

The Architecture of Happiness, or a Short History of the Polish “Gargamel”

Piotr Marciniak

On one of the popular websites dedicated to architecture in Poland and around the world, a separate thread was started regarding the phenomenon called “Gargamelism.”¹ As the discussion developed there even appeared a definition developed by one of the online users who wrote: “But, as the name itself suggests, a Gargamel is the distortion of the idea of a palace or a small castle [...] it is the distortion of historicizing architecture [...] these are pseudo-fortresses or pseudo-villas, generally speaking – buildings with pinnacles, cheap mock-ups for the nouveau riche that terrify with their shoddiness [...] and so on.”²

¹ Comp. <http://www.skyscrapercity.com>, *the thread* [Poland] “Gargamele i kaszaloty” (12.10.2011).

² The definition written by the online user using the nickname “marns” in 2003, comp: <http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=967926&page=2> (15.10.2011).

This is how an anonymous member of the public and a critic of architecture defined the framework for everything that is associated with pretentious and exaggerated buildings imitating historical forms. The historical continuity and preservation of culture, as well as sentiments and a need to identify with the financial elites, are all the driving forces behind building magnificent residences. They also serve as signposts along the path to settling in a palace, a manor house or eventually in a castle. And while the first two of these archetypes seem historically justified, the form of a castle naturally raises doubts. Historically speaking, a castle is made up of elements of defense and residential buildings that together form a fortified complex. Originally it was the center of a nobleman's power and the structure played an important defensive role. Of course the castles served as the noblemen's or knights' residences, but the main purpose for which they were erected was to protect the local territory.³ The defensive function of the castle was combined with its residential and economic purposes. The origins of the castle go back to the Middle Ages but the establishment and development of the modern castle was to a large extent dependent on social and economic change in this part of Europe. The development of the agricultural industry based on serfdom helped the nobility (who were gradually transforming into the landed gentry) become rich and happened at the expense of the cities' development. On the south-western borderlands of Poland, huge estates of the magnates were established

³ B. Guerquin, *Zamki w Polsce*, Warsaw 1974, p.15.

which began having a significant influence on the economy of the Polish Republic. The development of those *latifundia* made it necessary to erect new residences and centers of administration. Since the south-eastern borders were under the constant threat of the Mongol invasion, the builders were forced to erect defensive fortifications.⁴ It must have been around that time that the image of the magnate's seat – a vast and sumptuous, yet at the same time fortified, building complex – first appears in the public consciousness and becomes reinforced with time.

The change in both building techniques and military doctrine led to the end of the castle in the form of a fortified feudal residence. As a consequence, castles went through consecutive redevelopments, losing their defensive functions in the process. A great example of this can be the Royal Castle in Warsaw whose redevelopment in the 16th to 17th centuries resulted in the structure completely abandoning its defensive character and keeping only its representative functions. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries castle owners started leaving their residences in large numbers, which made the latter fall into ruin and sink into oblivion. The abandoned castles became romantic ruins that could easily be depicted in emotional pictures and other images that raised sentiments and nostalgia for the past. Castles situated within the city walls completely changed their function; some of them were turned into city residences. In time, members of other

⁴ Ibidem, p.57.

social classes – like the bourgeoisie – aspired to inhabit them. While in the countryside the manor house or the palace was a natural architectural model to follow, in the cities the castle could also be a source of inspiration.

It was only in the 19th century that the first attempts at adapting the abandoned castles to new needs took place. At the same time, under the influence of a French architect and architectural scholar named Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, a more rationalistic approach to the preserved monuments of history developed. This was one of the reasons why the castles in the Greater Poland region belonging to the Działyński family went through a thorough redevelopment: the castle in Kórnik was redeveloped in a neo-gothic fashion with oriental influences and the one in Gołuchów gained the form of a French Renaissance castle.

Regardless of the changing fortunes of the old defensive residences, at the turn of the 19th century an historical style of decor became almost obligatory form for the castle: starting with the Polish aristocracy residences, such as – dating as far back as the 16th century – the castle of the Radziwiłł family in Ołyka that was redeveloped by Zygmunt Gorgolewski, to the residential architecture of the Warsaw bourgeoisie like the villa in Turczynek near Milanówek designed by Dawid Lande to “the triumph of native tradition” in the form of a “castle-like” palace belonging to the Kurantowski family in Gościeszyn. Of course, it has to be clearly stated at that point that this sentiment

for native architectural forms clearly aimed at developing the manor house style, which gained common acceptance at the turn of the 20th century and was prevailing during the interwar period.⁵ It has to also be stressed that most of those residences were country houses. It was the 20th century which brought a renewed interest in castle architecture. In 1910, the imperial residence for Wilhelm II designed by Franz Schwesien was built in Poznań. It was erected in the form of a medieval *pfalz* (a palace) that was supposed to manifest the German control over the cradle of Polish statehood.⁶ To the Polish people the castle became a symbol of the continuity of government and national tradition, just like the castle on Wawel Hill in Kraków or the Royal Castle in Warsaw – meticulously restored after World War II.

The form of a castle still appeals today. It conveys various meanings through both its dimensions and architectural form, as well as the residential architecture. Specifically in Anglo-Saxon countries, traditionalism as a form of aesthetic continuum was, and still is, an incredibly popular and lasting trend. Similarly in interwar Poland, traditionalism forever became an inherent part of the Polish architectural reality. It could not count on comprehension or popularity in the post-war period due to forced aesthetics of social realism and modernism – understood as the defiance of the communist regime. At the beginning of the 1980's, along with the post-modernistic trends in archi-

⁵ T.S. Jaroszewski, among others, writes extensively about the abovementioned problems in *Od klasycyzmu do nowoczesności* (From Classicism to Modernity), Warsaw 1996.

⁶ J. Pazder, *Zamek cesarski*, Poznań 2010, p. 15.

ecture, came the fascination of architects for history, later followed by a wider circle of audiences. That fascination had been certainly greatly influenced by the ideas of an American architect named Robert Venturi, who propagated complexity and contradiction in architecture.⁷ A series of books also translated into Polish by a well-known architect and theoretician named Charles Jencks helped introduce those ideas among both the populace and the country's elites. References to historical architectural styles, treated as a paraphrase, a pastiche, or an element of the new eclecticism easily entered everyday language becoming the avant-garde aesthetics that was employed by the most renowned architects designing in the post-modernist fashion such as Tomasz Turczynowicz.

After 1989 the architects turning to the aesthetics of historicism as well as those representing a style called New National Romanticism gained recognition and popularity. Today a group of the most affluent members of the middle class seem to be safeguarding these traditions in their efforts to emphasize their high social status at any cost by inhabiting residences that resemble traditional palaces or castles. Traditionally, people who aspire to be part of the social elites have always followed historically well-established architectural patterns in terms of their residences. What is curious in this case is that it is usually those unable to boast either aristocratic roots or titles of nobility who do so.

⁷ One of the most important books of the past century comprises Venturi's considerations on complexity and contradiction (R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, 1966)

Architecture has always been a reflection of its period but it has also shown the relation between the present and the legacy of the past. The erection of castles is an example of a broader trend manifesting itself by the return to historical stylistic forms and by reaching for traditional materials and solutions. The architecturally historical and stylistic decor (not only in case of the castle but also the manor house or the palace) is a convenient pretext to manifest – often ostentatiously – one’s attachment to the past. For the power of attachment (even if it is exaggerated) is enormous and is best illustrated by historical inspirations behind many examples of public architecture built throughout the 19th and even well into the 20th centuries. The most amazing example of this can be seen in the Neuschwanstein (or the New Swan Stone) – a castle built on the gorge of the Poellat River in the Bavarian and Tirol Alps. This utopian vision carried out from 1869 by Ludwig II of Bavaria (sometimes called the Mad King) after many years became one of the most valuable tourist treasures of Bavaria that is visited by thousands of tourists each year. The power of the dream and the unique architectural vision a while later became an inspiration for the fairy tale Disneyland built on the outskirts of Paris.

As a matter of fact, more and more castle-like objects, both in public and private building sectors, are appearing. One of the most spectacular examples of recent years is certainly the headquarters of the Polish public television on Woronicza Street in Warsaw, designed by Czesław Bielecki. It was an intentional reference to aesthetic plu-

ralism and complexity⁸ on the part of the design's author, yet those who comment on his work tend to compare the building to the Tower of Babel,⁹ or precisely a castle – the forms of which are supposed to “uplift” the television's public mission.

The most questionable castle project over the past few years has been a controversial restoration, or to be more precise, expansion (or even creation) of the King Przemysław Castle in Poznań. The Gothic-Renaissance vision designed by Witold Milewski (incidentally, one of the co-authors of the most well-known examples of modernistic architecture from the 1960's and 70's in Poznań) divided both expert circles and public opinion on the historical truth and usefulness of building objects in historically-stylized architectural form.

Aside from public service buildings, we can also note historical references willingly and frequently used in residential projects. An explicit example of the abovementioned trends are the houses of the members of the Polish Roma population. The architecture of the “Polish Roma group” has never made references to ludic forms, to traditional regional architecture, or to proletarian houses. It has always reached for “higher” patterns – those adopted by more affluent groups that enjoy greater prestige and

⁸ Bielcki writes that eclecticism is “the freedom of choice, composition, and interpretation of the historical legacy” as well as the possibility to adapt “the universal model of culture to one's own creative models”, see Cz. Bielecki, *Więcej niż architektura. Pochwała eklektyzmu*, Warsaw 2005.

⁹ G. Stiasny, “Nowa siedziba TVP – awangarda czy bubel” see: http://www.se.pl/wydarzenia/ciekawostki/siedziba-tvpawangarda-czy-bubel_98872.html (15.10.2011).

higher status in the society. Forced to settle down permanently, the Roma looked for references in high culture – hence the various forms adopted by them include such patterns as manor houses, palaces, city villas, or precisely – castles.¹⁰ What re-appears in those buildings is the latitude in adapting original architectural elements in complete disregard of the principle that every part of the structure is subordinate to the overall aesthetic concept. It aims both at showing off material status as well as the possibilities and rights connected with ethnic identity. In a world filled with threats, where one lives with a feeling of social alienation, a reference like that becomes very attractive. Having power, which in today's world is manifested through money, can be stressed by architectural forms that provide the feeling of absolute security.

The awareness of one's own wealth and a willingness to build a fairy-tale land of one's own results in the search of such forms that would satisfy one's ego, even at the expense of being condemned to social ostracism.¹¹ And this by no means is the domain of ethnic minorities. For some in the Polish middle-class, the manor house has become the current model for a home. For those aspiring to higher social classes, the castle has become the dream residence. Evoking these forms as residential dwellings is meant to show the high aspirations of the owners who often draw their inspiration from magazines or TV. Such aspirations provide motivation to build new residences whose historicism allows the owners to find a sense of identity and be-

¹⁰ P. Marciniak, "Architektura polskich Cyganów", *Czas Kultury* 5-6/2001, pp. 35-44.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

longing and help those people of different social and professional backgrounds compensate for their psychological need of appreciation.

It is only natural that in the discussion on architecture a question about the boundaries of good taste and kitsch should appear.¹² Designing homes for individual customers has always carried (and probably always will) a direct risk of giving in to tastes that are not of the highest order. Towers and pinnacles, attics, cornices, and ornaments or fairy-tale combinations close to the richness of the Middle East architecture are all inspired by the new owners' visions. They are driven by those Gombrowicz-like prototypes so typical of the bourgeoisie culture and a very distinct feature is the ornament used in exaggeration. It would be unfair to call into question the use of past treasures. In truth, the shape of one's house is an attempt at aestheticizing one's aspirations, likings and desires – often hidden yet at the same time exposed, well-visible and certainly exaggerated. What is kitschy is no doubt the lack of authenticity, transferring elements, symbols and meanings from the architecture of the highest quality or adjusting trends and innovative and outstanding works to the level and possibilities of the local – not always talented – authors. Hence, neo-styles are kitschy since their authors take over already well-established artistic patterns as the basis for their own creations. Front facades made from broken plates, oddly shaped roofs, Gargamel-like castle-houses, a myriad of variants of Polish manor houses – all these

¹² See: P. Marciniak, *op.cit.*

are attempts at “uplifting” architecture and making it different than it is in reality. And the post-modernistic ambiguity, the willingness to encode meanings and at the same time make them clear, an attempt at creating order in a world of aesthetic chaos – all this could lead to considerable exaggeration.¹³

Is the attachment to tradition then condemned to social ostracism? After all, the Polish landed gentry and intelligentsia during the interwar period took great and unceasing care to make the manor house (as well as the whole traditional architecture) perceived as a symbol of what is the best and most refined.¹⁴ Of course, the problem lies in the quality of architecture created by the architects who are not always high-class specialists. Another problematic question is the extent to which architecture is supposed to reflect the essence of the period to which it belongs.

Why do castles, palaces, and Gargamels raise such emotions then? After all in Anglo-Saxon countries on every corner one can come across residences full of historical references. It is difficult to disagree with the opinion of Hermann Muthesius who claimed that: “the true value of architecture is completely independent of the matter of style.”¹⁵

¹³ P. Marciniak, “Architektura i kicz. Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej”, *Czasopismo Techniczne* no. 8/2003, Kraków, pp.230-235.

¹⁴ T.S. Jaroszewski, *Od klasycyzmu do nowoczesności* (From Classicism to Modernity), Warsaw 1996, p.244

¹⁵ After: Z. Tołłoczko, *Sen architekta, czyli o historii i historyzmie architektury XIX i XX wieku*, Kraków 2002, p.5.

Bruce Goff, an eminent American architect working in the middle of the 20th century¹⁶ who was self-taught, designed such amazing objects as the Turkey House and the Umbrella House. His residences have become an inherent part of the American architectural landscape being an original inspiration for many other artists. Why then should a house in the form of a castle raise such high emotions? The already mentioned eminent theoretician of architecture, Charles Jencks, gives an answer: “After all it is the Midwest [of the US] where the Vitruvian principles do not apply and the architecture of free association has always been appreciated.”¹⁷ Europe, on the other hand, relies on the abovementioned principles described by Vitruvius, whose key elements have for centuries been stability, functionality and beauty.

Translated by Agnieszka Rubka-Nimz

¹⁶ Also called the angel of kitsch

¹⁷ Ch. Jencks, *Architektura późnego modernizmu* (The Architecture of Late Modernism), Warsaw 1989, p.160