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## NEW ARCHITECTURE IN THE SURROUNDINGS OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

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### NOWA ARCHITEKTURA W OTOCZENIU ZABYTKÓW

#### Abstract

Walls, facades, and pediments are elements of urban space that form the urban structure and its interiors. Each of these elements, individually and collectively, tells a story about the past and history. Sometimes it distinguishes and expresses – it highlights the individual objects that form the historical urban fabric and its transformations. Against the backdrop of these old stories, it is worth showing contemporary projects so that, in the future, it will be possible to identify the period in which we are currently operating. The diversity of forms of expression and technical possibilities should be part of the interplay between the past and the present – and perhaps even the future. The key lies in maintaining harmony and respect for the surroundings and the past. Examples include the contemporary project in the heart of Syracuse in Sicily – the Artemision building standing next to the former Temple of Athena, now a cathedral on the island of Ortigia – and the Z33 building in the center of Hasselt in Belgium, which is integrated into the medieval quarter of the city, formerly a beguinage. These projects can serve as a starting point for a discussion on design trends in historic urban fabrics.

*Keywords: Artemision Syracuse, House of Contemporary Art Z33, minimalism*

#### Streszczenie

Ściana, mur, elewacja, fronton to elementy przestrzeni miast tworzące strukturę urbanistyczną i ich wnętrza. Każdy z tych elementów pojedynczo i w zespole opowiada o przeszłości i historii. Niekiedy wyróżnia i wyraża – eksponuje pojedyncze obiekty, tworzące historyczną tkankę urbanistyczną i jej przemiany. Na tle tych dawnych opowieści warto pokazać współczesne realizacje, tak aby w przyszłości można było identyfikować okres, w którym obecnie działamy. Różnorodność form wyrazu i możliwości techniczne powinny być częścią gry pomiędzy przeszłością i teraźniejszością, a może i gry z przyszłością. Istotą jest utrzymanie harmonii i dbałość o szacunek dla otoczenia i przeszłości. Bardzo mocną pozycję w łączeniu epok i stylów zyskują sobie ponadczasowa prostota, czystość formy i minimalizm. Takim przykładem jest zarówno współczesna realizacja w sercu Syrakuz na Sycylii, budynek Artemision stojący tuż przy dawnej świątyni Ateny, a obecnie katedrze na wyspie Ortygia, jak i budynek Z33 w centrum Hasselt w Belgii, który wkomponowany jest w średniowieczny kwartał miasta będący wcześniej beginażem. Realizacje te mogą być wstępem do dyskusji o tendencjach projektowych w historycznych tkankach miejskich.

*Słowa kluczowe: Artemision Syrakuzy, Dom Sztuki Współczesnej Z33, minimalizm*

Admiration for the past and historical monuments cannot hinder progress and the search for new solutions and new means of expression. The use of quotations, copying fragments, and using old forms are always compositional elements and architectural references – a kind of dialogue between the past and the present. Respect for old architecture is the ability to fit

into the context, but also to act on the principle of contrast and highlighting differences. However, one should not imitate or recreate the past, because the past is gone. The protection of monuments, or more broadly, the protection of the cultural environment, cannot therefore be equated with restrictions on creative human activity<sup>1</sup>. Copying and recreating non-existent buildings is an expression of weakness. Today, we should design in accordance with the knowledge and sensitivity that we have and use today. Composition and harmony with the environment should be a consequence of knowledge, known techniques, and possibilities, while at the same time reflecting the contemporary era, current aesthetic trends, and architectural solutions. Responding to social and functional needs, architecture designed today in a historical environment should blend harmoniously into the city's structure, while at the same time utilizing all known achievements, emphasizing and showing the time in which it was created.



Ill. 1. View of the building's facade from Via della Minerva, author Lamberto Rubino, source: *View of the facades on Via della Minerva* [in:] EUMiesAward, [www.miesarch.com/work/556](http://www.miesarch.com/work/556) (access: 17.07.2025)

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<sup>1</sup> A. Kadłuczka, *Ochrona dziedzictwa architektury i urbanistyki, Doktryny, Teoria, Praktyka*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2018, p. 15.

An excellent example of the author's sensitivity in approaching the symbiosis of contemporary architecture with the historical urban fabric is the Artemision – a pavilion providing access to the remains of the Temple of Artemis in Syracuse.

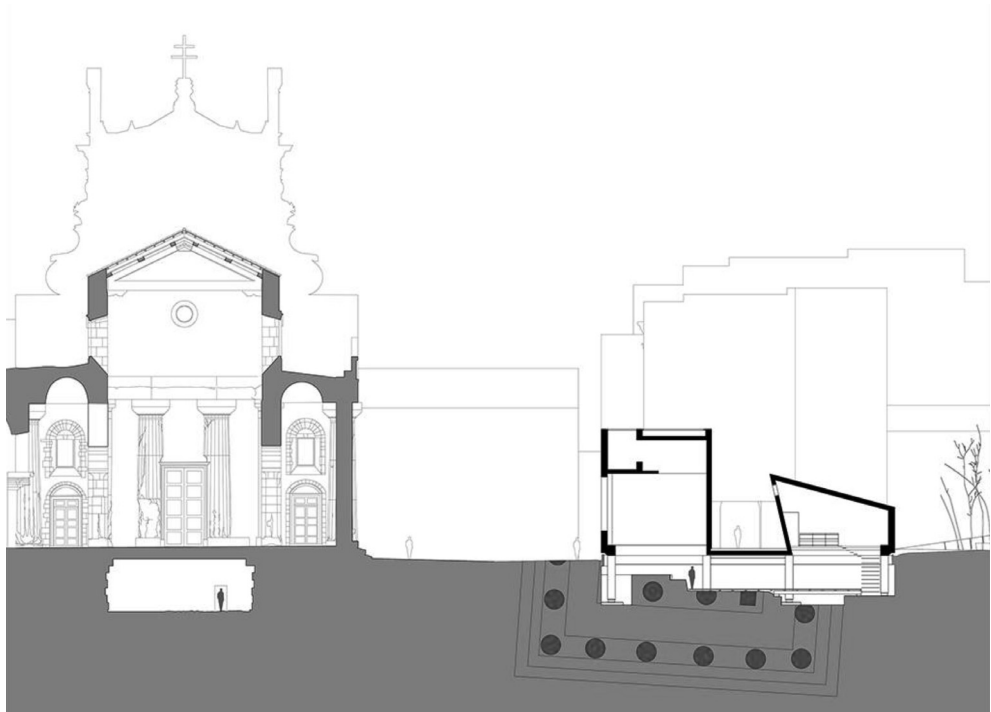
Syracuse was an extremely important city in the past – a polis. Founded in the 8th century BC on the island of Ortigia, it played a very important role in the Greek world. The city was and remains an extraordinary center of Greek culture. It was here that Archimedes, the physicist, mathematician, and inventor, was born, and the city itself is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the very center of Syracuse, at Piazza Minerva, there is a unique space. On one side, the square is enclosed by the side wall of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Syracuse (Italian: *Cattedrale metropolitana della Natività di Maria Santissima*), where the facade displays the preserved rhythm of Doric columns from the ancient Temple of Athena from the 5th century BC, now filled with a stone wall from the 7th century AD, created as a result of the Byzantine reconstruction of the temple into a Christian church.



Ill. 2. View of della Minerva, on the left, the side elevation of the cathedral; on the right, the Artemision, by Lamberto Rubino, source: *View of the entrance pavilion to the excavations from Via Minerva* [in:] EUMiesAward, [www.miesarch.com/work/556](http://www.miesarch.com/work/556) (access: 17.07.2025)

On the opposite side of the square, on the site of a destroyed tenement house and in the vicinity of classic tenement houses, the access pavilion to the Artemision excavation was built – a museum designed by architect Vincenzo Latina. Artemision leads to the remains of an unfinished Greek temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis from the 6th century BC,

considered one of the earliest places of worship of Artemis on the island. This monument is an important example of early sacred architecture in the Greek colony. The goddess Artemis is an important figure in the pantheon of Greek gods and is the goddess of hunting, nature, the moon, and the protector of virgins. The building was planned to be parallel to the temple of Athena, mentioned earlier, located on the other side of Minerva Square, which was absorbed by Baroque-Byzantine temples. The unfinished building was built over with houses and townhouses. The structure of the city absorbed the unfinished work of the ancient Greeks. Some of the remains are located under Minerva Square, some under neighboring buildings.



Ill. 3. Relationship between the cathedral and the space in the Artemision pavilion in cross-section, source: *Relationship between the cathedral and space inside the pavilion of the Artemision in the section* [in:] EUMiesAward, [www.miesarch.com/work/556](http://www.miesarch.com/work/556) (access: 17.07.2025)

The remains of the temple were originally discovered in 1910 by archaeologist Paolo Orsi and uncovered in the 1960s by archaeologists Gino Vinicio Gentili and Paola Pelagatti. They conducted excavations in preparation for the construction of a new building for the city. During these excavations, artifacts from the aforementioned temple of Artemis were found. The Artemision introduces visitors to the “buried” part of the temple, an unknown underground area that has preserved thousands of years of Ortigia Island’s history in the basements of buildings. The pavilion leads to some of them, providing access to the excavations of the Ionic temple, several Sicilian huts from the late Bronze Age, and the crypt of the Church of St. Sebastian (*S. Sebastianello*), presenting remarkable archaeological finds.

This unique building fits perfectly into the frontage of Minerva Square, complementing the line of tenement houses while at the same time discreetly revealing its contemporary character. It is a very modest but apt composition in the surrounding space of the square. The use of local stone for the facade preserves the material heritage that characterizes the image of the city. Historic Syracuse – the center of the island of Ortigia – from ancient times to the present day has been built of stone that is still quarried in the vicinity of the city. For hundreds of years, this stone has been used as a building material for the construction and finishing of facades and details of Greek, Byzantine, and Italian buildings. Architect Vincenzo Latina used a minimalist curtain wall on a rectangular plan, which slightly rises – levitates above the stone floor of Minerva Square and at the same time moves away from the facade of the tenement house on the left with a slight distance. On the right side, the Artemision facade does not connect to the adjacent building, which is one of the municipal offices of Syracuse. Here, it can be seen that the pavilion is designed as a stone block, a limestone “monolith” inserted in the frontage line between the tenement houses. The stone wall of the facade, in a straight line, remains at a distance from the adjacent facade. This short break in the frontage of Minerva Square is the entrance to the archaeological excavation site.

The lack of connection between adjacent buildings in the dense urban fabric of the city center is very intriguing. It arouses curiosity, but does not scream or call out. It is a very discreet invitation to enter. Looking at the stone block with a single gap, inserted between the tenement houses, just a dozen or so meters from the wall of the cathedral, where Doric columns are visible, one may be surprised. The desire to discover what this “monolith” is, what this narrow passage is, is an invitation to the Artemision archaeological site. It is curiosity that invites passers-by into the interior of the pavilion.

The lack of a formally accentuated entrance, the lack of doors, the lack of a portal, and the lack of steps is an expression of respect for the surrounding buildings full of architectural details and decorations. This minimalist stone wall, apart from slight distances, has one longitudinal, vertical opening, formally emphasizing its architectural purpose. The front of the building simply rises, levitating above the square’s floor. It is an excellent example of modern contemporary architecture that harmonizes with the historic surroundings and does not interfere with the context of the interior and the appearance of the city.

Vincenzo Latina was recognized in 2012 and received a gold medal for Italian architecture, a prestigious award established by the Milan Triennale, and in 2013 he was nominated for the European Mies van der Rohe Award. He was awarded the Arch & Stone’13 prize for his work in 2013. In 2015, he won the Italian Archi national award.

A similar solution was also applied by Italian architect Francesca Torzo when designing the House of Contemporary Art, Design & Architecture in Hasselt, Belgium – Z33. Hasselt is a city founded in the 7th century with a medieval urban layout characteristic of this region. Hasselt was granted city rights in 1232. The Z33 building is integrated into an irregular quarter of the city. In the past, this quarter was a beguinage. The Beguines led a simple life based on work and prayer, forming a religious congregation of unmarried women living in a Catholic community, but not a convent. This form of religious life probably originated among the widows of crusaders, who devoted themselves to asceticism after the loss of their husbands. Living in seclusion, they engaged in charitable activities<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Cisek, *Niderlandzki „begijnhof” – wspólnotowy model mieszkaniowej zabudowy gniazdowej*, “Architectus” 2002, no. 1(11), p. 121.

Beguinages were complexes of small houses surrounded by walls, inside which there was a church or chapel, a hospital, an isolation ward, a brewery, a stable, and a garden. They are most commonly found in northern France and Germany, as well as Belgium and the Netherlands. In Hasselt, inside the quarter, in addition to the gardens of the former beguinage, there are remains of a chapel destroyed in 1944.



Ill. 4. View of the north facade of the Z33 House of Art, by Zbigniew Śnieżek, July 7, 2025

In the same area of the city quarter, the Z33 House of Art is located next to the Jenever museum building – a former distillery of gin known as jenever. It is a very popular and well-known drink. The pavilion blends very discreetly and intriguingly into the historical context of the city. Three other buildings on Bonnefantestraat, which still have their original facades, are also part of the Z33 House of Contemporary Art. Functionally, they are part of the complex of activities and exhibitions, but from the street, they appear to be separate buildings. In the past, this site housed cultural institutions – from 1938 it was the Begijnhof, followed by the exhibition wings Vleugel 58 and Vleugel 19. The history of these cultural, artistic, and exhibition spaces has been combined into a single whole, Z33, by architect Francesca Torzo. The House of Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture was completed

in 2020. It blends in perfectly with the surrounding buildings of the exhibition wings from the 1950s and the historic Jenever Museum.

The minimalist exterior wall maintains the original line of the frontage and the course of the street. The facade is made of ceramic tiles, repeating the brick material used in most of the city center. However, the ceramic tiles on the facade are diamond-shaped and laid without joints in a characteristic “opus reticulatum” grid pattern. This type of pattern visible on the walls is the result of a Roman construction technique used from the 5th century BC to the 1st century AD, called “opus reticulatum”.



Ill. 5. View of the southern facade of the Z33 House of Art, by Zbigniew Śnieżek, July 7, 2025

The front facade surprises with its austerity. No cornice. No details. No visible structure or divisions. Just a wall – a wall of uniform height. On one side, it connects with the upper

cornice of the neighboring tenement house. On the other side, it strongly dominates the facade wall of the neighboring building. There, in the upper corner, is one of three austere openings, which are the only compositional elements of the front facade of pavilion Z33. All these openings are devoid of detail, ascetic, simple, without frames or lintels. They are simply openings. Two of them serve as access to the interior of the building, but the entrances themselves are hidden in recesses. The facade of the building is a high ceramic wall that carefully hides the interior of the contemporary art house. The wall begins and ends with mysterious openings – recesses, a wall that does not invite, does not open onto the street and the city, but intrigues and arouses curiosity. The minimalist form of the facade in the context of the old town is, as in the case of Artemision, brought to extreme perfection. Here, the ceramic facade, in Syracuse – stone, and the exceptional simplicity and purity of form combine modern buildings with the fabric of the old town interiors.

The internal facade, on the other hand, opens up completely onto the interior of the former beguinage. The wall is filled with a rhythm of windows of various sizes and proportions. Arranged in groups, the window openings create a wonderful harmony, like a musical score, with window frames that tilt outwards. Precisely selected and fired ceramic profiles made to special order are visible. The uniquely selected ceramics of the facade cladding – red, slightly faded or worn, just like on the front facade – harmonize beautifully with the brick and stone motifs of the neighboring buildings.

This magnificent introverted building of the House of Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture won the Piranesi Award (2018), the Italian Architecture Award (2020), the Moira Gemill Award for New Architecture (2020), and was shortlisted for the 2022 Mies van der Rohe Award.

The beginnings of bold initiatives in historic city centers can be found among our southern neighbors. In 1930, construction of the Moravian Bank building, designed by architects Bohuslav Fuchs and Ernst Wiesner, was completed in Brno, Czechoslovakia.

In the heart of Brno, on Freedom Square (*Náměstí Svobody*), between old tenement houses in the historic center of the city, a building with a surprising modern form was erected. To this day, it remains an architectural and cultural icon of the city. Its facade stands out for its lightness, with horizontal bands between the floors seemingly fastening and connecting the neighboring tenement houses, creating a coherent frontage. The curtain wall facade levitates above the square's floor. This is due to the structural layout used. The Moravian Bank has its structural columns hidden behind its two front facades. The horizontal arrangement of window bands and the horizontal division of windows simultaneously distinguish the bank building in the space of the square. At the same time, through its simple form and lack of detail, it does not impose itself, nor does it create dissonance in the perception of the interior.

The impressive entrance hall with its communication system and staircases made of white marble is also noteworthy. In 1930, this was a revolutionary solution, which architects Bohuslav Fuchs and Ernst Wiesner used as a magnificent example of functionalism. An architectural competition was held for this project on the site of the previously demolished Kounic Palace.

The architects Bohuslav Fuchs, Miloslav Kopřiva, Emil Králík, Jaroslav Syřiště, Jaroslav Stockar-Bernkopf, Jan Víšek, and Ernst Wiesner took part in the announced architectural competition for the construction of the bank's new headquarters. And so, on the site



Ill. 6. View of the facade of Moravska Banka, archival photograph, courtesy of Prof. Vladimír Šlapeta

of the demolished Kounic Palace, an extremely modern building for its time was constructed and designed, in accordance with the jury's wishes, by architects Ernst Wiesner, and Bohuslav Fuchs<sup>3</sup>.

For many years, Bohuslav Fuchs<sup>4</sup> designed in the spirit of functionalism, departing from traditional forms and principles. He was one of the main promoters of functionalism and modernism in Brno. His designs were characterized by simplicity and modern structural solutions. The Moravska Banka building combines banking, residential, and social functions – it fits harmoniously into the city's central square and continues the tradition of a lively urban space. Thanks to its bold technical and aesthetic solutions, it has become one of the key examples of Czech functionalism. It was one of the first examples of modern architecture in the historic surroundings of the city.

Meanwhile... in Ribe, Denmark's oldest town, among the winding streets of historic buildings in the middle of the central square Torvet, stands Jutland's oldest cathedral. In Catholic

<sup>3</sup> Moravská banka (Komerční banka) [in:] Brněnský architektonický manuál 1900–1918, <https://www.bam.brno.cz/objekt/c086-moravska-banka-komerčni-banka> (access: 5.05.2025).

<sup>4</sup> “Between 1925 and 1929, Bohuslav Fuchs was also the chief architect of Brno, and his building designs were featured in leading international magazines in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Norway, Great Britain, and France, quickly making him the undisputed most famous architect of his time. His winning competition designs for the regulation of Brno in 1927 and 1933 still influence the city's development planning today. He became a member of CIAM and in 1934 was elected a corresponding member of RIBA”, V. Šlapeta, Czech Architecture Greats: Bohuslav Fuchs, “The Friends of Czech Heritage” 2025, no. 32, p. 7, <https://www.czechfriends.net/images/BFuchsByVŠlapeta.pdf> (access: 31.07.2025).

times, it was dedicated to the Mother of God, but today it belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. The cathedral is largely built of stone in the Romanesque style, with numerous architectural layers. The facade shows numerous reconstructions and additions made of local brick in the Gothic style. The first church was built in 1250 from stone quarried in the Ardennes, Vosges, and Eifel Mountains, which was transported by ship for the construction of the temple. Ribe was a very wealthy port city at the time. Unfortunately, the North Sea receded from the city, causing it to decline. As a result, in addition to the cathedral, the city, which had lost its economic momentum, still has the oldest existing town hall in Denmark and the oldest medieval secular building, Puggard.

It was in this setting – among historic houses and opposite the cathedral – that architects Boje Lundgaard and Lene Tranberg designed the parish house and exhibition space known as Kannikegarden. The roof rests on raw concrete pillars, which are quite thin, and its ceramic-tile-covered slopes break and cover half of the facade, creating a spectacular visual effect. The massive, heavy roof, resembling a tent, rises and levitates above the cathedral square. It is made of ceramic tiles specially designed and manufactured for this project. Its color and texture blend in with the surrounding historic brick facades of the buildings. The layout of the roof slopes and gable walls of the parish house fits in with the geometry and form of the neighboring houses. On one side, the new gable wall approaches and almost touches the gable wall of the old Gothic part of the parish buildings.



Ill. 7. Front view of the parish house in Ribe, author Zbigniew Śniezek, June 24, 2023



Ill. 8. View of the parish house and cathedral in Ribe, author Zbigniew Śniezek, June 24, 2023

The precisely designed, offset and sloping roof of the new building reveals the old brickwork, a small round window at the top, and the brick buttress of the adjacent historic building. Vertical wooden blinds are inserted between the concrete columns of the structure, which is exposed outside the building. All of them are mounted on steel rotating axes in different rhythms and at different angles, giving the structure a lightness from the outside while introducing shadows and a slight twilight for the exhibition of the ruins, over which the roof structure hovers.

Under the levitating roof is an exhibition space for the ruins of a canonical monastery from 1100. The remains of the monastery are accessible to visitors and at the same time visible from the outside to passers-by. Kannikegarden is a tribute to Ribe's past, to time, to history.

The architects used materials that are very raw, clearly bearing traces of their manufacture and production. The ceramic roof tiles come in various shades of red and brown, are slightly uneven, and show various discolorations from the firing process and sand imprints. The soffit and shutter boards are planed but not sanded. The concrete pillars are raw, unplastered, and unpolished.

Window openings are scattered across these roof areas and sections of the ceramic facade. Several types of windows, unevenly distributed across the vertical and sloping parts of the roof, are deeply recessed. The panes are almost invisible, and the frames around them are made of the same ceramic as the roof tiles.

Above the exhibition space in the roof structure, there are rooms used by the parish, offices, and a lecture hall. Next to it, in the next corner of the streets, a mini garden has been designed, like an internal courtyard, a separate place from which you can see the remains of the former monastery and the surrounding part of the city with the cathedral dominating it.

In view of the discussion on conservation guidelines for maintaining the character of historic urban spaces as a continuation of old styles, it is worth looking at modern solutions currently being implemented in Europe.

The examples presented are proof that we should not be ashamed of our times. Let us show our thought and creativity in the best possible but contemporary form. Designing in historic urban spaces requires extraordinary maturity, modesty, and courage. Introducing a contemporary architectural form into an existing urban structure is not an easy task, as the designer must integrate it appropriately into the existing context and cultural landscape<sup>5</sup>.

Finding a bridge between historic surroundings and contemporary forms of expression is a challenge of the highest order. Creating new architecture in the vicinity of historic buildings along an old street frontage requires a thorough analysis of the surroundings and great delicacy in the choice of form of expression, and the principle of “less is more” is particularly helpful in this regard. Simple and minimalist modern forms fit perfectly into the old landscape and historic urban fabric.

Let us not copy the past because it is gone. Today, architecture is trying to break away from the modernist understanding of the function of buildings, striving for novelty, originality, and uniqueness. The specific “style” once assigned to the function of a building to emphasize its character is disappearing.<sup>6</sup>

Diversity in contemporary architecture is a result of technological and construction possibilities and the speed of information exchange. Universal access to knowledge about wonderful and diverse architectural projects around the world leads to a variety of forms and ideas. It is important that they are of the highest quality.

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<sup>6</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Architektura a sztuka*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2018, p. 27.

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