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## REIMAGINING THEATRE: SPATIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN CONTEXTS

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### NOWE OBLCICZE TEATRU: PRZESTRZENNE I TECHNOLOGICZNE ADAPTACJE W ARCHITEKTURZE I STRUKTURZE MIEJSKIEJ

#### Abstract

Since its very beginning, theatre, as an idea, an art form, and an institution, has undergone continuous transformations at multiple levels. This article examines the spatial configurations of contemporary Warsaw theatres, the number of which has increased in recent years. The authors focus on theatrical institutions located in spaces originally designed for functions other than theatrical performance. The research conducted for this study also considers advancements in engineering and theatre technology that have made it possible to integrate theatre into existing architectural environments.

*Keywords: adaptations, architectural form, identity of place, theatre, theatre technologies*

#### Streszczenie

Teatr jako idea, sztuka czy instytucja od początku powstania przechodzi ciągle zmiany na wielu płaszczyznach. Autorki artykułu postanowiły przyjrzeć się przestrzeniom współczesnych teatrów warszawskich, których ilość w ostatnich latach wzrosła. W artykule autorki opisują szczegółowo instytucje teatralne, które zostały umiejscowione w przestrzeniach projektowanych pod inne funkcje niż teatralne. Badania przeprowadzone na cel niniejszej pracy obejmowały również rozwój inżynierii i technologii teatralnych umożliwiających wpisanie teatru w istniejącą przestrzeń architektoniczną.

*Słowa kluczowe: adaptacje, forma architektoniczna, tożsamość miejsca, teatr, technologie teatralne*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary theatre architecture stands at a critical intersection of cultural, social, and technological phenomena that are redefining both its architectural form and social function.

The traditional theatrical zone – the stage, auditorium, and foyer, referred to as the “front of house”<sup>1</sup> – is no longer a closed, repetitive structure. Instead, current trends reveal a multiplication of forms, a blurring of functional boundaries, and increasing integration of theatre spaces into existing architectural and urban fabric. These transformations respond to shifts in cultural participation models as well as to changes within the architectural environment itself, which increasingly embraces concepts such as flexibility, temporality, and circularity.<sup>2</sup> Theatre architecture today includes both purpose-built venues and adaptive reuse projects, often involving the conversion of warehouses or former industrial halls. These adaptive strategies not only attract new audiences but also enrich the cultural landscape of cities.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Theatre as an art form originated in the 6th century BCE in ancient Greece, emerging as a ritual practice dedicated to the god Dionysus and took the form of a nomadic performance tradition. After several decades, it was granted a permanent architectural setting, dated to the 5th century BCE. Greek and Roman theatres were typically situated on hillsides, into which the audience seating was integrated. During the medieval period, purpose-built theatres were not constructed; instead, liturgical dramas were staged in various types of spaces: primarily churches or marketplaces and were intended for the entire local community. The Baroque era introduced a clear division between the actor and the spectator. The stage became the designated site for the performance of a scripted, fictional narrative, observed by the audience from a fixed viewpoint. This theatrical format, often referred to as the *Theatre of viewing* or the *Theatre of experience*<sup>4</sup> underwent significant evolution. Over time, the boundary between stage and audience began to dissolve: performances extended into the auditorium, or the audience was placed directly on stage. These spatial innovations aimed to bring actors and spectators physically closer, challenging classical divisions and encouraging more immersive, affective engagement. The ultimate goal was to intensify the viewer’s sensory and emotional involvement, transforming the spectator from a passive observer into an active participant. Nonetheless, regardless of the model adopted, one element remains constant in theatre: the direct encounter of one human being – the actor, with another – the spectator. This encounter takes place within the performative space, the shared territory of stage and audience. It is this spatial and relational dynamic that creates the essence of theatre, whose fundamental function remains the presentation of dramatic works.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Koziń-Woźniak, *Teatry Interferencji. Współczesna architektura teatralna a nieformalna przestrzeń teatru*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2015, p. 97. The “front of house” – that is, the front zone – includes all the elements of the foyer that serve the audience.

<sup>2</sup> K. Boháčová, A. Schleicher, *Temporary forms of performative space: Impact of temporary architecture on audience diversification*, “Architecture Papers of the Faculty of Architecture and Design STU” 2024, no. 1, pp. 32–36. DOI: 10.2478/alfa-2024-0005.

<sup>3</sup> K. Boháčová and A. Schleicher point out that temporary theatre structures effectively “bring theatre beyond urbanized structures and thus bring culture closer to where it was previously unavailable”, *Pop-up architecture as a tool for popularizing theatre: Prototype No. 1*, “Architecture Papers of the Faculty of Architecture and Design STU” 2022, no. 1, pp. 40–42. DOI: 10.2478/alfa-2022-0006.

<sup>4</sup> M. Koziń-Woźniak, *Teatry Interferencji, op. cit.*, p. 86.

## 1.2. THE PRESENT

Since the 1990s, Poland has witnessed an increase in new theatrical initiatives. According to Paweł Płoski's report on the organizational transformations of theatre in Poland, 1989–2009<sup>5</sup>, prepared for the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, there were 111 repertory theatres (both dramatic and musical) operating in 1989. Based on the most recent data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS) in 2023, 207 theatres and musical institutions were engaged in stage activity, of which 182 had their own artistic teams.<sup>6</sup> The number most frequently cited is 136 theatres, including 90 dramatic theatres and approximately 30 independent ones, defined by their ownership structure and financed from sources other than public funds (i.e., municipal budgets).<sup>7</sup>

In the last two decades, several private theatres have appeared in Warsaw. However, not a single new small-scale theatre building has been constructed specifically for theatrical purposes. The number of so-called *small stages* has grown, though at a relatively slow pace. These new theatres have been established within pre-existing spaces, often shaped by the creative visions of performance makers, who adapt the spatial characteristics of existing buildings to suit their artistic needs. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend of reusing existing architecture as a design resource, following the principles of circular architecture and the goals of sustainable development.<sup>8</sup> It is worth emphasizing that in addition to the growth in the number of dramatic and independent theatres, there has also been a rise in the number of small stages, although the pace of this process has remained moderate. Spatial adaptations, such as converting small halls within residential buildings or repurposing post-industrial structures, have become a common practice.

## 2. CASE STUDIES

*Teatr Druga Strefa* (former warehouse space, 14A Magazynowa Street)

The practice of adapting existing structures for performing arts purposes finds its expression in numerous architectural realizations. A notable example of such transformation is *Teatr Druga Strefa*, an independent theatre operating within a repurposed space. This venue represents the conversion of an industrial facility into an experimental stage. Located in the Mokotów district of Warsaw, the building originally served as a warehouse, typical of the logistical infrastructure found in urban areas during the communist period in Poland. Its

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<sup>5</sup> P. Płoski, *Przemiany organizacyjne teatru w Polsce w latach 1989–2009*, Warszawa 2009, [https://www.academia.edu/53021910/Przemiany\\_organizacyjne\\_teatru\\_w\\_Polsce\\_w\\_latach\\_1989\\_2009](https://www.academia.edu/53021910/Przemiany_organizacyjne_teatru_w_Polsce_w_latach_1989_2009) (access: 20.05.2025).

<sup>6</sup> Based on: *Działalność teatrów i instytucji muzycznych w 2023 roku*, GUS, 5.04.2025, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/kultura-turystyka-sport/kultura/dzialalnosc-teatrow-i-instytucji-muzycznych-w-2023-roku%2C13%2C8.html> (access: 28.06.2025).

<sup>7</sup> Based on: B. Schubert, *Ile jest teatrów w Polsce? Zaskakujące fakty o ich liczbie i rodzajach* [in:] Bogusław Schubert. pl – Sztuka: Inspiracje, Artyści i Wydarzenia, 6.02.2025, <https://boguslawshubert.pl/ile-jest-teatrow-w-polsce-zaskakujace-fakty-o-ich-liczbie-i-rodzajach> (access: 20.05.2025).

<sup>8</sup> M. Braungart, W. McDonough, *Cradle to cradle: Remaking the way we make things*, North Point Press, New York 2009, p. 139.

architectural form is characterized by simplicity: a single-storey hall-type structure with minimal fenestration and a raw, utilitarian façade. In 2006, responding to the growing demand for alternative cultural venues, the building was adapted into a theatre by Sylwester Biraga. The adaptation process prioritized the maximal use of the existing volume; the open-plan layout of the interior was preserved, enabling the creation of a flexible performance space. New technical systems were introduced, including stage lighting, acoustic installations, and minimal scenographic elements that accentuate the industrial aesthetic of the interior. The intimate scale of the venue allows for direct interaction with the audience, while the spatial flexibility supports the development of unconventional theatrical experiences. This transformation illustrates how post-industrial architecture can acquire a new identity as a site of contemporary cultural production. (Ill. 1, 2)



Ill. 1–2. *Teatr Druga Strefa*, photos: Julia Cieślak

#### *Och-Teatr* (formerly a cinema auditorium, located at 65 Grójecka Street)

A completely different scale and aesthetic are represented by *Och-Teatr*, located in the modernist building of the former Ochota Cinema. The structure was built in 1949 to a design by Mieczysław Piperek. As an example of postwar utilitarian architecture, the building was characterized by a compact form, a large screening hall with a traditional auditorium layout, and a spacious foyer with an original circulation system. Following the closure of the cinema between 2000 and 2009, the building fell partially into disrepair. Its modernization and adaptation into a theatre took place in 2010, initiated by the Krystyna Janda Foundation for Culture. The scope of the renovation included the transformation of the cinema hall into a proscenium theatre space with expanded backstage and technical facilities, while preserving key historical elements such as the original façade, neon signage, and interior layout. The implementation of contemporary acoustic and technological solutions enabled the creation of a state-of-the-art performance venue capable of accommodating over 400 spectators. The conversion of the former cinema into a theatre restored the building's cultural function and allowed it to re-emerge as a hub of contemporary urban culture within the district. (Ill. 3, 4)



Ill. 3. *Och Teatr*, source: Yga.kostrzewa, Siedziba Och-Teatru [in:] Wikipedia, <https://pl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Och-Teatr.jpg> CC BY-SA 4.0 (access: 29.06.2025)

Ill. 4. *Och Teatr*, source: PANEK, Och Teatr – wejście [in:] R. Soroczyński, Pięć lat Och-Teatru [in:] Warszawa.pl, 16.01.2015, <https://www.warszawa.pl/piec-lat-och-teatru/> (access: 29.06.2025)

#### *Teatr Capitol* (former commercial-service pavilion, 115 Marszałkowska Street)

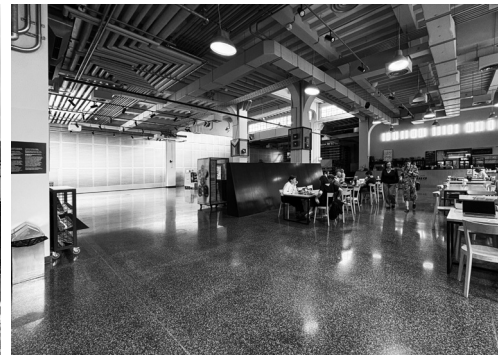
Among the examples of spatial adaptations involving buildings originally unrelated to culture, *Teatr Capitol* is worth describing. It was established in a structure built in the 1990s, initially designed as a commercial-service pavilion. The building emerged during a wave of urban transformations in central Warsaw, aimed at increasing commercialization and diversifying the functions of the city's core. The structure is defined by a simple geometric form, large glazed façades facing Marszałkowska Street, and a multi-storey layout tailored to the needs of commercial tenants. In 2008, the interior was reconstructed and adapted to accommodate the private *Teatr Capitol*. The adaptation process involved the creation of two performance halls, backstage facilities, a foyer with gastronomic functions, and office spaces. Modern technological solutions were implemented, particularly in the areas of lighting, sound, and acoustic comfort. Although the building lacks historical or heritage value, the conversion of a commercial pavilion into a cultural venue reflects current urban trends, where commercial spaces are reimagined to serve new social and cultural functions. (Ill. 5, 6)



Ill. 5–6. *Teatr Capitol*, photos: Julia Cieślak

*Nowy Teatr w Warszawie* (former Municipal Sanitation Depot, 10/16 Madalińskiego Street)

Another example of introducing theatre into a post-industrial urban fabric is *Nowy Teatr*, an original initiative by director Krzysztof Warlikowski and stage designer Małgorzata Szcześniak. In 2009, a competition was held to select a design for the modernization, adaptation, and construction. The project envisioned the transformation of a former municipal sanitation depot, occupying an area of 8,800 m<sup>2</sup>, originally designed in 1927 by Tadeusz Emmel. Until 2012, the site functioned as a workshop hall serving as a technical facility for vehicle maintenance within the municipal waste management system. The architectural conversion of the historic structure into a theatre was developed by the architectural studio Piotr Fortuna Architekci. The central element of the theatre complex is the main hall, whose architectural form has been preserved due to its heritage status. It was adapted for theatrical use by installing a system of movable walls, enabling the creation of a performance space for up to 450 spectators. These mobile walls provide the venue with multifunctional flexibility, allowing for a wide range of performances and events in varying formats and scales. The adaptable nature of the space allows for simultaneous uses by partitioning the interior as needed. The only permanent element is the overhead lighting grid, a mobile structure equipped with a fixed set of lighting instruments and capable of accommodating further installations. The entire theatre complex, covering approximately 2,800 m<sup>2</sup>, includes a spacious foyer with ticket offices, a bookstore and restaurant, a rehearsal room, staff facilities, a library, and a two-storey backstage area housing dressing rooms, makeup rooms, technical support, and storage. *Nowy Teatr* is integrated into the urban fabric through its accessibility, supported by additional public functions such as a restaurant, bookstore, and a large outdoor square. (Ill. 7, 8)



Ill. 7–8. *Nowy Teatr*, photos: Maja Piechowiak

*Teatr Komuna Warszawa* (former primary school, 31 Emilii Plater Street)

An equally unconventional and striking example of the creative transformation of a utilitarian space is *Komuna Warszawa*, a theatre that has operated since 2020 in the building of a former primary school. Its artistic director, Grzegorz Laszuk, has been developing an alternative, anarchist-experimental, off-theatre scene since 1989. The school building was designed by architects Jerzy Baumiller and Jan Zdanowicz between 1959 and 1961. Today, situated between modern commercial buildings – formerly part of the Marriott and Elektrim developments – and surrounded by green areas and a sports field, the site creates

a unique urban and architectural complex. The two-storey building includes a courtyard with a covered concert and performance stage, a summer cinema screen, a former gymnasium converted into a theatre hall, a banquet and exhibition space, two workshop and conference rooms, four artist residency studios (including one adapted for music recording), dressing rooms, support facilities, and a foyer. Performances are staged in the theatre hall, which was created by adapting the school gymnasium for theatrical purposes. The audience area, accommodating up to 100 spectators, is constructed from modular stage platforms with mounted seating. The stage has no wings or backstage area and is enclosed with black curtains to create a black-box effect. Above the entire space, a quadrosystem truss structure has been installed to support lighting and acoustic equipment. (Ill. 9, 10)



Ill. 9–10. *Teatr Komuna*, photos: Maja Piechowiak

*Teatr Kamienica* (historic tenement house, 93 “Solidarności” Avenue)

*Teatr Kamienica* was established in a historic tenement building originally constructed in 1910 in the Art Nouveau style. Prior to World War II, the building served as a residence, and during the war it housed the Office for the Fight Against Usury and Speculation. Emilian Kamiński, the founder and long-time director of *Teatr Kamienica*, transformed the building’s function from residential to theatrical. The adaptation required a new architectural design, which involved constructing load-bearing walls and installing a new roof covering the entire structure. The decision to locate the theatre in a pre-war building was intended as a gesture toward the legacy of Warsaw’s interwar theatrical tradition. *Teatr Kamienica* now houses three performance stages – *Orla*, *Elitarna*, and *Piwnica Warszawa* – as well as two dining halls, *Kolumnowa* and *Butelkowa*. *The Orla Stage* is the largest performance space, occupying 450 m<sup>2</sup> reclaimed from former residential areas. The adjoining foyer adds another 150 m<sup>2</sup>. The 54 m<sup>2</sup> stage, composed of modular 40-cm-high platforms, can be freely arranged, as can the audience seating, which uses portable platforms and chairs. This stage is connected to the restaurant areas via the foyer. *The Piwnica Warszawa Stage* is located in a 150 m<sup>2</sup> room and accommodates up to 100 spectators. *The Elitarna Stage* comprises 270 m<sup>2</sup> of theatrical space characterized by an intimate ambiance enhanced with wall paintings. The small stage is positioned close to the audience, fostering direct interaction between performers and guests. (Ill. 11, 12)



Ill. 11–12. *Teatr Kamienica*, photos: Julia Cieślak

*Opera Kameralna – Basen Artystyczny*, (former swimming pool, 6 Konopnicka Street)

The last, particularly distinctive, example is the *Basen Artystyczny* (*Artistic Pool*), a performance venue belonging to the Warsaw Chamber Opera, located within the former YMCA swimming pool complex. The building was constructed between 1929 and 1932 in the modernist style, based on a design by architect Antoni Jawornicki. It originally housed public facilities, including a covered swimming pool, gymnasium, and residential units. Executed to the highest construction standards, the building was equipped with a large gymnasium, a 25-meter swimming pool, lecture halls, and multipurpose rooms. Currently, the former pool area has been transformed into a performance hall accommodating approximately 200 spectators in a traditional proscenium (box) configuration. The venue is equipped with advanced audiovisual technologies that allow the staging of operatic works in a space not originally intended for such performances. Former ancillary areas, such as the changing rooms, have been repurposed as dressing rooms, makeup areas, and storage spaces for performers. The original entrance hall has been adapted into a theatre foyer, complete with cloakroom facilities for up to 300 guests. In addition to operatic productions, the venue hosts a variety of other events, including private functions and banquets. (Ill. 13, 14)



III. 13. *Opera Kameralna – Basen Artystyczny – YMCA*, source: Konopnickiej 6 róg Prusa – Gmach YMCA Polska (Związku Młodzieży Chrześcijańskiej) [in:] Fundacja Warszawa1939.pl, <https://www.warszawa1939.pl/obiekt/konopnickiej-6> (access: 27.06.2025)

III. 14. *Opera Kameralna – Basen Artystyczny – YMCA*, source: Basen z innej beczki [in:] Basenprof, 1.06.2013, [https://www.basenprof.pl/artykuly/4/basen\\_z\\_innej\\_beczki.html](https://www.basenprof.pl/artykuly/4/basen_z_innej_beczki.html) (access: 27.06.2025)

## 2.1. THE PERFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF TRANSFORMED SPACES

An analysis of Warsaw theatres operating in adapted spaces reveals that they are by no means inferior to those housed in purpose-built venues. On the contrary, many of them – such as *Nowy Teatr* and *Komuna Warszawa* – demonstrate a high level of both organizational and artistic quality. These examples affirm the effectiveness of adaptive reuse strategies within theatrical practice, a trend also reflected in contemporary research on new models of cultural infrastructure in post-industrial urban contexts.<sup>9</sup> Modern private theatres not only benefit from flexible performance spaces but also possess professional technical facilities, ranging from scenographic workshops to costume and set storage. The adaptation of such buildings leads not only to their architectural revitalization but also to the social and cultural reintegration of spaces into active public use. Regardless of location, a core element of any theatre remains the direct encounter between artist and audience. Adapted spaces tend to foster this relationship, creating a closer performative dynamic, as noted by scholars of contemporary performance studies. As shown in municipal reports, audience attendance at such venues has remained stable and has, in some cases, even surpasses that of traditional theatrical institutions.<sup>10</sup>

## 3. THEATRICAL AND STAGE TECHNOLOGIES

The adaptation of existing buildings for theatrical purposes should not be viewed as a secondary, but rather an effective response to the needs of contemporary theatre characterized

<sup>9</sup> J. Hausner, A. Karwińska, J. Purchla, *Kultura a rozwój. Społeczne i ekonomiczne aspekty rozwoju sektora kultury w Polsce*. Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2013, pp. 239–250.

<sup>10</sup> W.J. Burszta et al., *Badanie publiczności teatrów stolicy*. Raport, Fundacja TR Warszawa, Warszawa 2022.

by flexibility, mobility, and contextual sensitivity. Their existence demonstrates that theatre architecture does not need a monumental form; instead, it can emerge as a spatial response to artistic ideas, social processes, and changing urban conditions. This transformation is made possible by the integration of contemporary technologies and media into 21st-century theatre, which has enabled the development of new forms and aesthetics, as well as the adaptation of a wide range of buildings and interiors for performative use. In theatres established within adapted spaces, the dimensions of the stage are dictated by the spatial constraints of the existing structure. These stages often lack standard architectural elements found in purpose-built theatres, such as the proscenium arch, technical ceiling, stage trap systems, side wings, upstage areas, traditional rigging systems (often replaced by point hoists), or orchestra pits. Furthermore, many of these venues do not have permanent audience seating designed specifically for the stage. Instead, traditional stage technologies are replaced by modular and flexible solutions, including mobile seating platforms, adjustable stage risers, and computer-controlled performance platforms. These systems allow for the spatial relationship between actor and audience to be modified according to the demands of a given production, something that classical theatre architecture cannot accommodate due to its fixed layout. Technologies such as digital projections, video mapping, and LED screens bring new possibilities to contemporary staging and can be deployed in any environment. Scenic wagons, hidden in side-stage pockets, can now be replaced by remote-controlled (RC) mobile platforms, a widely accessible and cost-effective solution. Stage lighting systems are typically mounted on modular trusses suspended from ceilings, using standardized, system-based components. Both purpose-built theatres and adapted spaces increasingly seek to incorporate additional functions such as bars, restaurants, cafés, libraries, and bookshops. One example is Warsaw's *Teatr Studio*, where the former cloakroom on the ground floor has been transformed into a venue called Bar Studio. Similarly, in the *Grand Theatre–National Opera*, the foyer space has been adapted into a café, which previously functioned as a record shop.

#### 4. SUMMARY

The development of stage technologies in recent decades has significantly influenced theatrical practices, granting creators greater control over space, time, and the relationship with the audience. Contemporary systems of lighting, sound, multimedia, and stage automation enable not only more precise articulation of artistic intent but also foster deeper audience engagement in performances where the boundaries between the stage and reality are increasingly blurred.<sup>11</sup> Theatre is no longer confined to the traditional institutional model; instead, it increasingly assumes ephemeral, hybrid, and open forms – operating temporarily in public, post-industrial, or semi-private spaces. These phenomena are reshaping not only theatrical aesthetics but also the social role of theatre within the urban environment. Theatre space is becoming an urban tool, contributing to the revitalization of degraded areas and the formation of local communities.<sup>12</sup> In this context, theatre functions as a form of cultural recycling,

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<sup>11</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *The transformative power of performance: A new aesthetics*, Routledge, London 2008, p. 165.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hausner, A. Karwińska, J. Purchla (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 239–250.

reclaiming abandoned buildings and endowing them with new symbolic and social significance. However, as shown in the report *Audience Research of Warsaw Theatres*, developed by the Generacja TR Foundation in collaboration with the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, the majority of spectators identify the actor's personality as the primary factor in their decision to attend a performance. Nearly as important are the atmosphere of the venue and personal recommendations from acquaintances.<sup>13</sup> This indicates that, despite advances in technological infrastructure and spatial flexibility, the emotional connection to the space and to performers remains a crucial element of the theatrical experience. In a broader sense, these transformations reveal theatre as a typologically unstable, hybrid structure in dynamic interaction with the city, its history, and its future. Twenty-first-century theatre thus emerges not only as a site for artistic presentation but also as a catalyst for urban transformation and a model of cultural recycling.

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<sup>13</sup> W.J. Burszta et al., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

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