

PIOTR OPAŁKA

ORCID: 0000-0002-7798-4787

University of Applied Sciences in Nysa, Poland

SPATIAL CONTEXT AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT BUILDING THE MYTH OF ARCHITECTURE

KONTEKST PRZESTRZENNY JAKO ISTOTNY ELEMENT BUDUJĄCY MIT ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

The spatial context is an inseparable element of architectural design. Objects or groups of objects related to a specific environment not only fill a specific space materially, but also define the way of moving around in it and affect the environment, influencing other spheres of society's life. Transforming, removing or relocating an object can significantly disturb the combination of events in time and space, generating specific interactions in space. The article presents selected examples of interference, consisting mainly in the relocation of historical objects and complexes in space.

Keywords: cultural heritage, relocations, spatial context, transformation of space

Streszczenie

Nieodłącznym elementem projektowania architektury jest kontekst przestrzenny. Obiekty lub zespoły obiektów związane z konkretnym otoczeniem nie tylko wypełniają materialnie konkretną przestrzeń, ale definiują sposób poruszania się w niej i oddziałują na otoczenie, wpływając na inne sfery życia społeczeństw. Przekształcenie, usunięcie lub przeniesienie obiektu może w istotny sposób naruszać spłot zdarzeń w czasie i przestrzeni, generując określone interakcje w przestrzeni. W artykule przedstawiono wybrane przykłady ingerencji, polegające przede wszystkim na relokacji obiektów i zespołów historycznych w przestrzeni.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo kulturowe, kontekst przestrzenny, przekształcanie przestrzeni, relokacje

1. INTRODUCTION

The Vitruvian triad: *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas* has been one of the foundations of architecture for two millennia, defining the principles of designing and erecting buildings. An inseparable element of these timeless principles of designing and constructing buildings is the spatial context. Objects or groups of objects related to a specific environment not only fill a specific space materially, but also define the way of moving in it. In addition, they affect the environment, influencing other spheres of life, both individuals and the wider society. The transformation or removal of even one object, or sometimes part of it, can significantly disturb the combination of events in time and space. These actions can have different consequences. Mutual social bonds, including interpersonal relations, historical references, and a sense of identity and security, may be destroyed over time. Also, moving an object or a set of objects to a new place in an analogous way may generate specific interactions in space,

violating the genetic code established in time and space. The article presents selected examples of interference, consisting mainly in the relocation of historical objects and complexes in space, redefining space.

2. THE MYTH OF ARCHITECTURE IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Shaping space by man is a history of constant transformations on an architectural, urban and landscape scale. It is a history of both destroying established myths in space and building new ones, including their transformation. Subsequent ideas of shaping space, redefining the existing ones over the millennia, changed the rules of their functioning, as well as the spatial context. In fact, no human interference in space is indifferent to the surroundings. Form of interference and their impact on the environment cannot be counted. Nevertheless, the perception of a space with special values, subject to transformations, may significantly affect the recipient. The transformation of space as carriers of well-established social bonds and interactions, or simply close to the heart, may destroy the sense of identity and security.

So fixed violate the “myth” of architecture. The changing concept of the architectural myth is reflected in the repeated cycles of construction, duration and passing of aesthetic and artistic trends. Heinrich Wölfflin “drew a model sinusoid reflecting the stylistic transformations of architecture. Showed that the next era of style contradicts its predecessor, after which it is contested by its successor.”¹ The alternation of construction, duration and passing of aesthetic and artistic tendencies can thus be reflected in the construction, duration and passing of the myth of architecture.

In collective memory, the architecture can be both erased and stored. Erasing can be the result of physically removing or transforming it. The physical removal of architecture most often results in its elimination from collective memory. Perpetuating the myth in architecture will be stronger in the case of historically, artistically or spiritually important objects. Sometimes objects or space, despite being physically removed, may remain in memory. Wojciech Kosiński draws attention to “the preservation in memory of collective architecture that has been removed from the face of the earth, but has survived in the oral, written and iconographic tradition.”² And so, to this day the myth of the so-called “Seven Wonders of the World”: Great Pyramid of Giza, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, Statue of Zeus in Olympia, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Colossus of Rhodes and Lighthouse of Pharos. Of all these miracles, only the Great Pyramid of Giza has survived to this day. There is no hard evidence for the existence of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The myth of the wonders of architecture is still alive. Nowadays, lists of “New Wonders of the World” are being made, not only of architecture, but also technology, nature, etc.

The myth of ancient Greek and Roman art seems to be particularly legible and enduring, which has been revived over the centuries with varying degrees of strength. Most strongly in the Renaissance, and then, enriched, inter alia, with the experience of Renaissance art, in

¹ The Wölfflin sine wave (H. Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1966) was presented graphically: W. Kosiński, *Trwanie i przemijanie architektury – stymulacje twórczości*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2011, no. 4–A/1, p. 197.

² *Ibidem*, p. 196.

the art of Classicism. To this day, mainly for representative reasons, Palladian style mansions are built on almost all continents.

The first phase of modernist architecture, cut radically not only from historical styles, but also from any stylization, in the following decades, if it was not a source of inspiration, it remained a reference point in shaping space. The myth of universal cultural narratives has collapsed, especially visible in historicising decorations – “Ornament is a crime.”³ The myth of early Modernism architecture is constantly present, even if in subsequent scenes it may sometimes refer to selected quotations from the elementary of classical architecture.

The myth of architecture can be read in the spatial arrangement of cities. The urban layout can provide modern knowledge about the primary communication system and the transformation of the urban tissue over the centuries. Piazza dell’Anfiteatro in Lucca, Tuscany, is built on the ruins of a former Roman amphitheater from the 2nd century. The form of the amphitheater, the remains of which are currently about 3 meters below the ground, is legible through the layout of the buildings. Aldo Rossi sees these “city artifacts” in terms of “city memory.”⁴

The spatial layout of Diocletian’s Palace in Split, despite numerous demolitions, reconstructions and filling with new buildings over the centuries, is still clear. Still clear plan is scheduled palace modeled on the Roman fortified camp, with the main streets intersecting it Cardo and Decumanus. Similarly, hundreds of other cities created according to this principle carry the myth of the original assumptions. In the space of the urban tissue, spaces after the demolition of defensive walls that have lost their original defensive function are particularly visible. Planty usually constitute a green communication buffer between the strict downtown and the rest of the cities.

The ideas of shaping cities often did not withstand the test of time during implementation and, above all, their use. It is also the history of utopia in architecture – the idea of ideal cities, both Renaissance and at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a history of happily unrealized ideas (*vide*: Voisin plan, plans to build more Palaces of Culture in Poland).

3. DEMOLISHING THE MYTH OF ARCHITECTURE IN THE COURSE OF THE WAR

Space transformations over the centuries may have different sources. The military operations had the greatest impact. Human memory is unable to grasp the scale of the heritage lost in this way. The cultural expansion left a significant mark on the traditional culture of the conquered countries and continents, weakening, redefining or eliminating the local cultural code. Together with the invaders, a new culture was attacked that violated the original myth of architecture. Warfare is obviously always associated with the destruction of material culture, including architectural objects, or their plunder. In particular, the actions of the last war changed the image of the space of urbanized areas. Today, we are also witnessing the irretrievable destruction of the world’s cultural heritage, most often for religious reasons and/or to humiliate the opponent. Before our eyes, the myth of architecture is being destroyed both on a local and global scale.

³ A. Loos, *Ornament i zbrodnia. Eseje wybrane*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2013, p. 133.

⁴ A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1991, pp. 168–169.

In 2015, the attention of the world's media was focused on the deliberate destruction of the monuments of ancient Palmyra. Islamic State fighters blew up the magnificent Arc de Triomphe. Acts of barbarism affected not only objects from Roman times. The castle of the Crusaders Krak des Chevaliers, built by Christians, and the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, built by Muslims, were also destroyed. In total, as many as five of the six monuments inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List have been completely or partially destroyed.

In 2001, in central Afghanistan, in Bamian Province, the Taliban blew up giant Buddha statues hollowed in the 6th century CE. Using artillery fire and explosives, the 53-meter-high sculpture, which was the world's largest image of the Buddha, was destroyed. The future potential reconstruction of the statues may turn out to be very difficult, due to the fact that a large part of the stone elements was used by the local population as a building material. A significant part of world history was thus destroyed.

In 1993, the Croats bombed the Bosnian bridge over the Neretva River in Mostar, erected in 1567. In this way, the myth of the building that had not been destroyed for five hundred years was violated. This is just one of the huge number of buildings destroyed during the Civil War. In total, in Sarajevo by 1993, 35,000 objects had been completely destroyed, while almost all damaged.

After the end of hostilities, in peacetime, reconstruction was possible, but usually in newer forms, with a new message. The preserved architecture began to adjoin the new one – in a new spatial context. A cycle of constant changes. Changes in which material and immaterial reality were rewritten, building new myths. It is in this architecture.

4. ACTIVITIES ON THE VERGE OF ETHICS

In the history of architecture, there are many cases of objects that were “saved,” most often by invaders or by art dealers, and found a new place of exhibition. Most of such architectural works, presented in whole or in part, are found in the colonizing countries. Public spaces in dozens of cities, including Venice, Florence, Rome and Paris are decorated with numerous obelisks, sculptures or even entire architectural objects “obtained” in this way.

An example can be the Hellenistic Great Altar of Zeus on the Pergamon acropolis, which as a result of hostilities and then further gradual demolition was a building material for the construction of, among others, the so-called Byzantine walls and town buildings located below the royal hill. Thus, it physically and gradually disappeared into collective memory. At the end of the 19th century, during excavations carried out by a German archaeological expedition, altar plates covered with reliefs were discovered on the acropolis. In the years 1911–1930, the altar was reconstructed in Berlin, where it is still exhibited in the Pergamon Museum. In its original place, on a large flat area, there is only a part of the altar plinth. Therefore, the Pergamon altar in collective memory is still present today, albeit in a different spatial context. Is the “myth” of the Altar of Zeus closer to the new or original location?

At the end of the 19th century, Lord Elgin took away 56 plates from the Parthenon frieze and one caryatid and a column from the Erechtheum to London. The marbles were obtained using saws, crowbars and explosives. The Acropolis was profaned in some way. The robber method of acquiring historical sculptural elements made by Lord Elgin and the mutilation of cultural treasures on the Athenian acropolis formed the term “elginism,” which today does not apply only to the Parthenon. This term now applies to all forms of cultural vandalism.

The project raised ethical questions from the very beginning. Here, too, one can ask whether the myth of the temple was not destroyed by the dismantling of the Parthenon.

We associate the Egyptian obelisk on an elephant sculpture with Bernini, Rome and Piazza Santa Maria sopra Minerva. There have been many more associations that build the myth of sculpture, place, author, and events in space-time. However, we have no connotation with the original location of the obelisk. A new myth, fixed in time, not only in architecture, has been present in the collective consciousness for almost four centuries.

In these cases, the myth related to the original location has been violated. A new myth was built in the new location. New meanings were assigned to the new places.

5. PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Transformations of architectural space can also have a peace scenario. We can mention here primarily activities related to the preservation and care of cultural heritage, as well as others related primarily to the transformation of technical infrastructure (mainly communication) or increasing the functionality of the space (adapting to the new spatial development plan). Relocations can also include lifting buildings and structures. The reasons for such undertakings include technical, functional and aesthetic reasons.

During the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, several temples were demolished as part of the UNESCO project and rebuilt outside the endangered area, protecting them from flooding after the creation of Lake Nasser. The largest 24 objects were moved to higher, non-flooding places. In recognition of the help in relocation of monuments, the Egyptian authorities gave four countries one temple each. The Debod Temple was moved to Madrid, the Dendur Temple to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Ellesya Temple to the Museo Egizio in Turin and the Taffeh Temple to the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, the Netherlands. Each of the buildings erected in the new location, building a new myth architecture.

In 2007, in the town of Heuersdorf, near Leipzig, in connection with the planned extraction of lignite deposits, it was decided to relocate the 750-year-old stone Romanesque Emaus church. The temple was transported on a roller platform to the town of Borna, 12 km away.

Placing new objects in historical space, with memorized space-time structures, can fundamentally change the myth of place. In Poland, in recent history, such activities have been caused by the war damage, and then by the post-war, politically lined reconstruction in a new form and scale. In Warsaw, after 1945, the myth of the place was disturbed in the most drastic way with the erection of the Palace of Culture and Science. In the place of regular buildings, an object was created that ignores the historical space recorded in the collective memory of society. The post-war years in Poland was a period of reconstruction and, at the same time, a period of experiments in shaping space. The reconstruction of the urban tissue often drastically disturbed the historically shaped buildings, which were accumulating in time and space. The most visible here are the so-called reclaimed lands, where the quarter buildings were replaced with modernist ones. In extreme cases, housing estates were built in the city center, for example in Nysa (Ill. 1). Characteristically, the historical experiences of city shaping have been ignored and continue to be ignored. Here, huge “merit” in this respect is spatial planning legislation, in particular after 1989. The mess in this respect is especially visible when we compare the Polish–German and Polish–Czech border areas.



III. 1. An example of changing the spatial context and, at the same time, destroying the architectural myth: Wrocławska Street in Nysa: top picture – view around 1920 (postcard from the author's collection); bottom picture – view 2018 (author's photo).

For an ever-smaller group of former residents of Breslau, Oppeln, Neisse, Stettin, as well as Lviv, Stanisławów and Vilnius, sentimental journeys to the places of their youth are extremely difficult. The lands of childhood, with their buildings, smells, tastes and sounds, are a thing of the past, a myth. What's new is usually not easy to accept.

Destroying the architectural myth is also visible in rural areas. The image of the countryside, just a few decades ago, especially after 1989, was changing very quickly. Socio-political, cultural and demographic changes, combined with excessively liberal legislation, in the Polish countryside resulted, among other things, in the disappearance of individual agricultural production, an influx of urban population, almost uncontrolled transformations or the emergence of new forms in new urban layouts. The spreading rural areas phenomenon (urban-sprawl), typical of urban areas, has also become a part of rural areas. There was an increase in the demolition of culturally valuable buildings, not covered by conservation protection – often on purpose, so as not to incur the costs of maintaining the devastated economic buildings.

Ultimately, these and many related phenomena resulted in very rapid and profound changes. They destroyed urban systems established in time and space, destroying the myth of architecture in rural areas. One may be tempted to say that there was (and there is!) a tacit consent for these actions – every legal loophole is absolutely used to devastate the space.

The transformation of cultural heritage in rural areas was also legal. Often in good faith so that it does not degrade. An example is relocation of monuments to ethnographic parks. The section of the cultural landscape recreated in open-air museums, characteristic of the regions presented in them, seems to be the only sure way to preserve and protect a commonly devastated space. Unfortunately, the removed objects from the original location are usually supplemented with low-value architecture or remain undeveloped. The wooden cottage, typical of the Opole village, does not exist in the natural landscape. Today you can admire them, like the last species of animals in zoos, only in the Museum of the Opole Village in Opole. A certain myth of architecture has been destroyed.

6. THE MYTH OF ARCHITECTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Nowadays, climate changes, natural disasters, environmental pollution and rising levels of seas and oceans have an increasing influence on changes in the shaping of space. The above-mentioned threats will more and more often force the relocation not only of individual buildings, but entire districts and cities. Spectacular examples are the Swedish town of Kiruna, located behind the Arctic Circle, and Indonesian Jakarta.

In view of the risks associated with the effects of iron ore mining in Kiruna and the planned further mining near the city, where the main ore deposits are located, the authorities decided to move the entire city to a new location. The most valuable historical buildings will be moved to Nowa Kiruna in parts or in whole. A new urban layout and a new technical infrastructure are planned for the new city.

In 2019, the president of Indonesia decided to move the capital of the state – Jakarta, the second largest agglomeration in the world, inhabited by almost 32 million people. The capital is to be transferred to the island of Borneo. The reason for the decision is the constantly rising level of the Java Sea, which apart from catastrophic floods, together with torrential rains, causes buildings to slide down and collapse under the weight of the structure. Additionally, Jakarta is under seismic threat. Carrying out an operation unprecedented on such a scale may pose a huge threat to the natural environment of Borneo.

7. SUMMARY

The myth of architecture is a fluid concept that changes in time and space. The boundaries of perception are the human imperfect memory. Durable if materially preserved. In collective memory only thanks to oral, written or iconographic messages. It may seem to contemporary people that we have more opportunities to record events and phenomena from the past. But what will remain of our civilization in the event of a “power cut” and destruction of digital records?

The myth of architecture is constantly evolving. Nowadays, in the age of globalization enabling the rapid flow of information, architecture is increasingly threatened

by uniformization. An additional element influencing the unification are the increasing requirements in the field of energy efficiency. Will the unification of spatial solutions, even in this respect, additionally carried out under the pressure of the economic factor, if not demolish, significantly reduce the construction of a myth in architecture?

References:

- [1] Kosiński W., *Trwanie i przemijanie architektury – stymulacje twórczości*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2011, no. 4–A/1, pp. 196–207.
- [2] Loos A., *Ornament i zbrodnia. Eseje wybrane*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2013.
- [3] Rossi A., *The Architecture of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1991.
- [4] Wölfflin H., *Renaissance and Baroque*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1966.

Author's Note:

Piotr Opalka, PhD, Arch.

Architect (2000), civil engineer (1995). Assistant professor at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Department of Architecture at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa. Since 1994, he has been running the “Archi-Concept” architectural studio. Chairman of the Disciplinary Court of the Opole District Chamber of Architects. Co-founder and member of the Polish Green Building Council. The scope of research includes the protection of cultural heritage.

piotr.opalka@pwsz.nysa.pl