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# ASTONISHMENT, ABSOLUTE NOVELTY OR A VISION OF DECLINE. ON ANTICIPATION AS A NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN ARCHITECTURE

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## ZADZIWIENIE, ABSOLUTNA NOWOŚĆ ALBO WIZJA UPADKU. O ANTYCYPACJI JAKO STRATEGII NARRACYJNEJ W ARCHITEKTURZE

### Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of narrative architecture aiming to evoke astonishment, with reference to the technology development. Based on the analysis of examples of contemporary buildings, two types of anticipation were distinguished: utopian and anti-utopian. New technologies enable designing forms that evoke amazement and convey futuristic narrative. The need for further research of narrative with an emphasis on the phenomenon of astonishment was identified – as a key element of architectural creation.

*Keywords: amazement, anticipation, architectural narrative, technology, utopia*

### Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono zagadnienie architektury narracyjnej dążącej do wzbudzenia zadziwienia, w kontekście rozwoju technologii. Na podstawie analizy przykładów współczesnych budynków wyróżniono dwa typy antycypacji: utopijną i antyutopijną. Nowoczesne technologie umożliwiają projektowanie form wywołujących zdumienie, przekazujących futurystyczną narrację. Wskazano na potrzebę dalszego badania narracji, z naciskiem na zjawisko zdumienia jako kluczowy element twórczości architektonicznej.

*Słowa kluczowe: zadziwienie, antycypacja, narracja architektoniczna, technologia, utopia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION. ON ASTONISHMENT, NARRATIVE AND TIME IN ARCHITECTURE

Astonishment and absolute novelty as a new goal of architecture (positive or negative in expression) is realized with narrative architecture. It was pointed out by Nigel Coates: “narrative in architecture is rarely a prescribed sequence of meanings, but is instead an anti-sequential “framework” of associative meanings held in wait to “drench” the unsuspecting

visitor”<sup>1</sup>. As works of art can convey ideas, meanings, and other content in literature, painting or graphic design – it can “narrate” also in the discipline of creating space, referred to as “narrative architecture”<sup>2</sup>. In the theses of this conference, the possibility of realizing the category of astonishment in buildings is linked to technological leap which is “creating new opportunities, opening up new horizons for artists”. As has been added: “Construction can finally free itself from the representation of boring everyday life and common shapes”. These sentences clarify what factors allow space to break out of the shackles of tradition but they do not specify whether and how the category of time – which is necessary in the process of looking into the future – is more profoundly related to architecture. After all, the art of building tries to liberate humans from the “terror of time”, through the permanence factor preventing the “death of the object” – and thus the oblivion of the human individual<sup>3</sup>. Monumental architecture strives for eternity.

According to Vladimir Toporov, the inherent phenomena of space and time constitute a unified continuum linked to human life “in the archaic model of the world”. In it, the factor of creation is important – “the rush towards life” and “towards form” (as the Russian semiotician puts it). Its embodiment is man and created, used, interpreted text. Toporov linked space and time in a phenomenon that he called a “mythopoetic chronotope”<sup>4</sup>. In it, these two categories mutually specify each other: time, by spatialising itself, becomes the form of space (its fourth dimension), while space “temporalises” itself, draws itself into movement and “takes root in the myth, the plot (i.e. in the text) that develops in time”<sup>5</sup>. On this basis, one can search for works of architecture and designers’ strategies leading to a sensation of astonishment. This is done through analogies between the poetics of architecture and the theory of literary narrative.

In order to refer in a literary plot to a narrative situation placed in a given moment to the past or future, authors use poetic strategies that disrupt literary time. Primary among these are retrospection and anticipation, aimed at drawing the reader’s attention to certain aspects of the story<sup>6</sup>. Architects also use them, and in architectural poetics they are close to literary poetics. While retrospection in the city space or greenscape is evident in clear references to the context or to traditional buildings (as in New Urbanism), the eclectic pop-architecture connections of Leon Krier’s postmodernism, or the double-coding of Graves, architectural anticipation occurs much less frequently – as in literature – and is most often an allusion about the further course of the plot<sup>7</sup>. It creates suspense, and most frequently, as Bal points

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<sup>1</sup> N. Coates, *Narrative architecture*, Wiley, Chichester, West Sussex 2012, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Definitions of this notion can be found e.g. in: S. Psarra, *Architecture and narrative: the formation of space and cultural meaning*, Routledge, London 2009; A.M. Wierzbicka, *Architektura jako narracja znaczeniowa*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, Warszawa 2013.

<sup>3</sup> K. Harries, *The ethical function of architecture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1997.

<sup>4</sup> W. Toporov, *Przestrzeń i rzecz*, Universitas, Kraków 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22 (translation by the author). Among concepts that inextricably bind space and time the semiotician listed some that can be tied directly to works of architecture and the city as their archetypes: ‘circle’, ‘rotation’ and ‘path-road’ as its developed form, as well as ‘temple’ – sacred place (the Latin notion ‘templum’ shares a common root with ‘tempus’ – time). Toporov’s key concepts related to time and space are: ‘absence’, ‘fullness’ and ‘centre’.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bal, *Narratologia: wprowadzenie do teorii narracji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

out, expresses a fatalistic vision of fate<sup>8</sup>. In architecture, strategies of retrospection and anticipation are matched by quotes from the past and references to the future.

A preliminary observation emerges that the state in which someone sees something that he did not expect is opposite pole of the Plutchnik's wheel of emotions from the attempt to predict the events of the future – anticipation, or expectation, linked to alertness and curiosity<sup>9</sup>. Simultaneously, the literary strategy of anticipation applied to architecture serves to evoke astonishment. The above is a paradox, because the emotions lying opposite each other in the Plutchnik wheel negate each other.

New perspectives in architecture, as stated in the theses of this conference “seeking to break the habitual perceptions of the form of a building and the style in which it should be built” presuppose two types of vision of the future: a kind of utopia and an anti-utopia. The analysis of selected examples of architectural realizations, operating with the poetics of addressing the future, shows the methods of applying anticipation in architecture. New technologies have made their pro-future forms possible. Forms, functions, ideas and intentions of designers were studied to define the poetics of anticipation in architectural narrative.

## 2. UTOPIAN ANTICIPATION, OR A VISION OF A BRIGHT FUTURE

Contemporary architectural utopian visions, although seemingly replaced by a pragmatic approach, in fact continue to be present. They “play” with the features of classical utopia, have a scientific basis and a speculative dimension. By breaking the classical convention, utopian planning fulfils the task of proactive, forward-looking thinking about a better world, which is to be realized in the case of the advances in technology<sup>10</sup>.

Friendly anticipation is represented by the renowned Kunsthau Graz building designed by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier (2003) – a biomorphic “Friendly Alien”<sup>11</sup>. In this building, new morphology, aesthetics and materials have been applied next in a historic urban context, producing the effect of a surprising body unlike anything before (perhaps except the Archigram drawings). The building's façade, with its freely-formed geometry, is a novel solution here – with an integrated, adjustable illumination that results in it changing over time. The display of moving images is a further development of the erstwhile play with mirrors and illusionist painting (e.g., in the Baroque era). They have been replaced in modern times by the manipulation of scale and the use of optical illusions to create apparent space. A double façade, in some places completely detached from the building, is useful in this regard, enabling meanings to be transferred freely and exchanged quickly at will. Thus, the narrative becomes “moving” and customized to users rather than imposed by the building's creator.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> R. Plutchik, *Emotion, a psychoevolutionary synthesis*, Harper & Row, New York 1980.

<sup>10</sup> E. Szpakowska-Loranc, *An ideal city vs 21st-century pragmatism* [in:] B. van Klink, M. Soniewicka, L. van der Broeke (eds), *Utopian Thinking in Law, Politics, Architecture and Technology*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, Northampton 2022, pp. 188–207.

<sup>11</sup> S. Casciani, *When radical utopia met parametric architecture: the Kunsthau in Graz* [in:] “domus”, 15.02.2023, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2003/12/12/archigram-has-landed.html> (access: 15.06.2024).

The cultural institution decides on the communicated content and disseminates its own narrative, i.e. messages for visitors.

The following case, City Hall in Alphen aan den Rijn designed by Eric Van Egeraat (2002) is a public building with a dynamic aesthetic, meant to reflect the rapidly developing region of the Netherlands. The streamlined glass body, reminiscent of a floating ship, has been seemingly “detached” from the ground, and the building’s verticals and horizontals have been replaced by acute angles, which, as Tomasz Kozłowski writes, works against the obvious law of architecture applied for years and emphasized by purists and the perfection of right-angle geometry<sup>12</sup>. The object’s glass facades give it a futuristic look on the one hand, while on the other, they provide a view of the surrounding area from the inside. This is a concept often used in administrative facilities of democratic countries. According to the narrative conveyed, those in power are accessible and look towards the future.

In this object, the narrative message is not supported by moving images, letters or other iconic signs. Ideas are distributed by means of forms, materials and architectural detail. This is a “high-speed architecture”, and without modern technology, achieving such a contemporary form would not have been possible. Its glass facades were created in close cooperation between the architectural studio and the manufacturing company. In this “form of speed” the roundness of the shapes and the uniformity of the glass panels blur all details (although the glass has a plant pattern), the rhythm of the vertical lines bends and merges, and the architects maneuvered the horizontal lines in such a way that they are actually diagonal – dynamically directed.

The Musée Des Confluences in Lyon designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au (2001–2014), on the other hand, refers to the future through the ideas used, in the sense that it is intended to be the building of a museum facility (with auditoriums and work space) in which “the present and the future, the known and the still unknown are conceived as a spatial arrangement trying to ‘spur public curiosity’”<sup>13</sup>. Technology plays an important role in this forward-looking project: this can be seen for example in the complex construction of a seemingly pillarless foyer, but also in pro-environmental solutions such as an elaborate natural ventilation system and groundwater-based cooling.

For this type of building, the designers chose architectural strategies of: “mutations of form, penetrations, deformations, simultaneities, breakdowns and variabilities”<sup>14</sup>. These “new geometries” were applied to the traversable space; the building stands on pillars to create a public space under the building. In situ observation has shown that this idea is a bit of a fraud. At moments of closing the museum the space is empty. It forms the dead end of the island instead of the iconic point that the architects and decision-makers wanted. Clearly, however, the building metaphorically “speaks” with futuristic forms. The entire exhibition space of the museum has been raised above the terrain to the “cloud” volume, while by the ground level Coop Himmelb(l)au placed a glass entrance area, auditoriums and workshop spaces.

Mannerist deformation of space – tension, “vibration of figures, dynamic pulsation”<sup>15</sup> – used in the objects described above is a contemporary artistic procedure, made possible by advances

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<sup>12</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Tendencje ekspresjonistyczne w architekturze współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Musée des Confluences [in:] Coop Himmelb(l)au, <https://coop-himmelblau.at/projects/musee-des-confluences/> (access: 15.06.2024).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Toporow, *op.cit.*, p. 83.

in the construction. It reflects in a static form the movement – forces acting on matter. This strategy can be seen very clearly in Bernini’s sculpture *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Kozłowski writes about the art of the Mannerist period: “drama and disintegration of forms, in a mood of the galimatias of disintegration”<sup>16</sup>, finding ecstatic space in the architecture of today.

### 3. ANTI-UTOPIAN ANTICIPATION OR DIRECTED COLLAPSE

Events such as World War II destroyed Cartesian thinking about architecture. Instead of “erasing” the traces of the tragedy, architects began to recall it, using an aesthetic infused with apocalypse to the contemporaneity<sup>17</sup>. Ruin is a symbol of the end, the morbidity of buildings and a symbol of civilization as a whole. Thus, houses in a *polis* turn into tombs of *necropolis*. The aesthetics of trash and bricolage remind us of omnipresent or imminent chaos. The second type of anticipatory strategies is accelerated, directed collapse, caused by economics or greed.

In this context, the ruin, conceptually signifying the final stage of the building but designed from its very beginning, disrupts the linearity of time by transforming it from a vector into a spiral. What follows is a Deleuzian game of difference and repetitio. Simultaneously, according to Juhani Pallasmaa, contemporary architecture has ceased to be the carrier of memory that it was in the past, and has become by its nature accelerated and neurotic. This corresponds to the currently lengthening human lifespan and shortening building duration<sup>18</sup>. It is the ruins that show the essence of architecture. Aberto Campo Baeza, on the other hand, considers structure to be the essence: “when we talk about architectural ruins or traces, what we are talking about is the structure that establishes the order of space, which is central to architecture, the most essential thing that has been able to resist time. Just like the skeleton in the human body, ruins, traces, are the memory of that architecture that strongly evokes the spaces that had been built there.”<sup>19</sup> According to another concept of ruins, different from the vision of collapse, they reflect the true spirit of architecture – freeing form from function, and making the construction of human hands similar to the work of nature.

Eric Owen Moss’ most recent major development in Los Angeles, (W)rapper (2023) is an office building located in the Culver City neighbourhood, adjacent to the rail line<sup>20</sup>. The tall structure was provided with an “exoskeleton” – a construction of reinforced concrete strips, running irregularly around the building and joined on one side by a sculptural staircase. The “ruin effect” is created by the concrete mass around the glass block of the office building, formed with different “densities” in relation to the curtain wall facades. With the strips on three sides, the fourth wall with a central wing extending on an axis is more solid. Here the irregular openings look as if certain elements of the structure have been demolished

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<sup>16</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Ku wyrazistej ekspresji*, “Przestrzeń i Forma” 2015, no. 24, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> P. Cembrzyńska, *Wieża Babel: nowoczesny projekt porządkowania świata i jego dekonstrukcja*, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Kraków 2012, p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. Pallasmaa, *The Space of Time – Mental Time in Architecture*, “Contents” 2007, no. 12(1), <http://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/openarchive/wolke/eng/Subjects/071/Pallasmaa/pallasmaa.htm> (access: 20.03.2024).

<sup>19</sup> A.C. Baeza, *Rewriting about Architecture*, Estudio Arquitectura Campo Baeza, Madrid 2020, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> The building’s significance can be judged by the number of awards it has received and the positive reviews the architect provides on his website.

– “punched holes”. This effect is emphasized by a single vertical row of windows on the axis. The whole sends a message to the viewers about the destruction of the architecture, which must once have been rational and rectilinear, since the orthogonal grid of openings has been left. The building located on the side of the road and railway, stands on a reinforced concrete pedestal – an irregular mass again. Separating upper floors from the foundation has an anti-seismic effect<sup>21</sup>. Moss’s ruin illustrates “accelerated decline” only formally.

A slightly different form was given to Pterodactyl, by the same architectural office, also located in Culver City (2014). The structure housing the offices and united with a multi-level parking lot, got a form pretending to be giant beams, which Moss clad in zinc sheeting and “dropped” onto the parking structure. The four-level parking lot for 800 cars, which according to the architect acts as the building’s “conceptual podium,” has a functional, economical, and rational design. The catastrophic effect is enhanced by forming parts of its slabs as sloped, so that they appear to bend under the weight. In contrast, the nine “beams-boxes” of Pterodactyl (connected to give the impression of being “glued” with glass facades) were drawn by Moss’s office already in 1998. Their construction, however, was considered so unsafe that (according to the press) no contractor was willing to undertake the development<sup>22</sup>. Only on the basis of the 2012 BIM drawings was it possible to build a 2-story office space, partly open and – following the designers’ logic – irregular, crisscrossed by a network of reinforced concrete columns and beams.

Aaron Betsky interpreted Pterodactyl as, in a sense, “broken” classical architecture: “in some ways this is a conventional composition, with a forecourt, an entrance emphasized by symmetrical parking ramps, and then, above that, an honorific element which looks like a pediment turned upside down and fractured. A modern-day temple front.”<sup>23</sup> For Betsky, Moss’ method of shaping space is, on one hand, to achieve a complex space by simple means, and on the other hand, it creates a place that stimulates the creativity of those working in it. The interiors are perceived by users as creations from drawings of M.C. Escher, while Michael Webb associates Pterodactyl with the structures of the Coop Himmelb(l)au office<sup>24</sup>.

Indeed, this last association comes to mind when observing the forms, but also through the conceptual connection between Moss’ construction and the group’s manifesto:

Architecture that bleeds, that exhausts, that whirls, and even breaks. [...] Architecture has to be cavernous, fiery, smooth, hard, angular, brutal, round, delicate, colorful, obscene, lustful, dreamy, attracting, repelling, wet, dry, and throbbing. Alive or dead. If cold, then cold as a block of ice. If hot, then hot as a blazing wing. Architecture must blaze.<sup>25</sup>

It is a Broken Space according to the terminology of Maria Misiągiewicz, questioning the previous achievements of architecture, described by her as “essentially a historical” “neo’ style”<sup>26</sup>. She credited Broken Space to deconstructivist tendencies, deliberately not analysing the notion. Instead, basing the “intertextuality” of Moss, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Hadid, Tschumi and others on a belief in the postmodern “death of the author” and “pleasure of the

<sup>21</sup> (*Wrapper* [in:] Eric Owen Moss Architects, <https://ericowenmoss.com/project-detail/wrapper/> (access: 26.03.2024).

<sup>22</sup> M. Webb, *The Pterodactyl Has Landed*, “Mark” 2015, no. 57, pp. 132–139.

<sup>23</sup> A. Betsky, *Pterodactyl Culver City, Calif. Eric Owen Moss Architects*. “Architect” 2016, no. 5, p. 224.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> The Blazing Wing [in:] Coop Himmelb(l)au, <https://coop-himmelblau.at/projects/the-blazing-wing/> (access: 1.09.2024).

<sup>26</sup> M. Misiągiewicz, *O prezentacji idei architektonicznej*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2003, p. 170.

text,” she recognized the symbolism in these works as ultra-poetic and so individual that only the authors have the right to interpret it<sup>27</sup>.

#### 4. SUMMARY. NOTES ON THE POETICS OF ARCHITECTURAL ANTICIPATIONS

The chapter analysed six examples of buildings, identified as narrative architecture using anticipation. Their main common feature is that without the development of technology, their construction would not have been possible. Folded facades, complex constructions, advanced climatic solutions, or computer imaging that enables the representation of a complex object so that it can be built, have made it possible to shift the boundary between the practical present and visionary future. The first quarter of the 21st century continued what Neil Spiller wrote about the architects of the 1990s: some of them “began to explore new technologies and push visionary architecture onto the knife-edge between the virtual and the actual”<sup>28</sup>. Meanwhile, anticipation as an architectural poetic means creating an “in-between” space; “located” between moments in the present and the future. The present here means the physical existence of the building, and the future means its form. This parallel undermines the importance of stability and permanence as classical qualities of architecture.

Simultaneously, Toporov’s mythopoetic space is always filled with things. They co-create it by setting boundaries, structurally organize and provide it with meaning and validity. The opposite is “non-space”, which is “embodied” by chaos as a condition preceding creation. Chaos contradicts the idea of canon and order of architecture. It is in that context that Konrad Kucza-Kuczynski asks: “How do we place canon and order, and that written down mathematically, in the consideration of creative action, which Bruner beautifully calls bizarre, serious and silent?”<sup>29</sup> He goes on, recalling that Jerome Bruner considered the hallmark of a creative endeavor to be “effective astonishment”<sup>30</sup>, and adds: “novelty, even in a small part, is an essential feature of any creativity”<sup>31</sup>.

This astonishment also depends on the type of anticipation used. As Bal notes, literary anticipations can create suspense when they are implicit suggestions or “rob” the narrative text of it, when they act as explicit messages<sup>32</sup>. This level of literalness also M.-L. Ryan included in her matrix of narrative works, but she placed architecture in the field of metaphorical (not literal) narrative – along with instrumental music<sup>33</sup>. In contrast, she considers texts to be closer to the poles of determinate or indeterminate where the latter allow the audience to imagine a story, because their authors do not tell it from beginning to end (unlike the former).

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> N. Spiller, *Visionary Architecture: Blueprints of the Modern Imagination*, Thames & Hudson, Thames & Hudson 2007, p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> K. Kucza-Kuczynski, *Zawód – architekt: o etyce zawodowej i moralności architektury*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, Warszawa 2004, p. 55.

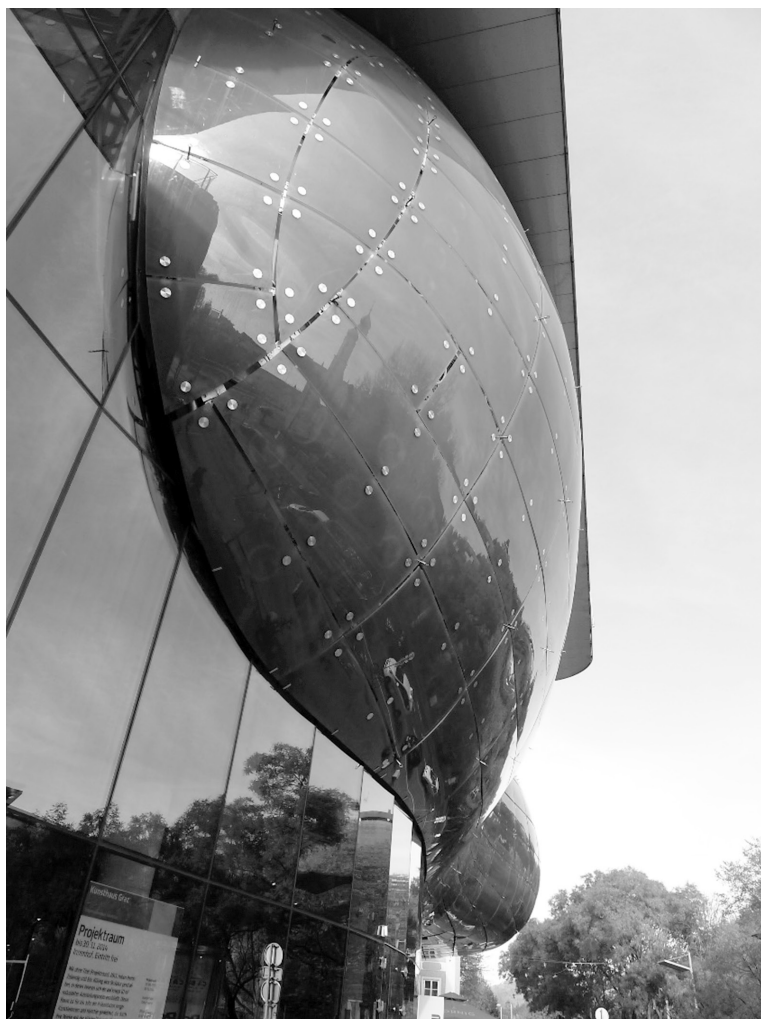
<sup>30</sup> Cf. e.g. J. Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1996.

<sup>31</sup> K. Kucza-Kuczynski, *Zawód – architekt..., op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> M. Bal, *Narratologia..., op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> M.-L. Ryan, *Narrativity and its modes as culture-transcending analytical categories*, “Japan Forum” 2010, no. 21(3), pp. 307–323.

In this context, constructed space that has been designed to the smallest detail is linked to the concept of “thematization of space”, in which forms that are culturally “foreign” to the time of creation are consciously placed forming an “urban spectacle”<sup>34</sup>. In the architectural narrative, communicating ideas while avoiding full saturation with information means to introduce suspense and astonishment. Referring back to the conference theses, astonishment and absolute novelty have been described therein as “no longer linked to new social ideas. It is pure commercialism, intended to please a new mass audience, uneducated, but no less demanding in its expectations”. It is, however, impossible to say now whether anticipation as a narrative procedure has a commercial face. Observers must be left with the necessity of their own answer...



Ill. 1. Kunsthaus Graz, photo by author.

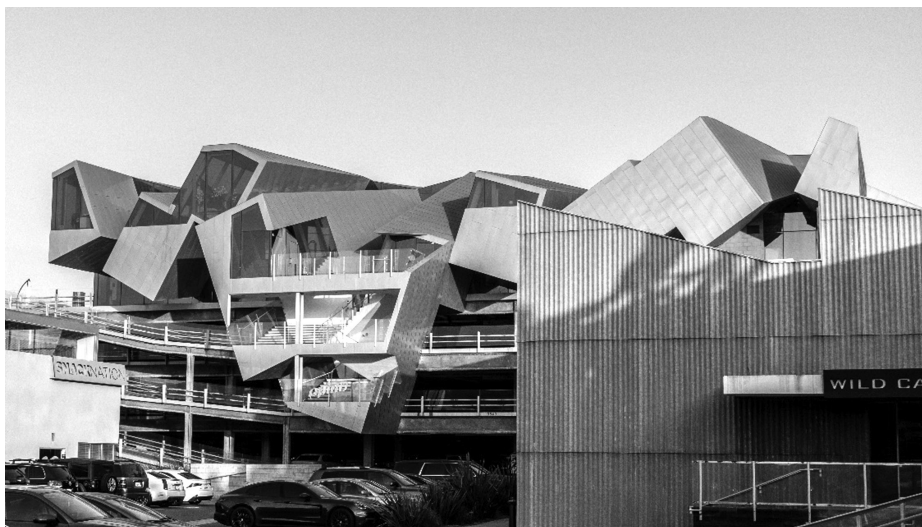
<sup>34</sup> P. Lorens, *Tematyzacja przestrzeni publicznej miasta*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Gdańskiej, Gdańsk 2012.



III. 2. Musée des Confluences Lyon, photo by author.



III. 3. Wrapper, Los Angeles, photo by Jengod, source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wrapper\\_-\\_Eric\\_Owen\\_Moss.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wrapper_-_Eric_Owen_Moss.jpg) (access: 30.06.2024).



III. 4. Pterodactyl, Los Angeles, photo by Archit73, source: [https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pterodactyl\\_-\\_Eric\\_Owen\\_Moss.jpg](https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pterodactyl_-_Eric_Owen_Moss.jpg). (access: 30.06.2024).

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