

ALEKSANDRA ŚLIWA

ORCID: 0000-0002-0964-5222

Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice, Poland

THE MYTH OF ARCHITECTURE STABILITY AND THE MOBILE FORMS OF DWELLING OF CONTEMPORARY NOMADS

MIT STABILNOŚCI ARCHITEKTURY A MOBILNE FORMY ZAMIESZKIWANIA WSPÓŁCZESNYCH NOMADÓW

Abstract

The Vitruvian triad has become subject to interpretation, losing its unambiguity. Today, stability rather than durability of architecture remains a deeply rooted myth that determines the perception of architecture and its emanations. The mobile forms of dwelling specific to nomads are accompanied by the process of shaping space. The research considers various models of habitation. The result of the analysis is a classification of the phenomenon in the broad context of residential architecture.

Keywords: forms of dwelling, mobile architecture, modern nomads

Streszczenie

Witruwiańska triada z czasem uległa interpretacji, tracąc jednoznaczność. Dziś nie trwałość, a stabilność architektury pozostaje głęboko zakorzenionym mitem warunkującym wyobrażenia o architekturze oraz jej emanacje. Mobilnym formom zamieszkiwania właściwym nomadom towarzyszy zjawisko kształtowania przestrzeni. Badania uwzględniają różnorodne modele zamieszkiwania. Rezultatem analiz jest klasyfikacja zjawiska w szerokim kontekście zabudowy mieszkalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura mobilna, formy zamieszkiwania, współcześni nomadzi

1. INTRODUCTION

*The city of Sophronia is made up of two half-cities.
In one there is the great roller coaster [...], the carousel [...], the Ferris wheel [...],
the death-ride [...], the big top with the clump [...].
The other half-city is of stone and marble and cement, with the bank,
the factories, the palaces, the slaughterhouse, the school, and all the rest.
One of the half-cities is permanent, the other is temporary [...].
And so every year the day comes when the workmen remove the marble pediments,
lower the stone walls, the cement pylons, take down the Ministry, the monument,
the docks, the petroleum refinery, the hospital, load them on trailers [...].
Here remains the half-Sophronia of the shooting-galleries and the carousels,
the shout suspended from the cart of the headlong roller coaster [...].*

Italo Calvino¹

Vitruvian durability, utility, and beauty defined the perception of architecture, not only by description of the state of the art, but also by opening up the possibility of casting aside anything that escapes dignified criteria. It is the solution to the problem of bad architecture – the negation of its existence.² Without durability, utility, and beauty, “architecture [...] does not exist.”³ One of the established myths of architecture is its momentousness. Since Roman times, the concept of architecture has been redefined and the triad has been interpreted, thus losing its original unambiguity.⁴ The debate affects every aspect of it:

- Is durability limited by immutability?
- What is the threshold of utility?
- Can the subjective experience of beauty provide a basis for objective categorization?

Evolution teaches us that the way to survive is to be able to adapt – cities last for centuries constantly transforming.⁵ In the dynamic reality of the 21st century, continuous transformation has become the most current embodiment of the architectural continuum.⁶ On the other hand, ascetically beautiful and geometrically perfect pyramids are uncompromisingly permanent, but it is difficult to speak of their usefulness beyond their impact on the imagination. Today, it is not the durability but the stability of architecture that remains a deeply rooted myth conditioning perceptions of architecture and its emanations. Created and contained in space, it is perceived as connected to a place in accordance with the idea of *genius loci*. This condition results not only from the statistical majority of architectural implementations, but also from the cultural heritage concerning being and inhabiting.

In order to classify the phenomenon of contemporary nomads’ mobile forms of dwelling, I analyze the issue of habitation in the following contexts: genesis of its origin, philosophical,

¹ I. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, A Harvest Book. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book. Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego New York London 1974, p. 63.

² S. Gzell, *O architekturze. Szkice pisane i rysowane*, Wydawnictwo Blue Bird, Warszawa 2014, p. 48.

³ *Ibidem*, p.120.

⁴ P. Marciniak, *Aktualność teorii Witruwiusza a zmiana paradygmatu architektury*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, p. 392.

⁵ J. Rykwert, *Pokusa miejsca. Przeszłość i przyszłość miast*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2013, p. 26.

⁶ G. Nawrot, *Constans w architekturze*, Pretekst, 2020, no. 10, p. 29.

cultural and social. The hypothesis is that mobile forms of habitation are marginalized, even though they constitute a specific architectural example that fulfills the criterion of transformation of space. The source of information on the examples of mobile architecture was a report by Jessica Bruder on workampers – nomadic seasonal workers living in mobile homes on wheels.⁷

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DWELLING AND PLACE

We do not know the genesis of architecture, but its beginning must have been habitation. On the one hand, habitation implies the connection of man with the place⁸, on the other hand, primitive man led nomadic way of life performing all the basic activities, which define the state of dwelling: he rested, prepared meals and consumed them⁹. It is possible to be homeless, but not impossible not to dwell. Christian Norberg-Schultz in “Being, Space and Architecture” refers to Martin Heidegger’s words about how being is the same as inhabiting¹⁰ – architecture builds the physical form of existence.

We can conjecture what the first house looked like. It could have been a hut made of branches and leaves or a nest in a tree, it could have been made of clay or covered with animal skins, or it could have been an adopted cave. The first house may have been built in many places at the same time, in many different forms. It certainly was created in paradise, as it represented the first transformation of space, which, after all, had to take place in a pristine environment. For the same reason Robert Rykwert included his considerations on the above subject in his book entitled “On Adam’s house in paradise,” where he presents the view that both primitive and present-day architecture refer to natural forms, caves and trees¹¹ – a reinforced concrete and steel pillar imitate a stone column, a column imitates a wooden pillar, and a pillar imitates a tree. Meanwhile, there are also inspiring cases in nature when a house wanders with its owner wherever the latter goes. Since man was constantly on the move in search of nourishment, we can assume that primitive architecture had elements of mobility. In fact, mobility has accompanied architecture since its beginnings,¹² therefore is not its negation, but a complement – one of its forms. Today, due to the process of globalization and the information revolution, mobility is gaining new meanings and a previously unknown virtual dimension. The development of the phenomenon forces a verification of the Vitruvian *firmitas*¹³ which is essentially an incarnation of the myth of stability.

⁷ J. Bruder, *Nomadland. W drodze za pracą*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2020.

⁸ C. Norberg-Schultz, *Bycie, przestrzeń i architektura*, Wydawnictwo Murator, Warszawa 2000, p. 16.

⁹ G. Nawrot, *O współczesnych formach zamieszkiwania w mieście*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2015, p. 186.

¹⁰ C. Norberg-Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹¹ J. Rykwert, *O rajskim domu Adama. Idea pierwotnej chaty w historii architektury*, Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich, Warszawa 2018, pp. 59–61.

¹² A. Śliwa, *Shaping spatial relations – about transformability and mobility in architecture* [in:] M. Perinkova, S. Juttnerova, L. Videcka (eds.), *12th Architecture in Perspective 2020. Proceedings of the international conference = 12. Architektura v perspektivě 2020. Sborník příspěvků z mezinárodní konference*, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava Faculty of Civil Engineering, Department of Architecture, Ostrava 2020, p. 16.

¹³ K. Kwiatkowski, *Postulat architektury mobilnej – jako metaforyczne odczytanie Witruwiusza*, *Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura*, 2009, no. 1-A, p. 362.

The myth of the stability of architecture is the result of several reasons. A tamed space becomes a place as it gains meanings,¹⁴ and for man, the place of greatest importance is his home. From our earliest years we learn about the world from the perspective of home, as if it were the base of an expedition into the unknown. The relationship between home and place is one of the factors determining man's sense of ontological security.¹⁵ This dependence is reflected in the deep-rooted aversion to *landlessness*, exemplified by the biblical expulsion of Eve and Adam from Paradise, and later the desire to find the promised land, or the now archaic punishment of banishment. All of the above examples make human dignity dependent on one's connection with the land and, as a result, on the possession of the land and the resulting belonging to it. Contemporary nomads practicing the nomadic lifestyle do not call themselves homeless but *placeless*, undermining the status quo of the belonging of a man and his home to a place.¹⁶ Stigmatization of homelessness, or lack of belonging to a place, is now legally sanctioned in many countries of the world as a phenomenon inconvenient to the authorities and potentially threatening public order based on control mechanisms.¹⁷ We can speak about culturally conditioned discrimination based on economical background, occurring directly on the architectural ground – the possession of a place to live determines a person's position in society. Here we return to the earlier observation: to live is to inhabit. There are at least several reasons for the marginalization of mobile forms of habitation:

- the relatively small percentage of occurrence of the phenomenon,
- the rejection of forms that go beyond the framework of Vitruvius' momentous architecture,
- the conflict between the idea of mobility and human attachment to places,
- the cultural dependence of dignity on having a place in the world.

3. MODERN NOMADS MOBILE FORMS OF HABITATION

As Christian Norberg-Schultz states, “the concept of home can be variable in scope,”¹⁸ if it is possible to live in the public spaces of the city like a 19th-century flâneur, it is certainly also possible to live in less formal or variable settings. The concept of dwelling is constantly evolving, expanding or narrowing its scope – today, working remotely from home seems to be an extension of the basic residential function, but the medieval craftsman lived in his workshop, so the development of the concept of dwelling can take many different directions.

Since the beginning of habitation, humans have also chosen to live a nomadic lifestyle, whether in search of food, favorable climatic and environmental conditions, or because they are escaping danger, in search of work, or for the purpose of travel itself. Whatever the reason, there are two basic mechanisms for dwelling on the road:

- in the architecture found on the journey – the stable architecture,
- in moving with each other – mobile architecture.

¹⁴ Y.F. Tuan, *Przestrzeń i miejsce*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1987, p. 173.

¹⁵ G. Nawrot, *Constans w architekturze*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁶ J. Bruder, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 153.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 10, 213–214.

¹⁸ C. Norberg-Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Mobility is one of the criteria of architecture classification next to the context, the way of developing a land parcel or the way of solving internal communication. Grzegorz Nawrot distinguishes degrees of mobility of architecture: from the most mobile caravan, through a residential river barge, mobile shelter for the homeless UNS (Urban Nomad Shelter) and a housing container, to completely stable single- and multi-family residential buildings.¹⁹

Based on the premise that architecture is a spatial system created through separations, the following definition of mobility was developed:

Mobility in architecture is realized by changing the location of the spatial system relative to the environment or an element of this system relative to itself and the environment, assuming that the possibility of this change is intentional and technologically anticipated and its purpose is to change spatial conditions.²⁰

The definition makes it possible to distinguish examples of mobile architecture from a number of apparently related instances, such as hotels, pensions, or asylum camps that serve as stops for their inhabitants.

4. NOMADLAND

In the report “Nomadland. Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century” by Jessica Bruder²¹ described the housing situation of thousands of Americans. While exact figures are difficult to verify, it is estimated that approximately one million Americans live in caravans, campers or specially converted mobile homes on wheels. A wide variety of vehicles from cars and vans to trucks, buses and coaches are converted into nomadic homes. For some nomads this is a transitory state, but there are also those who consider mobile living to be their final state of life. There are many observable parallels between mobile and stable dwellings, ranging from the smallest scale of a single dwelling unit, which is the mobile equivalent of a single-family house, through camps formed by modern tribes – the equivalent of multi-family housing or housing estates, to functionally diverse metropolises temporarily formed from thousands of mobile units.

4.1. MICRO SCALE – THE SINGLE DWELLING UNIT

Mobile dwelling units are condensed, multifunctional spaces for living. In spaces measuring from a few square meters to several tens of square meters, it is possible to hide from the surroundings, sleep, cook, eat, take care of personal hygiene, rest, receive visitors and work – thus realizing all the activities that define a state of habitation.²² When stationary, a mobile dwelling unit occupies a defined area, often with the ability to adapt the immediate environment to its needs, which involves the separation of zones, the transformation and equipping of space. In terms of functional-spatial structure, living in a mobile unit is almost the exact equivalent of living in a single-family home.

¹⁹ G. Nawrot, *O współczesnych...*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

²⁰ A. Śliwa, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²¹ J. Bruder, *op. cit.*

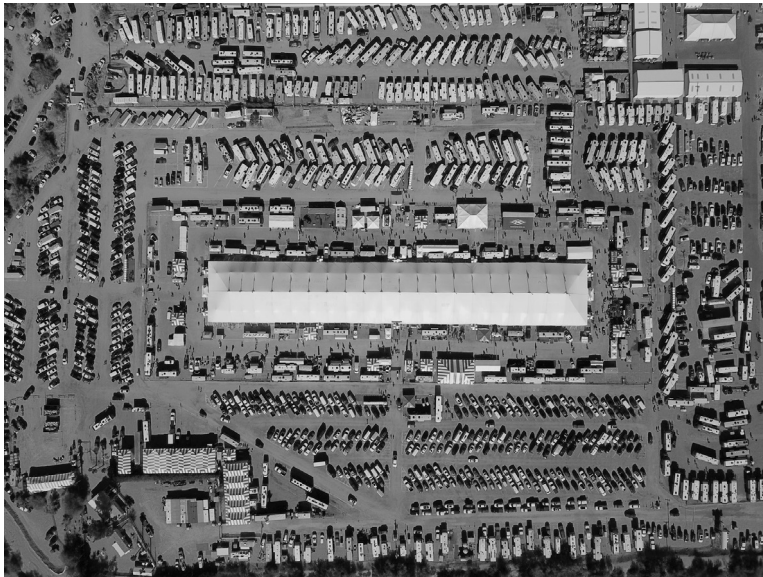
²² G. Nawrot, *O współczesnych...*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

4.2. MESO SCALE – THE CAMP

As in the case of stable forms of habitation, mobile ones also are associated with the formation of social groups, called by some tribes.²³ Individual dwelling units are combined to provide private and communal spaces in a structured setting that allows for intentional regulation of relationships between residents.²⁴ Jessica Bruder describes an example of a camp: “At the place they called ‘the nest,’ they found more than eighty-five bluebird wanderlodge luxury coaches lined up side by side in a great circle – like sunbeams in a child’s drawing.”²⁵

4.3. MACRO SCALE – THE CITY

Mobile cities have a temporary character, being a conglomeration of visitors attracted to a particular place by employment, comfortable climate, favourable living conditions or organised events bringing together people who share this lifestyle. The term city is fully justified, as nomads, apart from living here, also perform other functions: they provide services, trade or run mobile workshops and bookstores.²⁶ An example of a mobile city is Quartzsite, in Arizona, which is populated by four thousand people during the summer and hundreds of thousands of nomads during the winter.²⁷ Thus, the mobile city has a stable location while simultaneously consisting of hundreds of variable, mobile elements that form a living structure with a regulated order of functioning.



III. 1. An aerial view of Quartzsite, Arizona, source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/quartzsitervshow/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1587291151487386&ref=page_internal (access: 28.06.2021).

²³ J. Bruder, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 144, 150–151.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 131–132, 153.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

5. CONCLUSION

The myth of stability, established by the Vitruvian triad, determines the perception of architecture, excluding its mobile forms. Deeply rooted in culture, attachment to place makes us reject the phenomenon of placelessness that does not correspond to the imposed scheme. However, mobile and stable architecture share a common origin and the idea of habitation itself can transform in various forms.

Analyses have revealed that mobile forms of habitation created by modern nomads meet the criterion of shaping space. In terms of functional and spatial structure at micro, meso and macro scales they reflect the patterns known from stable architecture. Referring to Calvino Italo's provocative and surrealistic description of the city of Sofronia cited at the beginning – mobility is the complement of stable architecture, the part without which the city of Sofronia cannot be complete.

References:

- [1] Bruder J., *Nomadland. W drodze za pracą*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2020.
- [2] Calvino I., *Invisible Cities*, A Harvest Book. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book. Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego New York London 1974.
- [3] Gzell S., *O architekturze. Szkice pisane i rysowane*, Wydawnictwo Blue Bird, Warszawa 2014.
- [4] Kwiatkowski K., *Postulat architektury mobilnej – jako metaforyczne odczytanie Witruwiusza*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, pp. 362–366.
- [5] Marciniak P., *Aktualność teorii Witruwiusza a zmiana paradygmatu architektury*, Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura, 2009, no. 1-A, pp. 392–396.
- [6] Nawrot G., *O współczesnych formach zamieszkiwania w mieście*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, Gliwice 2015.
- [7] Nawrot G., *Constans w architekturze*, Pretekst, 2020, no. 10, pp. 27–32.
- [8] Norberg-Schultz C., *Bycie, przestrzeń i architektura*, Wydawnictwo Murator, Warszawa 2000.
- [9] Quartzsite Sports, Vacation & RV Show, https://www.facebook.com/pg/quartzsiterivshow/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1587291151487386&ref=page_internal (access: 28.06.2021).
- [10] Rykwert J., *Pokusa miejsca. Przeszłość i przyszłość miast*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2013.
- [11] Rykwert J., *O rajskim domu Adama. Idea pierwotnej chaty w historii architektury*, Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich, Warszawa 2018.
- [12] Śliwa A., *Shaping spatial relations – about transformability and mobility in architecture* [in:] Perinkova M., Juttnerova S., Videcka L. (eds.), *12th Architecture in Perspective 2020. Proceedings of the international conference = 12. Architektura v perspektivě 2020. Sborník příspěvků z mezinárodní konference*, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava Faculty of Civil Engineering, Department of Architecture, Ostrava 2020, pp. 16–19.
- [13] Tuan Y.F., *Przestrzeń i miejsce*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1987.
- [14] Vitruvius, *O architekturze ksiąg dziesięć*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 1999.

Author's Note:

Aleksandra Śliwa, MSc, Arch.

PhD student at the Faculty of Architecture of the Silesian University of Technology in the Department of Housing and Public Architecture Design, focused on the issue of architectural factors shaping the living space in residential, multi-family housing.

aleksandra.sliwa@polsl.pl