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ARCHITECTURE AS EXPERIENCE

ARCHITEKTURA JAKO DOŚWIADCZENIE

Abstract

Contemporary architecture increasingly functions as an image. While photographs and visualisations allow the form of a building to be captured quickly, they omit a significant part of the actual experience of space. Architecture is not merely an object to be viewed. It is a bodily experience that unfolds through movement, scale, light, sound, touch, and smell. We perceive architecture with our entire body, rather than through sight alone. Experiencing architecture also requires time. A building reveals itself gradually, as people move through it and encounter successive sequences of space. Movement through space, rhythm, changing light, and the relationships between interiors create a distinctive form of narrative. Architecture becomes an event that cannot be reduced to a single image. Atmosphere is an essential element of this experience, which often determines whether a space remains in our memory. Memory does not preserve space photographically; rather, it selects particular images, sensations, and meanings. The significance of architecture is therefore revealed not only through form and function, but above all through human experience. Only when a building has been experienced, inhabited, and remembered does it begin to function as something more than an object. Architecture is a process that takes place between space, the human being, time, and memory.

Keywords: *acoustics, architecture, building materials, experience, human, sensations*

Streszczenie

Współczesna architektura coraz częściej funkcjonuje jako obraz. Fotografie i wizualizacje pozwalają szybko uchwycić formę budynku, pomijają jednak znaczną część rzeczywistego doświadczenia przestrzeni. Architektura nie jest wyłącznie przedmiotem oglądu. Jest doświadczeniem cielesnym, które dokonuje się poprzez ruch, skalę, światło, dźwięk, dotyk i zapach. Człowiek odbiera ją całym ciałem, a nie tylko za pomocą wzroku. Doświadczenie architektury wymaga również czasu. Budynek ujawnia się stopniowo, wraz z ruchem człowieka i kolejnymi sekwencjami przestrzeni. Droga, rytm, zmienność światła oraz relacje pomiędzy wnętrzami tworzą swoistą narrację. Architektura staje się wydarzeniem, którego nie można sprowadzić do pojedynczego obrazu. Istotnym elementem tego doświadczenia jest atmosfera, która często decyduje o tym, czy przestrzeń pozostaje w pamięci. Pamięć nie przechowuje jej w sposób fotograficzny, lecz wybiera określone obrazy, odczucia i znaczenia. Architektura ujawnia więc swoje znaczenie nie tylko poprzez formę i funkcję, ale przede wszystkim poprzez doświadczenie człowieka. Dopiero budynek przeżyty, zamieszkany i zapamiętany zaczyna funkcjonować jako coś więcej niż obiekt. Architektura jest procesem zachodzącym pomiędzy przestrzenią, człowiekiem, czasem i pamięcią.

Słowa kluczowe: *akustyka, architektura, człowiek, doświadczenie, doznania, materiały budowlane*

The representation of architecture has long suffered from a certain condition: an excessive emphasis on the visual. Books, magazines, photography, and contemporary architectural criticism often present a building as if it were an image (which, of course, it is to some extent, but...). Ideally, a building is viewed from the right vantage point, in the right light, and after the careful selection of the frame. This tendency was partly inspired by attempts to reproduce with the camera the remarkable perspective drawings created by Erich Mendelsohn. The problem, however, is that a human being is not a camera. We have legs, we breathe, we sense temperature, we hear sounds, we touch materials, and we move in ways that cannot be predicted from a single photograph. And it is precisely at this point that architecture begins to become something more than a representation. It ceases to be a sketch or a drawing and becomes a place. The experience of architecture therefore does not begin with the eye, but with the body as a whole. Sight is only one of the sensory inputs, and it is by no means necessarily the most important one. In a space, we orient ourselves through hearing, touch, smell, and also proprioception – the ability to sense the position of our own body without having to look. Juhani Pallasmaa points out that the dominance of vision in modern architectural culture has led to an impoverishment of the way we understand and experience space[1]. Put even more simply: We have learned to look at architecture before learning how to be in it.

Every person brings their own body into architecture, and therefore their own scale. We differ in height, walking pace, stride length, and sensitivity to temperature and sound. Even something as seemingly obvious as the height of a stair riser is not merely a value prescribed by a standard. There is also the person who has to negotiate that step (the step rule, or Schrittmaßregel: two risers plus one going equals sixty to sixty-five centimetres). At this point, it is worth recalling Le Corbusier and his Modulor. The concept was an attempt to establish a universal human measure and to relate the dimensions of architecture to it. He wrote:

> My dream is to set up, on the building sites which will spring up all over our country one day, a 'grid of proportions', drawn on the wall or made of strip iron, which will serve as a rule for the whole project, a norm offering an endless series of different combinations and proportions; the mason, the carpenter, the joiner will consult it whenever they have to choose the measures for their work; and all the things they make, different and varied as they are, will be united in harmony. That is my dream[2].

The problem, however, is that the universal human being exists primarily on paper. The actual user has their own height and their own habits; sometimes they are tired, sometimes in a hurry, carrying a backpack or holding a cup of coffee or an umbrella in one hand. Architecture therefore encounters a concrete body rather than an abstract human measure of 183 cm in height.

The body responds to space faster than consciousness. Before we have time to reflect on a building, we already know whether we feel comfortable in it; whether the stairs are too high, whether the corridor is too narrow, or whether the interior is too loud. These are very simple experiences, yet they are difficult to capture in an architectural drawing. Steen Eiler Rasmussen wrote about architecture as an experience of movement and of passing through space. A building is therefore not simply something we look at. We experience it in motion.

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[1] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły* [*The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*], Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012.

[2] Le Corbusier, *The Modulor and Modulor 2*, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2004, p. 37.

He writes: "I am quite sure that most people would notice that all of these façades are rhythmically divided. And yet if you were to ask them what rhythm in architecture means it would be difficult for them to explain, let alone define. The term rhythm is borrowed from other arts involving a time element and based on movement, such as music and dancing"[3]. In this sense, architecture happens rather than simply exists. The user does not merely look at a building; they move through it. Each successive step changes the perspective, the light, and the relationship between interior and exterior. The height, the material, the temperature, and the sound change as well. All of this contributes to an experience that cannot be reduced to a single image. One might even say that a building has its own rhythm. At times, it guides a person quickly through space; at other times, it makes them pause in a particular place. This is not, however, a rhythm that is fixed or written down as in music. It emerges only when someone begins to move through the architecture, and, of course, everyone moves at a different pace. From this perspective, architecture ceases to be merely an aesthetic object. Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasised that perception is not a purely intellectual act, but an embodied way of being in the world. He wrote: "We cannot relate certain movements to bodily mechanism and others to consciousness. The body and consciousness are not mutually limiting; they can be only parallel"[4]. Space, therefore, is not simply something that exists "before us". It is a space in which we are. Our bodies do not observe it from the outside, but remain a part of it.

Acoustics also plays an important role, yet it is often treated in design as something that is addressed only after everything else is already in place or only when a theatre hall is being designed. Yet sound can completely transform the way a space is perceived. The same corridor can feel calm or unsettling, depending on whether footsteps echo off the walls or are absorbed by the material. An empty space sounds different from the same space filled with people. Sometimes a single echo is enough to make a place feel unfamiliar. Sound is therefore not an addition to architecture, but one of its integral parts.

Touch works in a similar way. For us, a material does not exist as an abstract piece of information recorded in a design. Concrete is cool to the touch, wood feels warmer, and stone has a particular texture and weight. We can, of course, describe these properties in technical terms, but this does not exhaust the experience of the material. Peter Zumthor draws attention to the presence of materials and their ability to affect us before we have even had time to name them[5]. Material, therefore, is not only what we see but also what we feel.

Then there is smell, perhaps the most overlooked of the senses involved in the experience of architecture. Smell cannot easily be switched off. It cannot be framed or moved outside the frame. The smell of a basement, damp wood, dust, fresh paint, stone, or the distinctive scent of an old house can remain in our memory for many years. When we walk through an Orthodox church, the scent of burning candles accompanies us throughout, deepening the visual and auditory experience. What is more, this means that we do not always remember what was most important from the architect's point of view. Sometimes what remains is something as seemingly insignificant as the memory of a particular smell.

And this is where something important emerges. Architecture does not have to be perfect to be remembered. It does, however, have to move us in some way. Sometimes it does so

[3] S.E. Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1964, p. 133

[4] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London–New York 2002, p. 142.

[5] P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2006, pp. 11–12.

through light, sometimes through material, sometimes through sound, and sometimes simply through the atmosphere of a place. All of this means that architecture is not merely an image. It is a bodily experience. And the body, unlike a computer-generated image, does not view a building from a safe distance. It has to be in it. Here, we can also consider the role of memory. We never experience space for the first time in an absolute sense. We compare every new building with dozens of places that have already been inscribed in our memory. Gaston Bachelard observed that the childhood home remains one of the most enduring images that shape our understanding of space. He writes: "A sort of attraction for images concentrates them about the house. Transcending our memories of all the houses in which we have found shelter, above and beyond all the houses we have dreamed we lived in, can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all of our images of protected intimacy?"[6] Even if we do not remember its exact layout, we remember its atmosphere. We remember the light coming through the window, the creaking of the stairs, the coolness of the basement, or the smell of wood. It is precisely these fragmentary memories that later become an unconscious point of reference for all our subsequent experiences.

Architecture remains one of the few fields in which technology meets philosophy, and mathematical precision meets human emotion. It exists neither solely as a structural system nor as an aesthetic composition. Its true value reveals itself only through the user's experience – through movement, memory, sensory perception, and the passage of time, each experienced differently by every individual. It is there that the meaning of a building emerges. An architect may create a technically perfect building, yet one devoid of what we call the atmosphere of a building. Conversely, it is possible to create a space that falls far short of formal perfection, yet remains in the memory of its inhabitants for decades. The history of architecture shows that the ultimate verdict is delivered neither by professional jurors in architectural competitions nor by art critics, but by successive generations of users. It is they who decide whether a given building was merely a correctly executed construction project or whether it truly became architecture. And then perhaps successive generations of architects who begin to imitate such works will emerge, and this would be the highest form of tribute to their creator. Yet all of this unfolds over time, and we can never be certain that we are dealing with a true work of art. The work will remain with society for years to come, and only successive generations of viewers and users will ultimately prove whether it was merely a building or truly architecture.

References

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[2] Le Corbusier, *The Modulor and Modulor 2*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2004.
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[6] G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston 1969, p. 3.

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