

DENYS CHERNYSHEV

ORCID: 0000-0002-1946-9242

Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine

CHANG PENG

ORCID: 0000-0001-7772-5200

Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine

POSTMODERN BUILDING AS THEATRICAL DECORATION: ARCHITECTURAL ILLUSIONS OF MANUEL NÚÑEZ YANOVSKY

BUDYNEK POSTMODERNISTYCZNY JAKO DEKORACJA TEATRALNA: ARCHITEKTONICZNA ILUZJA MANUELA NÚÑEZA YANOVSKIEGO

Abstract

Architecture has been truly reflecting the function of a building for thousands of years. The end of the 20th century became a turning point, which was marked by daring experiments on architecture, and brought to the architectural arena Charles Moore, Ricardo Bofill, Hans Hollein. The same time there emerged a modish tendency to rethink creatively and ironically classical styles and remarkable works of the past. The exterior of the building becomes "an architectural deceit," when the function cannot be defined by its front, and one of the most illustrative examples of "pervasive fraud" is the work of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky, who showed himself as a startling architect, who boldly transforms material object into theatrical decoration and combines function with its unusual architectural appearance.

Keywords: architectural deceit, illusion, postmodernism, Manuel Núñez Yanowsky

Streszczenie

Od tysięcy lat architektura była prawdziwym odzwierciedleniem funkcji budynku. Koniec XX wieku stał się punktem zwrotnym, który upłynął pod znakiem odważnych eksperymentów architektonicznych i przyniósł na arenę architektoniczną Charlesa Moore'a, Ricardo Bofilla, Hansa Holleina. W tym samym czasie pojawiła się modna tendencja do przemyślenia twórczo i ironicznie klasycznych stylów oraz niezwykłych dzieł z przeszłości. Zewnętrzna część budynku staje się „oszustwem architektonicznym”, kiedy jego funkcja nie może być zdefiniowana przez jego front, a jednym z najbardziej ilustrujących przykładów „wszechobecnego oszustwa” jest dzieło Manuela Núñeza Yanowskiego, który pokazał się jako zaskakujący architekt, śmiało przekształcający przedmiot materialny w dekorację teatralną i łączący funkcję z niezwykłym wystrojem architektonicznym.

Słowa kluczowe: kłamstwo architektoniczne, iluzja, postmodernizm, Manuel Núñez Yanowsky

1. INTRODUCTION

The architecture of the postmodern period was marked by a desire for aesthetics and converging with art, as well as involving people without architectural education in professional design.¹ The trends of creative rethinking of the heritage of the past centuries, especially ancient Greek and Roman, have intensified. It has become normal to be ironic in the historical style – to change the proportions of the order, combine traditional order compositions with ironic insertions, to turn it into a part of the whole building or to create residential complexes based on the composition of theatrical scenery.² The involvement in the design of people without special education has become a characteristic feature of architecture, and in this case it is worth quoting the words of Tomasz Kozłowski from his monograph *Architecture as Art*: “However, contemporary architecture knows many built works that were not signed by architects. The creator who has made a significant contribution to the history of architecture neither was an architect by profession, nor did he manage to build anything.”³ However, here we are dealing primarily with the authors of the so-called “paper architecture,” which never became real objects.

But many non-architects by education were lucky to build not one, but many original objects. One of the most striking interpreters of traditional architecture is considered to be Manuel Núñez Yanowsky who began his architectural activities in the Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura and then broke off all relations with them and began to work independently. He described his work as follows:

I am not an architect. I am a stage director. I came from a school of theatre, not of architecture. And for me, architecture is a continuation of my theatrical career, which can be defined in a simple manner – I try to be a tragicomedian. If in theatrical culture the unit of measurement is a man, then in architecture, it is the metric system. In my activity, I prefer the theatrical human measurement system.⁴

As the architect said in an interview for Kyiv journal, his worldview was influenced by childhood memories – upbringing in a theatrical and architectural environment, visiting theatres and concerts, so he simultaneously dreamed of becoming both an architect and an artist.

Indeed, in 1961–1965 he attended the stage design and art direction department of the Adria Gual School of Dramatic Art in Barcelona, and perhaps that is why he treats many of his objects not as material volume, but as a real theatrical production: a prelude – approximations to the object, action one, action two, etc., and acquaintance from different sides; the plot development – deployment of interesting perspective views; the climax – paying attention to a dynamic accentual detail or a fragment of the facade; denouement – removal from the object.

¹ K. Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Thames and Hudson, London 1985; A.N. Shukurova, *Arkhitektura Zapada i mir iskusstva XX veka* [*Western Architecture and the Art World of the 20th century*], Stroyizdat, Moscow 1990.

² M. Orlenko, Y. Ivashko, *The concept of art and works of art in the theory of art and in the restoration industry*, Art Inquiry, 2019, vol. 21, pp. 171–190.

³ T. Kozłowski, *Architecture as Art*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków, 2019, p. 21.

⁴ Manuel Núñez Yanowsky – architect-urbanist, http://www.nunez-yanowsky.com/manuel_nunez_yanowsky/about_architect (access: 02.06.2020).

In the creative heritage of the architect, there are many objects of various functional purposes. They are characterized by the unusual form and composition, but objects of other world masters of architecture also have these features. That's why we pay attention to that peculiarity of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky, which is a hallmark of his author's style and which distinguishes many of his buildings from other designers – he can skilfully transform the construction site into a theatre, and the building into a stage with a theatrical performance, where the architectural action takes place with subtle irony with a change in the styles of the past in modern rendering.

2. ARCHITECTURE AS A GAME OF THEATRE AND A GAME OF ART OF THE PAST

Historically, humanity created several stereotypes of the types of building for a specified purpose; it helped to navigate in the surrounding space – it was impossible not to recognize the church, the palace of the ruler, the town hall or the market. But in modern architecture, there are more frequent cases of the architect's intellectual game with the viewer, when the viewer must guess the function of the building by its appearance (and in many cases, the viewer is mistaken, as in the case of the amoeba-like buildings of Kunsthaus Graz or a synagogue in the Negev desert). Moreover, modern architects have invented a kind of “a game in the past,” when the viewers should guess where the allusion came from. And to solve it, they need a bundle of intellectual knowledge about the author of the sculpture “Dying Slave” or what the statue of the Venus de Milo looks like, or about the appearance of the pharaoh Akhenaten, the images of which are integral parts of architectural and intellectual performance. In this case, architecture becomes somewhat similar to a book, because it encourages the viewer to take an interest in some information and read something, which means intellectually developing. From this point of view, the architecture – game, performs a developing function, in contrast to modern office skyscraper boxes built according to standard designs and similar materials.

According to the authors, the peculiar feature of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky's creativity is primarily an intellectual “game with the audience,” his approach to architecture not as to the fulfilment of the particular function with the most appropriate planning and constructive means, but as to the art, or rather, as to the synthesis of such art as theatre, sculptures and architecture. At the same time, it creates an occasion to have interest in the quoted originals – Michelangelo's sculptures or the Ancient Russian architecture. And we can say that the architect's creative work also fulfils a special cognitive and educational function. According to the words of Philip Johnson, to understand the informative message of his objects is possible only from the position of “non-functionality” of art:

Art has nothing to do with intellectual pursuit – it shouldn't be in a university at all. Art should be practiced in gutters – pardon me, in attics. You can't learn architecture any more than you can learn a sense of music or painting. You shouldn't talk about art, you should do it.⁵

Indeed, what function is entrusted to the regularly repeated figures of “The Dying Slave” on the building of the police station in Paris, or what was the need to place 18 statues of

⁵ P. Johnson, *The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture* [in:] Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, Warszawa 2013, p. 243, quote from: T. Kozłowski, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Venus de Milo in the “Venus 18” complex instead of columns, if you are directed only with functional expediency?

Obtaining a diploma does not guarantee the creation of a unique object and of tens of thousands of annual graduates of architectural universities, there may not be one capable of daring experiments and denying stereotypes. The creation of a new approach to architecture is because the artist without an architectural education is not restricted by the rules and requirements that are taught to students at universities and to PhD candidates at doctoral studies. It enables approaching architecture not from the standpoint of its functionality, but from the standpoint of a work of art, opening up space for “non-functionality,” uselessness from the point of view of functional need, and the ability even to laugh at the viewer, giving the architectural object the look of a wicker basket (The Longaberger Home Office), ducks (The Big Duck) or an orange (Bono’s Orange Stand).

It is based on these positions that the creative activities of Manuel Núñez-Yanowsky are on a par with the work of such a startling architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and the characteristic of the work of Hundertwasser can be at the same time a characteristic of the work of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky:

An absolute novelty, sometimes no easy to create by an architect, leads to works such as the Hundertwasserhaus. Friedensreich Hundertwasser is not an architect, and not even a painter from an academic point of view as he left the academy after three months. And yet, like the sculptor Fritz Wotruba, he is known primarily for his architectural achievements.⁶

The unconventional approach of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky to the architectural process is partially revealed from his statements during his visits to Chernihiv, where he drew ideas from the monuments of Baroque and Kievan Rus for designing the Russian spiritual and cultural centre in Paris. In talking with Yulia Ivashko he said about his own vision of architecture and architectural styles.

The architect continually thinks with symbols, allusions and analogies. For him, it is significant to connect the public space with greenery as the intersection of nature and urban development. In architecture, he sees analogies with nature: Gothic for him is the first real Catholic architecture, and the architecture is “woody” if we speak about the specificity of the design scheme, where vaults are allusions to an over tilted boat with tree twigs, the portal with stepped blind arches is an allusion to the entrance to the dense spinney. Manuel Núñez Yanowsky sees Christian architecture primarily as the specific symbol: Byzantine Sofia was erected according to Roman canons, and Roman and Gothic architecture in the interior turns into the allusion of the Garden of Eden with a “botanical” ornament and “natural” motifs. Paradise is a garden, therefore, according to the architect, if you need to describe heaven, you should show it in all its luxury. Roman architecture on the territory of modern Europe disappeared, then to be reborn in the Romanesque style, but with poor-quality masonry techniques of the 7th-8th centuries.

Consequently, in the 11th century, the Gothic philosophy tore the dull Romanesque medievalism, and it was reflected, among other things, in architecture. French Gothic let divine light into the gloomy squat architecture of the Middle Ages, creating a multimedia effect of light in Gothic cathedrals – both white, through windows, and colour, through

⁶ *Ibidem*.

stained-glass windows, combined with candlelight; it creates an extraordinary effect of light performance in combination with a script of the church service, organ, church singing, murals and sculpture.

Manuel Núñez Yanowsky also approaches the design process from the philosophical foundation, perhaps also because from 1970 to 1973 he studied at the Faculty of Archeology and History of Central University of Barcelona majored in Ancient Egypt. Inspecting the Chernihiv churches, he expressed his perception of Orthodox architecture in Ukraine. For an ancient Greek, paradise as a garden was a paradox; in the minds of Slavonian Christians, it is the embodiment of heaven on earth (exotic fruits, birds, fantastic animals). Paradise is abundance; therefore, in the Baroque epoch, a cornucopia became a popular figure of decoration. Most of the structures of Kievan Rus were rebuilt and enriched outside in the Baroque era, and, as Manuel Núñez Yanowsky said to Dr.hab. Yulia Ivashko, when he visited Chernihiv: “It is the presence at the baroque full surrealism performance when the building is in the building.” The architectural performance organically sprouts from previous styles, as modernity grown in its time – from Gothic, Islam, even from the Catholic Baroque with curved facades and domes.

In construction, in his opinion, the nature of the architecture of ancient times depended heavily on the material: the Egyptians built buildings of bricks; the Greeks who lived on rocky territories used stone; the Romans adopted the traditions of construction from Egypt and worked with modular masonry in the creation of churches; from Roman architecture, Gothic adopted the transfer of information from design to construction. But modern architects are not restricted in stuff and can freely realize their ideas into various materials.

In his opinion, each architecture should truthfully reflect its time and not be a fake of an inappropriate era. As an example, he mentioned the cathedral in Dresden, where remained old stones were black after the fire, and additional masonry was made of light stone. In modern architecture, the quotes from famous art and architectural works of the past are appropriate, but in their current rethinking, and not in blind copying. In addition to the already mentioned police station building in Paris with sculptures of the “Dying Slave,” one should mention the design of the “Venus 18” residential complex in Villeroy near Paris, the peculiarity of which is a startling rethinking of the Venus de Milo sculpture, which in this case turns from a work of art without any specific function into bearing support like the Greek caryatid in Erechtheion: armless Venuses, which stand in different angles and at different heights, carry the overhanging floors on their shoulders, and one Venus, in-depth, it does not have neither both hands nor even a head. The same rows of Venuses in the role of supporting columns – with and without a head – support the building from the side of the courtyard (Ill. 1). It is significant that in both cases the architect was invited by the agency Logement Francais. As in other designs of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky, this design also has a dynamic performance, when the facades unfold in front of the audience, like a theatrical action. Expression unfolds in the direction of the angle of intersection of two facades, and at the same time, the emphasis is the intersection of two streets. Although the object is perceived as one building, in reality, it combines two buildings on both sides of the intersection. Eighteen concrete Venuses support the corners of both buildings on their shoulders; according to the architect’s plan, this had to symbolize dynamism, and, at the same time, fragile balance.



Ill. 1. Venus 18. Fragment of elevation. Watercolour by Chang Peng, 2020

3. FIGURATIVE TECHNIQUES AND THE AUTHOR'S STYLE

Each outstanding architect throughout his/her life has developed his/her own author's style and a number of figurative means. Since Manuel Núñez Yanowsky is closely correlated with theatrical art and history, in his masterworks, it is felt theatricality and allusions to the historical styles of the past – Egyptian, Greek, Romanesque, Renaissance, or oriental architecture. How can one not recollect the famous expression “All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players.” Despite a large number of masterworks of the architect, we will focus only on those objects that better reveal the nature of architecture as an intellectual game.

The interest of the architect in Ancient Egypt is possibly supported by his studies at the Faculty of Archaeology and History of the Central University of Barcelona majored in Ancient Egypt. This theme “sprouted” in the Residential district Claude Levi-Strauss, Sarcelles, one of the northern quarters of Paris, which was populated by the biggest Jewish community in France. Also, there lived lots of Muslims and Christians, immigrants from Algeria and Islamic countries, and it caused the “Egyptian” theme and the end faces of the buildings have a form of the stylized Jewish Tablets of the Law. The buildings have Roman and Arabic numerals from one to ten (a reminder of the Ten Commandments). The entrances to the porches of each section are “guarded” by the huge heads of the pharaoh Akhenaten from reinforced concrete (Ill. 2).



III. 2. The Residential District Claude Levi-Strauss, Sarselles, Paris. Fragment of elevation. Water-colour by Chang Peng, 2020

At the Psychopedagogical Institute in Wasmès, Belgium, an architect intentionally combined the architecture of different eras and different countries, deploying it as a theatrical action, when one picture successively replaces another. In the complex of the Psychopedagogical Institute, such “theatrical actions” are as follows: the entrance facade, reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance palazzo; the rows of stylized columns that suddenly, from a different angle, turn into the defensive towers of Carcassonne; deliberately theatrical and “intangible” facades of the passage according to the style of the Belgian street buildings.⁷

Greek architecture is one of the favourite topics for historical citation in architect’s objects. At the Psychopedagogical Institute in Wasmès, it was expressed in the rows of columns stylized as lower parts with flutes and base towers with loophole windows made of red-brown concrete. And if in a prospective reduction these volumes look like the rows of cut columns, then the columns are frontally interspersed with walls, giving the impression of medieval walls, where some see an analogy with the Carcassonne fortress in France.

The Psychopedagogical institute in Wasmès is distinguished by the presence of allusions simultaneously to many historical styles of the past, and one of them is an allusion to the Italian architecture of the Renaissance, in particular, one of the facades presents an allusion to the Malatestiano Temple in Rimini (1450).⁸

The stylized quotes of the Renaissance are also present in another facility – the residential-and-hotel complex “La Grand Place” in Paris. Though the territory was designed

⁷ P.E. Jodidio, *Works of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky*, A + U 84:02 February 1986, no. 161, pp. 117–122.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

with the use of new materials and structures (monolithic reinforced concrete with some precast concrete elements of decoration), but according to the composition and proportions of the famous “Ideal city” painting of the Renaissance, where the buildings are flanking a rectangular area. The Renaissance allusions are combined with allusions to ancient Greek art: the facades are decorated with three-story reinforced concrete sculptures of Aphrodite. Here we should give an example from ancient times, which supposedly has nothing to do with the work of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky, but actually also demonstrates the approach to architectural design as a successive change of “actions” – “imagery pictures.” Many centuries ago, a similar technique arose in ancient China in the art of traditional gardens, and over the next centuries, it was constantly improved. In China, the landscape design of a private garden did not provide for a combination of different architectural styles, but the change in pictures was regular due to the artificial landscape techniques when outside one landscape was viewed another, and the slots became a kind of “frame” for the scenery. Manuel Núñez Yanowsky used the same “frames” in combination with his favourite Greek theme in the Venus 18 residential complex, where the corners of the volumes are raised at the intersection of streets and views of the courtyards are revealed through the formed openings at the level of the first, second and third floors.

An allusion to the Romanesque architecture of the Iberian Peninsula is the Sanctuary of Maritxell in Andorra la Vella, the plan of which resembles ancient fortified monasteries, and the rectangular laconic bell tower recalls the influence of the traditions of Al-Andalus and Maghreb on the early Catholic architecture of Spain.

However, a bold combination of eras, styles, contrasting the usual form and the accent element, not connected in any way with the appearance and purpose of the building was rejected by the customer.

The first example of a conflict of creativity and stereotypical thinking is connected with the construction of the Hotel de Police (Police Station) in Paris at the corner of Rambouillet Street and Daumesnil Avenue (Ill. 3). The building is quite traditional in the lower part, but it is pronouncedly expressive and creative in the upper part, the building is crowned by 15 concrete copies of Michelangelo’s sculpture “The Dying Slave,” six times enlarged.

The architect explained the choice of sculpture by the fact that the “Slave” holds with one hand his head, with the other – his heart, and his legs are pressed together, hiding his gender, thereby showing that a person is a slave of own mind, heart and sex.

However, such a philosophical essence appealed to the police leadership, which insisted on “squeezing” the figures into the facade to avoid frivolity, as the architect himself said during a lecture for students of Kyiv Civil Engineering Institute in the early 1990s. Forced to do this, the architect made holes in the backs of the sculptures in protest.

The same thing happened with the design of the Russian Orthodox and Spiritual Centre in Paris, which won the competition and was marked by a non-standard philosophy, expressed through the architectural forms. Transparent walls opened a view of the side facade of the palace in the neighbouring section, and a glass shawl-canopy covered the garden around the cathedral with laconic white walls and glass domes that glow from the inside in the evening and night with a golden light. The unusual feature of this design was the presence of several allusions to the famous architectural monuments of past centuries, which was noted by the authors of this article on the design descriptions.



III. 3. “Hotel de Police” in Paris. A fragment of the sculpture “The Dying Slave.” Watercolour by Peng Chang, 2020

The first allusion, the main one, is to the traditional old Russian architecture. The architect revived the memory of the multi-domed white-stone church of the Russian-Byzantine style and the temple as the centre of the ancient Russian settlement. To do it, Manuel Núñez Yanowsky used several features that are traditionally associated with Orthodoxy and the Old Russian period – the white stone of the walls, which he proposed to bring from Russia for greater authenticity, the bells cast in Russia; the transparent shawl – the glass structure – a symbol of the Holy Protection of the Mother of God.

The second allusion noted by the authors of the article is to the legendary Babylonian Hanging Gardens of Semiramis, but with tree species traditional for Russia. The garden with birch trees, rowans, willows, maples and linden trees had to start in front of the temple, and subsequently climb up the terraces of the administrative buildings of the religious and cultural centre (isn't that an analogy with the ancient legendary Gardens of Semiramis?)

The unusual image prompted the unique design and engineering solutions with a combination of traditional material (white stone) with solar panels on the facade and a complex glass structure that seems to hover above the walls of the temple and the garden around it, where the glass is washed.

However, it was precisely this non-standard thinking, the “game in architecture” that played a cruel joke with the architect, since Orthodoxy, especially Russian, is perhaps the most

conservative branch of Christianity, dominated by dogmas in the architectural appearance of the temple. The construction for Russian funds was supposed to begin in January 2012. When considering the application for construction and the winning design at the City Hall, the then-mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoé, rejected Núñez Yanowsky's design, stating that it discords with the development of the area and spoils the view of the embankment. The representatives of the West European exarchate of the Russian parishes of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, had also negative opinion about the design. They had recognized it as such that did not express the spirit of Orthodoxy. The Minister of Culture of France, Aureli Filippetti, opposed the scheme, she did not like the large size of the cathedral and the possibility of accidental environmental development during the construction and operation of the cathedral. Finally, Paris police believed that from the terrace of the cathedral it is possible to attack the neighbouring Palais de l'Alma, a National Palace of the French Republic. In December 2012, due to the negative reaction, the finalist design was withdrawn by the Russian side, and subsequently, the design and the author himself, who became the second-prize winner, French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, were changed, and this design was quietly agreed in 2014.

We have given our characteristics of the most, in our opinion, “theatrical” objects of the architect. In conclusion, we would like to bring the answer of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky to the question of Kyiv correspondent, how he characterizes his architectural style: “My style is ‘unfashionability,’ durability and strength, stability in time and space. I, like my clients, care about the life of the building in time and space, the steadfastness of materials and functions.”⁹

4. CONCLUSIONS

The peculiarity of Manuel Núñez Yanowsky's masterworks is that he offers the customer and the viewer a specific “game,” where all the stereotypes of the building's functional signs are intentionally changed and you won't be able to guess what is located behind the grey open-work walls that seem to be cardboard or in the huge lower parts of the columns with flutes and massive bases (the Psychopedagogical Institute in Wasmès, Belgium, 1984), in a strange building with windows in a large circle and stylized buttresses in front of the walls and narrow aisles under them (“Place Picasso” Public and Residential complex in Noisy-le-Grand, Grand Paris, 1985) or what is symbolized by a design resembling a veil, “strung” on the dome of the old Russian-style cathedral (the design of the Russian Orthodox and Spiritual Centre in Paris, 2011, together with the Moscow company Arch Group LLC). Such a “game in an architectural theatre” and changing stereotypes do not leave anyone indifferent but sometimes come across the refusal to accept.

Unfortunately, in some cases, our society is not yet ready for the perception of “architectural madness,” which fundamentally transforms architecture into a theatre or a work of pure functional art, just as society once did not recognise the “bony” Eiffel Tower or the “shells that crawled ashore” of Sydney Opera. It will not be a mistake to compare such innovative architects with science fiction writers, who for decades predicted scientific and technical inventions and problems of mankind. Perhaps the problem is that often society is not ready to accept fundamentally new

⁹ O. Babenko, *Núñez Yanowsky Manuel: “Architecture has practically disappeared”* Commercial Property, 2016, no. 6 (154), <https://commercialproperty.ua/cp-articles/manuel-nunes-yanovskiy-arkhitektura-praktichieski-ischezla/> (access: 02.06.2020).

aesthetic ideals, just as the usual mobile phone or laptop would be unnecessary or even dangerous in the Middle Ages. Such position is probably described by William Wharton: “Architects are a bunch of madman, half-artist, half-craftsmen, lost between reality and imagination.”¹⁰

In the interview for Ukrainian journal “Commercial Property,” Manuel Núñez Yanowsky was asked about the development of architecture in the future. He replied: “Today, architects are like shopkeepers on St. Andrew’s descent, who want to sell their faceless and unpromising goods as quickly as possible. We can say that the temple of art is crammed with merchants, but there is still no prophet to expel them.”¹¹

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Authors’ Note:

Denys Chernyshev, Prof. Assoc. Ph.D.

A specialist in a sphere of ecological architecture. Vice-rector, Doctor of Technical Science, Professor, Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture.

denis01011978@ukr.net

Chang Peng, M.Sc. Arch.

Post-graduate student, painter, Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture.

changpeng2277@gmail.com

¹⁰ W. Wharton, *Spóźnieni kochankowie*, Poznań 2010, chapter 9, quote from: T. Kozłowski, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹¹ O. Babenko, *op. cit.*