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MYTHIC AND NON-MYTHIC FUNCTIONS OF ARCHITECTURE

MITYCZNE I NIEMITYCZNE FUNKCJE ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Myth is a psycho-social construct that underlies a generally accepted interpretation of the archetypes. In architecture, the encoding of the meaning of a given form refers to its denoted functionality. By deriving the discourse from the theory of semiotics, the article attempts to explain why certain architectural functions relate to an archetype while many others do not. Why, subsequently, a house or a temple translates into specific architectural forms, while many other functions, such as a factory, do not? The research method is based on the analysis of literature and examples. The conclusions show that the emergence of a significant architectural form is determined by the myths evoked by its function.

Keywords: archetype, architecture, meaning, myth, semiotics

Streszczenie

Mit to konstrukcja psychologiczno-społeczna, która stoi za ogólnie przyjętym odczytywaniem archetypów. W przypadku architektury kodowanie znaczenia danej formy odwołuje się do denotowanej funkcjonalności. Wywodząc dyskurs od teorii semiotyki, artykuł podejmuje próbę wyjaśnienia, dlaczego pewne funkcje architektury odwołują się do konkretnego archetypu, zaś wiele innych go nie posiada. I dalej, dlaczego dom czy świątynia mają przełożenie na konkretne formy architektoniczne, a liczne inne funkcje, np. fabryka, go nie mają. Przyjęta metoda badawcza opiera się na analizie literatury oraz przykładów. Wnioski pokazują, że o wykształceniu się znaczącej formy architektonicznej decydują mity, które przywołuje jej funkcja.

Słowa kluczowe: archetyp, architektura, mit, semiotyka, znaczenie

1. INTRODUCTION

The functions of architecture are diverse. Besides its basic function, such as a house, a factory or a temple, every architectural object “performs a number of public functions whose meaning goes beyond its strictly utilitarian role”¹. The multitude of functions complicates their classification. Moreover, specialists of different domains perceive the problems related to the functions of architecture in different ways. Thus, sociologists, geographers, historians, architects, or artists look at this issue from substantially different viewpoints.

¹ A. Wallis, *Functions of Architecture*, The Polish Sociological Bulletin, 1986, no. 73/74(1–2), p. 65, www.jstor.org/stable/44816241 (access: 8.06.2021).

Nonetheless, the viewpoint of the architects converges with the sociological perspective at a crucial point which is social identification. Building environment delivers elements with which citizens can identify. Moreover, some of its elements (buildings) tend to be more critical in terms of social identification. Their functions are usually clearly conveyed by the architectural form.

Louis Sullivan said that “form ever follows function, and this is the law.”² This sentence became the motto of modernism which focused on purely practical values of architecture. However, the same expression can hide a different meaning. Namely, that architecture should be able to communicate its function to the users. That evokes an essential question regarding the basis on which humans decode architecture. How do we recognise specific functions under different architectural forms? What is the mental construction that enables reading the function of a house or a temple? And why are there functions that are effortlessly decoded while others cannot be guessed so easily?

This article will seek to answer these questions with the support of the semiotic theory, which explains the process of decoding architecture. Subsequently, it will refer to the Jungian theory of myth and archetype to propose that the functions of architecture can be divided into mythic and non-mythic ones. It also aims to demonstrate that mythic functions have their representation in archetypes, which facilitates their decoding. Non-mythic functions, on the contrary, have no clear equivalents in the archetypes, which makes them more challenging to decode.

The method used in this article is purely theoretical. It applies the knowledge of semiotics and the theories of myth and archetype to study how architectural forms and their functions are perceived by humans. The study employs logical analysis to reproduce the mental process of decoding functions of architecture, which is demonstrated based on selected examples.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. SEMIOTICS

Semiotics, sometimes referred to as semiology, was defined by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as the study of the life of signs within society.³ As a linguist, Saussure placed his interest in the language, which he considered a system of signs. According to the theory of semiotics, any sign is made of two components: the *signifier*, which in linguistics is a word, written or said, and the *signified*, which is the idea, the concept that lies behind the sign.

In semiotics, any form of communication consists in transferring mental concepts through the use of signifiers.⁴ This transfer entails constant encoding and decoding of the meaning, which is “embedded within and derived from a signifier.”⁵ The relationship between the signifier and the signified was found to be culturally determined, however. That means there is no

² L.H. Sullivan, *The tall office building artistically considered*, Lippincott's Magazine, March 1896, p. 408, <https://archive.org/details/tallofficebuildi00sull/page/n9/mode/2up> (access: 8.06.2021).

³ F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Payot, Paris 1983.

⁴ U. Eco, *A theory of semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1976.

⁵ K. Raaphorst et al., *The semiotics of landscape design communication: towards a critical visual research approach in landscape architecture*, Landscape Research, 2017, no. 42(1), p. 122, DOI: 10.1080/01426397.2016.1257706

natural reason why specific sign components should be tied permanently. This phenomenon was termed the arbitrariness of sign.⁶

The problem that one physical sign could trigger more than one concept was resolved by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who proposed a triadic model of semiotics. It consists of three elements: the *representamen* (i.e., the physical sign), the *object* that the sign refers to, and the *interpretant* (i.e., the idea to which it gives rise).⁷ The triadic concept of the decoding process explains why one sign can give rise to an infinite series of interpretations. Roland Barthes calls them *connotations*, while the term *denotation* describes the actual object to which the sign refers.⁸

According to Barthes, decoding messages is an immediate reaction, often unconscious, making it complicated to distinguish denotation from connotations. What causes the most popular connotations to rise are the so-called ‘grey areas’, which exist within popular culture as *myths*.⁹ Myths “make an unjustified claim to being ‘real’,” while “what people perceive as reality is an interpretation shaped by their personal experiences, background and beliefs.”¹⁰

Although the theory of semiotics was primarily developed in linguistics, it was soon applied to other systems of signs. It appeared to be particularly useful for visual studies and disciplines that use visual assessment methods.¹¹ For example, the theory of semiotics ties into iconographic studies of art,¹² the aesthetic approach to the landscape,¹³ or the study of symbols in architecture.¹⁴ It also concerns the field of architecture, which represents the most significant challenge for semiotics.¹⁵

2.2. SEMIOTICS OF ARCHITECTURE

According to Eco, the reason for which architecture poses the most significant challenge to semiotics is that architectural objects are not designed to communicate but to function.¹⁶ More precisely, architecture communicates functions that can be fulfilled. The meaningful role of the function has been indicated by Barthes, who claimed that “as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself.”¹⁷ Eco further develops this thread in the discussion, stating that the function is architectural denotation. Moreover, “besides

⁶ F. de Saussure, *op. cit.*

⁷ U. Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁸ R. Barthes, *Rhetoric of the image* [in:] S. Heath (ed.), *Image, music, text*, Hill and Wang, New York 1977, pp. 152–163.

⁹ R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Vintage, London 2009.

¹⁰ K. Raaphorst et al., *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Anchor Books, Garden City 1955.

¹³ S. Daniels, D. Cosgrove, *Introduction: Iconography and landscape* [in:] S. Daniels, D. Cosgrove (eds.), *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, pp. 1–10.

¹⁴ G. Broadbent, R. Bunt, C. Jencks, *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*, John Wiley & Sons Inc, Hoboken 1980.

¹⁵ U. Eco, *Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture* [in:] N. Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture. A reader in cultural theory*, Routledge, London–New York 2014, https://marywoodarch-theory.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/function-and-the-sign-the-semiotics-of-arch_u-eco.pdf (access: 8.06.2021).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

¹⁷ R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, Hill & Wang, New York 1968, p. 41.

denoting its function, the architectural object could connote a certain ideology of the function.”¹⁸ In other words, the essential utility of architecture is its denotation, while additional functions and concepts are its connotations. Eco explains it with the example of a cave. Its denotation was the function of a shelter. With time, it started to connote such concepts as *family*, *group* or *security*.¹⁹ Eco continues by stating that every architectural object has its “primary function, which is denoted, and a complex of secondary functions, which are connotative.”²⁰

Therefore, the decoding process of architecture entails distinguishing its primary and secondary functions. The success of the decoding process is substantially based on the collective memory that attaches to specific forms. Due to the long tradition of their appearance in the environment shaped by humans, such forms are both meaningful and timeless.²¹ Thus, they refer to the collective memory. During the decoding process, the experience of such forms evokes more associations, however. Those additional ideologies (secondary functions) are connoted due to the existence of the so-called “grey areas,” which belong to the common culture and are known as *myths*.²²

2.3. MYTH

Barthes defined *myths* as connotative concepts, ideologies, which pretend to be authentic. They are recalled from the depths of our collective memory in the reaction to concrete messages, also visual. According to Carl Gustav Jung, *myths* express ideas encoded into the human species along with its evolution from prehistoric times. Hence their universal character. Moreover, a *myth* in a Jungian sense is a psycho-social construction that lies behind the generally accepted reading of the archetypes.²³

2.4. ARCHETYPE

In the framework of his psychological studies, Jung considered *archetypes* as universal elements of the collective unconscious. Due to their intangible nature, the *archetypes* can be perceived only through their representations in behavioural patterns, myths, religions, or art. Thus, Jung defined *archetypes* as universal, archaic patterns or primordial types of objects that may be used to interpret observations. According to Jung, the *archetypes* are inherited and universal, and they refer to immaterial concepts that relevant objects or patterns of behaviour strive to copy or emulate.²⁴

In architecture, the *archetype* can be defined as a timeless reference to architectural types.²⁵ The *archetype* remains purely conceptual and finds representation in various

¹⁸ U. Eco, *Function...*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

²¹ C. Alexander et al., *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction*, Oxford University Press, New York 1977.

²² R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, *op. cit.*

²³ C.G. Jung, *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1969.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ M. Pieczara, *Archetypes in Contemporary Architecture*. Technical Transactions, 2019, no. 116(4), pp. 71–84, <https://doi.org/10.4467/2353737XCT.19.044.10356>

architectural projects and realisations. Several *archetypes* marked their existence throughout the history of architecture. The most universal among them include *archetypes* of the castle, ramparts (defensive wall), temple, monastery, house and settlement.²⁶

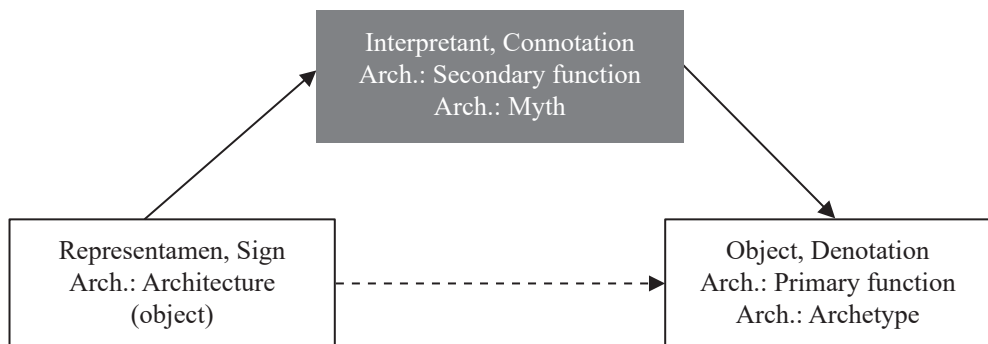
Architectural *archetypes* are not equal to the historical building forms. They are immaterial and exist within our collective memory, from which they can be recalled through the experience of architecture. And the *myths* contribute to this process by connotating relevant concepts or ideologies. Subject to the evolution, the *myths* got encoded into the collective memory, creating active connections linking to the *archetypes*. Hence, it can be argued that *myths* facilitate understanding of the built environment.

3. DECODING ARCHITECTURE WITH SEMIOTICS

This chapter intends to demonstrate the process of decoding architecture with the use of the semiotic theory. First, its central concepts are summarised in a table (Table 1) to show the analogies between the definitions provided by the most influential semioticians and explain how those concepts translate into the field of architecture. The notions of the archetype and myth are added to complete the decoding model (Table 1 and Ill. 1).

Saussure	Peirce	Barthes	Eco	
Signifier	Representamen	Sign	Architecture (object)	Architecture (form)
Signified	Object	Denotation	Primary function	Archetype
Signified	Interpretant	Connotation	Secondary functions	Myth

Table 1. Comparison of critical concepts in semiotic theory. Own elaboration.



Ill. 1. Triadic semiotic model and its application in the field of architecture. Own study.

The *archetype* is seen here as architecture's signified or denotation in the Barthian sense. Or, as borrowed from the triadic semiotic model by Peirce, as the object. Concerning

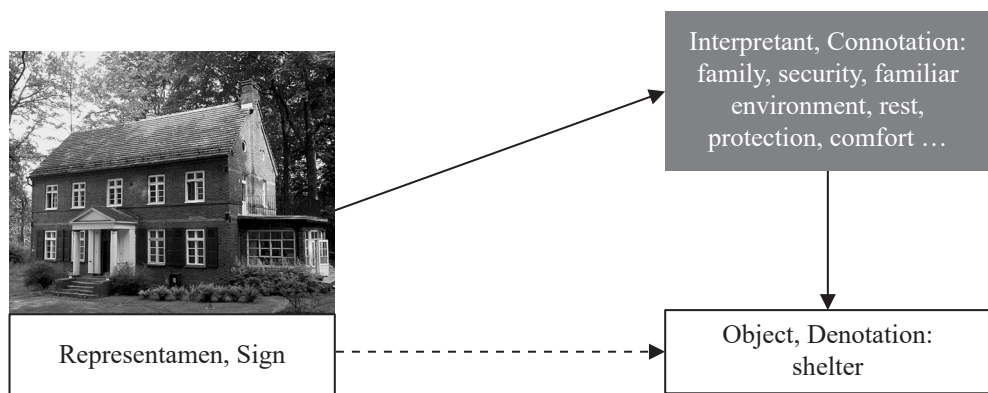
²⁶ *Ibidem.*

the semiotic theory proposed by Eco, the archetype could be treated here as architecture's primary function. As remarked by Eco, certain primary functions can become ineffective with time. When the code used by humans evolves and changes, the denotation might become illegible. "In the course of history, both primary and secondary functions might be found undergoing losses, recoveries and substitutions of various kinds." That would explain the difficulties encountered while trying to understand the denoted meaning of ancient ruins. We no longer possess the code that would make it possible to identify their primary functions.

The code used by humans to discern architecture's primary and secondary functions can be considered a psycho-social construction. It retrieves architecture's denotation from the collective unconscious through associations. The functioning of this mechanism is in line with the definition of the *myths* (see Chapter 2.3). Hence the idea that *myths*, in the semiotic sense of the term, are of crucial importance in decoding architecture. Part of the common culture, the *myths* evoke connotative ideologies relevant to the signified object. According to Eco, these connotative associations are secondary functions of architecture. Their role in the perception of architecture is to guide the user towards discerning the primary function of architecture, its denotation, or the *archetype* which lies underneath. The architecture decoding process can be seen in the following examples.

3.1. THE HOUSE

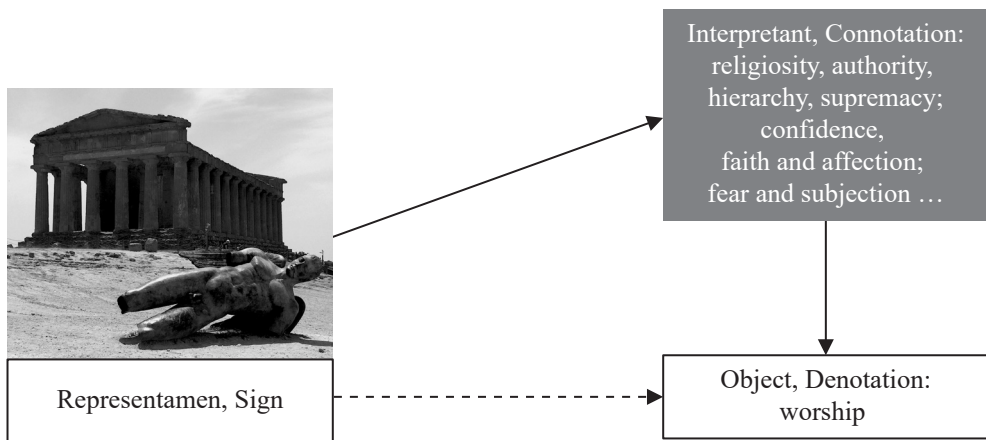
The primary function of a house is shelter. However, besides denoting its primary function, or its *archetype*, the form of a house gives rise to numerous connotative ideas, e.g., family, security, familiar environment, rest, warmth, protection, comfort and many others (Ill. 2). Notably, most of these connotative ideologies or concepts that come to mind about the form of the house are shared by all of humanity. And most are highly desirable. At the same time, the form of a house is one of the most recognisable shapes worldwide. This fact suggests that there can be a correlation between the universal nature of connoted ideas and the recognizability of a sign.



Ill. 2. The form of a house (sign), its denotation and a selection of connotative ideologies. It can be observed that most of the connotative secondary functions are desirable by society. Own study.

3.2. THE TEMPLE

The temple counts towards the most recurrent *archetypes* in architecture. Its global presence is related to the need for the faith that characterises all humankind to an equal degree. However, the popular forms of architecture that represent this archetype differ depending on the cultural background. Nonetheless, most of them assume the union of the architecture with the territory and the temple's dominant role in the landscape composition. Although architectural detailing can use different semantic codes in different cultural regions to communicate its sacred function, these two common features, i.e., union with the territory and dominant role, are sufficiently informative for most observers to denote the primary sacral function. The process of decoding the denotation of a temple is accompanied by multiple connotations that arise at its sight. For example, it can connote concepts such as religiosity, authority, hierarchy or supremacy. In terms of personal feelings, a temple can evoke confidence, faith or affection, but also fear or subjection (Ill. 3).



Ill. 3. The form of a temple (sign), its denotation and a selection of connotative ideologies. Own study.

Therefore, the nature of connotations evoked by the sign of a temple is more diversified than in the case of a house. Moreover, not all of these connotative ideologies and concepts are desirable. At the same time, however, both the house and the temple share a significant aspect that the semiotic theory can explain. As architectural signs, both the house and the temple have their denoted meaning in archetypes, rooted in the collective unconscious. Also, they both connote multiple ideologies and concepts, which exist in popular culture as *myths* and stand behind the generally accepted decoding of the archetypes.

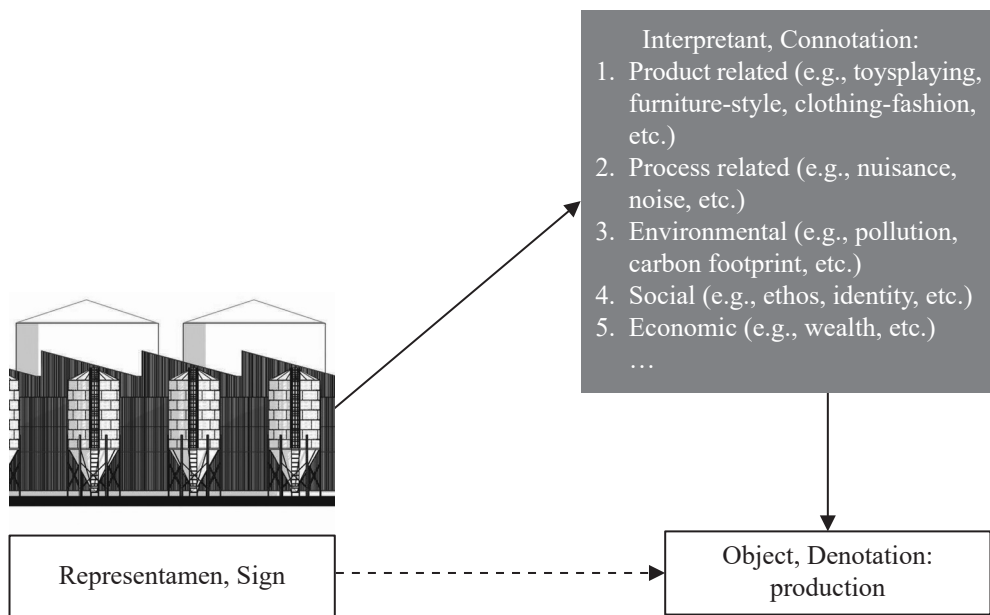
3.3. THE FACTORY

The primary function of a factory, and hence its denotation, is the production of stock and goods. But what connotative concepts or ideologies can be raised by a factory? There are

many, but they are also more differentiated depending on the industry branch. It can be safely assumed that a heavy industry plant, for example, will connote concepts such as environmental issues, pollution and nuisance. However, for some other observers, precisely the same sign will evoke the ethos of hard physical work or the concept of economic and industrial power. It happens because “what people perceive as reality is an interpretation shaped by their personal experiences, background and beliefs.”

Many connotative ideas that the image of a factory can raise will undoubtedly relate to the products. Looking at a factory of training shoes will quite probably give rise to the connotative idea of exercising. And a factory of toys connotes the idea of playing. A factory of furniture, another example, can connote the ideal of stylish living. It could, therefore, be claimed that the *myths* referring to the function of a factory are not as universal to human-kind as the previous two examples were.

Taking a cigar factory for another example, the connotations it causes to raise will most probably be shared by a part of the society: by the employees of the factory, the local community and, at a distance, maybe also by cigar smokers. This situation shows that the *myths* can also be regionalised, making them meaningful only for a group (community) of users.



III. 4. A form of a factory (sign), its denotation and a selection of connotative ideologies. Own study.

The variety of interpretations that could potentially be associated with the factory (III. 4) shows that the myths it engages are ineffective in reaching the depths of the collective unconscious. The underlying reason for this is the fact that there is no solid archetype to denote. Being a relatively new function, compared to the house or the temple, the factory does not have a single timeless reference, an architectural archetype. Instead, it has at

least a few popular typologies of buildings. Thus, the *myths* relevant to this function bring several connotative interpretations but cannot direct the user towards a single meaningful archetype. Hence the diversity of architectural forms.

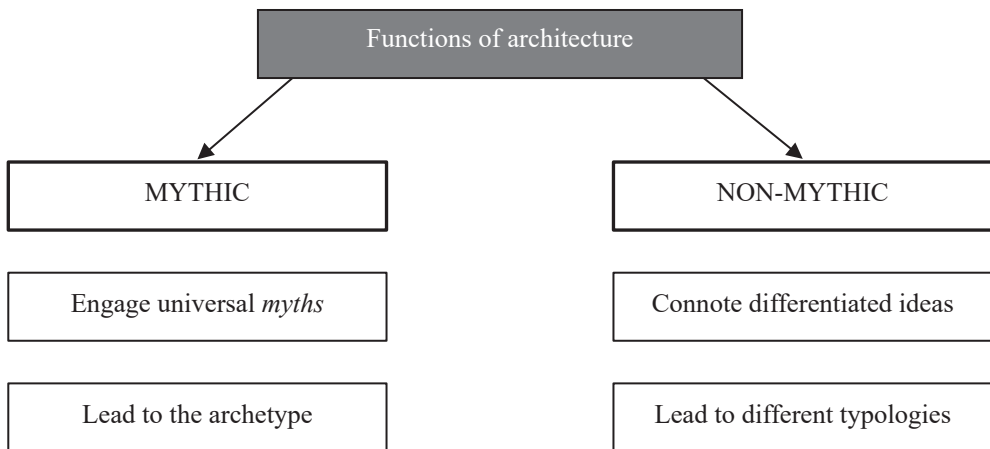
4. MYTHIC AND NON-MYTHIC FUNCTIONS

Every architectural object has its primary function, which should theoretically coincide with the *archetype*. Theoretically. Because not all primary functions have a relevant *archetype*, as we have seen in the example of the factory. Inherited and universal, *archetypes* are encoded in the collective consciousness. The encoding process can only happen through long history and tradition, which also results in the appearance of several *myths* that attach to the object or the primary function.

Thus, a new classification of functions can be suggested in addition to Eco's distinction among primary and secondary ones. Namely, the functions of architecture can be divided into mythic and non-mythic (Ill. 5).

Mythic functions relate to the *archetypes* in both formal and ideological senses. The *myths*, the connotative ideologies, create the links between an architectural object and the *archetype* (denotation). The stronger the *archetype*, the more universal the *myths* are and the more global their reach. It can also be said that mythic functions connote ideas that have universal significance for all humankind. Hence their widespread recognition. For example, every society values home, even a temporary one or a temple. But not every society necessarily values mass production and factories.

Non-mythic functions, on the other hand, connote more diverse concepts. They are also less universal for humans and do not have one *archetype* to discern.



Ill. 5. Classification of architecture's functions according to the *myths* they induce. Own study.

Because referring to the *archetypes* makes architectural forms meaningful to humans,²⁷ the role of the *myths* in discerning them is crucial to effective communication. Thanks to the

²⁷ M. Pieczara, *op. cit.*

connoted concepts and ideologies (the *myths*), specific architectural forms can discern specific meanings related to the *archetypes*. The relationships of this type are formed as a result of the history of human dwelling activity. Over the centuries, some have formed permanent relationships, dyads, linking a specific spatial form with appropriate meaning. For example, the gable roof became the synonym of a house. And the dome became the equivalent of a temple or a secular institution. However, even such simple messages require the knowledge of the proper code to be perceived.²⁸ This process relies, to a large extent, on the functioning of the *myths*.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical study of the semiotics, combined with the analysis of the selected examples, indicates that *myths* play a significant role in decoding the meaning of architecture. The connotative ideologies and concepts they raise facilitate discerning the actual denotation of a form. Moreover, this is not the number of the *myths* attaching to an object of architecture that makes it meaningful, but whether they converge towards one *archetype*. Also, the meaningfulness of an architectural form depends on the emotional load of its connotations. Some *myths* attach to universal values, such as family and security, which all humankind appreciates. That results in creating durable and readable links between the architectural form and its denotation.

Thus, architecture's mythic or non-mythic nature is based on evoking connotative ideas that direct towards *archetypes*. Mythic functions, whose connotative concepts and ideologies converge towards the *archetype*, have counterparts in specific architectural forms. And the other way round, under these forms, we sense the *archetypes* living in the collective unconscious. That makes these forms meaningful.

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²⁸ U. Eco, *Function...*, *op. cit.*

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