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ARCHITECTURE – THE MYTH OF INTERPRETING IDENTITY OF IMAGES

ARCHITEKTURA – MIT INTERPRETACJI TOŻSAMOŚCI WYOBRAŻEŃ

Abstract

The myth of the obviousness in the interpretation of the image is in Architecture a myth of permanence: of meaning and purpose adequate to the paradigm, of structural design and the matter that constructs it, and also – of the obviousness of these elements' synergy. Defined by Vitruvian triad, Durability, Utility and Beauty – suggesting an unambiguous categorisation in recognising what Architecture is and what is not, and creating additional tools for qualifying the evaluation of objects and concepts in this respect – also directed a kind of interpretative “obviousness.”

Keywords: interpretation, myths of architecture, symbolic permanence, metamorphic permanence

Streszczenie

Mit oczywistości w interpretacji wyobrażeń – to w Architekturze swoisty mit trwałości: znaczenia i przeznaczenia adekwatnego paradygmatowi, ukształtowania strukturalnego i konstruującego je tworzywa, a także – oczywistości synergii tych elementów. Definiowanie triadą Witruwiusza sprawiło, że Trwałość, Użyteczność i Piękno, sugerujące jednoznaczną kategoryzacją w uznawaniu, co jest Architekturą, a co nią nie jest i tworzące kolejne narzędzia do kwalifikacji oceny pod tym względem obiektów i założeń – ukierunkowały również swoistą „oczywistość” interpretacyjną.

Słowa kluczowe: interpretacja, mity architektury, trwałość symboliczna, trwanie metamorficzne

THE MYTH OF THE PERMANENCE OF MEANINGS. INTERPRETING MEMORIES

Bis repetita placent

Horatio

I only like songs that I've heard before; how can I like a song that I hear for the first time...
A sentence from a famous movie – regardless of the fact that it cannot be fulfilled in the light of the Eubulides paradox – accurately reflects the common perception of architectural space.

There exist many Myths of Architecture. Most are related to ontological security, i.e. what makes us consider safe, beautiful and true in space is what, in the light of past experience and the transmission of structures and symbols, is “universally” recognised as such and, in common interpretation, unambiguously reflects it. The myth of interpreting the identity of images is the myth of permanence in Architecture: the meaning and purpose appropriate to

the paradigm, the structural shape and the matter that constructs it, and the obviousness of these elements' synergy.

It was like this: a house should look like a house, a palace like a palace, a church like a church... It seemed that these forms were always recognisable, unchangeable, timeless.¹ It is easier to judge a building by looking at its facades and interiors – by referring to the forms and signs recorded in memory, and to the corresponding meanings, believing in the durability of associations, constituting the ontological security of moving among what, although apparently *new*, seems to be familiar. It is, however, different. More and more often, we move among what, although seemingly known, turns out to be a new content antonym, changing the meaning of that *known*. That happens in the time of a universally transforming organisation of social life and its material emanations, such as architectural objects, embedding and expressing places of events. However, perception should not be confused with existence. *Writing on the overwritten*, that is, the reinterpretation of the once constructed space of an object or a city, varied in execution and at least ambiguous in relation to the transmission of the truth recorded in previous messages – is often characteristic of the space of a functioning object.² The introduction of new elements, marking a contemporary difference from the existing ones or imitating them, reproducing a pretended historicity – is difficult to avoid, regardless of the approach taken in constructing the concept. That *overwriting* may concern the material sphere or the interpretative sphere, that is, from the observer's point of view – looking *at the body* or *into the soul*... In the second case, after successive metamorphoses of the mode of use – only the characteristic old name of the place or the function performed identifies it eponymically in the contemporary space.

According to Anthony Giddens, *lifestyle is the material dimension of the way a person defines their identity*. Architecture, shaped by man – reflects the identity of the time when it was created. The importance of interpretive permanence is essential for the continuity of predicting the understanding of the perceived space's essence: its structure and the reading of the information transmitted. It is connected with ontological security, which makes us consider as safe or dangerous, true or false, beautiful or ugly that things that, in the light of previous messages and personal experience of structures and symbols, are “commonly” known *as such* and, *as such*, appropriately reflected.

THE MYTH OF TIME: IT FLOWS. THE MYTH OF ARCHITECTURE: IT IS PERMANENT

*'I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat!
It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!'*

Lewis Carroll
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Dali's clocks with their hands immobilised in super-softness, plastic emanations of passing time, caused the loss of the purpose of the presented mechanisms – indicating the permanent

¹ D. Kozłowski, *Theses of the Conference Defining of Architectural Space*, Kraków, 2021.

² *Overwriting*, a term used by Juan Luis Trillo de Leyva during the International Scientific Conference *Defining of Architectural Space*, Kraków 2004.

changeability and progressive flow of time.³ They changed the essence of the clock's meaning, leaving its apparent form and former name. The dead clock and the dead architectural object remain clocks, with the recorded moment of the interruption of their purpose's meaning. They clarify the conventional meaning of time as a kind of paradigm, being only a concept enabling the construction of scalar tools of measurement to determine the sequence and distance of events. Time is not autonomous – and, as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz argued, is an order of succession of events occurring in the world.

Without the world of events – the concept of time loses its meaning.⁴ Without the world of events intended for it, the permanence of an architectural object redefines the meaning of its existence. In the face of the many elements defining the concept of architecture, three classical categories, classified as unquestionable truths by Vitruvius, captured its essence: *Durability, Beauty, Utility*.

Durability means trust in a created place where one can live and to which one can return with a reasonable certainty of finding it in a condition that allows finding what is expected: a *shelter* that is stable in its construction, a universally recognised *prestige* that is not susceptible to formal destruction, an unchanging set of *matter* elements that together construct a synergistically functioning system. Beauty and Utility are closely linked to Durability. However, the importance of Durability becomes questionable in the face of the passing justification of the existing utility of an object or urban design. Beauty, too, undergoes a kind of metamorphosis: from being vital to vital architectonics, it is transformed into non-existent, ruined or preserved, dead signs of the contemporarily interpreted past.

The fundamental logical and philosophical problem of the book about Alice's adventures in Wonderland is the question of identity. Alice's identity is violated by the collision with the unreal world. She has to redefine and adapt herself to that; the process is perfectly illustrated by her constant problems with growth – alternately rapid growth or shrinkage. The problem of identity is also a basic subject of her conversations with the people she meets in Wonderland. In Alice's case, the resulting question of *who am I?* is linked to the question of *where am I?*⁵

The essence of *firmitas* of an object of Architecture is the persistence of its identity and the questions that define it: *what am I and where am I?* *What am I* – after a reinterpretation of its intended use or renovation of its constituent elements, and *where am I* – after an often complete reconstruction of the context of its surroundings, which is a consequence of prolonged existence in a changing world.

Adolf Loos claimed that the form of an object should last, i.e. should be bearable, as long as the object lasts physically.⁶ In that sense, Architecture, not being indestructible – is not durable. There is also another reference. The perception of an object pertains to its content and its specific packaging in the multidimensional spatial structure of the object. The existence of an architectural object is the existence of the content and structure. If it is long-lasting – they are not unchangeable. The content expressing the intended use is the key. An object with a redefined content and purpose, remembered by name from its previous life,

³ Painting by Salvador Dali, *La persistencia de la memoria*, painted in: 1931.

⁴ M. Heller, T. Pabian, *Elementy filozofii przyrody*, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków 2014, pp. 35–37.

⁵ B.A. Markiewicz, *Uśmiech kota* [in:] M. Kudelska, M. Ruchel (eds.), *Prawda, samopoznanie, wdzięk: Beacie Szymańskiej w wielu postaciach przyjaciele*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008.

⁶ Loos Adolf, *Ornament and Crime*, 1908.

is – like, noticed by Alice, *that Cheshire cat's grin hanging in the air, without a cat*. All the more reason for it to be a dead packaging of past content.

A change of the building's use, resulting from social, economic and technological conditions – may, admittedly, reconstruct functional spatial divisions, without significantly changing the structure of the whole, but its functioning over the years – requires the gradual replacement of fragments of that structure. It results from the need to replace the worn-out ones. Thus, the architectural object becomes similar to a renovated antique car, in which not only the replicas of the mechanism's parts but also the new paint of the body, although imitating the previous ones, make the whole a kind of secondary, contemporary mock-up of the dead original. And that is only if the elements and forms used are reliable and consistent, and historically appropriate.

The successively replaced parts make it possible for the whole mechanism to be used without any defects – but in a way, they deprive it of its previous identity, these irreproducible features that create the imperfect individuality of the object and preserve the recorded memories of events, depicted by creaking seats, cracked upholstery, characteristic gloss of the car body, etc.

MATERIAL PERMANENCE, SYMBOLIC PERMANENCE, METAMORPHIC PERMANENCE

Tempus fugit, aeternas manet...

Myth: Architecture is a materially durable *e(E)difice*. In the common understanding, the utilitarian purpose of an object is materialised in the form of a compact object-building, becoming a material emanation of the philosophical metaphor of the *Edifice*. That *Edifice* connotes a dual interpretation: *functional*, whose material and structural emanation is the compactness of the body, and *metaphorical*, which is the emanation elements that are not necessarily material, perceived as a unified whole. The antonym of the former is *solid dispersion*, while the latter is a systemically constructed multi-level perceptual *compilation*.

In common understanding, durability is synonymous with immutability. It is an attribute of durability in the matter of construction, duration of standing, the interpretation of the message, the way it is used. The durability Architecture's matter is the durability of the materials constructing it. Nowadays, apart from the physical ones, it is also built of new ones: virtual and hitherto unknown hybrid forms, co-shaped by them.⁷ That applies to two methods of separating space: as a compact metaphorical *edifice* and as a non-compact *compilation*.⁸ In both, contemporary technologies have broadened the interpretation of traditionally understood *separation of place*, constructing it also by non-material means and finding a new type of communication in that place. Therefore, Architecture is the conscious and sensible separation of space, constructed from a material that is a compilation of tangible and intangible elements.⁹

⁷ Non-material means of separating space: light, colour, sound, temperature, consequences of users' cultural behaviour, information field, virtual spatial images, etc.

⁸ The terms *metaphorical edifice* and *spatial compilation* – are defined by the author in: *O współczesnych formach zamieszkiwanie w mieście*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2015.

⁹ G. Nawrot, *Architectonics – A Genome of Architectural Identity* [in:] M. Perinkowa, S. Juttnerova,

Myth: Architecture is symbolically durable. Yes, it is – albeit in a remembered original meaning. That is so because it is not non-superficially durable. The clarification of this durability's time dimension evokes further doubts. Vitruvian *firmitas* indicates unambiguously: there is no Architecture without an existing object. Architecture is therefore durable as long as the object representing It lasts. Completely dead, interpreted as a *graveyard of genius loci*, or losing its *utilitas* – cause problems in the context of such a definition. For, according to Vitruvius, can this utility be realised only metaphorically: in recalling, remembering or imagining the absent?

Another one is a kind of *metamorphic permanence* which is, in fact, as a successively progressing interpretation – a negation of permanence as such: of the original appearance, of original utility and perhaps also of original beauty. The exchange of content or the transformation of specific packaging, i.e. a structure saturated with used content and the permanent exchange of fragments of the object, makes Architecture last beyond the material sphere: in imaginations, memories, and myths. A name of non-contemporary content – often becomes a name of the memory of a place, identifying a palace or castle – once an office and home of the king, today a museum. Repeatedly renovated, the historical Warsaw hotel, finally equipped with an extra storey – remains permanent in name, use, memories and myths.

Firmitas of form, mechanism or meaning? At the moment of an unambiguous and sudden transformation of form, *utilitas* loses its current meaning. In an extreme case – losing it irrevocably. But there is yet another phenomenon: an architectural object can undergo a kind of progressive metamorphosis, stretched over time – becoming then similar to a living organism in which there is a permanent exchange, characterised by the refreshing of cells.

A perishing standing and also a kind of theurgy: the Parthenon. Johann Winckelmann argued that we see the perfection of the form of antiquity when it is depicted by a stone devoid of polychrome; hence his successors proposed monochromatic rather than multi-coloured visions of the moribund Athenian Parthenon. It is characteristic that the skeleton ennobling the original form often remains an emanation of the dead object. In man, refined by years of rest – it is white, the colour of bone. Most ruins, these “skeletons” of buildings and cities – are devoid of colour. Showing symbolically moribund permanence, it depicts the natural colour of the skeleton of the absent original form of the object's body – the “bones” of the material: white, grey, sandy. It reinforces the common misconception that ancient cities were grey, sandy grey, marble white.

And metamorphic permanence: the Wawel Castle. The red columns of the cloisters, the multi-coloured façades, accentuated by gilded rosettes glistening above the eaves, crowned by a roof made of colourful, patterned tiles – this is a different image of the Renaissance castle, not associated with today's one. Over the years: transformed, interpreted, living.

The elements ensuring the continuity of an architectural object or urban development are the invariability of the *manner of use*, *architectonics*, i.e. the extra-architectural system shaping the separation of space and in the specific *clothing of the object* (artistic appearance, general aesthetics, technology of shaping, materials, staffage).

L. Videcka (eds.), *12th Architecture in Perspective 2020. proceedings of the international conference = 12. Architektura v perspektivě 2020. Sborník příspěvků z mezinárodní conference*, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava Faculty of Civil Engineering, Department of Architecture, Ostrava 2020.

SUMMARY

The approach of man towards an object of Architecture:

- perceiving,
- remembering,
- imagining.

Perceiving realised in the context of recollecting experiences and messages of structures and symbols shaping a specific model of interpreting reality causes that what is seen as *safe* and *true* but also *beautiful, useful and durable* is what is commonly regarded as such in the interpretation of past experiences.

Imagining is interpreting an object in the context of events that become its characterising elements. Perception concerns the content and its specific packaging: a multidimensional spatial structure formed of tangible and intangible material. The existence of an architectural object is the existence of content and structure. In the case of permanence – these are not unchangeable. The content expressing the intended use is the key.

The myth of unambiguity in the interpretation of Architecture is the myth of durability of its meaning and purpose corresponding to the initially assumed paradigm, its structural shape and the material that constructs it, the obviousness of the synergy of these elements.

Although a change of use of a building, resulting from social, economic and technological conditions, may reconstruct usable spatial divisions without substantially changing the structure of the whole, its functioning over the years requires the gradual replacement of its fragments.

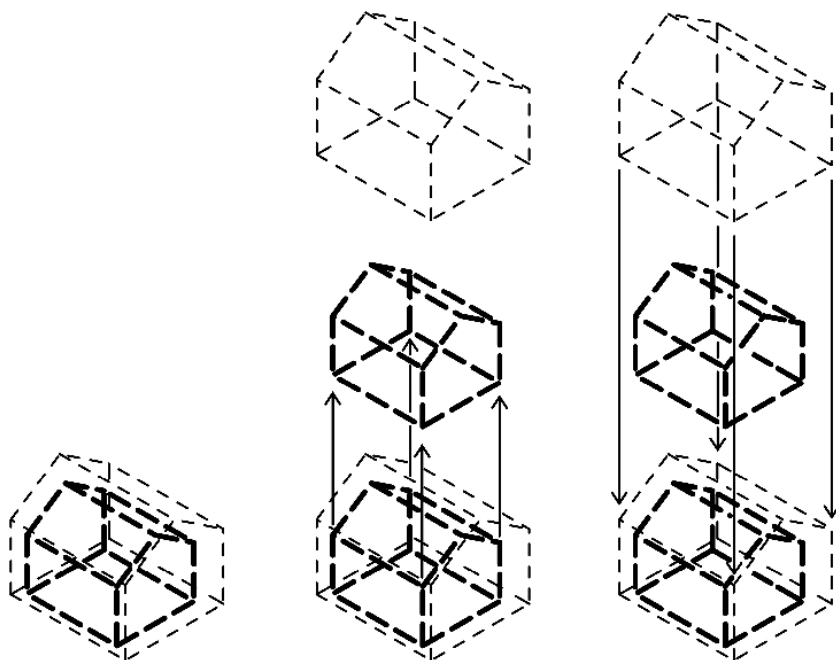
Material permanence, symbolic permanence, metamorphic permanence are attributes that characterise the Myth of Architecture's durability.

Architecture is *symbolically durable*, in a remembered original meaning or *materially durable* as long as the usefulness of the object representing It lasts. Completely moribund, losing its previous *utilitas*, the object – interpreted only as a kind of *graveyard of genius loci* – acquires the meaning of a mere symbolic place, inadequate in the context of Vitruvius' definition of the triad.

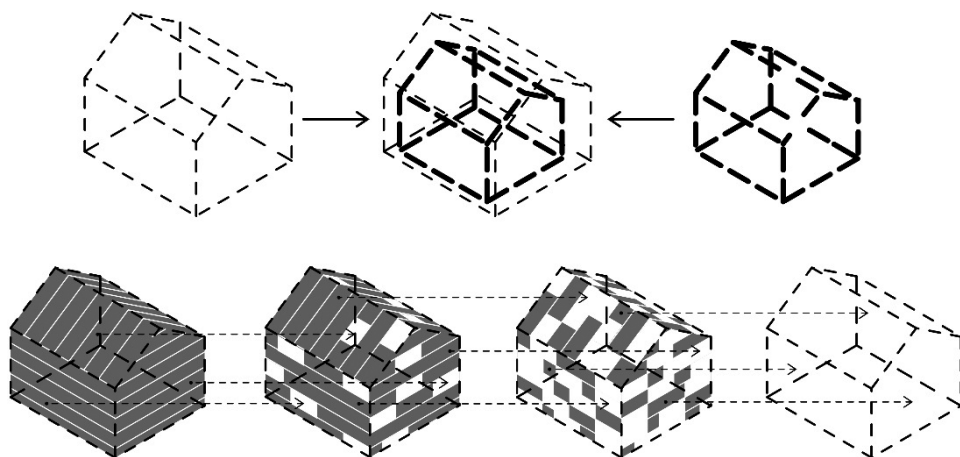
The specific *metamorphic permanence*, being, in fact, a successively progressing interpretation, negates *durability as such*: primordial appearance, primordial utility and perhaps primordial beauty. The exchange of content or the transformation of specific packaging, i.e. a structure saturated with used content and the permanent exchange of fragments of the object, makes Architecture last beyond the material sphere: in imaginations, memories, and myths.



- III.1. Dalí's clocks with their hands immobilised in super-softness (<https://lente-magazyn.com/dali-w-materze-roztopienie-w-czasie>) and the reconstructed Market Square in the open-air museum in Sanok (photo by G. Nawrot). Changed essence of meaning with apparent form and name left.



III. 2. Content replacement. An unchanging façade hiding new interpretations: the assignment of new content to the old packaging and the old spatial structure.



III. 3. Symbolic permanence. Metamorphic permanence negates durability as such: primordial appearance, primordial utility and perhaps primordial beauty. The exchange of content or the transformation of specific packaging, i.e. a structure saturated with used content and the permanent exchange of fragments of the object, makes Architecture last beyond the material sphere: in imaginations, memories, and myths.



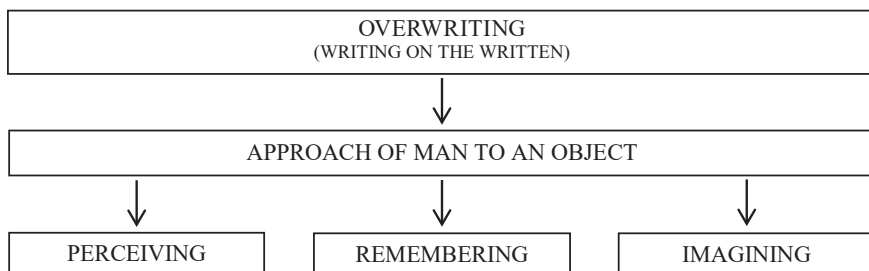
III. 4. *A graveyard of genius loci.* Moribund packaging of past content. Ruins of the 18th-century fortress of the Discalced Carmelites in Zagórze, Podkarpackie Voivodeship. Photo by G. Nawrot.



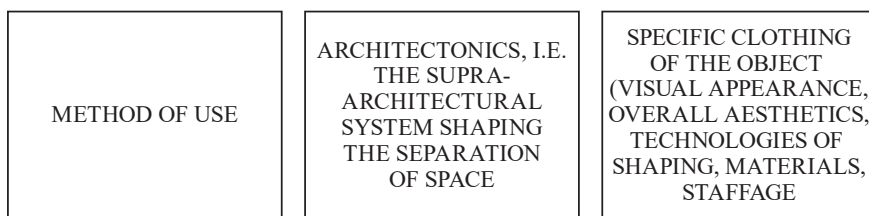
- III. 5. Reincarnation of the *graveyard of genius loci*. Former Starosty Building in Olkusz – today a Muzeum (designed by G. Nawrot, J. Witeczek, A. Witeczek). View of the courtyard before and after renovation. After successive metamorphoses of use, only the characteristic former name of the function performed eponymously identifies the building in the contemporary urban space. Photo by G. Nawrot.



III. 6. Change in the use of the object as a result of social, economic and technological conditions. Former Starosty Building in Olkusz – today a Muzeum; above – before, below – after revitalisation. Photo by G. Nawrot.



III. 7. The approach of man towards an object of Architecture.



III. 8. Attributes of continuity in the life of an architectural or urban structure.

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