DOI: 10.23817/2023.defarch.1-10

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A COMMERCIAL BREAK – THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL TREATMENT OF URBAN SPACE

PRZERWA NA REKLAMĘ, CZYLI WIELOFUNKCYJNE TRAKTOWANIE PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ

Abstract

The article addresses the problem of the nature of the elements crystallising contemporary public spaces in the context of the immersive action of commercial zones and areas of mass marketing of visual content. The research was based on observation, in situ analysis, as well as emotional perception (direct contact and perceptual reaction), in order to analyse selected urban spaces, as a result attempting to define an additional measure that valorises space.

Keywords: immersion, public space, space valorisation

Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza problem charakteru elementów krystalizujących współczesne przestrzenie publiczne w kontekście immersyjnego działania stref handlu i obszarów masowej sprzedaży treści wizualnych. Badania oparto na obserwacji, analizie *in situ*, a także emocjonalnym odbiorze (bezpośredni kontakt i reakcja percepcyjna), celem przeprowadzenia analizy wybranych przestrzeni miejskich. W rezultacie podjęto próbę zdefiniowania dodatkowego miernika waloryzującego przestrzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: immersja, przestrzeń publiczna, waloryzacja przestrzeni

1. INTRODUCTION

"The dynamic qualities embodied in everything our eyes perceive are so essential that one can say: visual perception is about experiencing the forces seen"[1]. The question of defining the most characteristic elements in urban space includes the individual fractions that constitute the urban composition, which include, among others: the crystallising elements of the city plan, roads, streets, districts, boundary lines and bands, height dominants, view corridors, openings, urban interiors, traffic routes, node points. The number of components and their possible combinations inherently construct urban space in a dynamic manner, enabling or blocking opportunities for change. This results in multiple images of urban spaces, subjected

[1] R. Arnheim, *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa*, Officyna, Łódź 2013.

to conscious and subconscious evaluation by the public (residents, visitors), which constitutes a basic kind of verification of the character of the areas in question, translating into their increasing popularity or lowering their overall ranking. "Many studies now point to correlations between the quality of urban space, quality of life of residents, public health, economic vitality, environmental and social benefits"[2]. The space in the context of which we live is the basic plane – the common denominator for all the activities we carry out and should be an element that supports the scene of our activities in a valuable way. Regardless of its role, as a subject or as a complement, it is one of the everyday participants in relationships, a witness to change and transformation. "We are constantly confronted with architecture and urbanism: from birth to death, at home, at work, on holiday, when we are awake and when we are asleep, and so one and the other are everywhere that we stop noticing that"[3]. We pass by, we become accustomed to the objects, to their character and quality, and even if there are noticeable changes, for example due to renovation, refurbishment, the appearance of a new development, after some time, these images become inscribed in the commonly recognised image of space, even if it has little to do with a good standard and comfort of existence. A kind of taming of space seems to be a natural process, given the pace of life, the flow of information, the exchange of content. In today's digital culture and increasing demand for stimuli that stimulate the senses, the way we perceive the reality around us is constantly changing. The level of need and the level of activation, which would constitute a new and noticeable response factor, is increasing. Man is therefore looking for a dynamic image of the world, information that is delivered at a sufficiently high pace and intensity. It is worth asking ourselves: what place in this context does the composition of the visual identification system and architectural objects have? What is the condition of the structures of the urban and architectural fabric of the 21st century that form the context of our existence? Considering the problem of the perception of space in terms of its semantic perception, it may indicate a system of data which will be helpful in defining the binding elements of space, as well as in delineating the components of significant importance for the perception and functioning of man in the city structure.

2. THE THEME OF CONTEMPORARY URBAN SPACE IN LITERATURE

Cities, as living organisms, are not indifferent to fashion, new technologies or communication needs. Problems arise when there is a cultural contact between spaces of historical value and new developments, which often differ from the assumptions of architects and urban planners of the previous eras. Contemporary trends in the shaping of accessible public space in the city pose a significant problem. The subject of the significance and nature of dominant as well as crystallising elements and areas of greatest popularity in terms of their impact on the public requires particular attention. The topic of public perception is addressed by M. Skiba in his study, referring to the principles of elite perception[4]. An important aspect can be found

[2] M. Stangel, *Kształtowanie współczesnych obszarów miejskich w kontekście zrównoważonego rozwoju*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2013.

[3] S. Gzell, *Na co nam architektura? Po co nam urbanistyka?* Lecture on the occasion of the awarding of an honorary doctorate of the Poznan University of Technology, Poznań 2010.

[4] M. Skiba, *Rozmyte miary przestrzeni miejskiej – w poszukiwaniu piękna*, "Czasopismo Technicz-

in the article by M. Janiszek and A. Majorek, addressing the problem of the valorisation of space, taking place through the subjective assignment of a specific value to it. Residents subconsciously assigned a value to places on the basis of their participation in decision-making processes related to the allocation of funds for the investments important for the given spaces, thus indicating "the areas they inhabit, fulfil themselves professionally and spend most of their free time in"[5]. An interesting approach is presented in a monograph by S. Mordwa, assuming that "objectively existing space is reflected in the subjective minds of people in the form of an image"[6]. He concludes that it is possible to reliably investigate space data, combining many different methods and techniques to obtain and analyse them. T. Dyckhoff discusses the changing laws governing urban space, influenced by globalisation, in an attempt to provide a picture of the contemporary city[7]. K. Urbanowicz presents his position[8] about the sensory perception of space taking place under conditions of rapidly developing technology and user-impacted sensory stimuli that affect the functioning of the inhabitants. In doing so, he suggests that there are possibilities for widening the ranges of non-visual perception of the space of the contemporary city. J.P. Szewczyk and J.C. Żarnowiecka comment on the change in the meaning of spatial dominants of the city, which become a collection of non-hierarchical fragments of space with a certain charm, "but they do not direct, they do not inform, they cease to play the role of reference systems"[9]. The theme of experiencing urban spaces and the transition from the concept of a static city to the vision of a kinetic city is taken up by Z. Kęsek[10]. B. Mak-Sobota and B. Lazarz also address the issue of spaces "created and/or generated by man, who by his actions gives them appropriate functions and meaning and marks them with various emotions"[11], pointing out that there may be processes and evolving relations between these layers that create the image and structure of the city. Axiological reflections on the values postulated and realised in twentieth-century cities are undertaken by B. Gutowski in his monograph entitled "Przestrzeń marzycieli, miasto jako

ne. Architektura" 2007, no. 6-A, pp. 404–408, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/27645917_Rozmyte_miary_przestrzeni_miejskiej_-_w_poszukiwaniu_piekna (access: 19.06.2023).

[5] M. Janiszek, A Majorek, *Waloryzacja przestrzeni miejskiej na podstawie projektów zrealizowanych w ramach budżetu obywatelskiego*, "Biuletyn Komitetu Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania Kraju PAN" 2017, no. 268, p. 183, https://journals.pan.pl/Content/102527/PDF/16_Janiszek.pdf (access: 19.06.2023).

[6] S. Mordwa, *Percepcja miast Polski środkowej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2003, p. 9, http://slbu.geo.uni.lodz.pl/sm/Mordwa_Percepcja%20miast%20Polski%20Srodkowej.pdf (access: 19.06.2023).

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projekt utopijny" ["The space of dreamers, the city as a utopian project"][12]. The author discusses the process of the formation of modern cities at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the trends characteristic of the late twentieth century, paying particular attention to the moral and artistic content that plays an essential function in the structure of the city. K. Życzkowska also discusses an issue relevant to the research in question,[13] which analyses the relationship between the intelligence of space and user perception, attempting to define the common area between real and virtual space. The authors, M. Czyński and M. Ostrowski, emphasise

> the need to develop more detailed provisions in local plans regarding measurable aspects and conditions of the presence of advertising in public space, to introduce the obligation to develop more substantive applications to legalisation procedures, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of the location of an advertisement (documentation of the existing state, architectural context, visualisation of the advertisement and its surroundings, etc.), resolving the issue of the expansion of advertising in public space and the social life of the city[14].

The issue of the operation of visual art – advertising in the area of urban structures is dealt with in the study by J. Suchowiak, entitled. "Symphony of lights – visual identification and advertising in the context of Architectural Interiors"[15], presenting the positive aspects in the perception of advertising and visual identification elements. Małgorzata Twardzik also deals with the subject of visual identification, pointing out that outdoor advertising, which is part of the urban landscape, takes on the form of a business card of a particular place, giving as an example, among others, Times Square in New York[16].

3. MODERN WAYS OF SHAPING PUBLIC SPACES

"It is not enough to see architecture; it still has to be experienced. One has to observe how it was designed for a specific purpose and how it interacts with the overall concept and rhythm of the era"[17]. S.E. Rasmussen aptly observes that architecture cannot be recognised without close contact with it. Perception, or the identification of architectural and urban space, is a complex sensory process interpreting elements of the three-dimensional external

[12] B. Gutowski, *Przestrzeń marzycieli. Miasto jako projekt utopijny*, Warszawa 2006, p. 10, https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/16255/filozofia_miasta_miasto_jako_projekt_utopijny.pdf (access: 20.06.2023).

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[17] S.E. Rasmussen, *Odczuwanie architektury*, Karakter, Kraków 2015, p. 35.

world, occurring owing to the use of the senses. Pictorial perception and visual thinking are consistent with the nature of design processes involving all forms of visual communication, where the priority is on graphic usability, in which the quality of the message is also important to influence effective perception. This, in turn, is a result of the progress machine at work, setting the pace of life and implying an amplification of stimuli, reciprocally translating into an increase in the demand for increasing levels of stimuli. These escalations result in a relentless rush towards new solutions on many levels of social, economic and scientific life. In general, "our perception is faster and shorter, focusing on the intensity of the signal and reception reaction. So, do we need the increasing power of the message? Are we living in the era of shock architecture, which is becoming ubiquitous, escalating in its expression and ideological extravagance?"[18] Architectural space is a product that reaches an audience that subjects given forms or assumptions to evaluation, comparison and criticism. They can admire, but they can also rebuke. "Architecture is not an individual work of the artist"[19], in the whole process the architect is one of a team created by people who create for people. They therefore know their needs, they can respond to the trends they are looking for, they take on the competition to make their work come out the best. Form, function, relationship with the context are interrelationships that provide important guidelines for design work, although there is a noticeable prioritisation that has quite an impact on the hierarchy of values. Among the most important ones now there are the marketing and digital culture we witness. Despite not always being its direct addressees, we do all experience it. Consciously designed to reach the widest possible audience, it touches every one of us. To this end, electronic media are used in the form of fixed television sets, radio sets, smartphones, tablets, the internet ubiquitous in each and every one of them, as well as outdoor advertising platforms. The latter use the planes of architectural objects, fragments, sometimes entire facades, as their backdrop, changing the faces of the original design intent, altering the character of the urban space. New dominants and crystallising elements appear, shifting the weight of attention from areas hitherto most popular than others, leading to reflection on the condition of the urban and architectural structure that forms the context of our existence.

4. COMMERCIAL BREAK – THE IMMERSIVE DIMENSION OF REALITY

A classically perceived street is associated with an arrangement of similar sized and proportioned buildings that form walls, quarters, neighbourhoods. The variety of buildings is emphasised by the details, colour and finishing materials used. Greenery, squares and plazas are customarily incorporated into these structures. Streets delineate the boundaries of areas with different types of use, create a space conducive to interpersonal contacts, and are an important element of the city's spatial composition. The main functions of a street are definitely connected with communication facilitating movement within the city. But does the street look the same today as it did in the last century? What is the function of

[18] K. Słuchocka, *Shock and Show – Architecture Today* [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining the architectural space – Avant-Garde Architecture*, vol. 2, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, Wrocław 2022, pp. 155–167.

[19] S.E. Rasmussen, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

a contemporary city street? The term "Parade Street", used by Christian Norberg-Schultz, "ceases to be an intimate environment for pedestrians"[20], seems to be obsolete. For the space of the street has taken on a new meaning. The function of digital communication has emerged. The large-format virtual images offered to the public seem to invite, draw them in, absorb them, giving "a sense of presence in a virtual world, an impression that escapes physicality"[21]. The environment of digital tools, by creating a sense of reduced distance, activates our senses in terms of sensory, auditory and tactile space. The sensation of participation in another dimension is felt in the space delimited by walls of advertisements and buildings with the function of a square, which is de facto a fragment of the traffic line of the intersection of Broadway and 7th Ave. The organisation of traffic has been changed to reinforce the effect of the One Times Square phenomenon, which every visitor to New York has on their itinerary, marked as one of the must-see points. Buildings-advertisements and even advertising-objects are all the more effective in their impact on the viewer the greater the contrast of led lights and high-resolution displays generating digital information becomes. The scale of the media intensively organises the space during the day, while after dark the action and effectiveness of the stimulus emissions reach extreme levels. The architectural and urban context acts as a structure for theatrical scenery, bearing the financial and marketing burden at the same time. Approximately 1.5 million advertising displays are presented daily in New York's Times Square, giving the place a specific identity. The viewers-passers-by, lured by the multicoloured advertisements of companies displayed on screens covering the lower levels of the façade, become passive customers. Strong, luminous, fast-moving information served up on a large scale. This is an effect of digital culture and marketing, interacting with the increasing commercialisation of space and undeniably influencing impression perception. Leaving aside the economic aspect that binds many communities, the focus should be placed on the character and quality of the space itself, i.e. the street – not the street[22]. For the most part, the Manhattan district is made up of slender, soaring buildings that rise above the average level of finials. These proportions shift the centre of gravity of the impression curve from the observer's level decidedly upwards. The gaze follows the glass panes of the façade, resting from time to time on the intersection of planes or the changing direction of the arrangement of the masses (Ill. 1).

The materials and forms of the buildings, which could pretend to be sculptures, are deprived of the small-scale details observed and admired during a walk (from a human level), a car journey, a tram journey, etc., in favour of larger-scale compositions, or even the ascetic play of glass, which brings the image of the sky closer, seeming to touch the ground, but moving away from the human being. The coolness of the façade encloses the frames of space, leading the gaze ever higher and higher. In the changing light of day and night, dressed in glitter, flash, colour and movement, they play like an orchestra meant to drown each other out with the sound of musicians, capable of mesmerising, fascinating and awe-inspiring. The small area of One Times Square attracts visitors to the city, as well as proficient marketing and sales professionals who exploit the commercial value of the space delineated by screens

[20] C. Norberg-Schultz, *Bycie, przestrzeń, architektura*, Biblioteka architekta, Murator, Warszawa 2020. p. 83.

[21] M. Heim, *Vocabulary for Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* [in:] M. Heim, *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, p. 153.

[22] K. Słuchocka, *Przestrzenie naznaczone/komercjalizacja przestrzeni* [in:] *Arche & Psyche 8*, Stowarzyszenie Psychologia i Architektura, Poznań 2022, pp. 189–196.

with sharp, changing colours. Their effect is so powerful that the media, or architectural forms on which they are placed, become less important, even invisible, thus losing out to the fever of advertising information.



Ill. 1. Hudson Yards, Manhattan, New York; (a) view from 10th Ave to the Edge observation deck; (b) soaring objects reflecting the light at 10th Ave; photo by K. Słuchocka.

4.1. SPACE FOR YOUR ADVERTISEMENT

In sensitively perceiving the architectural composition of the Manhattan space, we are looking for planes that stand out, that close in, that could change the image, hold the gaze. It has been natural so far, as Jan Gehl noted, that: "low buildings along the street harmonise with the way people move and with the way people's senses function – as opposed to tall buildings, which do not harmonise with these"[23]. This phenomenon has been used in marketing. The pedestrian was relieved of the need to look upwards for attractions. A readable, intensive set of stimuli was moved to a level accessible to the eye, operating with the factors of size, distance from the potential viewer and frequency and intensity of emission. This compensated for the paucity of character-rich cornices, carved window frames, ornate rustication details, plinths and more. The frontages built of pure in form elegant and restrained objects, devoid of details, act as delineated corridors that lead in a particular direction, namely upwards. This, in turn, led to the unification of the scale of impressions at the level of perception and indicated a place for the implementation of new stimuli – large-format advertising. A gap was filled and a so-called 'place for advertising' was found, filling the reception void at the level

[23] J. Gehl, *Życie między budynkami, Użytkowanie przestrzeni publicznych*, Wydawnictwo RAM, Kraków 2009, p. 99.



Ill. 2. Street view of One Times Square, New York; (a) visible disproportions in the size of architecture, advertising screens and human beings; (b) colourful composition of advertisements contrasting with the context; (c) the famous ball and clock placed in the background of the One Times Square space built up with advertisements; photo: K. Słuchocka.

of human-passer by perception. An intense set of stimuli was found at eye level, readable according to size and distance and intensity of administration. “These are places where

companies are keen to place their advertisements (…). They know that with their high-tech LED installations and high-definition displays, they are able to capture the attention of audiences who stop and admire these light shows (even though some claim they are distracting). Where there is an audience, there is advertising"[24]. Employees of the advertising and marketing industry know that advertising success is a balance between the location of the advertisement (the right place in the city space), the size of the advertising space and the broadcast content, which is confirmed by market profitability studies. Many stakeholders benefit from this, namely: advertisers, advertisers' customers, customers using the offer of the companies concerned, owners of advertising space gaining additional revenue. The city authorities also benefit in this chain of dependencies, as the One Times Square space has created its own identity and a new face for the street, providing a specific lure for tourists (Ill. 2).

We learn from Joanna Pełech-Mikulska's study that:

> advertising on the largest LED carrier at One Times Square, where a New Year's Eve ball is lowered with the inscription of the next beginning of the year (ball drop), reaches up to $3 million a month. As a curiosity, it is worth mentioning that the owners of this 'high-rise' at the junction of Broadway and Seventh Avenue earn $23 million a year from the billboards placed on it. A substantial amount, but paradoxically inexpensive compared to a 30-second Super Bowl spot, which costs up to $3.8 million for one quick show[25].

5. CONCLUSIONS

It would seem that spatial order is expressed in a harmonious urban composition and public spaces surrounded by building frontages that are interesting to look at. However, it is difficult to come up with a definition that would correspond to each historical epoch. The influence of economy, culture, technology and, above all, human needs, generates ever newer forms of space which respond to challenges with varying degrees of success. How, then, in the phenomenon of New York's exemplary One Times Square, are designers to find themselves? Where is the place for architects, urban planners and their projects, whose studies, urban plans and creations of intricately composed spatial forms, consequently become extras dressed in the eye-catching garments of well-known corporations, commercial and manufacturing organisations? "The basic mechanism is that – to paraphrase Winston Churchill – we shape cities and they shape us"[26]. One has to agree with these words. In an environment of new technologies, multi-level interprofessional cooperation, the use of digital tools to create reality, communication using VR and AI effects, architects, urban planners and many other professions draw on the achievements of modern science based on research, exchange and results. Urban space is like a kaleidoscope in which all the needs of the present day can be seen. Like a mirror, it reveals good decisions but also reflects the effects of the bad ones, giving a picture of the place and time in which we live. It is a sincere witness to action and, for the attentive, a participant in the dialogue. It can guide and suggest solutions. In the

[24] J. Pełech-Mikulska, *Cyfrowe osobliwości z nowojorskiej Times Square, Bemedia* [in:] BE Media, https://be-media.com.pl/cyfrowe-osobliwosci-z-nowojorskiego-times-square.html (access: 23.06.2023).
[25] *Ibidem*.
[26] J. Gehl, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

processes of shaping space according to the principles of sustainable development, in which social, economic, psychological and health factors are important, the city space should be treated as a partner. The part of the New York City area under discussion, colourful Times Square, continues to arouse admiration despite criticism and attracts millions more tourists. By listening and observing the phenomenon closely, it can be confirmed that architecture and urban planning are meant precisely to support people's activities, to simply exist, being only a background or as much as a backdrop for multifaceted activities. The commercialisation of a particular space is perhaps a temporary element, strongly acting in the space around us, which will devalue in time, giving rise to the need for further changes. A durable, useful and beautiful architecture will, in its essence, remain unchanged, able to meet them in an unpretentious and timeless manner. Perhaps, being bored, tired and overstimulated, we will feel the need to clean up our image of reality. Perhaps, under the assumption of 'zero waste', we will want to discard what is excessive, what is noisy, loud in its expression. Will we then see One Times Square in its original version, shouting like in Christian Andersen's fairy tale: "the king is naked"[27]?

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