

JEREMI T. KRÓLIKOWSKI  
 ORCID: 0000-0001-7532-5668  
 Warsaw University of Life Sciences

## ARCHITECTURE AND CITYSCAPE. PHENOMENOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

### ARCHITEKTURA, MIASTO, KRAJOBRAZ. OBSERWACJE FENOMENOLOGICZNE

#### Abstract

Phenomenological observation is a tool for recording phenomena by words or image. In this text, the author limits himself to a verbal description and its preliminary structuring pursuant to Norberg Schulz's suggestion of subsuming prosaic experience in poetry and science.

The change of paradigms of the city has resulted in a new city-architecture relationship – its landscape architecture, the cityscape. It is an architecture that is not just a building, but organises space through harmonious vistas as the University of Warsaw Library and the Oslo Opera House. They have common features in sufficient quantity to lend this architectural genre to definition, but they also have differences in sufficient quantity to guard against denial of their individuality. Through examples of architecture as a landscape, we are witnessing a new departure in this field of research, one which integrates architecture, city, landscape and space.

*Keywords: phenomenological observation, architecture as a landscape, cityscape, visual sequence, genius loci*

#### Streszczenie

Obserwacja fenomenologiczna jest narzędziem docierania do fenomenu. Jej wyniki mogą być zapisywane słowem lub obrazem. Tu autor ogranicza się do opisu słownego i jego strukturalizacji zgodnie z propozycją Norberga Schulza docierania do całości poprzez łączenie doświadczenia potocznego z poetyckim, a także naukowym. Zmiana paradygmatów miasta sprawiła, iż pojawiła się nowa relacja architektury i miasta – architektura krajobrazowa. Jest to architektura nie będąca tylko budynkiem, lecz taka, która organizuje przestrzeń poprzez widoki, jak Biblioteka Uniwersytecka w Warszawie i Opera w Oslo. Mają one wiele cech wspólnych, co pozwala na zdefiniowanie tego gatunku architektonicznego, a także wiele różnic stanowiących o ich indywidualności. Dzięki przykładom architektury krajobrazowej powstaje rozszerzenie pola badawczego wiążące architekturę, miasto, krajobraz i przestrzeń.

*Słowa kluczowe: obserwacja fenomenologiczna, architektura krajobrazowa, krajobraz miejski, sekwencja widokowa, genius loci*

### 1. THE PHENOMENON OF ARCHITECTURE

Architecture eludes definition. It manifest itself by reference to specific buildings, cityscapes, landscapes. It goes further, all the way down to words, gestures and events. More than anything, it's wherever the spirit breathes. And how does this spirit express itself if not in the language of architecture, the language of space, leaving room for the unfathomable mystery of its existence. We can intuit it if we focus sufficiently on decoding what it is conveying

to us. Language does not “speak” architecture anywhere near exhaustively, but without it we cannot even intuit what is unsaid.

## **2. PHENOMENOLOGICAL OBSERVATION**

Phenomenological observation is a tool for recording compartmentalised phenomena by word or image. The word guides the visual perception. It can reach where an image cannot. The word can precede the image, it can explain the image, the darkness. In this text, dealing with the relationship of architecture (ambiguously understood) to city, the author limits himself to a verbal description and its preliminary structuring pursuant to Norberg Schulz’s suggestion of subsuming prosaic experience in poetry and science. Phenomenological observation and description lay no claim to being comprehensive. It seeks to grasp, with the help of systematised semiotic or gestalt tools and the like, that what slips from view. One must start with a direct gaze that eschews theoretical assumptions.

## **3. BUILDING AND CITY: THE ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCE**

City and architecture can be melded in defining the shaping of space for human needs. But differences arise in interpreting expression and meaning. Through the language of architecture, a building can express domination like the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, immortality like the Egyptian pyramids, aspiration and pride like the Tower of Babel, glory and adoration like a Gothic cathedral, independence and sovereignty like the Wawel Castle in Cracow or the Royal Castle in Warsaw. Architecture expresses human feelings, aspirations and hopes; it can express joy and love, the spirit of the place, the spirit of the time. Cities, on the other hand, are made up of many narratives.

## **4. ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE**

The cityscape is the backdrop for its architectural detail. One of the most important relations of form, as Juliusz Żórawski writes, is its relation to its background. This triggers thinking on the relationship of individual objects to cityscape vistas as a whole, to thinking in terms of strong and weak, simple and complex, open and closed forms. Żórawski’s principles ceased to be a tool for communication not only between architects and the public but also between architects themselves. Oskar Hansen made the form-background relationship the basic principle of his concept of open form, but when speaking of architecture, one still thinks of a building detached from its background<sup>1</sup>.

## **5. ARCHITECTURE BUILDS THE CITYSCAPE**

The lack of socially functioning principles for the construction of architectural and, consequently, urban form, has led to single pieces of architecture being assigned the role of their

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<sup>1</sup> J. Żórawski, *O budowie formy architektonicznej*, Arkady, Warszawa 1962.

city's or region's icons. Choosing a single building as an architectural icon is a flight from responsibility for form and meaning, because it is then the number of votes of an indeterminate, random group that decides, and not argument, reason or experience. It avoids discussing architecture, it avoids responsibility. One would thereby accept the aleatoric creation of a cityscape without vistas.

## 6. ARCHITECTURE AS A LANDSCAPE

The change in paradigms of the city from predominantly built-up to green, and from motorist to pedestrian, has resulted in a new city-architecture relationship – its architecture as the landscape, as the cityscape. It plays a special role in shaping the city space. It is an architecture that is not just a building, but one that organises space through harmonious vistas. It can be defined by neither mass nor façade, though it has both, or even a myriad masses and façades. Two such architectural objects spring to mind: the University of Warsaw Library (further: BUW, architects: Marek Budzyński and Zbigniew Badowski, 1999) and the Oslo Opera House (Snohetta, 2009). They have common features in sufficient quantity to lend this architectural genre to definition, but they also have differences in sufficient quantity to guard against denial of their individuality.

## 7. FACADES

BUW's main façade skirting the street, holds the *mise-en-scène* of the library: alphabets, quotations, numbers, mathematical signs, musical notations, chemical formulas. It can be bypassed but, with its edge abutting the entrance, its significant assignation in the structure of the whole is thereby emphasised. In Oslo, unlike in Warsaw, the glass façades are devoid of any clear authorial intent. The large southern façade is a photovoltaic installation that could symbolise a modern energy source whose relevance is now passing.

## 8. ARCHITECTURAL FORM

The Oslo Opera House is of a decidedly distinctive form. Expressive as it is, it defies embodiment. It tries to be transparent, and like any glass block form, it is visible, but it does not close off internal vistas as most similar solutions do. The BUW has no strikingly defined forms in its external space that break away from the site. The dome, the pergolas, the stairs, are all minor add-ons to vast, indistinctly articulated, undulating planes.

## 9. PUBLIC SPACE

Both the BUW and the Opera House constitute distinctive public spaces attracting audiences who come just for these objects themselves and not necessarily exclusively for the functions they ostensibly serve. The roof of the Opera House has the character of a town square, which can be and sometimes is used for staging spectacles. The slopes of the planes make it easy to choose the location for stage and audience depending on the nature

of the event. This space engenders a sense of community, but it also affords intimate cubbyholes in counterpoint.

The outline BUW elements in their spatial setting give no clues as to the character of its interior. Nowise does the main façade adumbrate the cubature it encloses. Like an unfolding chart, it leads to the entrance gap between the walls. Inside, there are many non-obvious nooks and crannies, spaces to build communal interchange. The public space of the interior is enhanced with bars, restaurants, exhibition spaces, bookshops, travel agencies, a post office and like facilities. For a time, there was a children's play area in the basement. The interior passage is a meeting place and the square in front of the entrance to the BUW catalogue storage area is taken by booksellers. There are a number of surprising places in the garden that are, simultaneously, both open, affording distant vistas, and of an intimate nature.

## 10. INTERIOR-EXTERIOR RELATIONSHIP

Although there are numerous interpenetrating interior and exterior spaces in both BUW and Oslo Opera, with both buildings retaining their sharply defined autonomy. One can enjoy the gardens of BUW for hours and never look inside to make use of the books, the bookshop, or the café facilities on offer inside. One can peer through the glass dome into the reading room to satisfy one's curiosity. And one can linger on the expanses of the Oslo Opera House roof for any length of time, moving from place to place, changing vantage points height-wise, going from one level to another. For opera audiences, the Opera House roof terrace is just a thoroughfare, but for others it is the terminal point, the purpose of their visit, to be there and to enjoy the views. The inner hall can be a meeting place for coffee and sundry business, but, while being there, one does not lose contact with the external space.

## 11. LIGHT

A special feature of the Oslo Opera House is the way light is filtered through the building and how it varies depending on the time of day, season and weather. It plays on the expanses of the Carrara marble surfaces, bringing out even the smallest clefts and height differences in the sunlight, and penetrates through the glass sheeting of the main hall to bring out the wooden texture of the gallery balustrades. The sun's low-angled rays gliding across the frosted surfaces create dazzling effects attenuated by the mists shrouding the distant vistas. The role of light is emphasised by the Carrara marble, which is the only paving material that modulates its dynamics.

The glass block form of the lobby is highlighted after dusk revealing its interior.

Daylight and sunlight do not have that much of a role to play in the BUW complex. It flits across the curved façade, casts its shadow on the entrance gap, but the dominant feature of the outer surfaces is the greenery. Because of its different geographical location, changes in the quality and intensity of light are not as rapid as up north, in Oslo.

## 12. CHARACTER

Despite its free-flowing form, the character of the BUW and its garden is balanced.

The dynamism of the Oslo Opera House's forms is surprising. From afar, the roof-terrace planes emerge from the fjord majestically, and it is only when one enters their ambient interplay that the dynamics of the relationships of height, depth and distance are revealed.

## 13. CONTEXTS AND MULTIPLICITY OF VISTAS

In both these cases, the shaping of the buildings provides for differentiated vistas of their immediate vicinities, contexts, and distant cityscapes (which, in Oslo, also includes the fjord). The modernist city did not take into consideration its visually perceived vistas by pedestrians. As a result, the application of the doctrine has led to visual monotony, chaos and inarticulation. Landscape architecture produces new qualities in perceiving space. In the middle of a city, one can observe its inner panoramas which unfold in all directions. In Oslo it is the intimate boundlessness of the fjords, a glimpse towards the parliament and the royal castle, a view of the new district with the Munch Museum and the National Gallery; in Warsaw, it's the Old Town and what might be described as a cosmic view of the right bank of the Vistula above the river valley.

## 14. SYMBOLS AND MEANINGS

The BUW is saturated with meanings and symbols locked into its architectural details and sculptural forms. There is even a guidebook explaining the designers' intentions, who wanted the university library to be a space that not only housed books and other media for recording and transmitting knowledge, but to be itself a medium that speaks. More direct forms of communication have been used, such as the main façade and the statues of philosophers crowning the entrance columns to the "catalogues quadrant", as well as more implicit forms contained in the guidebook explaining its designers' intentions to make the space itself a medium speaking to readers.

The Oslo Opera House speaks above all with its space, which each viewer can interpret individually. This space points to an infinity that speaks by opening up to the forms of nature, by the fjords, the sun, the clouds, by day and night, and the seasons. This space, in particular, tends to be interpreted as a cathedral, as the space of an unfathomable inner sanctum, while at the same time such an interpretation is not clearly defined.

## 15. GENIUS LOCI

The Oslo Opera House is almost a textbook emanation of the phenomenon of *genius loci* described by Norberg Schulz<sup>2</sup>. It is an emanation of the tectonics of the Norwegian landscape

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<sup>2</sup> C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci. Toward phenomenology of architecture*, Academy Editions, London 1980.

with its rocky gradients, crevices and faults. It can be hypothesised that the Opera House has a romantic *genius loci*. Detailed proof of this thesis, however, would require separate exegesis beyond the scope of this text.

The idea behind the garden on the BUW roof was to echo the native vegetation of Mazovia. What is different is the varied relief contrasting with the common image of the flat Mazovian plain. However, even within its purlieu one finds great topographical differences, as witness that between the Warsaw Escarpment and the Powiśle district, where the building stands. Here, despite the many mysterious places, one can speak of a classic *genius loci* expressing the balance between heaven and earth.

## 16. REVITALISING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

The Oslo Opera House is a key element in the revitalisation of an area taken up by fast-moving traffic. Boring a tunnel in the rock under the fjord opened the possibility of creating a district of museums, cultural institutions as well as office buildings and flats with spaces loaded with artistic objects and installations. The Oslo Opera House is the closure of a natural-historical sequence progressing from the mountains tracing the course of the river down which timber was floated, and along which the now revitalised industrial plants were built.

The BUW is part of the university's development strategy, at the bottom of a slope atop of which are perched the main university buildings with their main entrance gateway giving onto the world's most beautiful street, Krakowskie Przedmieście, as some would have it (cf. Bolesław Szmidt and Kazimierz Wejchert<sup>3</sup>). At the same time, along with other newer university buildings, it is a boost for the neglected district that was 19th-century Powiśle, a quartier rife with human misery and degradation, as described by Bolesław Prus in "Lalka" ("The Doll")<sup>4</sup> and depicted in the paintings of Aleksander Gierymski.

## 17. CONTACTS

The shapes of both the BUW and the Oslo Opera offer varied vistas to behold, of their immediate neighbourhoods and contexts, and of their distant panoramic cityscapes (in the case of Oslo, also the fjord, which here, is part of the city).

## 18. OTHER SOLUTIONS

A further consequence of introducing the concept of landscape architecture will be to explore other examples. However, that is not the purpose of this text. It is only worth pointing out that among other buildings of this genre, the Podlasie Opera House in Białystok (architects: Marek Budzyński, Zbigniew Badowski, Krystyna Ilmurzyńska) stands out, which may be a topic adding impetus to the further development of the above observations.

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<sup>3</sup> B. Szmidt, *Lad przestrzeni*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1998, pp. 75–78; K. Wejchert, *Elementy kompozycji urbanistycznej*, Arkady, Warszawa 1974, pp. 174–180.

<sup>4</sup> B. Prus, *Lalka*, GREG, Kraków 2021, p. 70.

## 19. LANDSCAPE AND CITY ARCHITECTURE

Architecture as a landscape restores the dynamic trilateral city-architecture-human relationship. It may be expedient to reassert the idea of mobile architecture, as introduced by Kazimierz Wejchert into his concept of urban composition<sup>5</sup>. He pointed out that when a person walks, he or she sees distinctive architectural objects that change their position in visual sequences, giving the impression of movement. Contemporary architecture typically comprises of collections of disparate elements. As a rule, it does not create coherent visual cityscape sequences, and this is of small attraction to the pedestrian. Landscape architecture creates a new relationship, a quality not always noticed, between the architecture of the building and the city. As in the BUW garden and on the roof of the Oslo Opera House, it is the city that enters into the architecture of the building and not just the building that is entering the city.

Through examples of architecture as a landscape, we are witnessing a new departure in this field of research, one which integrates architecture, city, landscape and space.

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### Author's Note

#### **Assoc. Prof. Jeremi Królikowski, PhD, DSc, Arch.**

Born in 1943 in Lublin, architect, painter, art historian. In the field of scientific research, he has been dealing with semiotics and phenomenology of space, architecture and landscape for 50 years. In this field, he collaborated with Christian Norberg-Schulz for twenty years (1981–2000). He is the author of many articles and books.

jeremi2001@wp.pl

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<sup>5</sup> K. Wejchert, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–184.