

TOMASZ GRZELAKOWSKI
 ORCID: 0000-0003-1008-153X
 Lodz University of Technology, Poland

NIHIL NOVI ET ARCHITECTURAE

NIHIL NOVI W ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

Tempus fugit, and with it the ideas, avant-gardes that architecture strove for. As time passes, all are covered with the dust of history. The death of an idea is announced in cycles no longer of eras, but of years, or months. But tradition is something different from history – less visible but more resistant. Architecture has long been expected to guarantee immortality and durability, but is this expectation still valid today? This article aims to determine, to a limited extent, the mechanisms that affect the architecture of buildings. It outlines a fragment of the complex reality in which architecture shapes and is shaped by history.

Keywords: sustainable architecture, tradition, importance in architecture

Streszczenie

Tempus fugit, a wraz z nim idee, awangardy, do których dążyła architektura. Z biegiem czasu wszystko pokrywa się kurzem historii. Śmierć idei ogłaszana jest cyklami już nie epok, lecz lat czy miesięcy. Tradycja to jednak coś innego niż historia – mniej widoczna, ale bardziej odporna. Od architektury zawsze oczekiwano nieśmiertelności i trwałości, ale czy jest to dzisiaj nadal możliwe? Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu określenie, w ograniczonym zakresie, mechanizmów wpływających na architekturę budynków. Nakreśla fragment złożonej rzeczywistości, w której architektura kształtuje i jest kształtowana przez historię.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura zrównoważona, tradycja, znaczenie w architekturze

1. INTRODUCTION: THE DISAPPEARING HORIZON OF SUSTAINABILITY

The Latin phrase *tempus fugit* (time flies) conceals a quiet sigh over the impermanence of all that exists. Architecture, once the most resistant of all the arts to the erosion of time, is now itself being swept away by the very currents it once resisted. The avant-gardes that promised radical futures have become relics of the past. Postmodernism, with its fragmentary narratives and ironic gestures, seems to have lost its compass. Ideas that once defined eras now expire in cycles measured in months. And yet, amid this turmoil, tradition is returning as a tool for solving the problems that plague society today, no longer as a nostalgic relic but rather as a lasting trend redefining the meaning of architecture.

This essay attempts to answer how architecture negotiates its place in history by analysing case studies that reveal some of the mechanisms by which it is shaped and shapes

time. Drawing on contemporary theory and historical reflection, it argues that architecture's quest for immortality must now take into account a more fluid and layered understanding of durability. To a limited extent, it contributes to an analysis of the relationship between 'now' and 'then' in architecture.

In the face of global climate challenges and the accelerated cycle of ideas in architecture, traditional building solutions are regaining importance as a source of durability, energy efficiency, and cultural identity. This article analyses contemporary applications of conventional materials, techniques, and principles of spatial orientation in environment-friendly designs. Examples of projects by Norman Foster, Anna Heringer, and Diébédo Francis Kéré are presented, showing how tradition can coexist with innovation and support sustainable development. The article argues that tradition is not a regression but a rational design choice that responds to the environmental and social needs of today.

2. THE RISE AND FALL OF AVANT-GARDE IDEALS

Modernist architecture was born out of a utopian promise: to transform society through rational design. Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and other visionaries imagined a world of clarity, order, and functional beauty. However, this vision, abstract and often imposed from above, quickly met with resistance. As Howard Caygill notes, this bureaucratic administration of space was perceived by users as a "violent intrusion", detached from the experience of everyday life.¹

The post-modernist response to such formalisation was irony and eclecticism, a return to ornamentation and historical references, but also an emphasis on contradiction. However, even this trend, initially perceived as liberating, ultimately seems directionless. Its stylistic gestures (colourful pilasters, playful atria) ultimately became apparent symptoms of a more profound crisis: the loss of a standard architectural narrative.

Deconstructivism went even further, breaking down form and meaning, questioning the very logic of the language of architecture. Ultimately, however, even its radical gestures were absorbed by the mainstream, and their impact was weakened by repetition and detachment from the audience's experience.

3. TRADITION: THE INVISIBLE COMPASS

In the face of the collapse of grand narratives, tradition is once again emerging as a central force. It is used not as a closed history but as a continuity of certain aspects that transcend the political and ideological system. Contemporary architecture, tired of the fragmentation of postmodernism and the exhaustion of avant-garde gestures, is increasingly turning to solutions that do not so much refer to the past as continue it.

As Katarzyna Bernatek-Bączyk notes, many solutions considered avant-garde today are in fact a return to the principles of traditional construction, which over the centuries has

¹ H. Caygill, *Architectural postmodernism: The retreat of an avantgarde* [in:] R. Boyne, A. Rattansi (eds), *Postmodernism and society*, Macmillan Publishers, London 1990, pp. 147–162, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-1-349-20843-2_10.pdf (access: 12.04.2025).

developed optimal relationships between humans and the environment.² This paradox reveals a more profound truth: tradition is not regression but resilience. It is a form of knowledge that has survived not through spectacular manifestos but through practice.

It offers a framework of values that modernity often overlooks. Unlike the ideology of modernism, which sought to break with the past, tradition does not claim universality; instead, it operates locally, contextually, and empirically. As Howard Caygill writes, what modernism treated as an obstacle – locality, ornament, ritual – tradition recognises as the foundation of spatial design.³ It refers directly to the experiences of users, both at the functional and semantic levels. In this respect, it offers deeper connections between artefacts and their users than modernist objects, which, from the viewer's point of view, lack a network of references.

Transmitted through practice rather than stored in archives, it builds its durability not on documentation, but on the repeatability of gestures, techniques, and design decisions that have proven themselves in specific climatic, social, and cultural conditions.

It provides a compass where postmodernism loses its bearings. In a world where architecture is increasingly becoming a media product, tradition reminds us that space should serve people, not just an aesthetic effect. Its strength lies in what is hidden: in proportions, in the relationship between form and light, in materials that age with dignity rather than spectacularly.

In this sense, tradition is less visible but more durable. It has survived not because of its spectacular nature but thanks to ingrained knowledge – materials, proportions, and spatial relationships – that last for generations. It is like a foundation that cannot be seen, but without which no structure can stand. In an era in which architecture is increasingly subject to the pressure of novelty, tradition reminds us that durability does not have to mean stagnation – it can be a form of quiet resistance to transience.

4. TRADITION AS A MECHANISM OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ECOLOGY

Traditional building solutions – including materials, techniques, and spatial orientation – are not only a cultural record but also a response to local climatic and social conditions. Their origins stem from centuries of observation of the environment, the availability of raw materials, and the needs of the communities that produced them. Contemporary eco-friendly architecture is increasingly drawing on these resources not out of nostalgia but out of pragmatism.

An example of this is the use of rammed earth, a technique known since ancient times, which is now making a comeback in eco-friendly projects as a material with high thermal capacity, a low carbon footprint, and the ability to regulate the microclimate of interiors.

Similarly, wood, especially in the form of modern technologies such as cross-laminated timber (CLT), combines traditional aesthetics with high energy efficiency and the possibility of prefabrication. As Kéré works emphasise, architecture must be rooted in the local context

² K. Bernatek-Bączyk, *In search of a balance between tradition and the avant-garde* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining architectural space. Architecture and design*, vol. 3, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, Wrocław 2022, pp. 9–15, <https://dpa.arch.pk.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/defarch.3-1.pdf> (access: 25.05.2025).

³ H. Caygill, *op. cit.*

– not only cultural, but also climatic. Traditional materials such as clay and wood allow for responsible and sustainable construction.⁴

The spatial orientation of buildings, their location in relation to the cardinal directions, wind directions, and terrain, was once a fundamental design tool. Today, in the era of passive construction, these same principles are returning as the foundation of energy efficiency.

5. TRADITION AS A VEHICLE FOR ECO-FRIENDLY SOLUTIONS

5.1. NORMAN FOSTER – MASDAR CITY

Masdar City is an experimental city planned in Abu Dhabi, designed as a low-carbon and energy-efficient urban solution and a centre for research and business in the renewable energy sector. The project adopts a compact, dense urban structure inspired by traditional desert settlements. This is to reduce the area exposed to direct sunlight and shorten transport distances. The buildings are located and shaped to maximise natural ventilation and create shade on the streets, which also reduces the need for cooling. Narrow passageways and a dense street layout create permanent shade in public spaces, reducing temperatures and limiting the need for air conditioning in adjacent buildings, by using a simple principle known from traditional Arab architecture.

Masdar also revives the traditional mechanism of wind towers, which assist the flow of air masses through public spaces, enhancing the effect of protection against excessive heat.

In addition, courtyard layouts and massive building walls have been designed to store coolness at night and stabilise the temperature inside. Such solutions reduce the daily temperature amplitude inside and lower the demand for mechanical air conditioning systems.

The use of low-carbon materials and on-site recycling of aluminium and concrete is an approach consistent with the traditional principle of using local resources. Such practices reduce emissions associated with logistics and the production of building materials and facilitate the subsequent recycling of structures.

The design priority for pedestrian transport and short, covered routes connecting residential and service functions promotes a reduction in car traffic. This approach utilises the principles of proximity and compactness, as seen in historic cities, which reduce transport emissions and increase the energy efficiency of the mobility system.

The traditional solutions used in Masdar City – building orientation, narrow streets, wind towers, courtyards, local materials, and water conservation – effectively reduce energy and resource demands as a first layer of response to climate challenges. These simple, time-tested methods form the foundation for modern renewable technologies and management systems, allowing the project to combine the wisdom of tradition with the possibilities of contemporary engineering.⁵

⁴ D.F. Kéré, *Architecture for climate and community*, Pritzker Architecture Prize Lecture, 2022 [in:] the Pritzker Architecture Prize, <https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/diebedo-francis-kere> (access: 20.05.2025).

⁵ *Reichstag, New German Parliament* [in:] Foster + Partners, <https://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/reichstag-new-german-parliament/> (access: 18.04.2025).

5.2. ANNA HERINGER – ANANDALOY

The Anandaloy project in Bangladesh is a social and therapeutic centre made from locally available, biodegradable materials with a low-carbon footprint, including clay and bamboo. The building celebrates local craftsmanship and knowledge, integrating them with a biomorphic form inspired by nature.⁶

It is a unique building completed in 2020 in the town of Rudrapur. The project has gained international recognition, including the Obel Award for its innovative approach to sustainable construction.⁷

Anandaloy was built exclusively from local materials: clay, bamboo, and wood. The main structure is based on the technique of rammed earth (mud construction), which is not only environment-friendly but also accessible and familiar to local artisans.⁸

Anandaloy is not just a building; it is a tool for social change. The lower part of the building houses a physical therapy centre. In contrast, the upper part of the building houses a weaving workshop where women from nearby villages can work, learn and gain financial independence. The project was developed in collaboration with the local community, utilising minimal heavy equipment, which enabled residents to participate in the construction process actively.

5.3. DIÉBÉDO FRANCIS KÉRÉ – LYCÉE SCHORGE

The Lycée Schorge project in Burkina Faso uses sun-dried bricks and wooden eucalyptus façades to create shaded areas and promote natural ventilation. Kéré engages local communities, reduces costs, and strengthens cultural identity.⁹

Lycée Schorge is a public secondary school located in Koudougou, the third-largest city in Burkina Faso, designed by architect Diébédo Francis Kéré and completed in 2016. The building is not only a functional educational facility but also a manifesto of architecture rooted in the local social, climatic, and cultural context. The project has garnered international recognition as an exemplar of sustainable construction, seamlessly combining traditional techniques with modern aesthetics.

The main structure of the school was made of laterite bricks, a local sedimentary stone that is a cheap, readily available and durable building material. The bricks were formed and dried in the sun, which significantly reduced CO₂ emissions compared to those produced by firing in a kiln.

One of the most distinctive features of Lycée Schorge is its wooden eucalyptus façade, which surrounds the building like a sculptural curtain. Set at an angle, it creates a buffer zone between the interior and the intense sun, providing shade and natural ventilation. As a result, the school does not require air-conditioning, despite extreme weather conditions.

⁶ *Anandaloy: Centre for People with disabilities + Dipdii Textiles studio* [in:] Anna Heringer, <https://www.anna-heringer.com/projects/anandaloy/> (access: 26.04.2025).

⁷ *2020 Winner: Anandaloy* [in:] OBEL, 21.10.2020, <https://obelaward.org/2020-winner-anandaloy/> (access: 26.04.2025).

⁸ Heringer, Anna. "Anna Heringer: Building with Earth and Empowerment." *Rethinking The Future*, 2023. <https://www.anna-heringer.com>.

⁹ Ancci, *Francis Kéré's revolutionary slingshot towards architectural sustainability* [in:] The Republic, 21.02.2025, <https://rpublic.com/vol9-no1/francis-kere-architectural-sustainability/> (access: 26.10.2025).

The roof of the building was designed to allow air circulation: hot air rises and is discharged through ventilation openings, while cooler air flows in from outside through gaps in the façade. This is an example of passive architecture that utilises the laws of physics rather than technology.

The Lycée Schorge project was carried out in collaboration with local artisans and residents, which not only reduced costs but also fostered a sense of community and pride in the resulting building. The school has become not only a place of learning but also a space for meetings, cultural events, and social debates.

Although the building was constructed from simple materials, its form is sophisticated and expressive. The wooden façade resembles rhythmic waves, and the open and flexible spatial layout encourages interaction and collaboration. Lycée Schorge demonstrates that aesthetics do not have to be a luxury, but can stem from a profound understanding of place, material, and social needs.

Lycée Schorge is an example of architecture that not only responds to local climatic and economic challenges but also celebrates indigenous culture and knowledge. The building is often cited as a model of new African architecture that is innovative, responsible, and rooted in tradition.

6. BUILDINGS AS ARGUMENTS IN STONE, TRADITION AS INSPIRATION FOR IDEAS

In architectural terms, buildings are more than just structures; they are philosophical statements and often declarations of the ideas behind their creation, as well as commentaries on the current state of the world. They respond to their historical moment while simultaneously transcending it. They show that architecture can be both contemporary and timeless.

6.1. VANNA VENTURI HOUSE

This is one of the most iconic, and groundbreaking, buildings of the 20th century. Located in Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, it became a manifesto for a new approach to architecture that heralded the birth of postmodernism.

It is often regarded as the first post-modernist building and serves as a critique of modernist aesthetics. Instead, it proposes an architecture of “both... and...”, which combines contradictions: simplicity and complexity, symmetry and asymmetry, logic and paradox.

6.2. JEWISH MUSEUM IN BERLIN

This is one of the most significant works of contemporary architecture, both in terms of form and message. Opened to the public in 2001, the museum not only documents two thousand years of Jewish history in Germany, but also provides a deeply emotional space for memory, trauma, and identity.

Designed as “story architecture,” the building is a form that not only houses the exhibits but also becomes part of them. The main body of the museum, known as the “Zigzag” or “Blitz”, cuts through the space with sharp angles, irregular lines, and dramatic cuts that symbolise the fragmentation of Jewish history in Germany

One of the most moving elements of the museum is the so-called voids, vertical, unused spaces that cut through the building from top to bottom. They symbolise “the impossibility of representation” – the void left by destroyed Jewish communities that cannot be fully told or recreated. These spaces are cold, dark, often devoid of light, and deliberately unusable.

The museum’s façade is made of zinc sheet metal, which changes colour depending on the weather and time of day. The absence of traditional windows, replaced by irregular slits, allows light to enter the interior in a dramatic and unpredictable manner. This is not only an aesthetic effect, but also a metaphor – light as memory, as a glimpse of history in the darkness.

The Jewish Museum in Berlin is not only an educational institution, but also a work of art that redefines the role of architecture in the context of collective memory.

6.3. THERME VALS

This building was designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor and completed in 1996. It is one of the most highly regarded works of contemporary architecture, serving as a spa, a space for contemplation, and a manifesto of a design philosophy rooted in place, material, and sensory experience.

The project was conceived as an extension of an existing hotel complex. Still, Zumthor approached the task with exceptional sensitivity, not as an architect imposing form, but as a mediator between landscape, history, and user.

The primary material used in the building is local quartzite, a stone quarried nearby. It was used not only for aesthetic reasons, but also as a conscious reference to the region’s geology. The stone slab walls are laid in layers, resembling natural sedimentation processes.

Therme Vals is not a building to be looked at, but a space to be experienced. The layout of the rooms resembles a labyrinth in which the user moves between pools, niches, dark corridors, and bright openings. Light enters through gaps in the ceiling, creating dramatic contrasts and altering the atmosphere according to the time of day.

The temperature, humidity, smell of stone, and sound of water create a multisensory environment that encourages introspection. It is architecture that does not shout, it whispers.

Zumthor rejects spectacle and formal gestures. His approach is based on “architecture of presence” – design that does not dominate the user, but allows them to be. There is no decoration, no symbolism – only matter, space, and time.

It is a manifesto of an alternative approach to modernity. At a time when architecture is often subject to media pressure to be spectacular, it shows that true power lies in silence, material, and experience. This building is frequently cited as an example of a “new tradition” – design that draws on locality but does not fall into folklore.

7. TEMPUS FUGIT: IS IMMORTALITY STILL POSSIBLE?

In an era of rapid obsolescence, can architecture still aspire to immortality? Since digital design accelerates change while also archiving it, and sustainable development shifts the emphasis from durability to adaptability, the question of whether cultural memory finds new forms of expression in hybrid structures is crucial, allowing us to understand the nature of contemporary design and architectural reception mechanisms.

Perhaps the goal is no longer timelessness, but relevance – the ability to respond to context, culture, and continuity. Architecture may not resist time, but engage in dialogue with it. In this view, tradition is not an obstacle to development, but its foundation. The works of Foster, Heringer, and Kéré show that it is possible to create architecture that is modern, sustainable, and deeply rooted in local heritage. In the face of climate and cultural crisis. However, architecture must find a new language that combines innovation with a sense of memory.

This suggests that perhaps contemporary green building does not have to abandon technology, but should treat it as a supporting tool rather than a dominant one. Traditional materials and techniques – including earth, wood, stone, natural ventilation, and orientation towards the sun – offer proven solutions that, when combined with modern energy management systems, create buildings that are not only efficient but also deeply rooted in their cultural and environmental context.

Architecture that draws on local traditions, engages communities, and responds to the real needs of users becomes not only more sustainable, but also more human. It is in this synergy between the past and the future, between craftsmanship and technology, between locality and globality, that the potential for a new definition of sustainability lies.

8. SUMMARY

Tempus fugit – time flies. Yet architecture, even in its most fleeting gestures, leaves traces. It is a dialogue between the past and the future, between permanence and change. By rediscovering tradition, architecture does not regress, but renews itself. And by embracing the complexity of time, it can still fulfil its eternal promise: to endure. The Latin phrase is not just a fatalistic statement, but a starting point for understanding how architecture functions in time. It is not a one-off act, but an ongoing process of relationships between successive generations, materials, and meanings.

It leaves traces despite its transience. These traces do not have to strive for dazzling eternity. However, they can manifest themselves as layers of use, repair, adaptation, and reinterpretation. In this sense, durability is not an absolute goal, but the result of a creative dialogue with the past and consideration of future needs. Tradition appears as a living repertoire of technical solutions and valuable design frameworks. It is not a museum exhibit, but a practical resource. The materials, proportions, and technologies passed down through craftsmanship enable the continuity of adaptation activities, reducing the risk of short-lived experiments with no lasting impact.

At the same time, materials age and develop a patina. They become a carrier of memory. Design that takes these processes into account is a choice focused on materials that are susceptible to revitalisation, easy to repair, and environment-friendly. It is a choice that allows ageing to be transformed into an aesthetic and social value rather than a disadvantage.

At the same time, lasting architecture is participatory architecture, involving users, local workshops, and repair practices. These are buildings that offer the possibility of transformation without losing their identity. Involving the community in the life of a building strengthens its functionality and cultural legitimacy. In this light, designers should see their actions as the beginning of a conversation, not a final verdict. This means favouring programme flexibility, simplicity of construction, clear rules of reparability, and the use of local materials

and technologies. Investing in craftsmanship and adaptation mechanisms yields a better return than ephemeral formal gestures.

Architecture that embraces time as a multi-layered context does not fight against transience; instead, it accepts it. By rediscovering tradition and designing with repair, adaptation, and participation in mind, architecture does not retreat into the past; instead, it renews its task: to create spaces that can speak to generations. In this way, it can fulfil its eternal promise – to endure.

References

- [1] *2020 Winner: Anandaloy* [in:] OBEL, 21.10.2020, <https://obelaward.org/2020-winner-anandaloy/> (access: 26.04.2025).
- [2] *Anandaloy: Centre for People with disabilities + Dipdii Textiles studio* [in:] Anna Heringer, <https://www.anna-heringer.com/projects/anandaloy/> (access: 26.04.2025).
- [3] Ancci, *Francis Kéré's revolutionary slingshot towards architectural sustainability* [in:] The Republic, 21.02.2025, <https://rpublic.com/vol9-no1/francis-kere-architectural-sustainability/> (access: 26.10.2025).
- [4] Bernatek-Bączyk K., *In search of a balance between tradition and the avant-garde* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining architectural space. Architecture and design*, vol. 3, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, Wrocław 2022, pp. 7–18, <https://dpa.arch.pk.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/defarch.3-1.pdf> (access: 25.05.2025).
- [5] Caygill H., *Architectural postmodernism: The retreat of an avant-garde* [in:] R. Boyne, A. Rattansi (eds), *Postmodernism and society*, Macmillan Publishers, London 1990, pp. 147–162, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-1-349-20843-2_10.pdf (access: 12.04.2025).
- [6] Ibanez M., *Tempus fugit. Transitions and performance in architecture* [in:] K. Terzidis (ed.), *First International Conference on Critical Digital: What Matter(s)?*, 18–19 April 2008, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge 2008, pp. 245–251, https://www.academia.edu/103409216/Tempus_Fugit_Transitions_and_Performance_in_Architecture (access: 10.05.2025).
- [7] Kéré D.F., *Architecture for climate and community*, Pritzker Architecture Prize Lecture, 2022 [in:] the Pritzker Architecture Prize, <https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/diebedo-francis-kere> (access: 20.05.2025).
- [8] *Reichstag, New German Parliament* [in:] Foster + Partners, <https://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/reichstag-new-german-parliament/> (access: 18.04.2025).
- [9] Zumthor P., *Thinking architecture*, Birkhäuser, Basel 1998.

Author's Note

Tomasz Grzelakowski, PhD, Architect

Since 2015, an assistant professor at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Lodz University of Technology, main area of interest: the relationship between architecture and various manifestations of culture and the perception of architecture and architecture of buildings designed following the rules of sustainable development.

tomasz.grzelakowski@p.lodz.pl