

The Beauty of Skylight

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Abstract. It is commonly claimed that the modern secularized society worships consumption and fetishism of things and that consumerism has become a substitute to religion. Is that still true? Is our society really nonreligious? Has not secularization exceeded the stage of atheism? It might not need being defined to the old religion any more. Maybe again without remorse the new paganism indulges, for its faith is not ashamed. How are these trends reflected in architecture?

The paper presents details of a particular architectural work - skylight in an the Avion shopping center (Ostrava), as a case study, which analyzed and interpreted with help two opposite principles. It is also said that a hypermarket (English only knows the word: supermarket.) became a temple of consumerism. Temples traditionally used to have specific lighting - more of chiaroscuro. Windows allowed only little sunlight to enter, artificial light was imperfect. On to contrary a hypermarket has no windows - and the artificial light is even of better quality than the daylight. Still there is a skylight in a building of a shopping center. This modern temple is open to the sky, lets sunshine enter into the own inner. The skylight is shaped as a pyramid. Through skylight tradition meets with new practice: a popular symbol of free Masons is reinterpreted by nowadays builder/designer - steel rods have inverted bearing system, going from thin to thick profile. Skylight refers to himself - connects the earthly closed space with the air vertical (strengthens the axis mundi). It is an archaic work or on the contrary postmodern anachronistic?

Introduction

The paper wants to point out opportunities of a philosophical and a theoretical interpretation of a seemingly simple part of a utilitarian building Avion – a shopping center - a roof skylight. Its peculiar structure by originality in both layout (the opposite tectonics) and processing (beam rods opposite technology) [1] really points on itself – on a real as well as a symbolic celestial horizon.

Wider context of shopping centers

When turning into the 21st century social sciences begin to talk about the necessity of reevaluation of the rethink the paradigm of secularization, even the term "post-secular society" started to be used [2]. That meant that the secularization (loss of religion, loss of mythology, loss of spirituality and metaphysical dimension) as the classical heritage of the enlightenment was losing its general understanding and acceptance. One of the manifestations of the postmodern turn is that while rejecting the deification of totalizing modern understanding, man is not afraid of irrationality, or even spirituality. New religiosity and spirituality is one of the salient features of postmodern times. But it is another religiosity than the one in pre modern times. Post-secular is a society also because under the conditions of globalization and multicultural mixing it is made up of a significant segment of immigrants from yet classic religious environment. We will therefore have to get used to the fact that religious beliefs are again - at least for someone - important and that they become part of politics, social life and public space. Also, even non-religious people are (again) sensitive to the spiritual dimension and their postmodern life absorbed an adapted pre modern religious gear (tradition), though in all sorts of misshapen or caricatured form (pseudo-, quasi-, para-).

Religiosity and spirituality in a post-secular society serves surely also to a desperate search for identity, lost somewhere in the process of postmodern distraction, fragmentation and individualization. One manifestation of this panic are tendencies to general exaggeration

(overreaction) - gestures, emotions, the search for truth, as we see them in for example in organizing world events, all kinds of exhibitions, malls, buildings, sporting and cultural events (e.g. China). Searching for a lost identity, personal as well as collective, leads even to force highlighting of differences and peculiarities. This social hysteria describes among others the Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský living in Italy (*Post-secular Society II and Four Forms of Chaos*, 2010).

One of the many manifestations of this mental stress in post-secular society can be also a striking popularity of shopping centers, supermarkets, shopping malls, which cannot be explained simply by economic and consumer laws. The phenomenon of hypermarkets and shopping centers is already settled into a separate discipline (see, eg, *Journal of Shopping Center Research*), in which economists, sociologists, anthropologists, architects, engineers and project managers deal with all aspects of modern temples of consumerism and substitutes to paradise [3]. Likewise a discipline about consumer mentality and culture (see, eg, *Journal of Consumer Research*) was established, as a today's hedonistic substitute to former religious devotion.

Is it really necessary to be ashamed for the shopping centers? It is a fact that is difficult to trace the authors of such buildings; the designer-architects are hiding their share in a project or feeling ashamed for being connected to a shopping center. Are we ashamed for designing garages, parking lots or commercial warehouse storage zones? As we can see in reality, it is possible to design a good of quality and nice shopping center, successful examples as follow: Černý Most in Prague (Benoy), Vaňkovka in Brno (Hrůša et al.), Breda in Opava (Šafer + Hájek) or City Plaza and Plaza 66 in Shanghai (KPF + ECADI), there are also good smaller shopping centers in Austria and Germany. From that we can see the issue is the quality of the architectural design, well managed object scale of the functional plans, its material and technical processing to the very last architectural, technical detail with good quality of materials and their further sustainability. Although people are ashamed for their shopping mania for consumerist lifestyle, even for dedicating time to what the French philosophers call *flânerie* (meandering through the city and staring at shop windows) and psychologists describe as effect of “windows shopping” (latent dreaming about what a man could have if he could afford it).

Let's admit, that shopping centers are modern temples of consumerism and what people indulge in there bears characteristics of worship, liturgy. Some shopping malls have actual proportions of a temple; we can analyze it using geometry, spatial configuration, composition, order, interior views, using elements such as landscape, paintings, portals, and specific ways of lighting [4]. All this is true even though these buildings are also quite a utilitarian, pragmatic puzzle that fulfills meaningfully planned requirements about meters square and an appropriate amount of money earned, as it is clear from the Enlightenment spirit of modernism and its calculating rationality. It is high mathematics and money game. And to this pragmatic scheme comes a city planner and architect [5], who in addition to technical, normative knowledge has yet to add something to appeal on visitors and draw inside, into the vortex of mysterious shopping games, getting lost and wasting money, as well as reaching ecstasy, pleasure and the illusion of a new, higher life. Maybe it's a religion. But in any case it is the opium, aptly described by Marx. Devotion, intoxication, self-crossover, merging with the higher, ideal, pure - that's what philosophers like Plato, Kant and Heidegger described as desirable. Effectiveness and beauty are not mutually exclusive. It may be a detail or whole, exceptional phenomenon or elegance of harmony, but even on a shopping center can be found something that can be interpreted as a sovereign act of culture, not just of nature (consumer need).



Fig. 1: Skylight today, detail of the interior (photo: Vendula Šafářová)

Fig. 2: Skylight in the process of building construction, temple view (photo: Martin Krejsa)

A pyramid as a skylight?

The construction of the skylight was designed in the summer of 2007 as a part of the support system of the shopping center. The supporting steel structure of the pyramid-shaped skylight is made up of a space frame, which is supported around the perimeter by a system of fixed articulated linkages. The skylight has a symmetrical triangular floor plan with 36.3 m per side and is mounted on a support system of reinforced concrete structures. Rods structure consists of rolled sections with graded dimensions of IPE 140 to IPE 300. The author of the static calculation was trying to optimize the design of cross-sections of individual members with regard to the efficiency of the design, but also the aesthetic impression of the support system. Part of the support system is cross-bracing of the wind logs with a diameter of 10 mm, capturing the effects of horizontal wind, which was placed in the center of each side of the skylights. [1]

The figure (picture) of the skylight construction shows that the space has a composition, tectonics of a simple, rational, neo pragmatic design as a temple. It's an unusual idea, but if the observer does not know that it's an unfinished shopping center, this architecture scene can be perceived as a temple interior space. In modern European history, the architecture of pyramid shape was used by the Chinese –American architect I. M. Pei in Le Grande Louvre, herewith he sealed in the mental map and image of the city of Paris a new symbol and a new value for Paris. Pyramid serves as a symbolic entrance into the world gallery and simultaneously illuminates its underground space. The skylight in Avion shopping center is a three-sided pyramid with shorter height than side length and therefore it loses its essence of a pyramid, still similarities and intension what we can clearly observe and describe. The question is, what would happen, if the skylight was much higher than now and the pyramid shape was inserted radically to the bottom of the interior, than public could feel a real pyramid there. In such case a spatial composition would have probably moved further as well as the subsequent rich emotions and experiences formed by this rich interior space.

Summary – Quality

Postmodernism rejected the enlightenment mannerisms of functionalism as boring sexless boxes without a spirit of comfort, and welcomed the opposite, full of feelings and emotions, religious, archaic, anachronistic, organic shapes and symbols. Successful Mannerist eclecticism was created-postmodernism, which accelerated in deconstruction and minimalism, and on the other hand in neo pragmatism.

Architect Robert Venturi with his team created slight chaos in the architecture reality as well as theory when they began to teach according to Las Vegas, and further searched for new phenomena, and thus have refined in theory of opposites in architecture (Contradiction in Architecture). Architect Rem Koolhaas shifted and discredited the whole postmodernist discourse by his statement Fuck the Context. How these problems will solve a contemporary architect designing at the time of

consumerism, in his own philosophy? There are a few ways to increase the quality of space - work done with perfection, usage of good quality materials, innovative structures as here mentioned skylight. Pushing the boundaries of technology, technical sciences and aesthetic perception and philosophical thoughts of architecture and public space is the goal. It is important to try to destroy complex prejudices about shopping centers in general. The triangular skylight breaks the sameness of utilitarian forms of air cubic structures, but simultaneously does not conceal its technical skeleton and is not ashamed of its weight, points upward, emphasizes the verticality, thus acting against the award, which has a vision to get back to civil concerns (which are paradoxically pleasure too). Space for hope and a room to stop and breathe, slow down, exempt from the compulsive actions and addictions in life are created. Although it's only a contemporary pleasure, it makes you free from the ecstatic feeling of a race and accelerating life out there.



Fig. 3: Vertical skylight, overhead lighting, spirituality and people (photo: Vendula Šafářová)

Fig. 4: Avion Shopping Centre, Ostrava (photo: Panoramio)

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