

ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE FOR SCULPTORS “THE CONSTRUCTION” BY PAVEL KOICHEV

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By having the world renowned sculptor Pavel Koichev, Bulgaria has a thinker, a conceptualist and an experimenter. On 18th Oct. 2008, in the Vladovtsi quarter of the village of Ossikovitsa, “The Construction” - an exhibition as well as a building - was opened. The investor of the project is Miroslav Mihailov and the contractor – Krassimir Karaivanov, together with the Rhodope craftsmen. “The Construction Documentation” is an author’s miniature model of the scale of 1:10. The built-up area comprises approximately 110 sq. m. and the spread out area – approximately 360 sq. m.

I call this plastic work of art a “symbol-house” in order to share my view that the dispute about the purity of the genre and the professional specialization when referring to “The Construction” by the sculptor Pavel Koichev is a scholastic one. I also believe that the sculptor has realized a series of outstanding exhibitions interpreting Architecture as a separate theme, and has made decisive steps within the sphere of architectural language itself. Those exhibitions include: “The Cloister” (2001), “The City” (2004), “The Houses, the Summer and the Sea” (2005), “A Haughty Stroll” (2006).

There are solid grounds to believe that the ability of architectural language to code topical messages has weakened worldwide. Therefore, Pavel Koichev’s daring work can be compared to a laboratory creating new expressions of architectural language. For at least twenty years now the sculptor’s creative mind has been involved with the topic of space, of how we inhabit and live in it.

When the exhibition “**The Houses, the Summer and the Sea – an idea of a holiday town**” was opened at EIBank in Sofia, in October 2005, Pavel Koichev was wary of other architects’ reaction. No doubt, he has stepped into a “reserved” territory. And rightfully so, since he has mastered to perfection the plasticity of the form and has managed to convey a lot about its contents, too.

Because of such accomplishments like the above mentioned, some architects (especially architect Stancho Vekov) have made a gesture of cultural acknowledgement to Pavel Koichev and to the artist photographer Ivo Hadzhimishev by inviting them to show their exhibition “The Houses, the Summer and the Sea” in the showrooms of the Union of the Bulgarian Architects In Varna, in August 2006. In the old, Renaissance-style house, the 16 miniature models of houses, the photos showing details of old stone-wooden architecture, as well as the huge panoramic panel of Kamen Briag found a good home and enjoyed an enthusiastic welcome.

Pavel’s personality, just like his works, command respect and cause discouragement. I have never read a single word of criticism about his exhibitions, which take place each year, sometimes twice a year. He possesses the working capacity only an architect can possess. He has always been a conceptualist, not only in the years to follow the year 1989. I still keep with me the models of the four reliefs which were part of the unrealized project to build a fountain in the town of Pazardzhik, in 1975. Those reliefs represent four lying female figures, symbolizing the four big rivers in Bulgaria. At a local political level such a metaphor was not so hard to accept, not the artistic imagery, however – it put too much emphasis on the body

and involved too much matter to suit the conventional sophistication of the spirit. Thus, our fountain never found realization.

In an interview Pavel says: “We live in an imaginary world but surrounded by a perfectly tangible reality. We are made to live with material things through spiritual ones. This is a never-ending conflict.”

After the changes which took place in 1989 Pavel regularly pays for the opportunity to make exhibitions and share his thoughts with his audience. As far as I know, no financial returns come from this creative activity, nor does he expect any. But he keeps thinking, expressing his thoughts by means of his plastic language and being in quest for an audience, because it is only then that the creation of information makes sense.

The advanced information that he creates has led him out of the limits of sculpture since it is a fine art, while architecture is not. In my view, this is where the Limit is, and not in the Remaining within the territory of conceptualization or within the field of sculpture, inhabitable as it may be.

Pavel Koichev’s works attract architects’ attention with the freedom embodied in them. It is the same freedom that the well-trained architect loses in the very first years of his/her education but never abandons the quest for.

It is only natural that we should look for “free thinking” architects. Two main groups can be outlined – one of them is presented by Frank O. Gehry, who makes use of the plastic language of sculpture. His achievements are based on rejecting the fundamental values of architectural language, on overcoming the painful conflict with its functions, struggling to work with the most expensive materials (such as titanium) and, as a result, creating buildings-attractions. Later in his work, he often creates the same information, but, as it is widely known, repetition does not increase the amount of information. For this reason, Frank O. Gehry will certainly envy Pavel Koichev’s “symbol-house” for the orderliness with which the obviously flying away, disarrayed forms are organized. Pavel creates a framework following the laws of tectonics and achieves an atectonic flow of spaces.

The second free thinking group of architects comprises innovators who first prognosticate the form and the action, and then use technology designed specifically for the purpose. Examples include RTW Architects from Australia with their “Water Club” in Beijing and the energy-saving balloons implemented by ETFE. This model serves much better for a comparison with the method involved and the achievement of “The Construction”. The sculptor is no lesser an innovator – he is interested in the everlasting process of searching and creating. He consistently studies the form, its contents, i.e. the piece of space it creates, as well as its matter.

Artists also experience a certain amount of competition.

Pavel Koichev is not the only artist who steps into the territory of architecture; therefore references to the work of Friedensreich Hundertwasser are inevitable. Vienna houses have it all – colourfulness, organic materials, the connection between interior and exterior space, but it all remains at the level of retold architecture. While still living, Hundertwasser created a vivid halo around his eco-decorative style, but would have appreciated Pavel’s delicately expressed organic whole of form and space and their adequate presence in contemporary life.

Let us speculate a little on the architectural nature of the “house-symbol”.

During “The Houses, the Summer and the Sea” exhibition in 2005 and 2006 journalists kept asking a funny question: “Is it possible to build those houses or not?” I had already commented on my answer: in the age when architects create non-existing

constructions for their buildings, overloaded with informational innovation, creating the technology necessary to build them up is the next step ahead. Thus, the answer is that anything is possible to build, even Pavel's houses.

Miroslav Mihailov, an investor and a connoisseur of art, proves this possibility. Journalists and critics then go on to discuss matters concerning style, matters intrinsic to any kind of architecture. As far as materials are concerned, they consider architecture eclectic – stone, wood, mud, straw and lime on the one hand, and PVC joinery, water heating, steel and polycarbonate on the other. Architects, after admitting that a wooden plastic-bath is a masterpiece, would go on to criticize other aspects: the chandeliers are imitative – no frankness of attitude towards the material can be observed – some wooden sanitary items repeat the forms of the faience ones, the steel construction and the polycarbonate coat compete with the “great order” of wooden columns etc. All this has nothing to do with the true contribution of this work of art to the development of architectural language.

The pursuit of knowledge is only natural for people. This pursuit is preconditioned by the self-preservation instinct. People need information about their environment, architecture including, mainly for this purpose.

- People **need information about the usefulness** of interior space. The criteria people have built about comfort represent an objective base for evoking positive emotions. The spaces found in “The Construction” are totally satisfactory in this respect; moreover, they lead the recipient towards a state of reverie.

- People **need protection**; they need to eliminate stress and the feeling of fear. Architecture is able to bring about relaxation and, through its conventional means, to reveal to visitors the laws of constructing a building, its brightness, its measures, chosen to match the particular individual, the connection between interior and exterior space. None of this is missing in “The Construction”. It is a peripter with a beautifully modeled tiny wooden line of columns – each column and each capital being “individuals” bearing a piece of memory from the tree-stems of the Elenski Balkan. Other parts of the truss have even more convincing strength characteristics – two 7-metre long beams with a diameter of 0, 50 and 0, 6 metres dominate the space of the stone living room. There is also a big line of columns. The bar coupling of thinner, peeled wood ties the polyhedral roof of the third floor to the “great order” and transfers the tectonic exertion towards the earth in an obvious way. The strange aesthetics of this transfer of exertion brings to mind an association with Salvador Dali's picturesque works, the only difference being that his fixing method is rather ironic while Pavel's is a more poetic one.

- People need a more secure relation with **their environment**. With its inner and intermediate spaces, “The Construction” achieves even this. Priority is given to the above mentioned organic materials, coming from nature – for example, no cement is used with the stone masonry. Lantern light is also included, which offers the rare luxury of having a sky vista and natural illumination in a dwelling. The second floor fireplace is a part of the vestibule and at the same time an element of the intermediate space – a glaze verandah within the frames of the peripheral terraces.

- **The tactile scale** of “The Construction” is flawless. The contact with each element is a source of satisfaction with the absolute unity of visual and tactile perception achieved. Such an experience is often forced since not everything is sized by an architectural standard.

The investor Miroslav, driven by a deep respect for his author, keeps seeking Pavel's advice on the interior design details – he is aware that this should be approached as an art

gallery but is, in fact, a house. Pavel has already moved on, either because he is exhausted from this kind of work, or because he is thinking of new projects. Architects can breathe a deep breath of relief – he is a man, too, except for being the creator of new vocabulary; he has become familiar with the everyday architectural work.

I read somewhere Pavel being quoted to reject the word “design” when it comes to his work. Willingly or not, he is focused on the general contemporary understanding of design – the results of this activity, or philosophy mostly, go beyond the boundaries of the present limitations focusing on the product aesthetics and the ethics towards the consumer, and aim at the universal average. “The Construction” provokes the idea that the Bulgarian society should wake up from the dream of hopelessly outdated conceptions, policies and realizations.

Against the background of global childish senility, a sculptor gives us insights into the usefulness of preserving the child in our work. The intonation patterns in Pavel Koichev’s sign system are perceived to be traces of his hand and mind, and are seen not only as a final result but also as a process. Therefore, it will be beneficial if we keep posing the following question: “When will it be possible, if at all, that architects, with their moving source means, achieve the emotional informative potential of Pavel Koichev’s houses?”

Photos: Rumiana Chapanova and Ivan Balabanov (the photo with the miniature model and Pavel Koichev only)





