# Form vs. Idea – Reflections on Design

Natalia Baba-Ciosek, and Janusz Stankowski

***Abstract*****—** The scope of this paper is to demonstrate the implementation of the fact that an *idea* is the key to the creation of an architectural form in teaching practice at two Polish universities: Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice and University of Arts in Poznan. The observation is based on selected design studios conducted for Interior Architecture students. Student proposals provide a route from their own research and investigation field to the idea based design process. The introduced design reflections are preceded by intermediate reports, surveys and closing comparative analyses.

***Keywords*****—**Architecture, Design, Form, Idea.

## I. Introduction

Each form is perceived as an embodiment of a certain idea [1]. It would be difficult to disagree with Gropius, who stated that the evolution of an architectural form, and, generally, any form of art, is influenced, first and foremost, by new philosophical ideas, and, secondary, by material and technical means of expression. A new idea requires a new form – leading to the emergence of new values; whereas, in the absence of new ideas, i.e. "the lack of spirit" there comes the time of stagnation and return to neo-styles, to decadence.

According to Ch. Jencks [2], architecture must have a significant point of reference, thus, in the Renaissance it was the Platonic metaphysics, whereas in Ancient Rome – belief in the organization of the Empire. For hundreds of years the development of aesthetics in Europe was inspired and stimulated by Christianity. Modernism referred to leftist ideas (constructivism in the Soviet Russia, futurism in Italy), but its end was not associated with any specific idea. Modern architecture is devoid of ideology – thus it has no definite countenance, but is eclectic, it contains and exposes formalistic tendencies. To refer to Jencks's sarcastic remark: Apart from polite agnosticism, what should our architecture reflect? [2]. Hence, the search for bizarre metaphysics (Post–Modernism ), exposure of technical sciences and technologies or individual aesthetic expressions, and, accordingly, in urban space-absence of countenance, hierarchy, face, transcendental or social ideas - even utopian ideology. Will the form of modern architecture be shaped by the humanist concepts of freedom and democracy, or by attempts at rescuing our world from environmental hazards?

Natalia Baba-Ciosek is with the Faculty of Architecture, Silesian University of Technology, Gliwice, Poland (e-mail: natalia.baba@polsl.pl).

Janusz Stankowski is with the Faculty of Interior Design and Scenography, University of Arts, Poznan, Poland (e-mail: jastankowski@go2.pl).

*Art transforms and alters, but the cause of all its decay or flourish is always a spiritual and moral ideology prevailing at a given period* – as stated by Henry van de Velde in 1898. A form without any references – spiritual, philosophical, religious – is empty. The 20th century witnessed much more explicit, recurrent and direct dependence of artistic forms – their style along with language – on ideology imposed as aesthetic appropriateness. The art of the 20th century may be perceived to have an "international totalitarian style". While quelling authentic culture, totalitarianism offered its poor substitute: national tradition (in form), containing solely the binding doctrines. The occurrence of this rule three times in three different countries: Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany and Communism in Soviet Russia – made it a law. The reflections on totalitarian ideologies are arguments in favor of the necessity of developing unrestraint aesthetic concepts that create new forms inspired by an *idea*. Modern artists look for ideas and reject ideology. The notion of an *idea* involves many fields- not only spiritual and social- but also aesthetic and semantic. "International form", or, one should rather say: "international style" has cleared architecture from meaning. A certain legible code shaped for many centuries has suddenly been rejected but not replaced by any alternative. The *code* entailed the entire form which used to have a *meaning* (for example: a house, temple, town–hall, palace), as well as complicated details which revealed a variety of stories and references to classical culture. The rejection of all decoration (an ornament is a crime!) has led to decoding, disorientation, and resulted in the inability of comprehending culture in all of its dimensions. While endowing modern and future architecture with form, we search for meanings. This search designates a specific azimuth in the art of design, hence:

**The key to the search for a form in architecture, interior design, and, in a broader sense-in art- is an idea, a precise thought about an abstract load of expression that makes it original, individual and meaningful.**

The scope of the paper is to demonstrate the implementation of the above thesis in teaching practice at two Polish universities: Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice and University of Arts in Poznan.

The presented projects completed by students at different levels of their academic education are unitary *ideas* of various nature. Accordingly, they are not constructions of a universal dimension, but only design proposals that are not based on aesthetic speculations, or on the prevailing desire to fit into "fashionable" or "obliging" trends. The projects selected for this presentation contain the authors' individual load of intellectual and artistic expression, personal reflections on a

certain fragment of reality. Sometimes the reality is spiritual, exceptionally poetic, but sometimes it is a reaction to a social problem around and within us, in other cases just pure aesthetic and artistic speculation.

## II. EXHIBITION DESIGN COURSE

The design task allotted to students of the 1st level (B. Arch. course) classes on Exhibition Design was formulated as follows: Detour exhibition in a module of a 20 – foot transport container with the dimensions: 6.1 x 2.4 x 2.6 m. The exhibition was supposed to be focused on the promotion of a region, city, town, university, it could also render a historical presentation or exposure of a carefully selected social problem. The students undertook different current social issues, including: obesity, alcoholism, addiction to computers and other digital media, autism perceived as an illness that deceives human senses, military use of children, and many other searing social issues.

Selected examples:

### *A. Project: Milosz*

The exhibition promoted Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish poet, Nobel Prize winner in the field of literature in 1980. The author used four containers combined into a quadrangle, with a small patio in the middle of it. Upon the consultation with experts (two literature analysts and professors at The University of Poznan in memorial of Adam Mickiewicz) the essential and predominant features of Milosz's poetic output were defined: magical realism, contradiction, existentialism, religiousness, metaphysics. The author of the exhibition made an attempt at expressing these features in the form of drawings. The drawings, composed on the surrounding walls (exterior) and the ceiling, were formally unified and constituted the background for the projection of holograms in space- emerging and vanishing quotations from Milosz's poetry in different languages, set against the context of nature- green grass of the patio, above which the "*WORD*" in all known languages of the world was put on view.


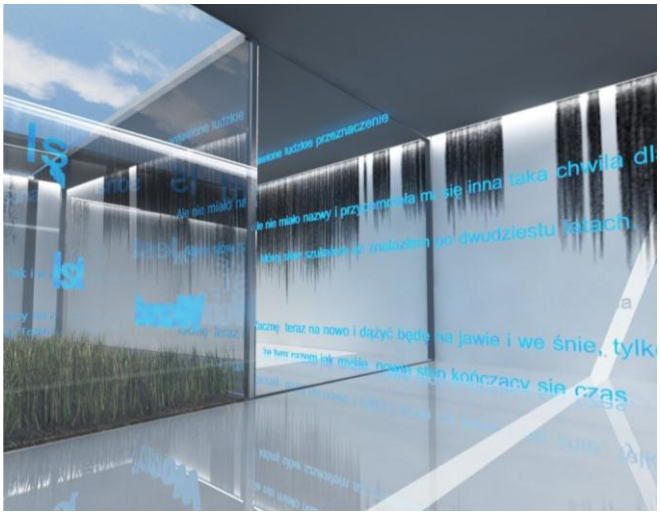

Fig. 1 Marta Brennenstuhl, exhibition: Milosz

### *B. Project: Anorexia*

The student who undertook this issue conducted a very in – depth analysis which resulted in an approach from a different perspective. The concept of presenting the essence of this illness to trigger public sensitivity involved dramatic compilations of sick women against the background of Salvador Dali's paintings. Thus, in a very discreet and personal way she looked at the perception and assessment of human body. The changing perspective of the different definitions presented diverse opportunities for their perception and evaluation. The resulting impressions may be either positive or utterly negative. The student followed the task by organizing an exhibition focused on a direct presentation of this health problem, but also on a wide spectrum of eating disorders as perceived and judged in view of anorexia [3]

Fig. 2 Daria Majka, exhibition: Anorexia

*C. Project3: Child Soldiers*

The exhibition was devoted to a hard issue of military use of children. In a certain perverse manner, the author showed a rainbow–like, joyful world of childhood on the exterior walls of the exhibition, drawing visitors to the interior to confront them with the world of child soldiers. The exhibition space was organized in a simple way, with minimal use of means of artistic expression. The entire structure consisted of two joint containers that held the exhibition. Such explicit and suggestive manner of presenting the *idea* was the right thing to do – the interior central exhibition space contained a cube that constituted a 3D map, spotting the areas where military use of children occurred very frequently. The sticking out gun barrels acted as binoculars through which the visitors could see the pictures of child soldiers.


Fig. 3 Agnieszka Zajac, exhibition: Child Soldiers

*D. Project: Slow Down*

The author contested our modern life-style – excess hurry, unreflective chase for the mirage of "normality", imperatives of "standards" – chiefly material – which people strife to follow at any cost. The exhibition consisted of three modules composed linearly and constituting a specific "passage" inside which everything was different (read: normal) – acoustics, color-lines, climate, scent.


Fig. 4 Wiktoria Mrozek, exhibition: Slow Down

## III. Interior And Architectural Design Course

The classes run at the 1st level (B. Arch. course) are propedeutics in architecture. Students are expected to find good solutions for some specified functions: commerce, services, catering, housing.

At the 2nd level (M. Arch. course) the assigned tasks are in-depth studies. Proper solutions of certain functions (assuming that most of the buildings or facilities are multi – functional) give the grounds for reflections on an architectural form; whereas the form is the response to the formulated task. In conclusion, the main focus is not on specific design tasks but on solving *ideational* issues, to give opportunities, or a starting point, for more profound deliberations. Therefore, the tasks are formulated in relation to a specific problem, instead of a specific building or facility and its functional program. The issues taken into consideration include: ecology in architecture, care for cultural heritage and historical values, sacral architecture – a point of reference in the context of universal values integrating the multi-threading and current changes in the perception of sacral space.

Selected examples:

*A. Project: Eco*

*Eco–architecture* – creation of an architectural form in consideration of environmentally – friendly attitudes (energy – efficiency, alternative energy sources, waste separation, etc.). The environmental protection issues have lately become popular, or even key qualities in the field of interest of design architects. Acquisition of water from rain or snow falls, use of alternative energy sources, waste separation, effective handing of materials – these are factors that may (or should rather?) have a decisive influence on modern architecture. Unfortunately, the form of such architecture renders solutions that are not cohesive or complementary, but remain only within the range of "modern" aesthetics, from modernist provenance of "minimalism" (which is an extremely imprecise notion that resists explicit classification) to high – tech. Just as every generation before us, we keep looking for the face – form – of modern architecture, and one of the *ideas* that drive this search is the protection of the environment. The presented

projects (completed by several authors) were drawing and spatial studies of forms that "react" to the wind, water flows, waves, sun – solutions to harness and utilise these elements.

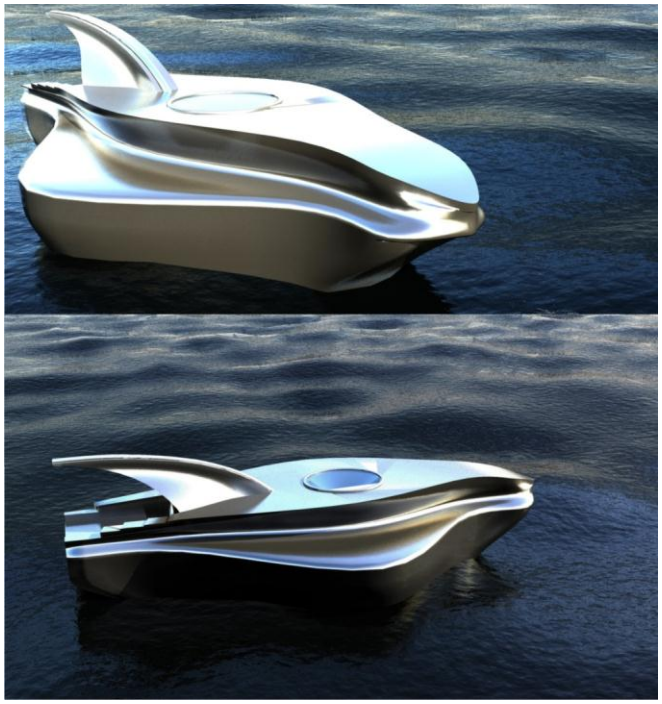

Fig. 5 Agnieszka Sobolewska, Holiday House on water

*B. Project: Primum non nocere*

The protection of the existing cultural, social and natural values is considered against the background of shaping and increasing students sensitivity to pro-environmental issues. *Primum non nocere – first and foremost, do not do any harm*. This *idea* is derived from the conditions of visually degraded environmental and its social impact, reaching beyond aesthetic digressions. The phenomenon of visual chaos, undoubtedly, exerts big influence on our psychical and psychological health. Academic and scientific circles are faced with a serious task of ordering all activities and phenomena that occur in the space that surrounds us. In Poland, the visual degradation of the natural scenery and cultural landscape evokes an urgent need for interference and becomes a soaring social problem. The visual changes in space – the space regarded as an asset that is limited and requires protection by the society – should be subordinated to some principles that should be articulated, observed and subjected to social control. The mechanisms that have already been used in other countries should be a benchmark for activities to be undertaken in Poland. Nevertheless, education of the society – at any and every level – is of crucial importance, and, in particular at universities. Accordingly, shaping students' attitudes towards the protection of the natural environment, respect of national, historical, and cultural heritage is essential, and, in consequence, shall disseminate a humanistic approach to making design decisions and increase the awareness of the social effects of applied architectural solutions.

The awareness of the consequences of architectural activities in space is a cornerstone of the profile of graduates from our Faculty of Architecture. The projects discussed in the paper are examples of the students' care and respect for the existing spatial context to such degree that makes it possible to regard their attempts as an *idea* – as reflected in the following exemplary projects :

1) Holiday housing unit in the forest- the architectural form is a reference to a pine cone, as pines are trees typical for Polish forests.
2) Holiday housing unit located in the scenery of the coast beaches on "Helski" Peninsula (Northern Poland).
3) Housing unit situated in the rural scenery, typical for "Wielkopolska" region in Poland.

Fig. 6 Joanna Szawlowska, House on the sand dune

*C. Project: Contemplation*

The project is a part of a M. Arch. thesis and of the collection entitled: *Contemplation*, focused on the concept of harmonizing the historical values (the ruins of the Radlin castle), cultural values (local graveyard) and the scenery with a new functional program. The author proposed an interesting symbiosis of the sacral function (graveyard chapel) with the museum function – pertaining to the history of the town and the castle and containing an archeological exhibition. The author's reticence, or even certain austerity in the architectural form, selected materials and colors is worth-noticing.

Another *ideational* project representing the same collection as an attempt at finding a universal sacral form that would contain a legible sign of the Sacrum – Universum. This multi-threading project was consulted with representatives of various religious creeds and won their approval. The project is a shining zone which, in itself, is a legible sign of the Universum, and the applied means of artistic expression appeal to different cultures and religious denominations: the light, whiteness, flame, space.

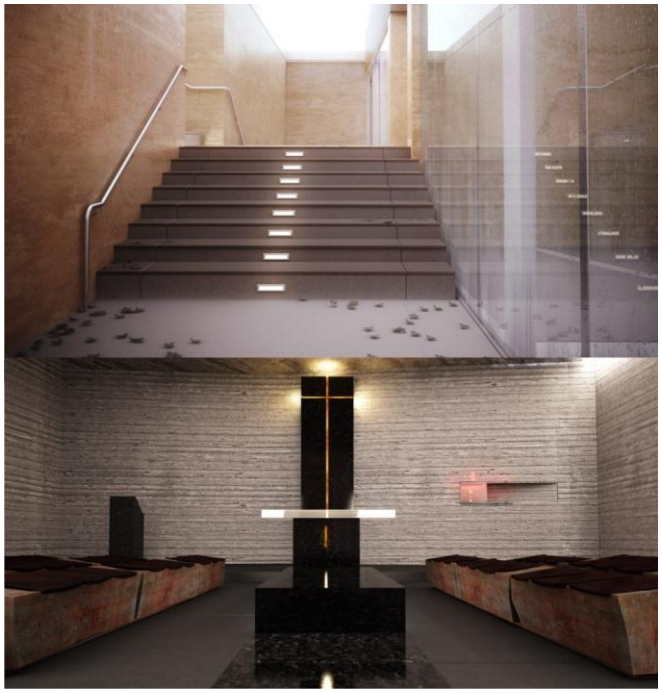

Fig. 7 Marta Brennenstuhl, Contemplation

The presented projects, the messages that they convey, their emotional charge and manner of comprehending and interpreting the world that surrounds us, as well as their artistic workshop, are proof of the authors' commitment and ability of making independent, often unpopular choices, and, last but not least, their growing design maturity. The awareness of the value of an *idea* in art, the idea that becomes a specific organizer of all activities concerning the form, designates the proper direction in the discussed teaching model. It is also interesting to observe the choice of the issues selected by the students. Thanks to the opportunities for making independent decisions, searching for the design topics that correspond to their interests, the students are given a chance to develop their individual cognitive tools and to expand their capacity to undertake more and more complex design tasks.

## IV. Conclusion

The presented exemplary projects completed by students of two Polish universities seem to illustrate, in a sufficient manner, the thesis that an *idea* is the key to the creation of an architectural form. This thesis was formulated in the assumptions adopted in the teaching syllabus for the study discipline of Interior Architectural Design. One of the principles of the syllabus states explicitly: Architecture is an art searching for the state of equilibrium – between the spirit and the matter, the form, function and structure, the existing space and a new *idea*. All these features make up the architectural form. However, the most important quality of the proposed educational approach and teaching model is the shift from task–oriented and substantive load to a wider issue–oriented attitude, which stimulates students' individual development, promotes profound insight into their fields of interest, and creation of their own designer personality. While creating architectural forms we always make conscious choices, bearing in our minds that we are responsible for the space that has been given to our disposal, the space that is our common good. We deliberately refer to classical values, bring back some long–forgotten notions, categories and criteria, among which *beauty* in its all variety is crucial.

We attempt to ensure that design works of future graduates –architects are ARTISTIC CREATIONS, expressions not subordinated to traditional and, unfortunately assumed division into *fine/pure arts* and *utility arts*.

## References

[1] W. Gropius, *The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus*, 1923, Trans. H. Bayer. reprinted in Art in Theory: 1900-2000. ed. Harrison and Wood pp. 309-314

[2] Ch. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Rizzoli; 6th edition, 1991

[3] N. Baba-Ciosek, A. Ciosek, *To design by recognizing: new approach*. In Proceedings of the Conference Knowing (by) Designing at LUCA, Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Brussels, 2013

**Natalia Baba-Ciosek** is an Associate Professor (Ph.D. and post-doctoral thesis in Interior Architecture). She is a Head of Department of Fine Arts and Design at Faculty of Architecture, Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice and also a Head of Post Graduate Studies in Interior Architecture and Design. She is a member of ZPAP The Association of Polish Artists and Designers in the field of Interior Design.

**Janusz Stankowski** is a full time Professor (Interior Architecture) at Faculty of Interior Design and Scenography, University of Arts in Poznan and Faculty of Architecture, Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice. He is a former Dean of Faculty of Architecture and Design at University of Arts in Poznan. He is a member of ZPAP The Association of Polish Artists and Designers in the field of Interior Design.