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# ARCHITECTURE AND ITS STORIES

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## ARCHITEKTURA I JEJ HISTORIE

### Abstract

This article explores the study of architectural imagery and perception strategies in the context of humanity's relationship with its own nature—the body. The aim of the research is to demonstrate how postmodern architecture pursues progress and innovation through a lack of uniformity in its language of communication and an openness to the affirmation of diversity. In this sense, it itself narrates a postmodern version of the Tower of Babel myth. The art historical perspective is broadened to include themes of aesthetics, the phenomenology of imagery, and philosophy.

*Keywords: architecture, aesthetics, philosophy, history*

### Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto problematykę badania strategii obrazowania i percepcji architektury w kontekście relacji człowieka z własną naturą – ciałem. Celem badań jest ukazanie, jak ponowoczesna architektura realizuje postęp i nowatorstwo poprzez brak uniformizacji języka przekazu i otwarcie na afirmację różnorodności. I w tym sensie sama opowiada ponowoczesną wersję mitu Wieży Babel. Perspektywa historii sztuki została poszerzona o wątki estetyki, fenomenologii obrazu i filozofii.

*Słowa kluczowe: architektura, estetyka, filozofia, historia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of architecture can be considered as a kind of narrative about the time in which it was created. Its forms are carriers of ideas; they tell stories about humanity, society, and its values. In the past, when times were characterised by a coherent narrative, they gave rise to stylistically unified forms. Postmodernity is a time without a grounding idea—one that unites, guides, and connects architectural expression. The simultaneity and diversity of themes can, therefore, lead to confusion in interpreting and reflecting on architecture. The methods and theories that once allowed us to describe visual aspects and organise them along a timeline are becoming increasingly multi-threaded and multi-layered constructs—a bit like the Tower of Babel. Its myth, based on the imperative to transcend reality and the compulsive act of building, has become a sum of the soaring cathedral, the modernists' machine-city, postmodern quotations, and contemporary, surprising structures or skyscrapers. In Wolfgang Iser's concept, the Tower of Babel reflects the modern world's affirmation of diversity. If there is no single history, then what characterises this multiplicity

of histories? What might it stem from, and what might it tell us? Today, the notion of style is no longer useful in systematising the characteristics of architectural representation.

Therefore, when asking about progress and innovation in the process of changes in architectural articulation, one can, for example, refer to the theme of the relationship between humans and their own nature—the body—and its cultural conditioning. In this context (following a brief outline of the process of historical transformations), the characteristics of how architecture is represented and perceived will be gathered in this study. The mode of perception will be interpreted within a broader context. For this reason, the study adopts the perspective of art history, expanded primarily with themes from aesthetics, the phenomenology of the image, and philosophy.

## 2. ARCHITECTURE AS A HISTORY OF FORMS OF *BEING* IN THE BODY AND *STAYING* IN THE SPACE

“As we perceive the body, so we shape space.” Richard Sennett described the history of the city in Western civilisation from this perspective<sup>1</sup>. The collective image of the body is closely linked to the image of architecture. This relationship is a legible and organising aspect of the historical continuum of forms. It allows for reflection that goes beyond the traditionally understood styles. Two aspects are particularly important here. The first is the image of the body as shaped by art, philosophy, and science. The second is how this vision translates into the organisation of space and the forms of architecture. What follows is a sketch of selected periods leading up to the present<sup>2</sup>.

For centuries, canons have reflected a philosophical attitude towards nature and determined the shape of artistic concepts. A model of the Greek image of man can be found in Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* (Spear-Bearer). In this figure, a vision of an organic, functioning human being, conscious of their body, was manifested. Man was treated as a part of nature and represented a record of universal truths. In this way, the biological body provided the Greeks with metaphysical meanings without losing any of its value in the physical dimension. The proportions of the body were transferred to the principles of constructing compositional forms. Forms and shapes were created in which the physical body found peace, harmonious balance, and equilibrium. The medieval order deprived the body of the joy of expressing itself through physical activity, subordinating the existential dimension to the spiritual. In the well-known drawing by Villard de Honnecourt (1230–1235), man is a structure. His exact physical appearance, reflecting the material image of existence, was irrelevant, as the goal of that existence was what mattered most. Hence, the fundamental feature of architectural space was its prevailing atmosphere of spirituality. The most perfect architectural object of Gothic architecture—the cathedral—was built almost “against the stone” in order to achieve the desired height and, at the same time, transparency. The stone was dematerialised to reveal the symbolic function of light<sup>3</sup>. Architecture carried the body into

<sup>1</sup> R. Sennett, *Ciało i kamień. Człowiek i miasto w cywilizacji zachodu*, Marabut, Gdańsk 1996.

<sup>2</sup> B. Juchniewicz, *Architektura ciała i ciało architektury* [in:] L. Nyka (ed.), *Architektura współczesna wobec natury*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Gdańskiej, Gdańsk 2002.

<sup>3</sup> C. Norberg-Schulz, *Znaczenie w architekturze Zachodu*, Murator, Warszawa 1999, p. 92.

a realm of spirituality and ecstasy. The Renaissance, in a certain sense, represented a synthesis of Christianity and Platonism. The logic of an absolute and eternal geometric order returned at that time. Leonardo da Vinci studied the proportions of the human body as a testament to the harmony inherent in all creation. In architecture, empirical forms were combined with ideal ones, and its orders reflected this stability and balance.

A few centuries later, a period of searching began, no longer guided by a single, binding doctrine. Experience became the foundation for philosophy. There was a growing belief that humans were capable of discovering the laws of nature's harmony, and the human body was compared to the mechanism of a clock. The eighteenth century brought a fascination with automatons constructed in the image of man. In architecture, new meanings were sought to replace traditional symbolic forms. Finally, nineteenth-century architecture opened up space for the individual, for human activity, and the freedom to choose one's own place. Twentieth-century functionalism continued this rational thread; through scientific analysis, it aimed to define standard forms appropriate for a democratic society. Functional architectural concepts were developed based on observations of the physical aspects of the human form. Le Corbusier's *Modulor* embodied this idea of seeking beauty within a rational order of the world. The *Modulor* man was meant to satisfy his need for beauty through contact with what was useful. This approach led to the vision of the house as a "machine for living." Everyday life, measured in square meters, placed the individual within a scientifically defined space of simple and stable geometric forms. Architecture was thus designed, stripped of ornamentation, for the anonymous citizen. Finally, postmodernism—perhaps as a response to the need for identity and a re-evaluation of modernist assumptions—brought back historicizing details. Architects began to juggle forms, codes, and scale, using transformed quotations, blending the present with history.

Modern humans belong to the electronic age. Concepts are emerging that view the body in conjunction with technological extensions. One example is the artistic vision of Stelarc (Stelios Arcadiou), who, within the Body Art movement, explores the relationship between humans and technology<sup>4</sup>. The body of the human-cyborg is a composite of parts. It possesses a range of electronic extensions for its senses. It is oriented towards experiencing processed or artificially generated images, and its skin becomes an unlimited surface that extends beyond the material shell. It collects signals from an unbounded informational space. As a result, the body is no longer identical with itself or self-aware in the traditional sense; rather, it transcends its boundaries and blurs the distinction between interior and exterior. This is an artistic vision of the condition of contemporary humanity, which quite accurately illustrates possible directions and the nature of current transformations. While it certainly does not exhaust all threads, it reflects the ongoing fascination with the new possibilities offered by digital technologies in expanding the field of sensory experience.

In architecture, the surface—conceived as a variably articulated zone of contact—has become an important aesthetic means of expression. The building's outer layer turns into a smooth skin, at times tattooed, at other times porous, changeable, and technologically "alive." Instead of seeking proportional harmony between the human body and the building, architects now refer to the processual nature of the natural world. A clear trend emerges toward the anthropomorphisation and animation of architecture. The composition of forms is often marked by dynamic and complex relationships with the ground. Artificial light and digital imagery help shape this multimedia vision of architecture.

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<sup>4</sup> Stelarc, <http://stelarc.org/projects.php> (access: 20.06.2025).

The characteristics of form composition, architectural surfaces, and digitally generated images emerge as three important aspects whose articulation influences the nature of visual representation in contemporary architecture. These aspects will be further explored below in the context of narrative creation and shifting ways of thinking about architecture and its history.

At this point, an important note must be made. This reflection focuses on architecture that places the greatest emphasis on pushing the boundaries of experience and on seeking pleasure in the play of visibility. This is architecture for which context is secondary—its primary concern is the exploration of ways to expand the expressive *language* of architecture. It is created by architects who could be connected by the previously mentioned concept/metaphor of the Tower of Babel. This theme will return again in the conclusion.

### 3. NARRATIVES OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE. STYLE AS A LANGUAGE OF EXPERIENCE

“The eye is in the world, and the world is in the eye.”<sup>5</sup> Boehm argues that a natural consequence of this contact with images is the act of experiencing them. For in this process of seeing, the entire “seeing body turned towards visible reality (...)” participates.<sup>6</sup> Further, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, he describes how the fact of our immersion in corporeality—and the fact that we are both seeing and seen—shapes this dual and inseparable process of *being* and *perceiving* reality. The *seeing body* can be understood similarly to the *eye-body*. It is this entity that gathers the full spectrum of experiences arising from the perception of architectural images and participates in activating the other senses. It connects everything that is real while also triggering sensations and provoking reflection.

#### 3.1. DYNAMIC COMPOSITION OF ARCHITECTURAL MASS – MEDIATIONS WITH THE LABYRINTH

An architectural object has always influenced the human being through its mass and its relationship with the components of a place. Its image changed depending on weather conditions, time of day, and season. And always, all these elements together contributed to the final expression and perception of architecture. Norberg-Schulz points out that, in defining architectural character, the *play of forces* expressed through structure<sup>7</sup> is particularly important. Experiencing architecture through form/its mass is closely tied to the mobility of the observer—it is the observer’s movement that regulates the variability of visual impressions. This situation directly relates to space that is experienced subjectively, kinetically, and through touch. Contemporary architecture, in particular, often complicates and energizes the relationships within form composition. Designers such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Daniel Libeskind, and Herzog & de Meuron have, through their built works, established the dominance of spectacular visions that play dramatically with gravity. The *Musée des Confluences* (2014) in Lyon, designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au, serves as a

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<sup>5</sup> G. Boehm, *O obrazach i widzeniu. Antologia tekstów*, Universitas, Kraków 2014, p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> C. Norberg-Schulz, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

strong example illustrating the thesis of composition as a record of movement and balance among its elements. The mutation of forms and their defragmentation create an impression of a simultaneous process of transformation to which the architectural mass is subjected. Arnheim points out that “Dynamic expression is a primary quality of all perception.”<sup>8</sup> According to Cembrzyńska, “The metaphor that encapsulates the philosophy of human nature is the constructive metaphor: the metaphor of a solid foundation, *fundamentum inconcussum*, upon which a structure is built—tall and secure (...).”<sup>9</sup> In combination with the concept of maintaining balance, it constructs a narrative of stability and permanence. Architecture, as a figure with complex relations to its surroundings, through its play with gravity, reveals an attempt to detach from real existence. It illustrates how human cognitive activity—our *sensory grasp of reality*—is accompanied by a *sense of possibility*. Boehm refers to R. Musil and his *The Man Without Qualities*, in which the “sense of reality” and the “sense of possibility” are described<sup>10</sup>. The tension between balance and its absence is a process of mediation with changeability and impermanence. It is, at the same time, a metaphor for the process of life. Images of architecture balancing with equilibrium, blurring their relationship with the background, erase all contexts. They invite scenographic interpretations. They chart paths, construct choreographies, and encourage nomadic thinking. The viewer, once a rational subject, becomes Bauman’s tourist/drifter—detached from place, a *gatherer of impressions*, a *collector of experiences*. Various poetics of mobility, including detachment from place, seem to convey meanings aligned with the *travel psychology* found in Tokarczuk’s novels: “It doesn’t matter where I am, it’s all the same where I am. I am.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. SURFACE AS THE INTERFACE BETWEEN INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR – METAPHORS OF TOUCH

The architecture of surface, by appealing to the senses, constructs narratives about how we “touch” the world and how we are “touched” by it. The envelope/skin is a boundary zone. Here, the interior and exterior meet. The image and organisation of this interface thus speak of our relationship with the outside world. In this context, the architectural idea of *Einfühlung* (empathy, feeling-into) is no longer expressed through references to human proportions or bodily movement, or to kinaesthetic perception, but through internal processes linked to the functioning of the organism. At the same time, bringing all these internal sensitivities to the surface invalidates the previous understanding of the boundary. The end of the 20th century saw the search for a digital language to establish an active relationship between the body and the surface of the architectural object it inhabits<sup>12</sup>. Many architectural-artistic projects explore the sensation of immersion in an aquatic environment. Examples include well-known works by creators such as Studio Olafur (Eliasson’s *Fresh H2OeXPO* and *Water Pavilion*) and Diller + Scofidio (*Blur Building*)<sup>13</sup>. Water is interpreted as more than just the context of the

<sup>8</sup> R. Arnheim, *Dynamika formy architektonicznej*, Oficyna, Łódź, 2016, p. 236.

<sup>9</sup> P. Cembrzyńska, *Wieża Babel. Nowoczesny projekt porządkowania świata i jego dekonstrukcja*, Universitas, Kraków 2012, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> G. Boehm, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

<sup>11</sup> O. Tokarczuk, *Bieguni*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2018, p. 443.

<sup>12</sup> K. Oosterhuis, *Hyperbodies Towards an E-motive architecture*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2003, pp. 62 and following.

<sup>13</sup> Such works are described, e.g., in: J. Fischer, *Water, wasser, eau*, H. F. Ullmann, [s.l.] 2008.

work. It becomes the environment, both interior and exterior, at once. “Derrida reminds us that touch is a matter of life and death. We cannot survive without being touched, without being in contact.”<sup>14</sup> Concepts of transferring narratives originating from our own bodies onto architectural surfaces shape a space that becomes an extension of ourselves—like a return to the mother’s womb. Here, vast surfaces vibrate, ripple, and touch us with their textural narratives. These stories—and the tactile experience of an artificial environment that simulates the natural—convey enlarged, over-scaled tales. Their breath and various multisensory actions surround us, and, being larger than us, draw us into a dialogue with an organicity that is dominant and engulfing. The images are devoid of real scale. They exist between materiality and immateriality, between what is natural and drawn from natural processes, and what is interpreted through a digital environment. Such images create a heterotopic space—one that cannot anchor itself in memory as a *Genius Loci* in the earlier, geographical sense, because it is defined primarily by digital-biological parameters.

### 3.3. EPHEMERAL IMAGES OF ARCHITECTURE – THE PLEASURE OF WANDERING

Since the Industrial Revolution at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, architecture has continually revisited aspirations towards transparency, immateriality, and the absence of weight—as qualities of a desired sensitivity. When it becomes difficult to distinguish what is real, what belongs to the interior, and what belongs to the exterior, the eye is drawn into a space of fiction. It wanders among ephemeral, shifting images formed on all mirrored surfaces. In such a space, clear rules of gravity, distance, and direction are absent. The image becomes a labyrinth for the eye. Materiality dissolves, and the eye wanders in search of real dimensions that would allow the body to orient itself. According to Friedberg, the *wandering eye* is a manifestation of the visual effect of dematerialisation. Glass membranes, as she describes, function as barriers that exclude other senses involved in organising the visible<sup>15</sup>.

Digital media and artificial light have entered into this game with visibility. First, in the evening, light contributes to the disappearance, exposure, or distortion of various parts of buildings. *Mapping*, in turn, allows façades to be animated and momentarily brought to life by saturating them with arbitrary content. This gives rise to images of architecture that partly become a kind of optical illusion. A second method involves the introduction of screens displaying moving and ephemeral images. Many buildings are now equipped with multimedia façades. Particularly notable is the use of technologies like *Magic Weave*—a combination of LED technology and a stainless steel mesh—which has enabled the creation of very large, thin surfaces. These programmable media façades integrate with their surroundings through interactivity, responsiveness to external stimuli, and their ability to infuse space with content. The fictional worlds created on these surfaces unexpectedly merge with real space, disrupting its continuity. A stationary observer experiences movement within the space. In this way, the previously distinct modes of perception—of the immobile viewer of images (cinema, television) and the mobile viewer of architecture—begin to dissolve<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> After: G. Świtek, *Grunt i horyzont. Interpretacje nowoczesnej architektury i sztuki*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2020, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> A. Friedberg, *Wirtualne okno. Od Albertiego do Microsoftu*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2012, p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 309.

Architectural objects such as *Kunsthhaus Graz* (2003), by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier, who combined a biomorphic form with a media façade, have redefined pathways for integrating dynamic architectural forms with the rapidly developing aesthetics of intermedia.

It is also worth mentioning that images generated by digital media and artificial lighting, unlike those that arise from the perception of the dynamics of a physical form/mass itself, have a different nature in many respects. Due to their complexity and detachment from the *here* and *now*, they appeal more to the imagination and less to direct observation. The viewer engages more with the memory of the body, as the stimuli acting upon them are disconnected from real kinaesthetic experience and tactile contact with external, material reality. This creates a space filled with intense, rapidly changing stimuli for the *ecstatic eye*. What dominates is visual immersion in the generated stimuli and a narrative full of traps but also exciting sensations. Disorientation within the stream of images becomes a source of aesthetic pleasure.

#### 4. SUMMARY. INFINITE STORIES

Today, architecture of complex forms for the *balancing eye* is an intense play with gravity and with the experience of imbalance. The *wandering eye* and the *ecstatic eye* symbolise a detachment from bodily sensation in the here and now. Finally, the *touching eye*, understood as a search for the experience of somaticity in architecture, is about building heterotopias that isolate from place in its traditional sense. “Everything” is a reflection of “something,” and, as a result, visually becomes a kind of photomontage composed of ephemeral images.

History shows how continuous mediations take place within topological space—between architecture and the entire visual culture—balancing geometry and its absence. The Cubists once amazed with visions of the “fourth dimension.” Today, fragmentation and deformation support the creation of *multidimensional* space.

Sometimes we fall into the temptation of viewing the history of architecture as a narrative of continuous progress. After all, every avant-garde movement carries slogans of innovation and transformation meant to revolutionise existing orders. However, from a longer-term perspective, history reveals itself as an alternating interplay between classicising and avant-garde periods. The avant-garde represents a time of change, a new perspective, often in opposition to—or even a rejection of—the past. Classicism, on the other hand, is a time of seeking perfection in what has already been proposed, until the moment of crisis and the emergence of a new avant-garde<sup>17</sup>.

Postmodernism has shown that novelty can also be understood as the reconfiguration and repetition of forms. This approach changed the traditional understanding of the categories of novelty and the avant-garde. The blending of different languages and codes opened up new cultural dimensions. At the same time, the notion of progress also became somewhat blurred<sup>18</sup>. Today, it seems that contemporary architecture achieves progress and innovation primarily through interdisciplinarity. New technologies and media support the opening of possibilities for a multi-threaded articulation aimed primarily at stimulating the senses in the experience. These are sensations tied to a disruption of balance, wandering among

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<sup>17</sup> M. Porębski, *Ikonosfera*, PIW, Warszawa 1972, pp. 235 and following.

<sup>18</sup> K. Wilkoszewska, *Wariacje na postmodernizm*, Universitas, Kraków 2008, p. 111.

images, and discovering the technological “touch” of architecture. It is a language of sensation that is both desired and consistent with the previously mentioned artistic concept of Stelarc.

In his reflections on changes in the iconosphere, Porębski stated that, in essence, innovation “(...) does not overthrow or convert, but takes up *the same thing once more*.<sup>19</sup>” Innovation also does not eliminate tradition: “Persisting in the layers of the subconscious and collective memory (...) it returns and is reborn in altered versions, often disguised beyond recognition.<sup>20</sup>” (...). “Everything leads to the conclusion that living tradition and true innovation are two closely interconnected facets of every civilisation that develops and preserves its essence—the essence of humanity—under conditions that accumulate all its experiences amid the changing surrounding world.”<sup>21</sup>

For example, a Gothic cathedral still has the power to transport us beyond physical reality and redirect our sensations towards stimuli that arise primarily from the dynamism of form and light. The *ecstatic eye* is captivated by the spectacle of the interplay of shapes, light, and colour—a spectacle that still holds the aesthetic power to make one dizzy. A similar experience occurs in Baroque interiors, where the excess and dynamism of detail disturb our sense of balance. What may differ is only the final interpretation in terms of meanings and values. Our physical, *seeing bodies* remain the same constant reference point for shaping form. What has changed are the artistic canons and our relationship with being a body and expressing ourselves through it. The physical, *seeing body* (through the *wandering, ecstatic, balancing, and touching eye*) continues, in new forms, to experience this “multiplicity of space” in essentially the same way.

Contemporary architecture no longer offers shelter, nor does it create stable structures that, like ancient buildings, once “grounded” the body and thought.

What is more, some creators claim that “(...) in the world after the Tower of Babel (...) the only place where the world could converge, where dwelling becomes being, can no longer be established. What is more, it even seems undesirable. Dreaming—or sleepwalking, wandering in a dream—proves better than peaceful sleep.”<sup>22</sup>

Gianni Vattimo, a representative of philosophical postmodernism, referred to what was “discovered in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger: the weakening of being, its liquefaction, and dissolution.” He stated that “(...) the stability of being has dissolved, the thought of being has been replaced by the thought of the event. (...) When the conditions for a universal history disappeared, an opportunity arose to tell many small stories.”<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, in the shadow of these small stories and the sensory “departure” of architecture, movements that emerged in the late 20th century have gained strength—ones that redirect thinking towards the context of place, balance, and ecology. This is a trend where advanced technologies are employed not to assert distinctiveness but to shape relationships with place.<sup>24</sup> Architects such as Zumthor and Holl guide the viewer towards an embodied, non-distant connection

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<sup>19</sup> M. Porębski, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 242.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> P. Cembrzyńska, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

<sup>23</sup> K. Wilkoszewska, *op. cit.*, p.111.

<sup>24</sup> D. Borges Ferreira, *Rethinking Sustainability Through Site-Specific Strategies* [in:] ArchDaily, 13.03.2025, [https://www.archdaily.com/1027018/rethinking-sustainability-through-site-specific-strategies?ad\\_campaign=normal-tag](https://www.archdaily.com/1027018/rethinking-sustainability-through-site-specific-strategies?ad_campaign=normal-tag) (access: 17.06.2025).

with the surroundings. In their reflections, they refer to the philosophical thought of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. Time will tell whether this narrative will ultimately prove stronger than the others. Perhaps it will remain just one of many languages of the builders of the postmodern Tower of Babel, which today may symbolise a world that embraces diversity.

Wolf D. Prix, architect of the Coop Himmelb(l)au studio, asked: “How can we think, design, and build in a world that is becoming more multidimensional with each passing day?” Without nostalgia for the history of styles or coherent and unified orders, he advocates building without foundations and without the burden of ideology. Architects, he says, want “(...) a different world: one that emerges like a puzzle, endlessly layered, disappearing and reappearing—because the failure of each project always opens up new possibilities. They thus continue the work of generations and build the Tower of Babel—not from scratch, but on the ruins of the past, fully aware that they will be building endlessly”<sup>25</sup>.

*Translated by Bogusław Setkowicz*

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She is interested in the relationships between architecture and the visual arts. She is also focused on the perception of new forms in contemporary architecture. In her research, she draws on perspectives from various fields of science: history of art and architecture, aesthetics, philosophy, and others.

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<sup>25</sup> P. Cembrzyńska, *op. cit.*, pp. 344, 345.