

MAREK PO CZĄTKO
 ORCID: 0000-0002-8907-289X
 Cracow University of Technology, Poland

(IN)VISIBLE CITIES. ON THE THEME OF CITY ARCHITECTURE IN ART

(NIE)WIDZIALNE MIASTA. O MOTYWIE ARCHITEKTURY MIAST W SZTUCE

Abstract

The use of architecture and city as themes in painting and sculpture is a well-established area of art. They can serve as a backdrop or be the primary focus of the work of art. The topic of this paper seems particularly relevant today, as cities from the past are experiencing significant transformation – as is the image of the city recorded by artists. The article explores the visible and invisible forms of the city, the metaphors of images of its space, and the expectations of its shape. It presents an analysis of artworks that depict the city and its architecture.

Keywords: image of architecture, image of the city, painting, sculpture

Streszczenie

Motyw architektury i miasta w malarstwie i rzeźbie jest rozpoznany obszarem sztuki. Pojawia się w dziełach jako tło, ale też jako element główny. Podjęty w artykule temat wydaje się aktualny, szczególnie że zapamiętane z przeszłości miasta podlegają współcześnie silnej transformacji – tak jak obraz miasta zapisany przez artystów. Znajdziemy tu jego widzialne i niewidzialne formy, metafory wyobrażeń o jego przestrzeni oraz oczekiwań wobec jego kształtu. Przeprowadzono analizę dzieł sztuki dotyczącą sposobu obrazowania miasta i jego architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: obraz architektury, obraz miasta, malarstwo, rzeźba

1. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of city and architecture, or architecture and the city, encompass a multitude of associations and interrelationships. These issues are not only of interest to architects, but are also an important motive for artists in various fields of art. As such, it is proposed to examine this matter through the perspective of artists and their ways of observing and recording the architecture of the city.

The theme seems to be relevant, especially as the cities remembered from the past are now undergoing a profound transformation, facing a range of difficult issues, not related to their form but to the stresses it causes. Therefore, we might be on the verge of major changes in urban planning and architecture. These changes may be significant and not yet fully recognized in relation to the history of cities.

The paper's title is a deliberate reference to Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*, which expresses the author's nostalgia and anxiety about the state of modern cities – cities that have always struggled to create a better place than they ever could be. The novel was written in 1972, at a time when various shortcomings and inconveniences of the modernist revolution in the shaping of cities were beginning to be recognised. It also touches on the visible and the invisible for residents, creators, urban planners and architects.

Thus, it is a paper about the images of the city that have been perpetuated by art. At the same time, it is about the theme of architecture that shapes the city and its image.

2. ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY OR CITY OF ARCHITECTURE?

The young, and soon-to-be legendary actor, James Dean looks sideways in a black and white photograph taken by Dennis Stock (Ill. 1). The architecture of Times Square immersed in rainy clouds provides the backdrop for the hunched protagonist, who walks hurriedly down the street in the inclement weather. The figure seems to be elongated by being reflected in a puddle mirror deformed from the downpour. This famous photograph arouses nostalgia not only in film lovers. Here, the architecture of the city is the backdrop but also the protagonist of the story in the picture:

The premiere of his 'Rebel Without a Cause' will take place at the same Astor Cinema, which can be seen on the far left of the photo. Nearby at 68th West Street, he has a modest flat, and Lee Strasberg's legendary Actors Studio is just steps away from Times Square.¹

The street provides the setting while also being an important place in the protagonist's daily life:

Times Square may no longer be the same place it once was. Yet, as Dennis Stock recounts, before James Dean left for Hollywood, Times Square was his home, where he navigated with the certainty of an animal in his territory. He hated staying in a small flat and spent his time outside, roaming the streets from dusk till dawn.²

How desirable, not only by architects planning cities, the above description is! It is a commentary on a place that is special, unique and original. So where are those cities, not so distant in time, that we recall with emotion, that we idealise in our memories?

In his novel *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino builds fantastic descriptions of worlds – dozens of cities that form a wide spectrum of places differentiated by their structure, their most characteristic urban and functional features and their magnificent architecture, which the author pays much attention to. Here we find and decipher literary, cultural and mathematical codes. They are built from Calvino's ideas and desires about the quest for what this invisible city might be. Tales of them are spun by Marco Polo who came to the court of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. These numerous metropolises, named after female names, have their other invisible side. Calvino lays out the story of these mysterious and magnificent places in tabular rigour and with his characteristic precision. In the book, we find the narrator's question about

¹ H.M. Koetzle, *Słynne zdjęcia i ich historie II. 1928–1991*, Taschen, Köln 2003, p. 82.

² *Ibidem*, p. 83.

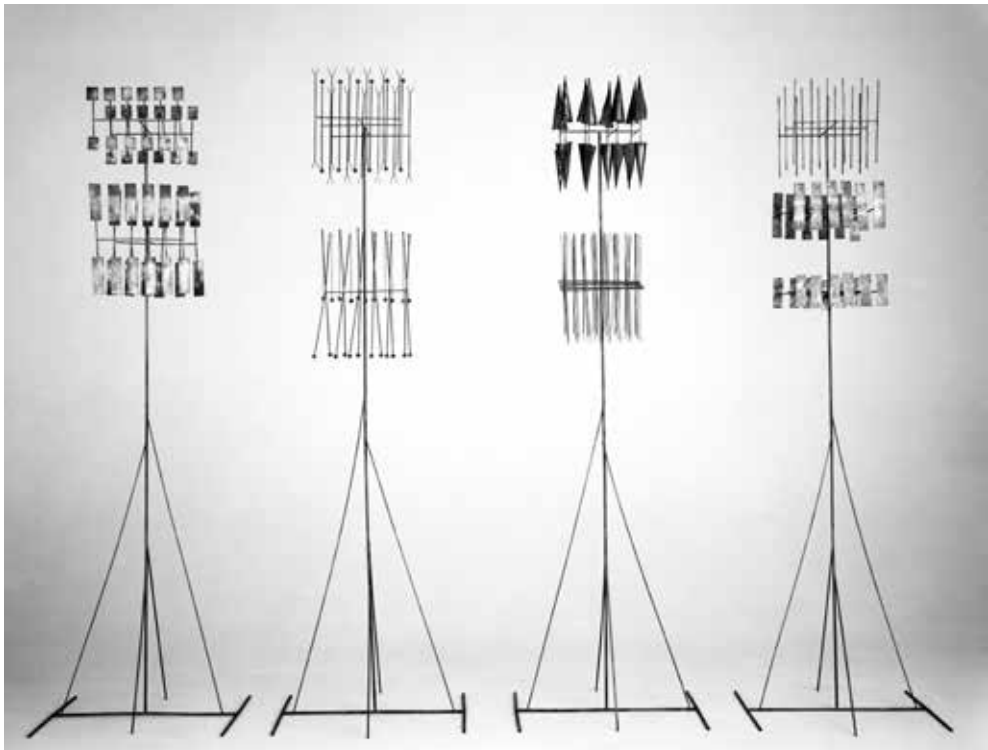


III. 1. Dennis Stock: *James Dean on Times Square*, 1955, source: Koetzle H.M., *Słynne zdjęcia i ich historie II. 1928–1991*, Taschen, Köln 2003.

memory – does anyone know their city by heart? Is it possible to read it and then memorise it like a book? The clue is Zora who

has the quality of remaining in your memory point by point, in its succession of streets, of houses along the streets, and of doors and windows in the houses, though nothing in them possesses a special beauty or rarity. Zora's secret lies in the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where not a note can be altered or displaced.³

The way in which the city is viewed and perceived and then fixed in memory is important, especially in the context of Calvino's statement about the city being made up of desires and fears. The writer involved in art was also interested in urbanism. In a way, he felt that the modernist city faced numerous problems. The motif of the city was particularly close to his heart. Not only because of his work – Calvino often changed his place of residence but the destination was always a big city. All the more so, *Invisible Cities* can be seen as a struggle for a literary image of cities that do not exist – but are magnificent and diverse. Italo Calvino's novel is widely regarded as essential reading for architects, and is believed to have been written just in time to capture the essence of cities before they became unbearable and overwhelmingly oppressive.



III. 2. Fausto Melotti: *Le torri della città invisibile/The Towers of the Invisible City* 1976, source: Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazionefaustomelotti.org/catalogo/1976-67/> (access: 31.08.2023).

³ I. Calvino, *Niewidzialne miasta*, PIW, Warszawa 2023, p. 21.

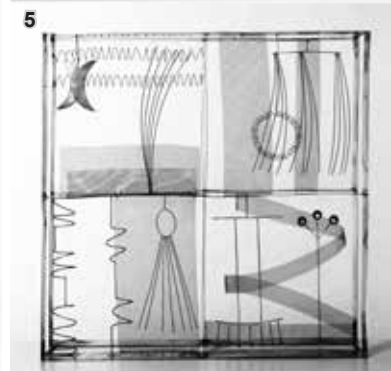
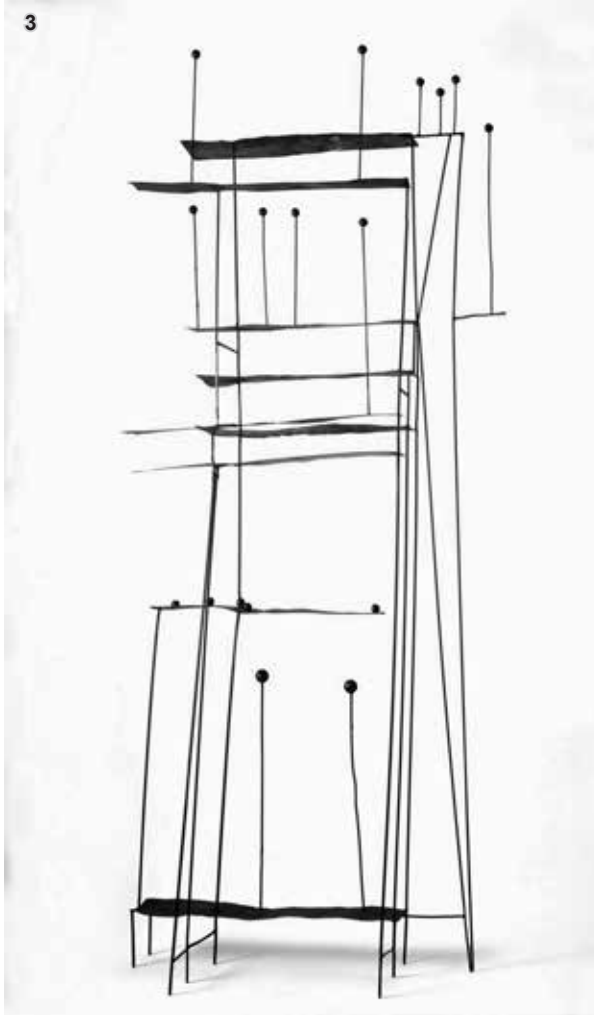
The writer mentions the motifs and inspiration from art – the sculptures of Fausto Melotti. This Italian artist, who also explored the theme of the city and architecture in his numerous works, created works characterised by ephemeral compositions, modest and frail constructions composed of light elements. Lightness, airiness, finesse – what Calvino sought in his non-existent cities: “I wanted to describe a city as airy as his sculptures: a city on stilts, a city in the shape of a spider web”⁴. The unusual and certain unreality of the sculptor’s compositions inspires the writer when creating literary images of cities. They contain a longing for a city without its contemporary problems, conflicts and impediments. An example of this is the series of descriptions of the Ethereal City – inspired by Melotti’s sculpture *Le torri della città invisibile/The Towers of the Invisible City* from 1976 (Ill. 2). Here we can see four metal compositions placed on filigree structures that look like analogue antennae. Repetition, alignment in rows, verticality, slenderness, simplicity and the basic geometry of solids and planes are characteristics that we can also attribute to the city and its towers. They describe a refined sculpture with an elegant and orderly form, perhaps expressing a yearning for a city that is in harmony and balance – a city that does not exist. Looking for the key to understanding this case of inspiration and the analogy between art and literature, one can continue to explore Melotti’s sculptures. The one called *Città* from 1963 (Ill. 3) reveals a multi-level structure where numerous slender vertical elements support horizontal planes of flat sheet metal. The protruding vertical bars end in spheres. The transparent composition, with its decidedly vertical arrangement, makes it possible to speculate about a reference to the skyscrapers of cities, with their clear layering of elements as if they were to have a logic and source in some theory.

Interesting for the discussion seems to be the extensive *Contrappunto/Counterpoint* series, created over many years, which constitutes a multi-threaded analysis and play with space (Ill. 4). The sheets enclose a composition of light and slender vertical and horizontal elements, which constitute a spatial framework as a subtle grid for elements suspended or inserted into their space. They are directional, two-dimensional like drawn compositions of flat sculptures. Again, the frame of four square fields provides the setting for the spatial internal elements, composed according to the logic of shape – an interplay of flat vertical sheet strips, oval elements and organic, curved and spiral bars. The geometric sculptural experiments provide an overview of the artist’s research and experimentation with space. Point, line, plane, space – artistic and architectural considerations through sculpture relating to the scale of the building and the city.

In the following years, Melotti created several other interesting *Contrappunto* sculptures. These sculptures have a flat base, from which thin and flat planes, as well as straight and curved bar elements, extend (Ill. 5 and 6). Here, too, we find an exceptional compositional lightness, which was achieved using simple geometric concepts and ideas. The next series of sculptures consists of vertical compositions of four cubic frames standing on curved rod legs. Inside these frames, the artist places flat sheet metal figures and curved rods.

It appears that there is a shared underlying concept behind the numerous diverse sculptures, a notion that has been analysed over many years, an evolution of form. Alternatively, it could simply be an artistic game, a geometrical interplay between the artist and the observer. Melotti’s background in physics, mathematics, and sculpture (Turin), as well as his collaboration with Gio Ponti with whom he developed the designs for Villa Planchart in Caracas

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 226.



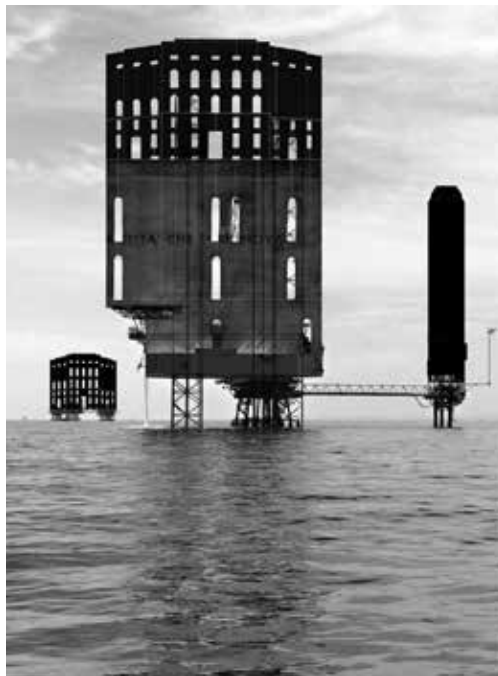
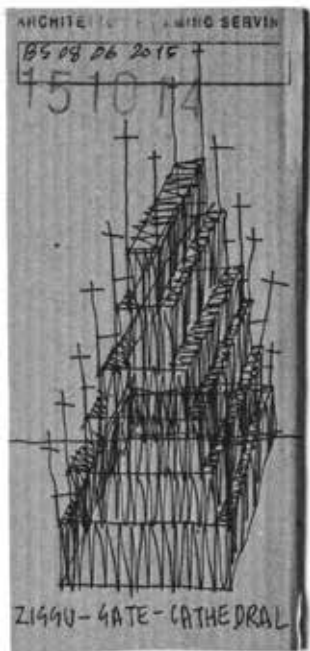
- Ill. 3. Fausto Melotti: *Città/City* 1963, source: Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazione-faustomelotti.org/catalogo/1963-3/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- Ill. 4. Fausto Melotti: *Contrappunto II/Counterpoint II* 1969, source: Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazionefaustomelotti.org/catalogo/1969-3/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- Ill. 5. Fausto Melotti: *Contrappunto IV/Counterpoint IV* 1970, source: Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazionefaustomelotti.org/catalogo/1970-43/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- Ill. 6. Fausto Melotti: *Contrappunto IX/Counterpoint IX* 1972, source: Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazionefaustomelotti.org/catalogo/1972-25/> (access: 31.08.2023).

(1956) and Villa Nemazee in Tehran (1960), suggest that the architectural and urban planning analogies are not accidental. As Leszek Maluga puts it:

Especially sculpture pretends to be the main partner in the architectural game for space. These days, it also includes diverse kinds of spatial actions: from installations and environments

to happenings or ephemeral actions which build an artistic and aesthetic relationship with an urban environment and architectural objects. Sometimes they look ‘almost like architecture’. Sometimes the space of art leaves unnoticed, sometimes it enters the space of architecture ostentatiously; in a similar way, the space of architecture turns into the space of art.⁵

Beniamino Servino, an Italian architect, portrays a slightly different image of the city and its architecture in his drawings and collages. In his works, architecture does not exist without an image – all considerations are written and outlined in small illustrations created in series and in large numbers. The study of the essence of form through drawings and collages is done in mixed techniques, including the juxtaposition of photographs and architectural compositions recorded in a few lines. He gives the buildings he draws heavy and tall forms, often ending with pointed and steep roofs. Crosses and television aerials are popular drawing motifs. The buildings are often oversized. Servino analyses and reflects on the form of architecture, which is transformed – given a new shape and meaning at a new scale (Ill. 7 and 8). The drawn experiments involve superstructuring, multiplying and duplicating but also creating new buildings. All this as a constant game of seeking the form for the architecture of the buildings and the city.



- Ill. 7. Beniamino Servino: *Ziggu – Gate – Cathedral 2015*, source: Servino B., *Small drawings*, Divisare, Rome 2017.
- Ill. 8. Beniamino Servino: *La città che si rinnova/The city gets renewed*, source: Beniamino Servino, *Seascapes* [in:] Divisare, <https://divisare.com/projects/322605-beniamino-servino-seascapes> (access: 21.08.2023).

⁵ L. Maluga, *Artystyczne okolice architektury = The Artistic Neighborhood of Architecture* [in:] D. Kozłowski, M. Misiągiewicz (eds.), *Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej. Gry i zabawy architektury*, “Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura” 2010, no. 7-A1, p. 194.



Ill. 9. Nikifor Krynicki: *Mountain Landscape with Town and Railway Station* 1930s, source: Wolanin Z., *Nikifor*, Muzeum Okręgowe w Nowym Sączu, Nowy Sącz 2007.

Looking at the painting entitled *Mountain Landscape with Town and Railway Station* from the 1930s (Ill. 9), made by Nikifor Krynicki in watercolour, one finds an almost fairy-tale-like juxtaposition of the town's architecture in a natural landscape, in which successive buildings pile up. The railway station is a sort of gateway to the city, then there are the linear roofs of tenement houses along a geometric grid of streets enclosed by the long façade of an important building. Above the whole dominates the mass of the temple with towers of

historic architectural design. It is complemented by strip-painted hills with forest. Just like the buildings, nature is framed by clear lines and planes. What is important is the edge of planes and stains, which are expressed through the detailed contours of windows, frames, roof tiles, fences and walls, cornices and even railway sleepers. These elements in reality merge into a stain or plane when viewed from a distance, but they hold great importance to the artist and have a sharp edge. It's possible that these fragments and others were inspired by 19th-century engravings that the artist had studied in the past, their detail but also their architectural composition. "Nikifor did not reproduce architecture, he observed it, after all he was an open-air painter, and yet his architecture was a projection of his imagination. The imagination shaped by extraordinary sensitivity, curiosity and intuition."⁶ The artist was captivated by railway station architecture, which he viewed as a window to the world. He expressed his fascination on canvas, rhythmically but imprecisely depicting vertical and horizontal features and arranging the storeys and façade details in a manner reminiscent of ancient orders. Through the slightly distorted buildings, sometimes seeming to be naïve renderings of the view, they pass through the carbon paper of the painterly style. "Nikifor was clearly fascinated by architecture, although he corrected reality in his paintings. He often altered, expanded and improved the architectural mass of a particular building he painted, giving it a monumental character"⁷. Once again, there is a vision of cities and their architecture presented in a distorted, idealised way and depicted in a specific and unique way. Creation leads to the extraction or addition of positive features in this complex structure.

The painter Edward Dwurnik took an equally original direction. However, in his paintings, one finds a slightly different mood, created with diagonally and linearly aligned streets and houses in rows, shaping housing estates and towns. The viewer's upper perspective creates a monumental feeling in the perception of painted cities, whether existing, distorted or invented and unknown. The cities in Dwurnik's work are an intuitive record indicating their seclusion and alienation. They represent limitless concepts of forms familiar from history juxtaposed on an immeasurable scale. They remain in the paintings as a metaphor for cities built from the expectations and desires of humanity. So much so, perhaps somewhat laced with horror and danger. They are often filled with heroes. These are usually so-called athletes. Dwurnik depicted everyday people engaged in their daily activities, throwing elbows, surrounded by architectural structures. The unique character of the figures in his paintings is reflected in the way he portrays the architecture. It is not depicted directly, but rather in a somewhat caricatural style, similar to the inspiration he drew from Nikifor.

The *Hitchhiking* series is a collection of bird's-eye views of cities created in the same manner as Nikifor's during his stays in various places in Poland. Anda Rottenberg describes this method of painting: "Each canvas is imprinted with a rush, a hand trying to keep up with 'what the head thinks'"⁸. These representations of cities are invisible – they are imaginings and re-imaginings of what surrounds the artist on a daily basis. Dwurnik's cities are dense and colourful. They are seen from above as if by a planner's eye, but, after all, they are not created from nature, but from imagination. It is only pencil sketches on paper that depict fragments of cities and architecture from the perspective of a person standing on the ground. They are more genuine, tangible and easier to accept without suspicion of the artist's distortions

⁶ I. Zuziak, *Architektura muzą malarstwa*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2009, p. 185.

⁷ Z. Wolanin, *Nikifor*, Muzeum Okręgowe w Nowym Sączu, Nowy Sącz 2007, p. 6.

⁸ A. Rottenberg, *Zbliżenia. Szkice o polskich artystach*, Arkady, Warszawa 2021, p. 90.

and transformations. These sketches are typically study drawings or contour drawings that focus on proportion and spatial arrangement, and do not include filling-in or shading. They are drawn with care and a certain level of accuracy in the representation of space and its perspective.



Ill. 10. Edward Dwurnik: *Kraków – Mistrzejowice* 1996, source: Dwurnik catalog, <https://edward-dwurnik.pl/index.php/Detail/objects/3011> (access: 21.08.2023).



Ill. 11. Edward Dwurnik: *Miasto idealne* 1993, source: onebid, <https://onebid.pl/pl/malarstwo-wspolczesne-edward-dwurnik-miasto-idealne-1993/1771070> (access: 21.08.2023).

In all of Dwurnik's paintings, the artist's own figure is not insignificant – a fulfilled, somewhat brash artist who is aware of his position. Although he referred to himself as a worker, it is impossible to accept this notion outright. Dwurnik who believed that the highest form of painting was abstraction, which contained the idea of painting itself, created thousands of paintings over his career.

Were the urban layouts, stripped of any illusions of beauty and perfection, just an average grid of streets with average buildings lined up along them? Does the architects' ideal urban vision bear no resemblance to the view recorded in Dwurnik's paintings?

The most important thing here seems to be the expression of a kind of nostalgia for the times when architecture had such a powerful effect on the imagination of painters that they produced works through which one can look into the soul of painters, read more than the obvious, and this reading is multi-layered.⁹

3. CONCLUSIONS

Architecture and the city are common themes found in paintings and sculptures, often serving as both background and main subject. These works depict a variety of structures and façades, large and sometimes unreal buildings and their interiors. There are also cities seen from a human perspective and from above – the way the imagination suggests. One can see natural, transformed, created, fantasy or unreal landscapes. When we think of cities, what also emerges, somewhat automatically, from our memory are the paintings of artists who filled their canvases with views of urbanism in their various states and times in the history of mankind. The paintings not only captured the magnificent faces but also depicted tragic moments like the great fires. Today, these paintings serve as excellent historical, research, and conservation material as they faithfully reflect the state of the city at the time.

Architecture and the city continue to be an important theme for artists, whether it be a motif more akin to architecture or the structure of the city – after all, one builds the other. Each time, though, it is subject to transformation, to processing in the artist's imagination. This gives rise to extraordinary paintings that are surprising in their content, and sculptures with inspiring forms. This motif is present not only in visual arts but also in literature, photography, and other forms of art. The visibility of cities and architecture inspires the creation of their invisible or unobservable counterparts, not only as a contrast to the existing, but also as a metaphor for the impossible.

References

- [1] Beniamino Servino, *Seascapes* [in:] *Divisare*, 19.07.2016, <https://divisare.com/projects/322605-beniamino-servino-seascapes> (access: 21.08.2023).
- [2] Calvino I., *Niewidzialne miasta*, PIW, Warszawa 2023.
- [3] *Città/City* [in:] *Fundazione Fausto Melotti*, <https://www.fondazionefaustomelotti.org/catalogo/1963-3/> (access: 31.08.2023).

⁹ I. Zuziak, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

- [4] Contrappunto II/Counterpoint II [in:] Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazione-faustomelotti.org/catalogo/1969-3/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- [5] Contrappunto IV/Counterpoint IV [in:] Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazione-faustomelotti.org/catalogo/1970-43/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- [6] Contrappunto IX/Counterpoint IX [in:] Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazione-faustomelotti.org/catalogo/1972-25/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- [7] Edward Dwurnik, Miasto idealne, 1993 [in:] onebid, <https://onebid.pl/pl/malarstwo-wspolczesne-edward-dwurnik-miasto-idealne-1993/1771070> (access: 21.08.2023).
- [8] Koetzle H.M., *Słynne zdjęcia i ich historie II. 1928–1991*, Taschen, Köln 2003.
- [9] Kraków – Mistrzejowice [in:] Dwurnik catalog, <https://edwarddwurnik.pl/index.php/Detail/objects/3011> (access: 21.08.2023).
- [10] Le torri della città invisibile/The Towers of the invisible City [in:] Fondazione Fausto Melotti, <https://www.fondazionefaustomelotti.org/catalogo/1976-67/> (access: 31.08.2023).
- [11] Maluga L., *Artystyczne okolice architektury = The Artistic Neighborhood of Architecture* [in:] D. Kozłowski, M. Misiągiewicz (eds.), *Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej. Gry i zabawy architektury*, “Czasopismo Techniczne. Architektura” 2010, no. 7-A1, pp. 189–198.
- [12] Rottenberg A., *Zbliżenia. Szkice o polskich artystach*, Arkady, Warszawa 2021.
- [13] Servino B., *Small drawings*, Divisare, Rome 2017.
- [14] Wolanin Z., *Nikifor*, Muzeum Okręgowe w Nowym Sączu, Nowy Sącz 2007
- [15] Zuziak I., *Architektura muzą malarstwa*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2009.

Author's Note

Marek Początko, PhD, Arch.

Assistant professor at the Department of Architectural Design FA CUT, membership in POIA (Chamber of Polish Architects) and SARP (Association of Polish Architects). His scientific interests focus on contemporary monumental architecture and the combination of art and architecture.

marek.poczatko@pk.edu.pl