

NINA JUZWA

ORCID: 0000-0001-9627-0782

National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning, Poland

ASTONISHMENT AND DELIGHT – THE ARCHITECTURE OF URBAN HOUSES OF MUSIC¹

ZADZIWIENIE I ZACHWYT – ARCHITEKTURA MIEJSKICH BUDYNKÓW DLA MUZYKI

Abstract

Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, referred to contemporary times as “the times of liquid modernity”, by which he understood the need for constant changes and the inability to accept something that persists in an unaltered shape.

This thought is also visible in contemporary architecture, and following this trail I came across the architecture of urban houses of music. In the past, created in historic, ossified forms, they aroused delight with the sound of music and the beauty of the concert hall. At present, they have become a part of the general trend in architecture, which apart from the perfect reception of the sound of music, seeks either delight with its distinctiveness of shaping the exterior form of the building, or astonishment due to the placement of said building.

Keywords: contemporary architecture, houses of music, Zygmunt Bauman

Streszczenie

Zygmunt Bauman, socjolog, nazwał współczesność „czasem płynnej nowoczesności”, przez którą rozumie potrzebę ciągłych zmian oraz niemożność akceptacji czegoś, co trwa w niezmiennym kształcie.

Myśl widoczna jest także we współczesnej architekturze, a idąc dalej tym tropem trafiłam do architektury miejskich budynków dla muzyki. Kiedyś tworzone w historycznych zastygłych formach wzbudzały zachwyt brzmieniem muzyki i urodą sali koncertowej. Współcześnie, dołączając do ogólnego nurtu w architekturze, który poza doskonałością odbioru brzmienia muzyki poszukuje zachwytu odmiennością kształtowania formy zewnętrznej budynku bądź zadziwienia wyborem miejsca usytuowania.

Słowa kluczowe: Architektura współczesnych, domy dla muzyki, Zygmunt Bauman

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries architecture has been an expression of longevity in the field of construction and technology used most often in the completion of a given work, and at the same time it has always been the fulfillment of a dream about the quality and beauty of the completed building.

¹ In a way, I owe my interest in houses of music to Tomasz Konior. Taking advantage of the Cracow Conference and the subject I have decided to write about, I would like to thank him sincerely.

At present, with the growing influence of market value, the search for perfection and/or distinctiveness as well as astonishment in the reception of the image of a building are becoming more and more important. As the examples in this text will show, houses of music are also becoming part of this trend, although in the past their perfection was only evaluated by the quality of the sound of music – the concert hall. I would like to present such a thought based on the examples of three contemporary houses of music. These are: The Opéra National de Lyon, 1980, and the Paris Philharmonic 2015, both designed by the architect Jean Nouvel, they create a sign which shows the uniqueness of the architectural image and causes astonishment as well as delight. The third building, the Hamburg Philharmonic designed by the J. Herzog and P. de Meuron design studio, arouses astonishment through the form of the presented architecture, as well as its location.

2. EXAMPLES

THE OPÉRA NATIONAL IN LYON, 1756 BY J.G. SOUFFLOT.

J.G. Soufflot – the creator of the Pantheon in Paris, was one of the first free-standing theatrical structures within city quarters. It had been expanded twice, the most recently by Jean Nouvel, Pritzker Prize 2008, an architect whose concepts move away from the universally acceptable patterns of buildings, which astonish but also delight with the innovativeness of the solutions². This is how the Opéra National Building, presently expanded by Jean Nouvel, can also be described.

The building is located within the frontage section of a narrow street in the center of the historical downtown. The new form, created in 1982 with a significantly expanded floor space, had to fit in a precisely formatted interior, in an outline of the plan and façades from 1838, designed by Chenavard.

The architect added six levels of basements and a high glass roof with a semi-cylindrical form to the old outline of the plan. In this way, he doubled the previous height of the building, and also fit in a new, larger program. The greater space of the interior easily fits the smooth black *envelope* of the auditorium and the newly designed, independent system of stairs and platforms leading to the auditorium and other rooms.

An amphitheater for 200 spectators is located on the level of the basement, while above, under the enormous semi-cylindrical form of the glass roof there are ballet practice rooms with windows stretching the entire height of the room. The spectators have two foyers to choose from: on the lower level in the nineteenth-century interior as well as on the upper level with a panoramic view of the city and the city hall with statues of the muses, the remains of Chenavard's facade.

The elevators, arriving directly at the entrance allow for the restaurant to function independently. Similar independence is afforded to the choir rooms, the artist changing rooms, the workshops, and other economic entities of the enormous structure. The building is closed off with a wall reminiscent of a curtain, whose rhythm of blinds and glass surfaces creates a uniform exterior plane.

² J. Nouvel [in] R. Petlason, G. Yan Ong (eds.), *Architect: The Pritzker Laureates in their own Words*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 2010, p. 40.

When discussing the building Nouvel points out its geometric simplicity, underlining the monumental character of the new form. This dignity and beauty result from the semi-cylindrical shape of the glass arch. The quality of form is matched by the trimming of the glass blinds, which create a transparent barrel vault – showing the interior of the structure. The grand form of the opera roof has become a new symbol of urbanity.

The construction confirming the beauty and simplicity of the grand form of the roof consists of a double layer of glass and creates a filter with superimposing thicknesses, while the crevice created in the middle with a width of 80 cm enables all circulation between the layers. Every horizontal purlin conceals a line of red light, which at night creates a rhythm of the curvilinear plane of the vault³. The vault overlay is covered on the outside with a layer of glass with screen printing, which causes an effect of the dematerialization of the great form. The huge roof glows red during spectacles with the light high above the city buildings. When talking about the Opera building and its new image Jean Nouvel says that, with the exception of the auditorium, “the entire building is treated soberly using the elements of a contemporary vocabulary in a register alternating between transparency and opacity”⁴. The enormous cylindrical roof has resulted in the building becoming a true *landmark* of this place.

THE PARIS PHILHARMONIC, DESIGNED BY JEAN NOUVEL, 2015.

The second presented building, also by Jean Nouvel, situated inside the *La Peripherique* ring road, joining the buildings of *La Cite des Science* (a culture, art, and recreation center), in close proximity to the Paris Conservatory in the *de la Villette* Park in the northeastern part of the city, was built on the grounds of the *Cité de la Music*. The whole of the arrangements consists of two buildings which house a room of the *Cité de la Music* and spaces opened in 1995 known as *Filharmonie no. 2*, as well as the new building designed by Jean Nouvel in 2015 – *Filharmonie no. 1*.

The form of the building exhibits all the features of contemporary expressionist architecture. In the face of the very orderly plan drawing, the shaping of the external form shows a great deal of freedom, and even arbitrariness of architecture striving to cause astonishment and delight in the viewer. Seen from afar, the structure is more reminiscent of a flattened hill or a *geological structure* with a height of 52m, than of a building. Only upon a closer look can we see the pattern adorning the elevation, seemingly an image of a flock of 340 thousand birds, which appear to move towards St. Denis.

Apart from the main room, the Philharmonic also boasts a museum of old, famous musical instruments, including Chopin’s piano, the guitars of the bard George Brassens, as well as restaurants and cafes⁵.

Presently, the building is considered the most expensive concert hall. It was commissioned by the French government. The construction lasted 8 years, while the budget three times exceeded the planned costs. According to AFP, the hall can successfully

³ Lyon Opera House [in:] Ateliers Jean Nouvel, <http://www.jeannouvel.com/en/projects/opera-3/> (access: 05.2023).

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Paryska sala koncertowa Jeana Nouvela* [in:] Info Architekta, www.infoarchitekta.pl/3510-paryska-sala-koncertowa-jeana-nouvela.html (access: 10.05.2023).

compete with the best concert halls from Berlin, New York, or Tokyo⁶. The acoustics were overseen by such masters as Harold Marshall from New Zealand, and Yasuhisa Toyota from Japan.

The building houses a concert hall for 2400 people, numerous rehearsal rooms, as well as technical, office, educational, and exhibition rooms⁷. The new Philharmonic is home to 2 orchestras – *Orchestre de Paris* and the *Ensemble Intercontemporain*. The well-known Baroque music band *Les Ars Florissants* also regularly performs there. The structure built in the northern 19th District of Paris, which had until then been inhabited by working-class residents, has rapidly caused it to become a very fashionable address. The long distance from the city center has resulted in a heated discussion in the French press, yet the conclusions reached seem to justify the selection of the location.

The author of the building, Jean Nouvel, the winner of numerous prestigious prizes, including the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for the building of the Arab World Institute in Paris in 1987, is famous for his unconventional solutions and a very bold connection of forms and conclusions. Such an opinion was confirmed in the justification for awarding the Pritzker Prize in 2008 – “courageous pursuit of new ideas and his challenge of accepted norms in order to stretch the boundaries of the field”. The architect himself believes that his works reflect the spirit of the times⁸.

The third house of music situated within city quarters presented in the text is the famous Elphi in Hamburg.

ELBPILHARMONIE IN HAMBURG, DESIGNED BY JACQUES HERZOG AND PIERRE DE MEURON, 2016.

Swiss architects, the creators of the structure, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron believe that dealing with existing buildings that require transformations is more exciting than developing a new building *on a green meadow*. The number of limitations imposed on such a design task requires specific creativity⁹.

The Elphi building is a spectacular example of the aforementioned limitation, as it creates a place that has become a harbinger of a new era when it comes to the role of architecture in the space of a city.

The building is situated on the grounds of a former harbor at the estuary of the Elbe River. In 2008, the *Hafen City* district was established, encompassing among others the former port and the largest in the world “district” of harbor warehouses – *Speicherstadt*, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The plans of Hamburg authorities assumed that in the long run, an all-encompassing revitalization of this area would take place and a new, attractive area of the city would be created. It was assumed that *Hafen City* would expand the area of

⁶ M. Klimowska, *Otwarto nową Filharmonię w Paryżu* [in:] *dzieje.pl – Historia Polski*, <https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/otwarto-nowa-filharmonie-w-paryzu> (access: 15.05.2023).

⁷ The great concert hall and auditorium are surrounded by balconies with a softly rounded line. The balconies surround the auditorium and the stage along with the space for the conductor, while the distance between the furthest spectator and the musicians is 32 meters. In comparison – in the famous Pleyel Concert Hall near the Champs Élysées, this distance equals 47 meters. *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ F. Marquez Cecilia, R. Levene, *Herzog & de Meuron 1998–2002 – the Nature of Artifice*, „El Croquis” 2002, no. 109–110, p. 51.

the city center by about 40% and in 2020 will number 12,000 residents, while 40,000 people would find work there¹⁰.

The building of the Philharmonic designed by the *Herzog & de Meuron* Studio fulfilled all the expectations – it became an icon of the place, as was the case before with the sail of the house of music designed by Utzon in Australia. The building of the Philharmonic is situated at the tip of the harbor. Its lower part consists of 37 m high brick walls of the former *Keiserspeicher* warehouse. Incorporated into the new structure designed by *Herzog & de Meuron* it plays the role of the entrance zone into the facility, housing a multi-level parking lot and residential apartments. Above the historical body of the building stretch the glass “sails”. Between the two cubatures there is a generally accessible terrace known as the “piazza”. The structure which reaches a height of 108 meters towers over the surrounding area.

The Herzog and de Meuron Studio won a competition for the design of a new philharmonic in 2003. During the works on the documentation and the initial construction phase, the costs of the entire undertaking began to grow rapidly, finally resulting in a sum that was eleven times higher than the originally assumed cost. This led to the local authorities being ousted, and an investigating committee was established, while a number of conflicts between the investor, contractors, and designers arose¹¹. However, when the grand opening took place, the controversies no longer mattered, while the voices of criticism were silenced. The building lived up to the expectations.

Hamburg had great ambitions to erect a spectacular and unique structure. The Elbphilharmonie is a dominant spatial structure in the Hafen City district. It is a distinct feature of the district, especially at the entrance to the port from the sea.

The construction of the existing foundation of the building was set on more than 1700 stilts, out of which 1100 were reused as they supported the structure of the former warehouse¹². The exterior character of the body is made up of two materials typical of industrial buildings: preserved brick and, based on a highly developed innovative technology – the materiality of a glass “sail”. The panels of concrete glass boast very distinct “tears”, and rotund protrusions, which along with the overprint make the elevation come “alive”. Each element of the enormous structure was individually designed, based on computer technologies – in order to adapt the shape and form to the weather conditions and sunlight¹³ while the concave roof of the Philharmonic with a curving silhouette is covered with prefabricated discs.

Among the many inspirations for the dynamic glass form, which the Swiss architects drew from, it would be worth mentioning one of the icons of German expressionist architecture – Chilehaus by Fritz Hager from the years 1922–1924. The building functioned as a house for a marine trading company based in Hamburg and its body purposefully resembled that of a bow of the ship¹⁴. The harbor and architectural tradition of the place, as well as the expected sensations from the users, became the main inspiration for Swiss architects¹⁵.

¹⁰ E. Więclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Architektura najnowsza w historycznym środowisku miast europejskich*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2013, p. 42.

¹¹ M. Lewandowski, *Nowa Filharmonia w Hamburgu*, „Architektura-murator” 2017, no. 3, p. 91.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

¹⁴ P. Trzeciak, *Przygody architektury XX wieku*, Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1974, p. 92.

¹⁵ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Tradycja miejska i zastany kontekst wartości nadrzędnej*, „Czasopismo Techniczne” 2011, no. 4-A, pp. 372–377.

There are three concert halls in the building with a capacity of 2100, 550, and 150 seats respectively. In addition, there are spaces of commercial, cultural, residential, and public nature. A 5-star hotel with 247 rooms was also designed, as well as 45 apartments (part of the old warehouse), conference halls, restaurants, orchestra rooms, and a nightclub¹⁶.

On the seventh floor, above the old warehouse, there is a public square. Despite the fact that it is located several dozen meters above the level of the terrain, it loses nothing of its significance as a meeting place for Hamburg residents. On the square, there are shops and restaurants, but its real value is in the great panorama of Hamburg's coastline and harbor¹⁷.

The concert hall in the immense philharmonic building was erected as a structure independent of the whole. This is of particular importance in such an extreme location of the concert hall. It allows to ensure the appropriate acoustic insulation between the external structure and the interior, that is the actual hall. The main auditorium was designed as a well-tuned instrument, which can be entered to listen to music.

It must be remembered that the concert hall is not simply a "wrapping" for the spectacle such as a concert, but rather it is its integral part. Herzog and de Meuron were aware of this dependence from the moment the works on the design started. The hall is arranged like a "Vineyard" similar to the arrangements of the Berlin-based *Circus Karajani*. Despite the enormous space with an auditorium for 2100 spectators, none of them is farther from the stage than 30 meters. Due to this fact, even places located very high seem to be near the orchestra. This feeling of participation in the concert is further intensified by the exceptional sound quality. The interior was optimally shaped – each element reflects and disperse the sound, which causes the hall to be filled with sound in a fascinating way during the concert.

The concert hall was paneled with approximately 10,000 gypsum fiber panels composed of a mixture of natural plaster and recycled paper¹⁸. The panels are between 4 to 14 cm thick and were digitally developed at the stage of forming the hall geometry. Thanks to using an algorithm each of the panels was precisely designed and then properly milled with the use of laser cutters. The floors made of bleached oak wood fit perfectly with the bright wall and railing cladding. A plafond with an organic form, reminiscent of a cocoon, floats above the interior.

In the neighborhood of the largest hall, there is also a smaller auditorium with a capacity of 550 seats with flexible geometry of the spectator area and the stage. It is ideal for chamber music but also for other events. As opposed to the Grand Hall, which is lined with gypsum panels, the smaller hall was finished off with wooden cladding.

Herzog and de Meuron believe that "the strength of their buildings is the immediate and profound influence which they exert on the passerby."¹⁹ The building of the Elbphilharmonie has also become the heart of Hafen City as well as a landmark of Hamburg.

Putting together a modern, glass corpus with a historical harbor warehouse required courage from the architects. Is it then possible to compare it to other iconic designs? Referring to the Sydney Opera House, we can see that apart from the marine symbolism these buildings are also connected by problems with their completion. Utzon's structure, however, never

¹⁶ P. Jodidio, *Public Architecture Now*, Taschen, Köln 2010, pp. 198–203.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ M. Lewandowski, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁹ R. Rutkowski, *Co sprawia, że architektura HdeM jest tak odmienna, tak pociągająca?*, „Architektura & Biznes” 2003, no. 2, pp. 40–43.

generated a public space around itself in the same way that the Hamburg Philharmonic did. It seems that the popular “Elphi” boasts closer ties with the Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik.

3. CONCLUSION

Even in bygone times, houses of music preferred locations within city quarters, becoming in time an important element of the city’s public space. The last decades of development have introduced important changes in the perception of the architectural image, which was to delight the observer, even shock him²⁰.

The examples presented in the text show these changes in shaping the image of a building.

The expansion of the Opera in Lyon is an excellent example of a positive continuation²¹ of actions in which the architect, while modernizing/expanding a pre-existing building, at the same time leaves behind a trace of the original concept. The remaining two examples exhibit, in the expansion of houses of music, features of a trend of expressionist architecture. At present, it is more and more often seen in public utility buildings but also in houses of music. This seems to be a sign of times, described by Z. Bauman as the era of liquid reality. As Paul Valéry says: intervals, inconsistencies, and surprises are typical circumstances surrounding our lives and they have even become an indispensable need for all those, whose minds can only be moved by sudden changes and constant new stimuli...²²

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²⁰ Ch. Jenks, *Ecstatic Architecture. The Surprising Link*, Academy Editions, New York 1999.

²¹ T. Konior, „Moje domy dla muzyki”, manuscript 2022.

²² Liquids as opposed to solids find it difficult to maintain their shape, they organize neither space nor time. They do not keep their shape for very long. They are constantly ready for change. Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2006, p. 6.

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A u t h o r ' s N o t e

Prof. Nina Juzwa, PhD, DSc, Arch.

Worked in the Faculty of Architecture of the Silesian University of Technology and at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Lodz University of Technology until 2021. Scholarship in France 1981–1982, worked in the architecture office of Professor Gunther Henn in Munich, Germany 1977–1979 and in INWESTPROJEKT in Katowice 1965–1976. Working as an academic teacher she did not lose touch with the profession of a designer. Her work includes numerous designing works, competitions, 32 supervisions of doctoral theses, and 6 books. The book *Polish Architecture in Contemporary Innovation: Thoughts, Dreams and Places* published in 2021, was awarded the Vitruvius Prize 2022 by the Architecture and Urban Planning Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Minister of Development and Technology Award for the best publications in the fields of architecture and construction, spatial planning and development and housing. The book has also been published in Routledge in 2023. At present, she cooperates with the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning in Warsaw.
nina.juzwa@p.lodz.pl