

Kitsch in Architecture – Contemporary Polish Hotels

Elzbieta Trocka-Leszczynska and Joanna Jablonska

Faculty of Architecture, Wroclaw University of Technology, Poland
elzbieta.trocka-leszczynska@pwr.wroc.pl, aska@stalwol.pl

Abstract. Kitsch has become embedded in the landscape of Polish cities and villages and is especially well represented in the architecture of hotels. It portrays society's relentless yearning for the wealth and tradition of extensive old-style mansions combined with economical building materials, restrictions of computer aided design and the desire to pander to mass tastes. In effect, there are produced over-scaled, not ergonomic, cheap accommodation facilities, filled with plastic and gypsum ornaments, which are unfamiliar to local culture. Drawing on a number of case studies this paper investigates the causes of kitsch manifestation and its effect on the surroundings and proposes methods of protecting the urban and rural landscape from devastation.

Keywords: Design for Quality of Life Technologies, kitsch in architecture, contex desig, computer aided design.

1 Introduction

The Polish urban and rural landscape is peppered with kitsch architecture and detail. The areas surrounding traditional or contemporary settlements are drastically changing due to questionable design choices and short-sightedness of investors and others members involved in the investment process. The problem especially concerns hotels, whose owners are mainly focused on attracting vast numbers of clients by choosing simple, fun and usually mediocre architectural designs. This strategy, combined with an economical approach towards investments, very often produces a styleless building decorated with pitiful imitations of what used to be good architectural solutions. Kitsch hotels are not by any means a new or only Polish phenomenon. There are many other examples, such as “Cesar’s Palace”, the “Mirage”, “the Venetian”, “Luxor Hotel and Casino”, “Circus Circus Hotel & Casino” or many other resorts in Las Vegas. This study, however, focuses only on the local problems, which is driven by the need to preserve the contemporary and historical landscape of Polish urban organisms, in an organized, clear and aesthetical form.

1.1 Definitions

The term “kitsch”, which is often related to artistic disciplines, is very hard to identify and describe. Definitions fluctuate from mass produced everyday items to achievements of pop-art and other self-aware implementations (so called “camp” – defined

by Susan Sontag [1]). In order to define the frames of this concept, authors tend to study the etymology of this word. Moles connects it to the lack of “style” in style and dates the first use of the term “kitsch” in its contemporary meaning to about 1860 in Munich. He relates this notion to German words: “kitschen” and “verkitschen” – which respectively meant: careless work and dishonest trade. Banach [2], on the other hand, refers to art schools in Munich during the 1870s, which used the word “kitsch” to describe objects of low value. The author also recalls another concept, which is derived from the English expression “sketch” or German “die Skizze” to describe something unfinished, preliminary to the actual masterpiece, unworthy of selling. But he is more fond of term “Kitt”, which means a kind of glue that can connect different things. [2] [3] Based on these ideas, kitsch may be defined as something cheap, shoddy, not worth having, created from mismatched parts or patterns or even deceptive.

At this point, the aforementioned trend does not seem excessively harmful or dangerous to true beauty or aesthetics. But Oseka [4, p. 11] states very strongly that (quotation): “Kitsch – is not a funny two-headed calf, but a serious, grim, and tragic disease that is spreading throughout the world with such force that it can be compared to environmental contamination.” The popular perception that kitsch is a form of entertainment tends to overshadow the problem, and therefore Oseka’s criticism may come as a shock to the general public. But even authors who have closely studied the kitsch phenomenon, tend to perceive it as a “playful companion” of everyday life. Take Banach [2] for example, who labels kitsch as “the enemy”, as it creates an untrue, short, and empty experience. On the other hand, he also highlights the role of kitsch in the mythologizing of down-to-earth life or in helping to fulfill one’s needs in a cheap way. Although the threats posed by ugly paintings or an odd-looking cup may sound irrelevant, such an indulgence is unacceptable as far as architecture is concerned. Architecture influences many people, their social life and taste, the urban context, and the spatial order of an urban, rural or natural landscape.

According to Moles [3], the popularization of the aforementioned trends is a direct consequence of the growth of the middle class and their material needs. He stresses that the need to develop relations between huge numbers of people, which is common in cities, is no longer based on emotions or feelings towards other human beings, but is driven by creating, selling and buying products, which are as artificial in nature as the process of their constant consumption. [3] [4] This “artificiality” cheapness, fictitiousness and unfamiliarity, will be used to identify the qualities of kitsch for the researched cases.

1.2 Methodology

The scope of work includes Polish hotels situated in small and medium towns as well as villages. The scale of the buildings is represented by the number of beds, ranging from 50 to 2000. The examples chosen for this study cover different aspects of architecture, and include the following: urban solutions of different scale and form, concepts of façades, small architecture, interior design, and architectural detail. Since the focus of this study is on contemporary issues, the choice of buildings was limited to

those erected within the last 20 years. It should be noted that this paper does not address the results of conscious and deliberate artistic activity, which is a different subject. The study adopted the following research methods: literature study, case study, analysis, graphical analysis, critical analysis, synthesis, and comparative synthesis.

2 Discussion

2.1 Causes

When we look at hotels in the context of the aforementioned definitions, it seems that such facilities are designed to please users by creating an illusion of “luxury” and “wealth”, but in a very economical way, and with disregard for aesthetics, quality and durability. As Moles [3, p. 35] states (quotation): “In the adaptations of the surroundings to the needs of man one can see a ‘recipe for happiness’. Kitsch is the art of happiness and each attempt to bring happiness to civilization is also an attempt aiming at kitsch. This is why kitsch is universal, for can it be imagined, that one would not be driven by this basic aspiration?”. This statement makes it so much easier to understand why recreation and leisure units, especially contemporary Polish SPA and Wellness facilities, as well as wedding hotels, use a very questionable mixture of styles.

Such an outbreak of “kitsch infection” is exacerbated by the fact that designers often pander to the wishes of investors. This theory was also proposed by a well-known Polish architect Piotr Szaroszyk [5], who states that the criticism of unsuccessful buildings should be addressed to the clients of architects. A closer look at this problem reveals that investors, hoping for a rapid income, tend to praise what they understand as “the tastes of the masses”. Architects and interior designers are also driven by the desire for profit, which allows them to neglect some aesthetic aspects. Moreover, in a number of cases, they are confident about their solutions because of their own understanding of architecture. At this point it should also be stressed that investors themselves often introduce many “improvements” to the hotels at the stage of “interior design”.

The aforementioned issues are closely connected with another cause of kitsch popularization in the Polish landscape, i.e. the complete lack of architectural criticism from professionals and independent observers. As noticed by Tokajuk [1], kitsch is also a social phenomenon and as such must be evaluated from different points of view. Szczepanik-Dzikowski [6] remarks that the public only notices unique buildings, while mediocre implementations remain invisible for the society. In most Polish small and medium cities, an overwhelming number of dull buildings have been erected in recent years. It is also not surprising that national architectural and social magazines or television programs are not interested in exposing these eyesores, for they are focused on attracting and intriguing their audience. For this reason kitsch criticism appears only on the Internet, where the whole problem is addressed with a touch of black humor. Due to the fact that anyone can publish their opinion in the form of a comment, these websites often resemble a second-rate public gathering, rather than a source of constructive criticism. Only by engaging in a constructive

debate can the public awaken to the threat of kitsch and learn about the importance of aesthetics, spatial order and the role of context. Such discussions are helpful in investigating which solutions are dangerous to the built and natural landscape.

2.2 Imitations of Traditional Architecture

In order to be a background for joy, celebration and comfort, kitsch architecture must reproduce forms that are recognized by masses. One group of such solutions is based in traditional wooden buildings, which evoke childhood memories of holidays in the countryside, whereas the second group is a symbol of great status and wealth. Interestingly enough not only Polish history is taken into account, and many elements are borrowed from different European cultures. SPA and Wellness hotels are usually inspired by ancient Greek and Roman or contemporary Turkish baths. The needs of clients to feel like bygone emperors are catered for in plastic pillars, plaster imitations of expensive stones immersed in swimming pools, which are finished with simplified mosaic patterns to match mass-production standards. At the same time, all of the swimming pools are usually fitted with stainless steel balustrades and covered by asymmetric, arched roofs, which are supported by glulam beams, due to structure and durability requirements. This odd set of mismatched elements seems to be indifferent to both architects and users.

Another example of kitsch-based units are wedding hotels. The experience of celebration is usually complemented by enormous portions of food and loud music and is short enough to fulfill the need for joy and fun. Fake architecture seems to be a proper frame for whole event. Brides, grooms and their guests must be photographed against the background of floral ornaments, classical pillars or sculptures. The picture is completed by rich architectural details made of foam polystyrene and gypsum, incompetently imitating agoras and temples of ancient Rome, historic Polish mansions or famous European buildings. Hotel gardens are filled with simplified forms of Italian and French fountains, plastic animals and sheds – a symbol of the “carefree” Polish country.

Both examples share the kitsch aspects listed by Moles [3, p. 96] (quotation): “accumulation as a factor of madness, the fantastic romanticism, comfort and culture mosaic”. According to the same author, these features can be extended to: the need to feel safe and comfortable, self-acceptance based on possessions, cultivate daily habits and maintain the same standard of living – at least the same as that of the neighbors. These reasons could be easily explained by a phenomenon that took place in Poland in the communist period after the second world war. During that time, due to the demise of a great number of Polish Intelligentsia, cities had to be filled with villagers. Although they came willingly in search for accommodation and labor, they had problems with adapting to new standards. It is needless to stress that post-war housing mainly consisted of modern prefabricated apartment buildings, which were unfamiliar both to villagers and city-dwellers. As a result, the impoverished members of society, who lived in substandard conditions, started to search for ways to manifest high social status, emphasize their noble descent, and fulfill the longing for their former lifestyle. Initially these phenomena could be observed mostly in the interiors of apartments,

but with time it spread to general architectural aesthetic. The process of economically-driven migration between the village and the city is still ongoing in Poland and, moreover, people have become convinced that a cheap way of demonstrating their social status is something positive and desired.

3 Case Studies

However the problem of contemporary kitsch in hotel architecture is not limited to the combination of unfortunate forms and styles, or ‘the lack of styles’. It also lies in the thoughtless transformation of historic elements or detail into simplified and easy-to-produce hybrids that look like a cross between the general understanding of ‘what old ornaments looked like’ and a cheap computer aided design or industrial technology. The artificial and standardized nature of particular features of the overall design combined with their availability and door-to-door distribution, allows for a quick and almost unlimited spread of what Osęka [4] defines as a disease. In addition, the near-desperate search for the individualization of cheap standardized technologies resulted in buildings with peculiar aesthetic qualities. Representative examples of such practices include the hotel in Prusice (Fig. 1, 180 – max. no. of guest in conference room), whose exceptionally vast, horizontal, two-story cubature has a form of simple rectangular barracks covered with flat roofs.



Fig. 1. Hotel in Prusice (on the left) and wedding resort near Rawicz (on the right) are examples of the over-scaled, chaotic search for individual form, which is disconnected from surroundings, tradition or culture (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

In order to improve the general perception of the building, parts with large window-openings and vertical pillars were added. These sections have also been decorated with strange slopes designed next to the windows and on attic-wall areas. A similar problem can be noticed in the wedding hotel near Rawicz (Fig. 1), where the first floor was pushed back withdrawn from the front façade the line of the ground floor so as not to highlight the magnitude of the building. Moreover, the inexpressive walls, which are lined with standardized windows, have been split by glass tubes that might be the result of the search for individual architectural expression. Though such cylinders originally might have been interpreted as allusions to the world’s famous contemporary buildings, in their current surroundings and with such an economical approach, they are at best mediocre.

Venturing further into the topic of “creative” inspiration in Polish hotels, it is important to mention two other examples. The architecture of the first one, situated near

Lipno (Fig. 2, with 27 rooms, a wedding hall, and a restaurant), seems to be a combination of multi-family housing and industrial forms, complemented with a windowless, low-rise tower. An amalgamation of square forms, triangles, rectangles and slopes is covered with a combination of gables and flat roofs. The exterior was finished with plaster painted in yellow and orange horizontal stripes. The roof was covered with ceramic red tiles and the entrance front as well as the front wall of the restaurant were glazed. These materials do not work well together, they seem to be “borrowed” from different functions and styles.

The hotel in Leszno (Fig. 2) seems a little bit more compact (with a multifunctional hall for up to 80 people), and its architecture seems to be vaguely inspired by ships. Though the building looks much simpler, it has a complicated plan with straight and obtuse angles, an additional tower, which is adjacent to the main building along a diagonal axis, and at least seven different types of windows. While the front façade features varied architectural articulation methods, the rear of the hotel consists of a blank plastered wall, painted in two colors. This architectural diversity of the building, and the aforementioned accumulation of unusual forms, is also observed in other examples (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).



Fig. 2. Hotels near Lipno (right) and in Leszno as examples of the search for contemporary forms based on industrial forms or ship-inspired architecture (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

Probably one of the most glaring examples of kitsch is the recently built hotel in Karpacz (Fig. 3). The hotel with 906 rooms was partially opened in 2010 and is a part of a country-wide network of hotels. Since it offers a variety of attractions and services, such as a water park, SPA&Wellness center, a conference center, a night club, restaurants, playgrounds, etc., it required a great volume. Despite many protests from the local community, resistance from local authorities (the project was incompatible with the land-use plan) and criticism from the architectural community, the building was erected in an over-scaled form, and now dominates the surrounding vernacular architecture.

At first glance it may seem that its features could serve as an inspiration for new designs, but a closer examination reveals that this architectural style is similar for all facilities built by this chain, regardless of their location. The volume of individual modules, their varied roof types, forms of balconies, widow types (especially curved large openings), stand out in the surroundings. The wood-like paneling of chosen details can hardly be considered as a reference to the tradition of the region as the dominating part of the facades is covered with painted plaster. Such economical

solutions, combined with PCV and steel sheets, appear in all the examples presented in this paper. These components are very cheap, and although they age really fast and ugly, they have successfully replaced all the other local and regional materials, such as different types of bricks and stones, ceramic tiles or wood.



Fig. 3. Enormous hotel in Karpacz: on the left – view of different cubic volumes covered with a variety of roof forms, in the middle – details of the façade, on the right: main hall (fot. J. Jablonska, 2013, E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

There is also another issue connected to the aforementioned problems. Similarly to other professionals, architects tend to use computers and dedicated software in their design work. One of the advantages of computer aided design is easy access to libraries with pre-defined 2d and 3d models of products available in mass production. In most cases, such software is a very useful tool as long as the designer uses typical and standardized solutions. Any customizations require additional knowledge, more time, extra effort and sometimes might be impossible to perform. It could be the case that the constant pressure of time and these virtual tools are contributing to the decline of creativity and, consequently lead to randomness in architecture. The wedding house in Rydzyna (Fig. 4) seems to be a good example of a diverse, but accumulation of typical forms. In front of the building there is a circular driveway, flanked by the two wings of the hotel, which were erected on a polygonal plan. The wings are connected with a curved stairway, and gable-roofed, glazed oriel. All this is complemented by a Bauhaus-like side entrance, atop a curved and organically-shaped staircase with an iron balustrade, half-circle dormers and windows in straight PCV frames.



Fig. 4. The “house of weddings” in Rydzyna – an example of an accumulation of forms based on standardized solutions, easy to create using computer-aided-design software (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

What is interesting, the interiors in most of the studied examples are usually disconnected from exteriors in terms of form and style (Fig. 5). Due to the low quality of design and economical approach towards selecting building materials, wedding hotels are usually a disproportionate composition of very simple blocks. These solids are covered by gable roofs, which in most cases do not fit in well with anything, but are required by local spatial regulation. The forms, shapes and materials of pseudo-traditional slopes do not match any other detail in the building. The quality of this solution is usually lowered even more by the cheapest building materials on the market used for finishing, i.e. steel sheets or bituminous tiles. Architectural accents are implemented in the forms of small, inappropriately-shaped oriels, mismatched secondary roofs over the entrances, large openings only next to ballrooms and terraces, which looks like additional extension. The windows and doors are usually made of vinyl imitation wood. Walls in such hotels are finished with plaster and painted in random colors.

Due to these economical standards of design, it is impossible to distinguish buildings from each other or to define their architectural style. This disproportion is clearly visible in another wedding hotel (with 105 rooms) situated near Poznan (Fig. 5). The property is a wide, horizontal single story building covered by a gable roof. Walls are finished with painted plaster (unsurprisingly) and accentuated with brick-like ceramic tiles. Simple sloping roofs are covered with steel-sheet tile and fitted with flat, rectangular skylights. The dominating element of the architectural design is the polygonal oriel with large openings. It is surrounded by secondary roofs over entrances, which are supported by simple pillars. The interior of this simple building, resembles a palace, rather than a single-story country house. Large public spaces and halls have been filled with simplified classical and baroque columns, cantilevers and circular suspended ceilings made from gypsum boards, and stretch ceiling. The walls are covered by patterned tapestry and decorated with richly ornamented mirror frames. The palatial character is also accentuated by crystal chandeliers (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. The wedding hotel near Poznan, as an example of architectural disconnect between the building's exterior and the interior. On the left – a village-like exterior, on the right – interior hall with a mixture of details – distant borrowings from classical and baroque style. (fot. J. Jablonska, 2013)



Fig. 6. The wedding hotel near Poznan, as an example of palatial architecture to express status and tradition (fot. J. Jablonska, 2013)

Similar solutions can be observed in the interiors of the aforementioned hotel near Rawicz. The main hall is bright in color with cylindrical pillars crowned by diagonal capitols, and is decorated with hanging strings of beads, art-deco chandeliers, golden frames of a mirror and a strange, quilted detail on one of the walls (Fig. 7). These elements could well represent the “glamour style” – which has recently become quite popular among Polish interior designers – but the floor paneling and gypsum-board ceiling are inconsistent with this assumption. The restaurant is a darker, club-like place, and adopts two contrary approaches to designing. One is historically-based with stylized tables and chairs, made from dark wood and patterned upholstery, supplemented with pinned curtains, sculpted plaster on walls and gypsum cornices (Fig. 7, 8) and lamps with crystal beads (Fig. 9). The other resembles a discothèque with aggressive green lights, asymmetrically-shaped mirrors and large aquariums. This stylistic puzzle is finished with the same floor paneling as in the hall, and glass partitions in very cheap and unstylish PCV frames. Moreover the dramatic connections between plastic ornaments, gypsum details, plain walls, and tiled floors, tend to bring out the senselessness of such solutions.



Fig. 7. The wedding resort near Rawicz, as an example of the connection between contemporary materials and “historically based” forms: on the left – round columns and ceiling made of cheap gypsum-board, on the right stylized entrance to restaurant (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

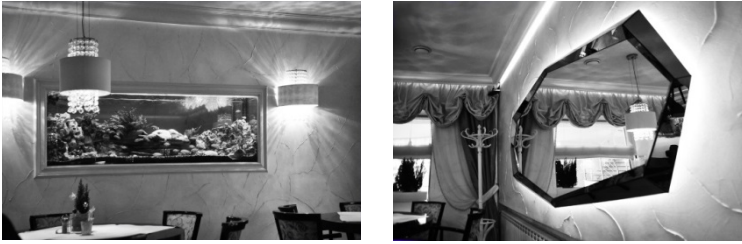


Fig. 8. The wedding resort near Rawicz – interior details: on the left – aquarium in gypsum form illuminated by “crystal” chandeliers, on the right – mirrors in polygonal frames made from tinted mirror glass, with a stylized hanger and palatial, textile window decoration in the background (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

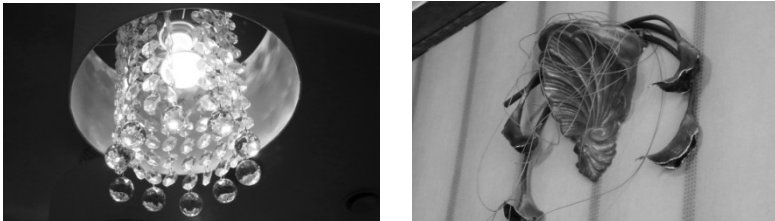


Fig. 9. The wedding hotels in detail: on the left – “crystal” chandeliers made from textile and plastic, on the right – plastic espalier covered with flaky paint and surrounded by artificial flowers (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014)

Details artificial in form and material were noticed in most of the studied examples, and they were present not only in the interiors (Fig. 9) but also in the form of landscaping features in the surrounding gardens or outdoor public spaces (Fig. 10). Small fountains used as a setting for photography, typically made of concrete, were supposed to resemble ancient Roman, Greek or baroque sculptures, though nothing in vicinity would justify such choices, e.g. a nymph placed in the corner of two plain walls. The most peculiar example found during this investigation, was an enormous installation of an insect in one of the wedding facilities.



Fig. 10. Landscaping features in wedding hotels: on the left and in the middle – concrete fountains inspired by ancient culture and baroque, on the right – giant insect installation (fot. E. Trocka-Leszczynska, 2014, J. Jablonska 2013)

The study resulted in a list of the most common elements in Polish kitsch architecture of hotels. It includes the following – for exteriors: neglected context, unstylish building structures merely adjusted to the land-use plan, incorrect proportions, lack of architectural expression, strange inspirations, unjustified references, accumulation of diversified details, the cheapest building materials, finishing made from plaster, paint, steel sheets or ceramic tiles – for interiors: significant discrepancy between the style of the exterior and the interior, contradicting ideas and assumptions or lack of concept in the designs, lack of clear functional and formal zoning, thoughtless choice of colors, textures, patterns, ornaments, fabrics, tapestry, etc.

4 Conclusions

What is interesting in the studied cases is that historical allusions are usually made to ancient, renaissance, baroque styles or to traditional country housing. Roman and gothic architectural features seem to be purposely omitted. In Poland these two styles are culturally connected to sacral architecture of churches. This phenomena perfectly shows the strong connection between kitsch and needs for entertainment or possessions. But owning even the most beautiful artificial chandeliers, concrete fountains and plastic columns neither enriches a person nor architecture. A civilization of happiness cannot be built on the basis of fraud, for it will not last. Moreover, creating and erecting any monumental building, which is correct in form, is possible today with the use of archeological, historical and conservatory knowledge, and with the implementation of proper building materials and technologies. The question is whether the contemporary Polish landscape needs Persian temples or Roman theaters? Although the nonsense of such a concept seems obvious to the whole society, it is constantly repeated in the architectural designs of hotels. The validity of both arguments against kitsch should be particularly stressed in all public debates and discussions on spatial order of urban and rural context in Polish historical and cultural regions.

Polish architecture has great potential to be exceptional and original. It should be based on traditional urban development and regional architecture. Inspiring ideas can be found in local materials and building technologies, both contemporary and historical. The scale and proportions of cities and villages are already adjusted to human proportions and needs, so their further growth must be harmonious with the existing structure. Hotels, as a service for both citizens and guests, should be erected in the architecture style which is representative of the country and which highlights the advantages of building culture. International or historic inspirations are also needed in the buildings but “borrowings” and connections should be of high quality and must be introduced with respect towards aesthetics and the overall educational role of architecture in everyday life of users.

References

1. Tokajuk A.: Piękno, oryginalność, kicz i estetyka drugiej kategorii w architekturze współczesnej. In: *Czasopismo Techniczne* z. 13. Architektura z. 6-A, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, pp. 438–442 (2007)

2. Banach, A.: O kiczu. Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, pp. 9–10, 18, 340–341 (1968)
3. Moles, A.: Kicz czyli sztuka szczęścia. Studium o psychologii kiczu. In: Szczepańska, A., Wende, E. (trans.) Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, pp. 13–18, 20–24, 35, 96, 101 (1978)
4. Oseka, A.: Introduction for “Kicz czyli sztuka szczęścia. Studium o psychologii kiczu”. In: Szczepańska, A., Wende, E. (trans.) Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, pp. 5–11 (1978)
5. Szaroszyk, P.: Krytyka czasem krzywdzi, ale nie wolno się obrażać. *Architektura* 11(17), 66 (2000)
6. Szczepanik-Dzikowski: Jaka architektura taka krytyka. *Architektura* 11(17), 66 (2000)