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## DIALOGUE WITH HISTORY – DECOMPOSITION AS A CONTEMPORARY MEDIUM OF MEMORY

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### DIALOG Z HISTORIAŁ – DEKOMPOZYCJA JAKO WSPÓŁCZESNY NOŚNIK PAMIĘCI

#### Abstract

The identity of a place shapes the unique character of a space, and each object has features that are rooted in the culture of its surroundings. However, dynamic social needs require new means of expression. Decomposition allows for the reinterpretation of culturally rooted forms without copying them, turning them into carriers of memory, symbolism, and narrative – a dialogue with tradition can be based on mutual respect for history and modernity. This allows for artistic expression while emphasizing that it is not necessary to fight and attempt to completely replace history, and that the local community does not want to forget the past.

*Keywords: decomposition of architecture, historical forms, identity of place, memory medium, reinterpretation*

#### Streszczenie

Tożsamość miejsca kształtuje unikalny charakter przestrzeni, a każdy obiekt posiada cechy, które zakorzenione są w kulturze danego otoczenia. Dynamiczne potrzeby społeczne wymagają jednak nowych środków wyrazu. Dekompozycja umożliwia reinterpretację zakorzenionych kulturowo form bez ich kopiowania, czyniąc z nich nośniki pamięci, symboliki i narracji – dialog z tradycją może polegać na wzajemnym szacunku historii oraz nowoczesności. Umożliwia to ekspresję artysty z jednoczesnym zaznaczeniem, że walka i próba całkowitego zastąpienia historii nie jest konieczna, a lokalna społeczność nie chce zapominać o przeszłości. Artykuł porusza problematykę stosowania dekompozycji jako środka wyrazu łączącego potrzeby historii i współczesności, dającego możliwość szacunku wobec zastanych form bez konieczności ich kopiowania, ale z wykorzystaniem ich jako źródła symboliki, ciągłości narracji kulturowej i odsłaniania pamięci

*Słowa kluczowe: dekompozycja architektury, formy historyczne, tożsamość miejsca, nośnik pamięci, reinterpretacja*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary architectural practice challenges designers to synthesize deeply rooted cultural heritage with the search for new means of expression. Each place, defined as a personalized

segment of space, gains its symbolic meaning and unique identity through the accumulation of cultural layers and historical narratives. In the light of rapidly evolving social and aesthetic transformations, the issue appears to be how architectural actions can, on one hand, honor this complexly interwoven identity and, on the other, adequately address the demands of contemporary generations. One might think that this challenge is becoming particularly pressing in an era of increasing homogenization, which threatens the authentic character of places and leads to the loss of their distinctiveness.

In this context, decomposition appears as an instrument enabling conscious dialogue with the past. It is the basis for creative reinterpretation that serves to reveal hidden layers of memory. The contemporary world does not have to be delicate or modest; the mutual relations between buildings can create tension and dynamic spaces. The multisensory perception of an architectural work emerges as the primary principle; what matters more is how the building will be experienced by the audience rather than how it appears visually.<sup>1</sup>

Architecture, understood in this way, becomes a medium that not only organizes physical space but also influences our tactile, olfactory, auditory, and even gustatory memory. It allows us to become deeply attached to a place and culture. It is worth remembering that philosophical and stylistic concepts, and thus aesthetic notions and criteria of value in architecture, are not immutable; they evolve dynamically with each era. It creates freedom for individual creativity, where the artist builds a separate world, sometimes entirely disconnected from reality or nature.<sup>2</sup> This freedom of expression, although seemingly detached from specific conditions, can in fact be a strong tool for reinterpreting and strengthening the identity of a place, provided that it is implemented with due regard for its heritage.

## 2. IDENTITY OF A PLACE IN THE PROCESS OF CREATING FORMAL AND SYMBOLIC DISTINCTIVENESS

A place can be understood as a personalized fragment of space that, through the process of socialization, shows symbolic significance and becomes rich in values. It becomes a refuge, providing a sense of security and belonging, although it can also be viewed negatively when stability is achieved at the expense of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

According to French historian Pierre Nora, “places of memory” are physical or symbolic paths that help preserve collective memory. Created by ancestors, they play a key role in the process of community self-identification. In Nora’s view, “places of memory” are spaces where “we clearly recognize our difference, the image of what we used to be but are not anymore”.<sup>4</sup> These serve as points of reference that, through a symbolic reinterpretation of the past, enable us to understand contemporary identity and differentiate ourselves from the past.

The identity of each place crystallizes through the interaction of two factors. The first one is its history, reflecting plenty of historical narratives and events that took place in a specific space, saturating it with symbolism and meaning. This history leaves its mark on the place, which manifests itself in its architecture, urban background, and the generally understood

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<sup>1</sup> E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Nowa sztuka i architektura w kontekście dziedzictwa kulturowego*, “Wiadomości Konserwatorskie. Journal of Heritage Conservation” 2015, no. 43, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> M. Czermińska, *Tożsamość kształtowana w pamięci miejsca*, “Ruch Literacki” 2013, no. 6, p. 597.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

“genius loci”. These conditions, present in the physical and non-physical qualities of a place, are a major factor that shapes how it is experienced.

The second crucial determinant is ephemeral, subjective impulses – personal experiences and memories that connect a specific person with a given place. Subjective, emotional, and sensory aspects add a personal, intimate layer of identity to a place, enriching its historical and objective values. The final character of a place is therefore the result of a complex interaction between its centuries-long history and personal experience.

Today, architecture and urban planning face the challenge of increasing homogenization. In many regions of the world, there is a tendency to build structures with a uniform formal design, which makes it difficult to identify their cultural and geographical quality. This architectural unification deprives places of their authentic character and, as a consequence, leads to the loss of their identity. “The pursuit of spatial identity preservation is the pursuit of protecting beauty in all its diversity and opposing standardization and globalization. For only diversity can be a source of creativity and inspiration for the development of art, culture, and civilization”.<sup>5</sup>

The identity of a place can therefore be understood as a dynamic, common living space, whose character is shaped by cultural and territorial layers created by the community. It is cultivated and protected by generations. It is therefore a key aspect of the process of creating a place and its history. Although it is collective in nature, it is also deeply individual and subjective. Perception is shaped by interaction with the environment and influenced by many sensory impressions.

### **3. DECOMPOSITION AS A TOOL FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY – SYMBOLISM, MEMORY, AND THE CONTINUITY OF CULTURAL NARRATIVE**

In modern architecture, decomposition is a way of creating dialogue that combines old and new features. It is a tool that enables the conscious decomposition and reinterpretation of forms in order to create new cultural values. Through this intervention, contemporary architecture engages with existing heritage, redefining its role and meaning in the current landscape.

An interesting aspect is the sensory dimension of decomposition. Through the stratification of space, it enables a multisensory discovery of its hidden meanings. Confronted with fragments of the old structure and the new one, the viewer engages all their senses, leading to a deeper, more personal experience of the place. Connecting the past with the present makes it possible to create various ways of use and symbolic references that exist together harmoniously.

Decomposition is also an important tool in the process of revitalization and building the identity of a place. This approach is not about demolishing buildings. It is beneficial for uncovering hidden meanings. It breaks the continuous historical story and reveals the many local traditions and small histories often lost in the shadow of official, monumental approaches.

Below is an attempt to provide a broader interpretation of these phenomena based on selected examples.

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<sup>5</sup> M.J. Siestrzewska, *Ochrona tożsamości przestrzennej na przykładzie wybranych miast Lubelszczyzny: Ostrów Lubelski, Biłgoraj, Kraśnik*, Politechnika Lubelska, Lublin 2011, p. 58.

### 3.1. THE SENSORY DIMENSION OF DECOMPOSITION – SHAPING THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACE THROUGH MULTISENSORY DISCOVERY OF THE HIDDEN MEANINGS OF SPACE

The perception of a place's identity is closely linked to the human sensory sphere. Our perception of the environment is based on the integration of elements from all the senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. This sensory synthesis leads to a unique, subjective experience that reflects our individual interaction with a given space. In the book *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, Juhani Pallasmaa presents architecture as a factor that fulfills the task of giving meaning, increasing our awareness, and proving that we belong to space and create it.<sup>6</sup>

Touch is something that allows our body to integrate with the surrounding world. It is our first cognitive tool. Therefore, every other organ, such as the mouth or ears, is related to what we perceive through the skin. Pallasmaa calls it the “mother of the senses”. Through touch, we ground ourselves in reality. Touch, as a sense, is activated immediately after our birth, making it a fundamental element in perceiving the space around us. Architecture and the senses are intertwined. The primary task of architecture is to ensure that humans are rooted in space and integrated with it. Touch allows us to materially experience reality through time, matter, and history. Materials, especially porous ones with diverse textures, allow a complex experience of space. When entering a building, the body touches the door, feels the coolness or warmth, and compares the height of an object with its own dimensions.<sup>7</sup>

When we look at the structure and elements of an object, we are able to imagine what it will feel like to the touch. It is known as a “tactile memory”. Touch allows us to perceive the three-dimensional qualities of a surface, including its shapes, porosity, and whether it is smooth or rough. Sight is the evaluation of basic shapes, dimensions, colors, structures, and textures. The author draws attention to Greek architecture. Through the use of numerous optical corrections, sight invites touch and activates other senses to participate in viewing works of architecture, sculpture, and details. Mies van der Rohe used a frontal perspective in his designs, focused on visual perception. He carefully balanced the line between emotional and visual perception thanks to his choice of details and sense of space.<sup>8</sup>

Smell is the most enduring memory in humans. Every building has a spectrum of unique smells that remain in human memory for years. Juhani Pallasmaa did not remember the appearance of the door to his grandfather's house, but he remembered the smell that filled all his senses when he crossed the door. We associate smells with objects. A candy store is connected with the sweet smell of candy, the innocence of a carefree childhood, and the bliss of youth. The smell of a bakery is associated with the abundance and nourishment provided by bread and grain. The smell of seaweed by the sea reminds us of its depth, weight, and mystery. A menu placed outside a restaurant allows us to immediately imagine and fantasize about the meal that awaits us inside. The author describes the smell of an old house that has seen many traces of history – smoke and soot, the sweat of people who have lived there, the smell of wall hangings, or fish fried there for years.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły*, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 68–70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 21–24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 66–68.

Human ears are capable of measuring volume. Standing in a tunnel with our eyes closed, we can immediately assess its length. We assess how long the echo remains within our hearing range. Every building has a unique “voice” – it may feel unwelcoming or welcoming, cozy and intimate, or grand and monumental, filling us with awe and wonder. When we are in a theater, the silence is broken by the applause of the audience, which instantly creates unity with the crowd. The screams of seagulls over the ocean make us think of its infinite depths. Every city has its own distinctive sounds that build and create emotions. The eyes and touch can arouse the desire to taste or to savor something we observe. The most mysterious sense is taste. Objects can stimulate it with their smoothness, color, or shine, as with marble. Junichiro Tanizaki, a Japanese writer who lived from 1886 to 1965, impressively describes the spatial and extraordinary qualities of the sense of taste. He presents a bowl of soup as an extraordinary experience:

In the case of lacquered bowls, there is a delightful moment when, between removing the lid and bringing the bowl to your lips, you look at the solidified, silent suspension filling the vessel, whose color is almost identical to that of the vessel itself. We cannot see what lies hidden in its darkness; we only feel the gentle swaying of the liquid in our hands, and because the edges of the bowl are covered with a delicate mist, we guess that steam is rising, and with it aroma that, even before we bring the dish to our lips, awakens in us a vague, indistinct sense of taste. [...] One could truly speak of a kind of mystical experience, a certain taste of *zen*.<sup>10</sup>

Taste can root us in a place, just as we return to a restaurant for our favorite dish.

A genuine understanding of architecture is about the visual perception of a facade that requires a sensory and holistic experience. It is a confrontation with the object, not just static admiration. Architecture, interpreted by Frank Lloyd Wright and his legendary Fallingwater, perfectly illustrates this thesis. This object is not an isolated building, but an integral part of its surroundings, allowing for a multisensory experience: from the touch of raw materials, through the smell of the forest, to the sound of flowing water. Such a work, rooted in place and time, quickly draws the viewer in, making them a participant rather than just an observer. The timeless task of architecture is to create a space that organizes our existence in the world. Buildings and cities allow us to discern and recognize who we are. It leads us to identify with a place. Architecture allows us to settle in a place, time, and culture, answering fundamental existential questions. The memory of a place, which is recorded through architecture, allows us to build our history. We identify with the space around us, which unites us and with the material world.<sup>11</sup>

The proper use of decomposition in the design process means consciously respecting the identity of a place and its historical heritage. Architectural works are experienced through all five human senses. Modern reinterpretations or historical monuments should show a multi-level approach to creating objects. This character is demonstrated not only by their external appearance but also by rich interior arrangements, which are particularly important when creating interactive museums. Architecture can engage viewers in many different ways. It can attract the eye with colors and modern installations, but also create a space for experience through hearing, touch, smell, and even taste. An architectural work can serve as a contemporary structure while integrating the memory of the past through innovative design

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

solutions. Decomposing a historic structure allows one to keep the contemporary identity while preserving crucial old elements. It means enriching it with innovative installations, sounds, or interactive multimedia experiences.

An interesting example of the use of sensual decomposition in architecture is the Old Mine Science and Art Center in Wałbrzych (Ill. 1). The Lower Silesia region is famous for its numerous postindustrial buildings. One of them is the complex of former Julia mines, reconstructed by the Warsaw-based Nizio Design International team. The complex gained a new meaning thanks to exhibition and museum spaces. Opened to visitors in 2014, the building was expanded on the basis of the Museum of Industry and Technology, which had been located there since 1999. In addition to the wealth of original equipment, such as locomotives and mining machines, which engage the sense of sight and imagination, the design deliberately preserves the authentic smells of the mine – coal, grease, stone, and metal. The sense of hearing is stimulated by recordings of the sounds of working machines and stories of former miners. The preservation of key structural elements, such as the metal truss corridor and original lifting towers, pays homage to the past and seamlessly integrates into the new architectural structure. As a result, the building becomes a living mediator in intergenerational dialogue, proving that history can be told in an innovative and engaging way without rejecting it. This example illustrates how Lower Silesia's preserved heritage has become the cultural center of Wałbrzych, and how combining history with technology has resulted in a multisensory experience accessible to visitors.<sup>12</sup>



Ill. 1. The Old Mine Science and Art Center, view of the complex, source: *Stara Kopalnia w Wałbrzychu* [in:] Dolny Śląsk, <https://dolnyślask.travel/obiekt/stara-kopalnia-w-walbrzychu> (access: 15.08.2025)

<sup>12</sup> A. Buczak, *Centrum Nauki i Sztuki "Stara Kopalnia" w Wałbrzychu jako przykład rewitalizacji obiektu przemysłowego*, "Prace Naukowe Wałbrzyskiej Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania i Przedsiębiorczości" 2015, nr 3, p. 48.

### 3.2. DECOMPOSITION AND REINTERPRETATION OF ARCHITECTURAL FORMS IN DIALOGUE WITH THE LANDSCAPE – RESPECT FOR EXISTING STRUCTURES WHILE CREATING NEW SPATIAL CONNECTIONS

In the book *The Most Beautiful House in the World* by Witold Rybczyński, the author recalls the construction of his own house. It prompted him to reflect on the role of architecture. He describes architectural works as a universal art form that is difficult to categorize.<sup>13</sup>

For the designer, it is crucial to maintain a sense of continuity between architecture and landscape. Integrating the space and the existing buildings demonstrates respect for the space. Without understanding what is around us, we cannot create a building that will be valuable to the local community. We should understand the rules and principles that were given to us. Space should meet the expectations of its users, rather than creating a completely different structure. China and the art of *feng shui* are considered the cradle of this thinking.<sup>14</sup>

When a building becomes part of the landscape, a new space is created, inviting reflection and respite. The Bruder Klaus Chapel in Germany (Ill. 2) has become such a place. The design by architect Peter Zumthor was completed in 2007 in the village of Wachendorf. The chapel is dedicated to the hermit St. Nicholas of Flüe, also known as Brother Klaus. The architecture is very expressive. The simple, prism-shaped building made of cement, sand, stones, and lime is situated in the middle of a field. It does not seem to dominate the open space at all, despite its 12-meter height. While working on the project, the author was inspired



Ill. 2. Bruder Klaus Chapel, front elevation, source: *Bruder-Klaus-Kapelle* [in:] Die Nordeifel, [https://nordeifel-tourismus.de/fileadmin/\\_processed\\_/c/a/csm\\_Bruder\\_Klaus-Aussenaufnahme-Sonne-pp\\_9350d2e1b8.jpg.pagespeed.ce.0ZSm55apnv.jpg](https://nordeifel-tourismus.de/fileadmin/_processed_/c/a/csm_Bruder_Klaus-Aussenaufnahme-Sonne-pp_9350d2e1b8.jpg.pagespeed.ce.0ZSm55apnv.jpg) (access: 15.08.2025)

<sup>13</sup> W. Rybczyński, *Najpiękniejszy dom na świecie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2003, pp. 9–18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 19–24.

by light and shadow, water, fire, sky, and earth. The tower-like building adapts to the seasons. It remains part of the landscape, adding a subtle point of reference that enriches the space. The shape of the prism is particularly visible when viewing the building from different perspectives. Each of the five walls is inclined differently, which gives the impression of plasticity. The number symbolism used in this building is not accidental. It refers to the five parts of the human body or to the pentagon – an element of the dodecahedron – associated with the harmony of the Universe. The building stands on a massive foundation that connects it directly to the ground. The triangular door to the chapel, located on the south side, reflects the sun's rays and clearly indicates the entrance thanks to the metal elements.<sup>15</sup> The walls, textured like tree bark, shape a calm space for contemplation and prayer. Located in fields and forests, the chapel emerges as a subtle sanctuary within the landscape.

An example of architecture that almost completely blends with its natural environment is Villa Vals, located in Switzerland (Ill. 3). The architectural office SeARCH & CMA created a house built directly into the rock structure. The building was completed in 2009. The elliptical façade seamlessly blends with the character of the Alpine mountains. The wall is almost entirely glazed. It is complemented by local stone from the Grisons region. The interior is located entirely underground. The building forms a “tunnel” covered with earth and grass. From the interior perspective, the landscape flows into the building, becoming an integral and harmonious part. Asymmetrical windows of varying sizes do not bring to mind a typical apartment, but rather the organic and raw appearance of rocky cliffs. A narrow path leads to the house, subtly indicating the entrance. At dusk, the building is illuminated by warm light. This



Ill. 3. Villa Vals, front elevation, source: <https://l.icdbcdn.com/oh/2797c5b9-857c-400f-93e9-fe13ba55575f.jpg?w=2080> (access: 15.08.2025)

<sup>15</sup> B. Stec, *Piękno jako oblicze świętości w Kaplicy Brata Klausa Petera Zumthora*, “Architecturae et Artibus” 2017, no. 1, pp. 54–55.

approach enhances the architecture without becoming a dominant feature. It is intriguing and eye-catching, but retains a restrained character and respect for the mountain ranges. Villa Vals was built near the famous Vals Thermal Baths, designed by the architect Peter Zumthor. This complex is renowned for its cave-like appearance interwoven with numerous baths. The apartment deliberately evokes a similar design concept.

### 3.3. DECOMPOSITION AS A METHOD OF REVIVING MEMORY – BREAKING DOWN LINEAR HISTORICAL NARRATIVE IN ORDER TO REVEAL THE MULTIPLE VOICES OF LOCAL TRADITIONS AND EVENTS

The identity of a place in the context of a large city is just as important as in smaller spaces. Developing areas are affected by history, constantly changing nature, and elements like myths and superstitions. The community inhabiting a given place is a factor that builds space. Thanks to this, identity acquires cultural value. The city's architecture and urban transformations, accumulated over centuries, create a cultural landscape that becomes a valuable asset for future generations. The whole and its coherence are made up of individual, smaller areas. These are individual elements of architecture, in the form of buildings or complexes, as well as public spaces such as squares or historic centers. Decomposition can be used as a kind of disturbance of space and for giving it a new purpose. The created place will provide an opportunity to emphasize the architecture. It becomes a point of reflection and focus.<sup>16</sup>

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (Ill. 4) represents the preservation of the memory of the past. Created between 2003 and 2005, the memorial allows history to be preserved within the city's structure. Designer Peter Eisenman incorporated 2,711 concrete cuboids into the city center, bounded by four streets, that were unveiled to the public in 2005. The number of spatial columns refers to the number of pages of the Talmud. Beneath the surface lies an underground museum housing an exhibition on the extermination of European Jews. Parallel steles create a series of spatial lines, which, from a bird's-eye view, form a monumental view reminiscent of a cemetery. The gray tones and the use of raw concrete emphasize the nature of this place – the commemoration of the Holocaust. The space between the steles is filled with paving stones. Visitors walking between the successive blocks feel as if they are in a labyrinth. This feeling is further intensified by their height, which, in some cases, measures twice the height of an average person. The sense of disorientation is a reference to the feelings that may have accompanied the Jewish victims. During the Holocaust, people lost their individuality and were forced to live on the edge of death under constant terror. The monument evokes emotions of concentration, but also consternation and fear.<sup>17</sup> This place encourages reflection and contemplation on the history of the city, home to 3.8 million people. A fragment of Berlin's city center has been decomposed in a unique way – a new space has been created, completely different from the typical buildings found in German city

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<sup>16</sup> J. Owerczuk, *Tożsamość miejsca – rodzimych przypadków kilka*, "Kwartalnik Naukowy Uczelni Vistula" 2017, no. 4, pp. 43–45.

<sup>17</sup> M. Polak, *Monumentalna przestrzeń pomnika Pomordowanych Żydów Europy*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Arte et Educatione" 2017, no. 12, pp. 102–104.

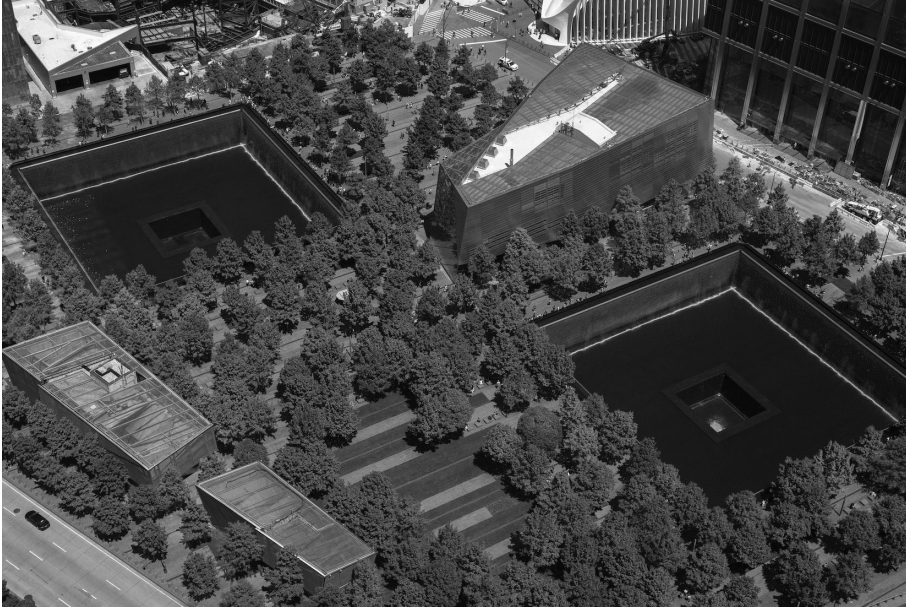


Ill. 4. Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, aerial view of the site, source: M. Markowski, *Pomnik Pomordowanych Żydów Europy w Berlinie. Wymowny hold dla ofiar nazistowskich zbrodni* [in:] *Magazyn WhiteMAD*, 15.06.2022, [https://www.whitemad.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/1920px-Memorial\\_to\\_the\\_Murdered\\_Jews\\_of\\_Europeabove.jpg](https://www.whitemad.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/1920px-Memorial_to_the_Murdered_Jews_of_Europeabove.jpg) (access: 15.08.2025)

centers. A square with steles has been forming as an urban monument. This approach to shaping the buildings has preserved and emphasized the memory of the city's history.

The second example illustrates the commemoration of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. The National September 11 Memorial & Museum (9/11 Memorial & Museum) in New York consists of two large pools located on the site of the former World Trade Center towers (Ill. 5). Inside the square basins, there is a waterfall that flows into smaller pools. The museum pays tribute to the more than 3,000 victims who fought for their own lives and the lives of others during the attack. The layout is monumental in nature, reflecting the actual dimensions of both buildings. It also has symbolic significance. It bears witness to people facing violence and highlights the tragic consequences of terrorist attacks. The basins cut out part of the space, creating a gap between the surface of the earth and what lies beneath it. The symbol of tears and wounds is intended to show the suffering and emptiness left behind after traumatic events. Entering the underground museum through the recess, visitors are faced with a moment of reflection. The change of environment allows them to step into the past. The exhibition space has been divided into sections so that survivors and families of the deceased can avoid elements that evoke feelings of trauma. The memorial has become a place to commemorate mass suffering, creating a new, vast area in New York City's urban landscape.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> E. Stewart, *Where were you on that day?: A critical analysis of the National September 11 Memorial Museum*, "Render" 2013, no. 7, pp. 2–4.



Ill. 5. 9/11 Memorial & Museum, aerial view of the site, source: *About the Memorial* [in:] National September 11 Memorial & Museum, photo by Jin S. Lee, <https://www.911memorial.org/sites/default/files/paragraph/image/2019-08/COM%20AERIAL%20SPRING.JPG> (access: 15.08.2025)

### 3.4. SYNTHESIS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH DECOMPOSITION – CONSCIOUS STRATIFICATION OF SPACE ALLOWING FOR THE CREATION OF VARIOUS USAGE SCENARIOS AND SYMBOLIC REFERENCES

Shaping the identity of a place is a process closely linked to its diversity. It is not only the individual personality traits of the inhabitants, but also their multiculturalism, different religions, and views, which naturally intertwine in the context of architectural and urban design. This interaction leads to the creation of successive layers of styles and elements that become a material expression of the existence and history of the community. The accumulation of these cultural and historical layers allows for an in-depth historical and cultural analysis. This creates space for individuals who need to express their uniqueness in architectural works, but also enhances collective identity, improving relations and coexistence between social groups.<sup>19</sup>

The area of historical form decomposition is occupied by architecture, which is united by the term “deconstruction”. In an interview conducted by Christopher Norris, French philosopher Jacques Derrida stated:

Deconstruction takes place when [...] certain architectural philosophies and assumptions are deconstructed—for example, the hegemony of aesthetics, beauty, utility, functionality, life,

<sup>19</sup> S. Pawlikowska-Musiewicz, M. Foltyniak, B. Głyda, *Tożsamość miasta a tożsamość miejsca. Wybrane aspekty*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Technicznej w Katowicach, Katowice 2018, pp. 7–12.

and housing. The objectives of the work must then be reformulated, but one cannot (or should not) simply abandon values such as habitability, functionality, and so on.<sup>20</sup>

One representative of this architectural trend is Daniel Libeskind. His extension of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, completed between 2003 and 2007, is a characteristic intervention in the dialogue between historical substance and modern architecture (Ill. 6). The complex, the oldest part of which dates back to 1914, has been supplemented with a set of interpenetrating prismatic forms, whose geometry refers to the crystalline structure of minerals presented in the museum's collection. The new architecture has not been harmo-

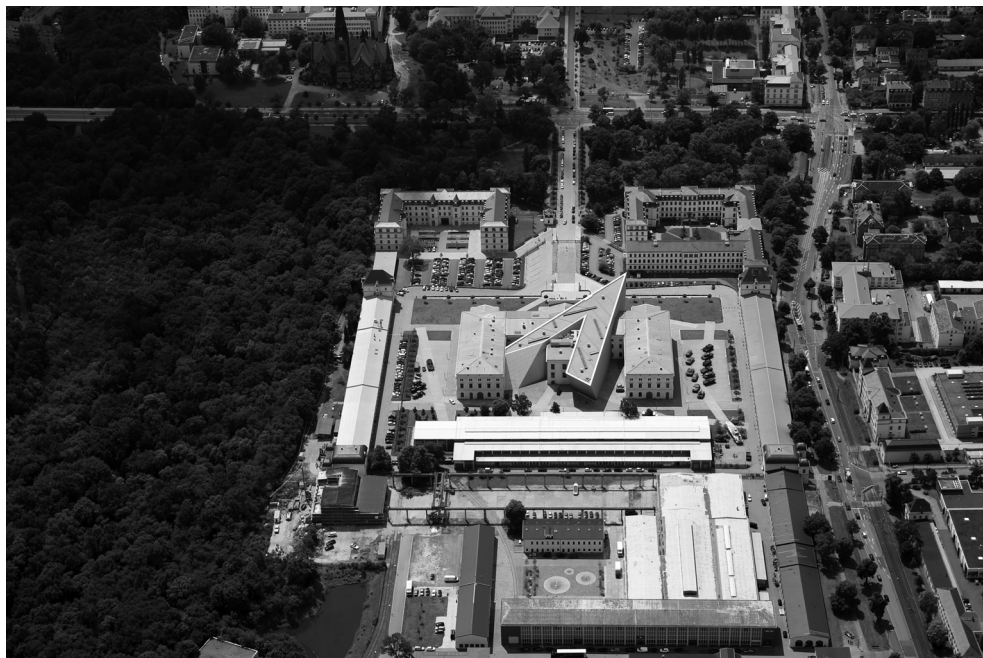


Ill. 6. Royal Ontario Museum, front elevation, source: M. Solkov, *Royal Ontario Museum in Fall 2021* [in:] Wikimedia Commons, 22.10.2021, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/72/Royal\\_Ontario\\_Museum\\_in\\_Fall\\_2021.jpg/1920px-Royal\\_Ontario\\_Museum\\_in\\_Fall\\_2021.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/72/Royal_Ontario_Museum_in_Fall_2021.jpg/1920px-Royal_Ontario_Museum_in_Fall_2021.jpg) (access: 15.08.2025)

niously integrated into the existing building, but rather contrasted with it through a dramatic clash of forms. Visually, it seems as if the modern structures are literally piercing the historic walls, which emphasizes the dynamism and expressiveness of the design. In reality, however, there is a distance of several centimeters between the two layers – a technical solution that allows for a clear separation of the historic substance from the contemporary intervention. In this case, we can talk about the decomposition of architectural form understood as the fragmentation and multiplication of its structure. The historic building with a compact, classical structure is confronted with the expansion of polygonal, irregular structures. They disrupt its legibility and, at the same time, open up a new interpretative perspective. Deconstruction, therefore, does not consist in the destruction of the object, but in breaking its geometric and

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<sup>20</sup> J. Derrida, *In Discussion with Christopher Norris*, p. 9, after: C. Waś, *Architektura a dekonstrukcja. Przypadek Petera Eisenmana i Bernarda Tschumiego*, Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2015, p. 15.



Ill. 7. Military History Museum in Dresden, aerial view, source: A. Zys, *Muzeum Wojskowo-Historyczne w Dreźnie. Projekt wykonał architekt polskiego pochodzenia!* [in:] *Magazyn WhiteMAD*, 6.06.2022, <https://www.whitemad.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/u0b1040-2280x1520-1.jpg> (access: 15.08.2025)

compositional continuity, thanks to which the museum gains a new identity – dynamic, hybrid, and multilayered.<sup>21</sup>

The intermingling of styles and cultures is also illustrated by Libeskind's 2011 renovation of the Military History Museum in Dresden. (Ill. 7). It is housed in a historic 19th-century arsenal, which served as the East German Army Museum after World War II and has been in its current function since 1990. The building, designed in the classical style, is combined with the architect's innovative idea. He incorporated a glass and steel wedge into the historic structure of the former arsenal. The dynamic form extends beyond the outline of the museum, creating a triangular superstructure in which new exhibition spaces have been created. Two seemingly completely different styles come together, presenting an example of the intertwining of the needs of history and the present. In this case, the architect proves how effective the integration of styles can be for culture. This approach makes architecture a vehicle for historical events, but also responds to the needs of viewers who want modern solutions that drive 21st-century culture. An additional historical aspect is the reference to Dresden's past, which was thoroughly destroyed during World War II. The symbolism of the letter "V" is not accidental. It is meant to be an element suggesting the rebirth of Dresden after the destruction

<sup>21</sup> K. Janicka-Świerguła, *Creative expression or rational submission to the past? Architectural trends in selected adaptations of historical buildings to contemporary needs* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining the architectural space. Rationalistic or intuitive way to architecture*, vol. 4, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2018, p. 80.

of war. The protruding wedge imitates its reconstruction and strength. This idea is crowned by an observation deck at the top of the added element, where viewers can admire the panorama of the city and reflect on its complex history.<sup>22</sup>

A completely different example of synthesizing the past and present is the original decomposition of the façade of the Fouquet's Barrière Hotel in Paris (2006). The project arose from the need to unify seven existing buildings located in the prestigious "Golden Triangle" of Paris, including authentic and pastiche Haussmannian buildings and structures from the 1970s. The aim was to transform these diverse structures into a coherent "Palace", giving it a strong, recognizable image (Ill. 8). Due to the conservation of authentic Haussmannian façades, it was impossible to create a completely contemporary look. In response to this challenge, Édouard François developed and patented an innovative concept called *moulé-troué* (cast and perforated). The process was based on two components: replication of the facade and the introduction of independent "aquarium windows". The authentic 90-meter Haussmann-style façade of the Fouquet's restaurant building was digitally scanned. A copy was then recreated in lead-gray concrete and applied to the remaining walls like a bas-relief. These facades appear flattened, and



Ill. 8. Hotel Fouquet's Barrière, front facade, source: L. Ghinitoiu, *A Complementary Architectural Dialogue of Past and Present in the Refurbishment of Hotel Fouquet Barrière* [in:] ArchDaily, [https://www.archdaily.com/915677/a-complementary-architectural-dialogue-of-past-and-present-in-the-refurbishment-of-hotel-fouquet-barriere/5cbf18ad284dd19951000051-a-complementary-architectural-dialogue-of-past-and-present-in-the-refurbishment-of-hotel-fouquet-barriere-photo?next\\_project=no](https://www.archdaily.com/915677/a-complementary-architectural-dialogue-of-past-and-present-in-the-refurbishment-of-hotel-fouquet-barriere/5cbf18ad284dd19951000051-a-complementary-architectural-dialogue-of-past-and-present-in-the-refurbishment-of-hotel-fouquet-barriere-photo?next_project=no) (access: 15.08.2025)

<sup>22</sup> D.A. Barnstone, *Paradoxes of war critique on display: The Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History*, "Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art" 2020, no. 1, pp. 96–97.

the sculpted details, such as lion heads and columns, lack depth. Large openings were carved into this concrete “skin”, and are completely independent of the original Haussmannian design. Their placement was dictated solely by visual comfort from inside the rooms and optimal functional layout. The result is an irregular pattern of glass “aquariums” that deviates from the symmetry of the classic facade. This method openly declares a break between the external decoration and internal functionality. The windows look as if they were “walled up” in concrete, and the hotel’s interiors are invisible from the street. The deep aquarium windows are framed with mirrors that reflect the sky during the day and show only fragments of the carpet at night. This deliberate prevention of viewing the interior from the outside creates a kind of game with the viewer of the architecture, emphasizing that the external form is an independent decoration that can imitate the context but functions independently of windows, balconies, or corridors. François showed that the layout of the facade does not have to strictly correspond to the layout of the interior, which is a bold manifesto of the independence of form and function.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.5. REVITALIZATION BASED ON THE DISMEMBERMENT OF FORMS – TREATING DECOMPOSITION AS A GESTURE OF REVEALING, UNCOVERING HIDDEN MEANINGS, AND CREATING A NEW, MULTIDIMENSIONAL CULTURAL NARRATIVE

The identity of a place is directly linked to the concept of revitalization, which allows for the reconstruction of historical and culturally significant works of architecture. Thanks to the conservation of monuments, the memory of a given place is preserved. Each space has undergone many stages of development, which should be treated with respect. The process of change associated with revitalization is long-term, involving complex economic, social, historical, and spatial analysis. It brings many positive effects. It contributes to strengthening social bonds by revitalizing the space and giving it a new character. Another effect is the improvement of the quality of life of residents, who gain new space to experience both cultural impressions (old buildings adapted into museums, art galleries, exhibition spaces) and improvements in the quality of everyday life (revitalization of degraded areas, creation of new jobs). It restores the former identity, often lost and forgotten over the years. The entire process involves cooperation between many entities – the local community, public authorities, and economic associations. This creates dialogue. Places are created where the community treats the past of the building with respect, but begins to give it a new, contemporary character that responds to new needs. Revitalization measures allow values to be passed on to future generations. In this case, the concept of decomposition is synonymous with a partial change in the form and character of the building, while respecting its main historical features. It is also linked to sustainable development, which, by adapting what already exists, gives buildings a new role, allowing for savings in materials and the use of space. Time allows for the gradual introduction of individual impressions, emotions, and architectural elements. They become one with events from the past. They create a space that responds to the needs of the local community’s identity and preserves the symbolism of the past.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Fouquet’s Barrière* [in:] Architonie, <https://www.architonie.com/en/pr/fouquet%27s-barriere/5100154/> (access: 18.08.2025).

<sup>24</sup> Z. Paszkowski, *Kryterium tożsamości miejsca w rewitalizacji miast*, Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Techniczny w Szczecinie [presentation], [https://rpo.wzp.pl/sites/default/files/pliki/12.\\_kryterium\\_tozsamosci\\_miejsca.pdf](https://rpo.wzp.pl/sites/default/files/pliki/12._kryterium_tozsamosci_miejsca.pdf) (access: 13.07.2025).



Ill. 9. Tate Modern Gallery, front elevation, source: “A museum’s architecture shouldn’t be its best exhibit, but at the Tate Modern it steals the show” [in:] *The Architectural Review*, [https://cdn.ca.emap.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2016/09/hdm\\_switchhouse\\_huftoncrow\\_040\\_389797512-1800x1200.jpg](https://cdn.ca.emap.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2016/09/hdm_switchhouse_huftoncrow_040_389797512-1800x1200.jpg) (access: 15.08.2025)

An example that illustrates the giving of new meaning to historical objects is the Tate Modern Museum in London (Ill. 9). Located on the banks of the River Thames, the museum displays modern art created after 1900. The building, constructed in the mid-20th century, was once a power station (Bankside Power Station), which operated until 1981. The power station was converted by the Swiss company Herzog & de Meuron, and the finished building was opened in 2000. The former power station had a raw character. It was set on a steel structure. The facades were covered with brick, which has been preserved to this day. The dominant feature of the entire building was its characteristic chimney, rising almost 100 m high. The conversion retained the key elements of the power station – the chimney, brickwork, and interior layout. The glass roof superstructure and the reinterpretation of the turbine hall, which is still equipped with original elements from the time when the power plant was in operation, give it a modern character. The building is unified by lighting. The lighting installations allow the exhibition spaces and historical elements of the interior to be highlighted. The facade divisions and the rhythm of the windows retain their proportions and former divisions. The entire museum complex has contributed to the revitalization of the area. The community has gained a valuable space, which is visited by approximately 4.7 million visitors annually.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> S. Kreidel, *Concept and experience: Tate Modern*, PhD thesis, University College London, London 2008, pp. 5–15.



Ill. 10. Akron Art Museum, front elevation, source: *Akron Art Museum. Museum as Urban Space* [in:] Coop Himmelb(l)au., <https://coop-himmelblau.at/projects/akron-art-museum/> (access: 15.08.2025).

The Art Museum, completed in 2007 in Akron, Ohio, USA, by the Coop Himmelb(l)au studio, is an architectural manifesto referred to as the “Museum of the Future” (Ill. 10). This concept goes beyond the traditional perception of a museum as merely a place for storing and exhibiting knowledge. It transforms it into an “urban concept”, a three-dimensional symbol of the city, exhibiting the contents of the visual world. The goal was to create a hybrid space where art can flow outwards and the city can flow inwards, encouraging encounters and unexpected events. The design is a conscious integration with the architectural context. The new building connects to the existing museum building – a Renaissance structure from 1899 that originally served as a post office.<sup>26</sup>

A key aspect is the decomposition of the structure into three distinct but functionally interconnected elements. The focal point is the “Crystal”, a three-story, glass-enclosed structure that serves as the main entrance, an orientation space, and a key connection between the new and old parts of the museum. Its flexibility allows for a variety of events to be organized and provides access to public resources such as a lecture hall, library, and café. Contrasting with the transparency of the Crystal, the exhibition area, the “Gallery Box”, is a vast space with few columns,

<sup>26</sup> *Akron Art Museum, Museum as Urban Space* [in:] Coop Himmelb(l)au, <https://coop-himmelblau.at/projects/akron-art-museum/> (access: 15.08.2025).

offering extreme flexibility in exhibition design. The designers deliberately eliminated natural light in the galleries to allow for strict control and prevent damage to the artworks. The whole composition is held together and crowned by the “Roof Cloud”, a 327-foot cantilevered steel structure that hovers above the building, creating a “blurred” outline for the museum thanks to its mass and materiality. This element not only encloses the interior space but also provides shade for the exterior spaces and acts as a horizontal landmark in the city, extending over both the old and new buildings and the adjacent street.<sup>27</sup>

The design philosophy of this building, in the words of Wolf D. Prix, “embraces the past rather than replacing and destroying it”, thus creating a harmonious yet dynamic relationship between old and new. The Crystal serves as the main connection and orientation point between the historic and contemporary wings, while the Roof Cloud symbolically encompasses both structures and the adjacent street, creating a striking new landmark.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. SUMMARY

The above considerations indicate that decomposition in architecture is not merely a stylistic device. It is a comprehensive methodology that enables a profound dialogue between the past and the present. It effectively functions as a tool that allows for the conscious breakdown and reinterpretation of historical forms, thus creating new cultural value and enriching the narrative of a place. It is not an act of destruction but rather a gesture of revealing hidden layers of meaning. It allows for the disclosure of the polyphony of local traditions and microhistories, which often remain in the shadow of official, monumental narratives.

Its sensory dimension is of key importance, as it engages the viewer in a multisensory discovery of its hidden meanings by stratifying space. It is the integration of data from all the senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – that builds a unique, subjective experience of a place. It makes architecture a medium that allows us to settle into space, time, and culture. Examples such as the Old Mine Science and Art Center in Wałbrzych and the Tate Modern in London clearly illustrate how the conscious use of decomposition and multisensory perception can revitalize places and give them a new identity, while paying tribute to their historical past.

The concepts presented resonate with Leszek Kołakowski’s philosophical reflection. He emphasizes the duality of human nature, which accepts the existing order and strives to preserve the world in its unchanged form, but at the same time feels a constant need for novelty. This need, tempting in itself, is probably related to the human experience of time and the desire to be at the beginning, with a sense of openness to the world. Kołakowski suggests that although we know only a tiny part of our collective past, everything that has happened has left traces that can theoretically be reconstructed.<sup>29</sup> According to this view, human existence depends on the coexistence of two forces: the conservative force, which ensures durability, stability, and calm, and the need to seek novelty and change, which is the basis for development.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>29</sup> E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Nowa sztuka i architektura...*, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem.*

Deconstructivist architecture, understood as the fragmentation and multiplication of a structure rather than its destruction, allows for a break in geometric and compositional continuity. It opens up new interpretative perspectives, as in the case of Daniel Libeskind's extension to the Royal Ontario Museum. What is more, working in a historical environment, despite obvious limitations, seems to be a powerful source of sublime creativity and intense intellectual effort. The use of contrasts – light and shadow, lightness and transparency juxtaposed with the mass of a wall, or aluminum and glass with stone – aims to evoke emotions and moods, in accordance with the psychological theory of dissonance.<sup>31</sup>

The creative process is an individual activity, an intellectual game, a flash of inspiration, delight, organization, rejection, selection. The idea for new shapes is, in turn, a transformation of the artist's experiences, feelings, and memories. As a result, decomposition becomes a conscious act of respect for the identity of a place and its heritage. It offers architectural solutions that respond to contemporary cultural and social needs. It enables the creation of spaces that not only organize our existence in the world but also allow us to identify with a place and culture, thus building continuity of history for future generations.

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<sup>31</sup> E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovic, *Nowe formy zderzone z historycznymi = A clash of new and historical forms*, "Czasopismo Techniczne Architektura" 2010, no. 7-1(15)A, p. 295.

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