts, memories, feelings. Integrated history of the image is created every day and is inseparably linked with a man. The article studies just a few manifestations of the memory of the past and dreams about the future forming the actual field of artistic reading of the architectural-artistic environment.

In our deliberations, we justifiably address exactly the boundary area of interaction of architecture, art and everyday reality. Just in this zone, the man's place is determined in the fairest manner and at the same time indicatively. Here, mainly in the city context, we leave our everyday traces – marking our history. All processes, even the most insignificant ones, are linked with the categories of space and time, belong to eternity, and are written into history.

In the article “The evolution of architecture of public spaces of the historic center of Nizhny Novgorod” Anna Gelfond proposed a model of evolution of public spaces of the historic settlement. It is established on the basis of real and potential interaction of Nature, History and Society and is



defined by the type of their relationship with a Man – Recipient [1, p. 1733]. The potential part of the model includes nature, history, society and, in its turn, the fourth potential constituent. Accepting this conception, let us supplement these links with one more perspective: Man – Environment – Art in the context of History.

Before starting to analyze the selected actual examples of the artistic-plastic history of the architectural environment of life, let us formulate a working hypothesis confirming the integral character of the ongoing processes. Indeed, the today's artistic-imagery potential of the environment is formed in the movement towards architecture – design – art and occurrence of a certain unified artistic meta-environmental origin. Architecture and art in this case approach their disciplinary borders. Formation of the boundary architectural-artistic link is considered an important ground of the city's new figurativeness [2]. Let us consider the most significant solutions of urban spaces, individual architectural objects and environmental artistic works from the angle of formation of the man's present outlook, primarily, the city inhabitant, the user of resources of modern environment and media, and the representative of urban culture.

2. Architecture-environment. Life of the past. History extension

We start considering architectural-artistic examples from the works the authors of which keep historic traditions in many respects: preserve and study historic heritage, images and meanings. Reconstruction of the Palazzo Gorani in Milan (Palazzo Gorani a Milano) by project of G. Zambotti (Gianluca Zambotti, 2017) represents an ensemble in the centre of the city incorporating historical and new objects. It looks like the name itself, under which the project is officially known, marks quite eloquently the idea of the authors – to keep historical and cultural identity. “Reconstruction” (though the project includes several new objects), at first glance, is a classical term suggesting tasks for the city's historical centre that have become traditional for a civilized society. However, it is worth looking at it in more detail and feels the situation in its entirety.

Firstly, the project preserves carefully the real monuments themselves: the remains of ancient foundations (behind the glass on the ground floor), fragments of the mosaic floor (glass windows in the pavement of the square) and the décor of the walls, the ruined tower in the centre of the ensemble. The Campanile serves the main compositional and semantic dominant being functionally an observation tower. It was restored with high skill and a certain amount of courage. On the one hand, the state of the brickwork, all irregularities and quality of the texture of the wall, intricate locations of window openings have been preserved. On the other hand, a careful observer will notice new high-tech solutions of glazing, modern staircases outdoors and indoors – all this was implemented extremely delicately, not affecting the general historical spirit of the structure. In spite of the new inclusions, the true, real image of the history has been preserved.

The tower is surrounded by modern residential buildings that take over partially the spirit of destruction, stratification of times and picturesque ageing, and express these merits in architecture. The abstract and quite rational white architecture, common in scale, turns out to be not at all sterile – “accidental” shifts of windows, cut off and bent corners of the buildings – all this is the technique linking the past and the present in a single image in the mind of the recipient [3]. The “screen” for an exponent has acquired features of “speaking” surroundings, laconic but emotionally rich environment ready to a dialogue with a visitor. Extension of history occurs on the level of plastic motive.

The functional aspect of the described urban space is also important, which is versatile, too. The territory is included in the archeological route of the city tourism, which provides for an educational and of its kind museum resource. Moreover, at the same time the renovated space is actively used by the city! On the one hand, this is a chamber square, which one may come across quite accidentally by turning into a narrow passage between the buildings from the street or through the arch, which is also small and especially almost not articulated. Another essential function of the space is a quiet yard slightly resembling a public garden for the dwellers of the surrounding buildings which perform here their everyday deeds: have rest, communicate, walk dogs... The integration function is an important and smart resource of the development of the historical city's environment, permitting today to live

through the history in several modes. In such a way, the concept of a living history, which is part of our everyday life, is realized. Along with this, the environment of man, who treats history and its artistic-plastic heritage trustfully and sincerely, has been formed here.



Figure 1. Reconstruction of the Palazzo Gorani in Milan (Palazzo Gorani a Milano) Architect Gianluca Zambotti 2017

3. Principle of the city and the memory of the place

The Centre of Contemporary Arts Prada Foundation in Milan (R. Koolhaas, 2008–2018) represents a fundamentally different example of work with historical material, what is dictated by the level of its cultural value, the renovated function itself and, by all means, the architect's personality. Formally, reconstruction of the buildings of the former distillery was realized here to accommodate exhibition halls of a center of contemporary arts – a widely used solution for a former industrial enterprise. However, we deal here not with the aesthetics of the loft, but with the author's play, and the play according to his own rules – in many respects ironic, contradictory and ambiguous. Relative value of the industrial facilities allowed the architect feel free in choosing solutions.

At the same time, Koolhaas is extremely respectful at any step and at any stage – the character of the old architecture has been preserved up to details, in the interior of the hall the gates are automatized and operate, even industrial blind is used creating additional semi-open space for installations. Material has become the main means of expression, and even more – the main artistic language – encounter of textures and tints: foamed aluminum, transparent polycarbonate (master's original technique), mirrors, wooden pavement of some walkways, gold plated foil. Multiplication of the space by the mirrors in the exterior gives a significant effect. Architectural volumes are alternated and mixed up: old and new buildings, new buildings, in this case, loose traditional characteristics of scale, for example, the white tower (building Torre, 2018). The Golden tower is an obvious culmination of the theme, simultaneously; it gives the key to the understanding of the author's conception.

What R. Koolhaas called "radical diversity" more likely seems to be "total..." endless, akin to "bad infinity" [4]. The man has preserved the history, but he is bored among its real traces - he redresses, complemented it in every way, plays with its décor. The complex of the Centre resembles a separate city in the city, which induces to recall the author's idea of the city-archipelago, more exactly, the interpretation of O.-M. Ungers' concept described in the book "Delirious New-York" (R. Koolhaas, 1978) [5], as well as in the work by P.-V. Aureli "The possibility of an absolute architecture" [6].

We are walking around a strange place consisting of fragments of different times and senses which wonderfully form a certain dynamic whole. A sense of anxiety and temporality of what is happening

does not pass, and is only increased by the demonstrated exponents. This is the history of a man who has lost integrity of the world.



Figure 2. Centre of Contemporary Arts of the Prada Foundation in Milan. R. Koolhaas, 2008–2015.

4. Design-environment. Play of contexts and collage of times. Theatre of history

In the Museum of Cultures in Basel, project by J. Herzog & P. de Meuron (2008-2011), the play strategy has been brought to the limit. We find out architectural environment on the verge of kitsch that follows advertising and entertaining tasks. And that was created brilliantly, on a high professional level. It should be noted that Basel is a native town for the architects: they know it in detail. They construct all over the city, sometimes very modest, “silent” objects, for example, the railway Central Signal Box. Recognizable addressing to historical prototypes is also obvious in this object. The overbuilt “roof” is assembled of the generalized archetypes of pitched roofing of the surrounding city (or the old town as such), and the revetment of reflecting tiles, according to the authors, is a reference to the traditional method of facing.

In general, design environment is shaping in the very heart of the city, in the yards of cozy little streets, where habitual meanings are mixed up and shifted. New senses of historical forms give rise to doubts in the truth of the suggested readings: the “roof” becomes an art-object fixing observer’s attention due to light reflection, thus, advertising the museum. In the space compressed from all sides there adjoin (or collide?) various tectonics: framed buildings, pitched roofing, vertical green areas, temporary tent covers against the heat. The environment turns into the collage of morphotypes and collage of times having a sustainable sense only in the artistic dimension – as a theatre of architectural form. It seems it is unlikely that the authors should be reproached for such a free attitude to the context. The resulting object-environment-installation is a very exact reflection of one of today’s most popular versions of the attitude to own history in a light, “popular” presentation and relevant reading thereof. The person here is confused, slightly cynical, but nevertheless is not depressed.

Considering the actual history of identity, we come up closely to the problem of the global and its versions in the behavior and creative thinking of the man, as well as in the city space. Correlation of global and local features is a painful, but at the same time a very promising theme. It is not by chance that the winners of the Pritzker Architecture Prize 2017 became architects Rafael Aranda, Carme Pigem and Ramon Vilalta (RCR Arquitectes) with the constructions of integral “glocal” plane [7]. Anyhow, the question of the share of the historic in the modern remains still open!



Figure 3. Museum of cultures in Basel. J. Herzog and P. de Meuron (2008–2011).

5. New history – the contradictory present

CityLife – a new region in Milan (A. Isozaki, D. Libeskind, Z. Hadid, K. Gustafson, under construction) may be interpreted as sort of an island of the supermodern in the city of a rich history. All buildings here, according to their imagery-plastic resource, do not just deliberately refuse from the context, but they have been accented to be “the author’s” by being named after their architects. Perhaps, the excessive ambitions became the reason for the cautious attitude of the local architectural community to the environment being shaped. Italy has strong protective traditions regarding culture! Yes, this “island” looks like it exists outside of the history, which in its time characterized modernism and its fulfilled and unfulfilled hopes. However everything is not that simple. This is the history of the present: achievements, aspirations and, of course, essential problems.

In the first place, perhaps, one should see transformation of the meaning of identity, which, in the given example, is strongly tied up with the architect’s personality and realized by a series of specific author’s methods (especially, in the residence area by Z. Hadid). The buildings are recognized by the author’s individual aesthetics, but this beauty has already been spread all over the world... Replicated identity? This paradox conceals one of the most complicated stories of the present – about whether the bright and original can survive in the global world. There is no definite answer, but organization of space encourages speculations.

The collision of times is intensified by a town-planning axis laid through the mentioned residence area to extend the old street: by one end, it rests against the towers under construction, at the other end, it is completed by a landmark work for Milan and European culture in the whole – the church Santa Maria delle Grazie. Due to such a dialogue, the new residence area, possessing no historic features, turns out to be included in the sense field of the city on the highest level. Following the “large” architectural part of the city, the environmental design has also become a part of its history (the square of the metro exit recessed below the earth level, a system of communication and services, considered lighting, benches, ecological motives, material and color scheme of coating, water islands-basins and art-objects), solved aesthetically and qualitatively. Perhaps, exactly the environmental architectural-artistic resource today is closer to high measures.



Figure 4. CityLife Hadid Residences in Milan. Z. Hadid. 2013

6. Art-environment. Merging with nature. The story of an artist

Let us turn to another understanding of the history: not in general social terms, but in terms of personal experience of an artist and a man. The story of artist Paul Klee is told in the Centre dedicated to his works in Swiss Bern (R. Piano, 2005). In the first place, the most complete collection of the author's heritage is presented here (paintings and graphic works, sketches, mobile hanging sculptures, puppets for the home theatre, as well as materials and tools), there function an auditorium, a media centre, educational children's studios and halls for temporary exhibitions, as well as all necessary tourist services are available. It is important to mention that the complex itself and detailed, and in a way "monographic" material presented for public have appeared due to the artist's direct heirs' support, who perpetuated, per se, the history of their own family. Let us remind also that the artist was buried not far from the place.

Another turn of the theme is related to the architectural form and artistic image of the construction – a dynamic wave, as if plunging under the earth, calls for motion, and a visitor's eye unintentionally follows its curves and lines of the landscape. It is not by chance that the architect himself associated his work with a "landscape sculpture" or the "spirit of the sculptor" being an integral part of the surrounding mountainous terrain. It seems that clearly understood organic metaphors also tell us about the P. Klee's life, about his artistic priorities – tell us the story of the artist.

We catch a reminder of a special attention to nature and love for animals, as well as key currents of author's artistic-plastic premonitions opening life of the line. "Ingres ordered the rest, I would like to order the movement (new romance)", wrote the artist in 1914 [8, p. 25]. It is a known fact that the master was dealing with graphics for a long time, and in some drawings the search for movement trajectories is fixed ("Snake ways", 1934; "Looking back", 1939). The line pulsates, tangles, returns to the start reminding about the circle of life. We find the like also in P. Klee's statements, for example, in such an illustrative phrase: "The contour encircles, collects the elusive, passing impressions" [7, p. 89]. All these are parts of the artist's whole philosophy described in the work "Elementary theory about creativity": "Shaping is good. Form is bad; form is the end, it is death. Shaping is movement, it is action. Shaping – this is the life" (P. Klee, *Bildnerische Gestaltungslehre*: 1.2 Principielle Ordnung, BG 1.2/78, 08.01.1924) [9].



Figure 5. Centre of Paul Klee in Bern. R. Piano, 2005.

Truly, the desire to be like nature and to be partner of its eternal processes has become a permanent leitmotif of the art of the XX century, including non-figurative one. Artists dreamed and tried to act as the nature itself, to create according to its laws. The presence of living organics in abstract experiments is especially valuable; it preserves ties with the man's nature and does not contradict sense perception and cognition. At the same time, interpretations of organic motives open a range of searches for renewed figurativeness of art and wider – conformable nature new culture of man's existence. Significance of organic intuitions is important in plastic metamorphoses of the form and space of architecture and architectural environment.

7. History of the future – seamless, organic, technologic architectural environment

It is expected and quite natural that organic presentiments are realized in works and in man's real habitat. Evolution shifts in comprehension of the space-time context, in this case, are sometimes quite significant and even provocative. In the training centre Rolex of the Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne (EPFL, Switzerland, 2010), architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa from Japanese bureau SANAA immerse a visitor in special organically developing environment, a single fluid space, where there is no place for the Cartesian coordinate system. Direct copying or imitation of nature is not observed – the object's geometry imitates directly neither the landscape nor individual bionic forms. The architecture gives no doubts that it belongs exactly to the culture of civilization being creation of the man's hands, but, perhaps, the man of the new or who is ready for the new. It seems that the architects offer some kind of “substitution” for nature: a new space-time created by the man thoroughly equipped technically, who dared to create like nature. There is the curved floor under the visitor's feet and the curvilinear ceiling above his head, from all sides surroundings are observed through the glass.

The basic function of the centre is a mediatheque, to be more exact, departments dedicated to various disciplines. The building provides facilities for education, work, and recreation. President of EPFL organization Patrick Aebischer made public the innovation conception of the complex, according to which the educational centre Rolex must become a place where traditional boundaries between disciplines vanish, and mathematicians and engineers work together with neurologists and microtechnicians on development of new technologies and improvement of our life [10]. Actually, everything in this construction neglects boundaries. Only the autonomous climatic mode is an exception. Special significance is given to natural light, which the authors tried to make averaged and distributed most evenly over the entire volume.

The natural question is whether there is any prehistory in this work or whether a fundamentally new environment without history was born here: out of context and out of time? A possible answer may be found in the personality of the authors, in their roots and creative biography. The

establishment of intermediate “semi-spaces” and “grey zones” (terminology of architect Kishō Kurokawa) is an ancient tradition of Japanese architecture and philosophy, suggesting nothing explicit, easily accessible – the essence must remain in the shadows. Bureau SANAA has repeatedly experimented with this kind of “nested” spaces and transparent shells. The object under study presents a completely transitional space between the indoors and outdoors, in whose shadow the desired knowledge is concealed.



Figure 6. Educational centre Rolex of the Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne (EPFL, Switzerland). Architectural bureau SANAA, 2010.

Summarizing the above mentioned aspects, we may see the modern poles in understanding the actual architectural-artistic history of the man through the prism of his habitat. The awareness of the continuing living tradition and the recognition of the artifacts of past eras are on one pole. On the other – the most universal, purified new tectonics, in which there is no place for the former forms and cultural codes of the past – “history of the future”.

8. Conclusion. Actual architectural-artistic creativity in environment: search, doubts, interrelations, tendencies

Thus, having considered various ways of work of architects in the urban environment, motives of professional and public reflection, it is possible to make preliminary conclusions about how the image of environment is conceived in the context of history by means of the man’s consciousness and his activities.

1. It remembers and reveres the history, lives the history and the history continues and lives rightfully in the present.
2. It plays in the theatre of history mixing up senses and shifting reference points, creates “collage” of traditional values and signs.
3. It rejects history and historic memory, formally placing it in new contexts or being forced to use traditional ones.
4. It creates a desired image dictated by immediate needs, which meets requirements and criteria of the society of consumption, advertisement and market.
5. It immerses in the world of absolutes of natural principles.
6. It creates innovative tectonics starting count of the renovated space and time.
7. It turns to the ideals of utopia, pure conception and fictional (virtual) reality.

From the given positions in this article, perhaps, no attention is paid to the final one, since the focus have been made precisely on the realized, implemented projects that have become a habitat for modern man. It should be accepted that conceptual searches and virtual design are strong directions that deserve a separate in-depth study.

Today's history of the artistic image of the environment is written by means of human presence: his creativity and traces of everyday life. At the same time, like any chronicle, it is far from objective truth. This happens not only because of the subjective perspective of perception of any artistic (and not only) message, but also because of the constant desire of our contemporary to partly "invent" his history, assign priorities, have wishful thinking. Thus, ecological or humanistic turns should hardly be considered an accomplished fact. Yes, the need for a creative, integral basis of life is clearly felt, but not fully realized.

The meeting of images in mental reality, i.e. the history of the spiritual world of the man, which continues today, is an implicit and hidden area, almost closed to scientific observation. The environment of our stay is a tangible, materialized border, a meeting place, a point (zone, line) of transition of the sublime, the imaginary into the everyday life and vice versa. We are certainly interested in the aspect of further penetration of such an integral principle in architecture, art and culture in general, the emergence of hybrid, transitional artistic forms on the border of everyday life. Does the category of artistic image survive in this case?

Art, partly retaining its high purpose and imagery, largely entered the culture of leisure and consumption, which caused a kind of "decline" in the level of elitism of plastic language. The authorship was more difficult to transform, entirely no longer belonging to the creator of the work – the artist, the architect or the designer. The main trends of transformation of the figurative field of the architectural-artistic environment were the following directions:

- correlation of realities and meeting of histories (artistic and domestic, real and imagined, present and predicted, myths of socium and personal recollections);
- integration, reinvention and reopening of architypes (in the sphere of social behavior and in the field of plastic forms, and their meanings).

We have touched just a few aspects that are actual for today's architectural-artistic urban space. Trying to answer the questions posed by modern history itself, it is necessary to highlight exactly the creative resource of the habitat as a junction of realities: everyday domestic and artistic. Today, the art itself provides opportunities for this meeting to take place, as it made a decisive step in human life, in many ways different from the previous forms of existence of creativity and creations of the artist.

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