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ARCHITECTURE AS EXPERIENCE IN A DISTORTING MIRROR. THE PERCEPTION OF SPACE IN POST-WAR POLISH SATIRICAL DRAWINGS

ARCHITEKTURA, JAKO DOŚWIADCZENIE W KRZYWYM ZWIERCIADLE. PERCEPCJA PRZESTRZENI W POWOJENNYM RYSUNKU SATYRYCZNYM

Abstract

This paper examines satirical drawing as a medium that transforms the experience of architecture, understood not merely as a material object but as a lived and interpreted space. Drawing on examples from post-war Polish caricature, the study demonstrates how architecture functions as an integral component of social reality, with its satirical distortion revealing hidden spatial mechanisms and the systemic conditions that shaped the built environment. Through metaphor, exaggeration, and grotesque imagery, satirical drawings become a means of interpreting architecture. Rather than serving solely as humorous commentary, architectural caricature is approached as an alternative mode of recording and interpreting the built environment. It captures the emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of architecture, offering valuable insight into the social perception of space and its role in shaping collective memory.

Keywords: *architecture, satirical drawing, spatial experience*

Streszczenie

Tematyka rozważań koncentruje się na analizie rysunku satyrycznego jako medium przekształcającego doświadczenie architektury, ujmowanej nie jako obiekt materialny, lecz jako przestrzeń przeżywana i interpretowana. W polskiej karykaturze powojennej architektura ukazywana jest jako element rzeczywistości społecznej, którego deformacja odsłania ukryte mechanizmy funkcjonowania przestrzeni oraz uwarunkowania systemowe. Satyra, operując metaforą i groteską, pełni funkcję narzędzia percepcji, umożliwiając identyfikację napięć między ideą a realizacją oraz między oficjalną narracją a doświadczeniem użytkownika. Rysunek satyryczny może być zatem traktowany jako alternatywna forma zapisu architektury, ujawniająca jej wymiar emocjonalny, poznawczy i kulturowy.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, doświadczenie, rysunek satyryczny*

1. INTRODUCTION: ARCHITECTURE IS MEANING AND MEMORY

Architecture is not merely a physical testament to its era. It is also a carrier of meanings, memories and social emotions, which are revealed not only in official historical narratives but also in popular culture[1]. One of the most interesting, though rarely utilised, sources for understanding the social perception of architecture is post-war Polish satirical drawings. By distorting reality and employing metaphor and the grotesque, they not only commented on current events but also captured collective experiences linked to the everyday spaces of life in the People's Republic of Poland[2]. In this sense, architecture became in these drawings not merely a backdrop to events, but above all a sign, a symbol of the political system, social changes, aspirations and disappointments.

The history of Poland, like that of many countries situated at strategic points across Europe, has been marked by periods of loss of sovereignty, sudden political upheavals and profound social transformations. Over a century of partition, the experience of the Second World War and several decades of living under a communist regime have left a lasting mark not only on the urban landscape[3] but also on the collective memory of the Polish people. The architecture of subsequent eras – from the reconstruction of destroyed cities to vast housing estates[4] and the monumental projects of Socialist Realism[5] – has become a tangible record of these experiences, whilst also being the subject of public assessment, emotion and criticism.

In a climate of restricted freedom of expression, satirical cartoons played a particularly important role. Published regularly in newspapers and magazines, they served as a kind of 'distorted mirror' reflecting the absurdities of everyday life, the shortcomings of the system and the changing landscape of Poland. Through humour and deliberate distortion, satirical cartoons made it possible to comment on reality in a way that was accessible to the audience, whilst at the same time preserving the collective memory of places, buildings and architectural phenomena. Satirical drawings not only documented how architecture was perceived, but also helped to shape its significance in the public consciousness.

In this text, however, the focus will be on depictions of architecture and urbanised space. The drawings analysed show that architecture was not treated merely as a backdrop to everyday events, but as a clear sign of social[6], political and cultural change[7]. It became a symbol of the system, a vehicle for collective experiences and a subject of social evaluation, revealing the tensions between the official vision of development and the actual needs of residents (Ill. 1).

The satirical commentary concerned both individual architectural structures and entire urban planning schemes. Criticism was levelled at chaotic development, ill-conceived

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[1] G. Neri, *Satira dell'architetto. Controstoria di una professione attraverso la caricatura,* Mendrisio Academy Press / Casagrande, Bellinzona–Mendrisio 2025, p. 27.

[2] W. Ostrowski, *Urbanistyka współczesna*, Arkady, Warszawa, 1975, p. 78.

[3] T.P. Szafer, *Nowa architektura polska. Diariusz lat 1966–1970*, Arkady, Warszawa 1972, p. 20.

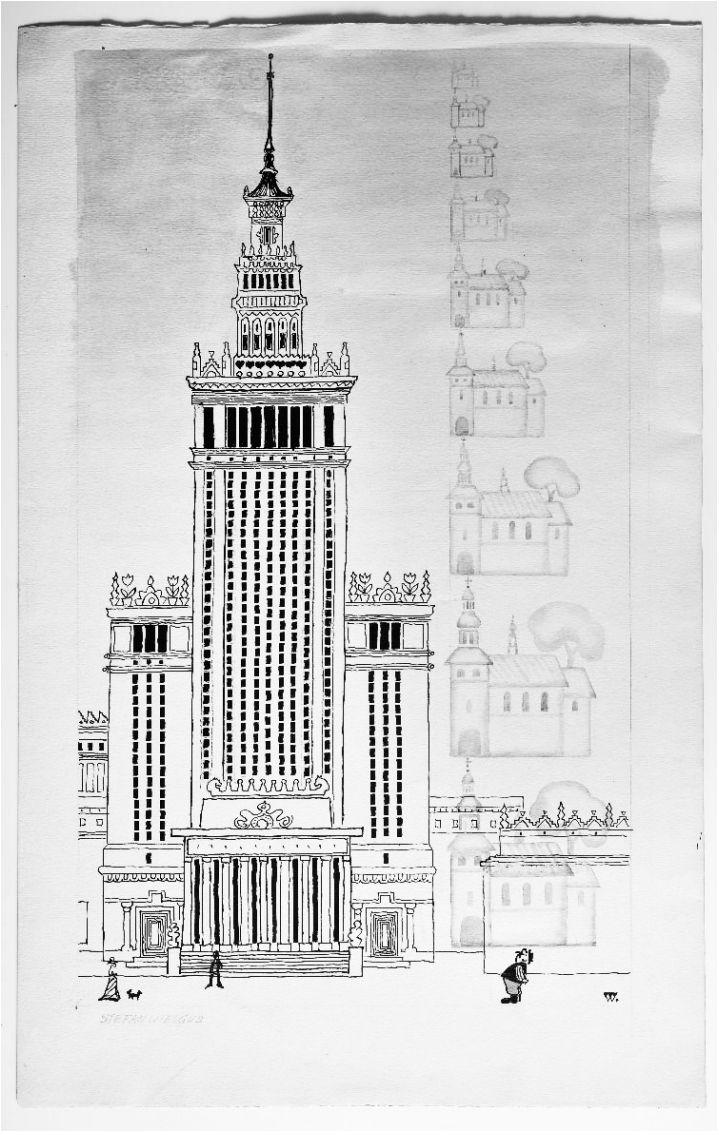
[4] T.P. Szafer, *Współczesna Architektura Polska*, Arkady, Warszawa 1988, p. 23.

[5] J. Zachwatowicz (ed.), *Budownictwo i architektura w Polsce 1945–1966*, Interpress, Warszawa 1968, p. 56.

[6] G. Neri, *Alan Dunn: The Cartoonist as Architectural Critic,* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA–London 2026, p. 45.

[7] M. Rosso (ed.), *Laughing at Architecture: Architectural Histories of Humour, Satire and Wit*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, p. 10.

modernisation projects, the quality of housing construction, and monumental projects subservient to ideology and propaganda. Through deliberate distortion and humour, satirical drawings not only exposed the absurdities of design and urban planning decisions, but also helped to preserve the public's memory of ways of experiencing space. The selected drawings presented in this article come from the collections of the Eryk Lipiński Museum of Caricature in Warsaw.



Ill. 1. A caricature by Stefan Wielgus depicting a Polish peasant visiting Warsaw, who is mentally comparing the height of the Palace of Culture and Science with that of the church in his home village. The Eryk Lipiński Museum of Caricature in Warsaw. Inv. No. MK 748. Date of creation: the second half of the 1960s. Technique: ink on Bristol board

2. ROOM WITH A VIEW, STIRRING THE MIND

From the moment the communist system became firmly established in Poland after 1947, the housing problem became one of the most emotionally charged issues of everyday life. Housing was not merely a component of infrastructure or the result of state-led construction, but a space associated with a sense of security, dignity and stability in life. In this sense, architecture evoked strong emotions, becoming a source of hope, but also disappointment and social frustration. The housing shortage and the inefficiency of the allocation system meant that architecture ceased to be a neutral backdrop to everyday life and instead became a symbol of unfulfilled aspirations and the restrictions imposed by the state.



Ill. 2. A caricature by Karol Ferster (Charlie). Two large birds' nests are depicted on two neighbouring trees, inhabited by two married couples awaiting the allocation of a flat from a state housing cooperative. In the background there is a panorama of Warsaw from the 1960s. The caption beneath the drawing reads: 'We, too, decided to spend our holiday a little differently…' On the reverse of the drawing, the artist has added a handwritten comment in pencil: 'The plan to make the flats available for occupancy in the first half of this year has been 26 per cent complete (official figures)', followed by an ironic punchline: 'Were we also promised a flat in the second quarter of the year?'. The Eryk Lipiński Museum of Caricature in Warsaw. Inv. No. MK 14428. 1950s–1960s. Technique: ink and watercolour on Bristol board

The caricature by Karol Ferster (Charlie) depicts this aspect of the social experience of architecture in an exceptionally evocative manner (Ill. 2). The drawing does not refer solely to the problem of housing shortages, but above all illustrates the emotions associated with

waiting for one's own living space. Years of waiting in queues, opaque procedures and arbitrary administrative decisions led to a growing sense of powerlessness, which the satire was able to capture with exceptional insight. In this way, architecture became an experience that deeply engaged its audience – it provoked not only laughter but also intellectual stimulation, prompting reflection on social reality.

The impact of the drawing is heightened by a handwritten note left by the artist on the reverse. Ferster noted, with ironic detachment, that he too was awaiting the allocation of a flat in the second quarter of the year. The artist's personal experience lends the caricature an additional dimension of authenticity and shows that the situation depicted was not merely an artistic hyperbole, but a reflection of a widespread social experience.

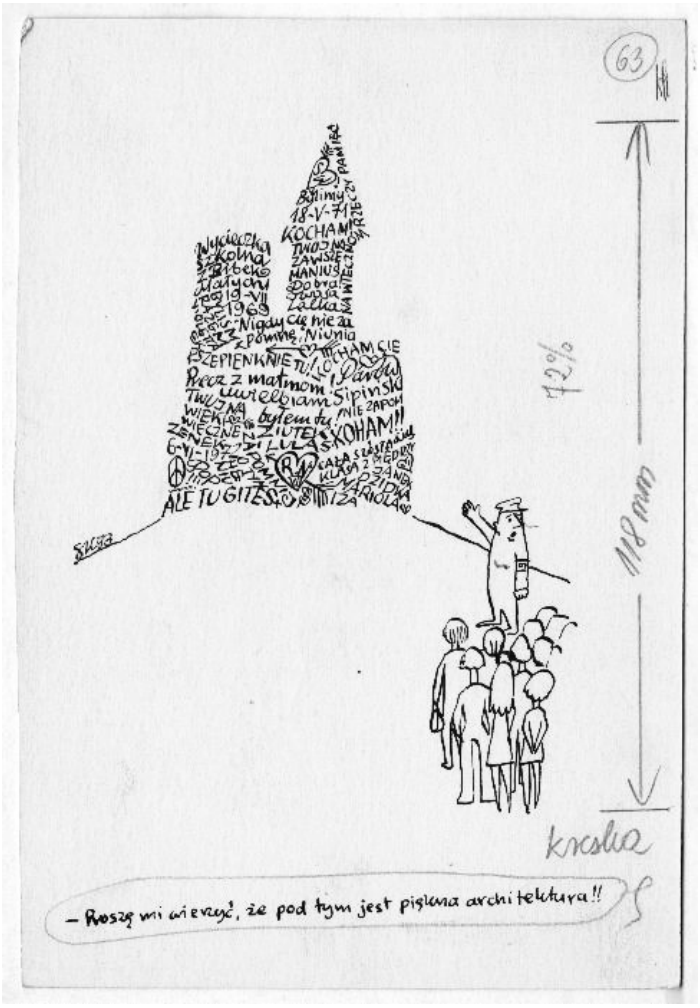
The figure also contains data on the implementation of the housing programme, indicating that the number of flats completed amounted to only around 25 per cent of the previously announced projects. Given the nature of state propaganda and censorship mechanisms, these figures should be treated with caution; however, it can be assumed that the actual scale of the delays was even greater. Satire thus served not only as a political commentary, but also as a kind of record of the collective emotions associated with architecture and living space. It demonstrated that it was the experience of architecture – rather than the buildings themselves – that became one of the most important elements of the collective memory of the period of People's Republic of Poland.

3. MATERIAL AND TEXTURE

The policy of the authorities of People's Republic of Poland towards historic architecture remained rife with contradictions. On the one hand, there was a drive to marginalise the physical traces of the former social order, particularly the residences belonging to the aristocracy and the landed gentry. Palaces and castles taken over by the state were often left without proper conservation care, leading to their gradual deterioration. As the building fabric fell into disrepair, so too did the opportunity to experience first-hand the authentic materials of historical architecture – stone, brick, architectural details and the traces of time – which together contribute to the memory of a place.

At the same time, sites deemed significant from the perspective of historical policy were subjected to conservation work lasting many years. However, these sites become difficult for the public to access while the work was under way. Instead of experiencing the authentic architecture, the visitors spent years looking primarily at scaffolding, temporary protective measures and building sites. Physical contact with the historic monument was replaced by contact with a temporary structure, which, paradoxically, itself became a distinctive feature of the landscape of Polish cities and places of remembrance.

This paradox was aptly captured by Szymon Kobyliński in a caricature from the 1960s. The group of tourists depicted, accompanied by their guide, came to see the historic castle, but instead of its walls, they saw only a dense network of scaffolding covered in inscriptions, graffiti and random comments. The drawing depicts a situation in which the physical fabric of the historic building has been almost completely obscured by a temporary structure created from 'local romantic escapades'. It is the drawing covering the building – rather than the stone, brick or historical detail – that becomes the object of observation and the vehicle for new meanings.



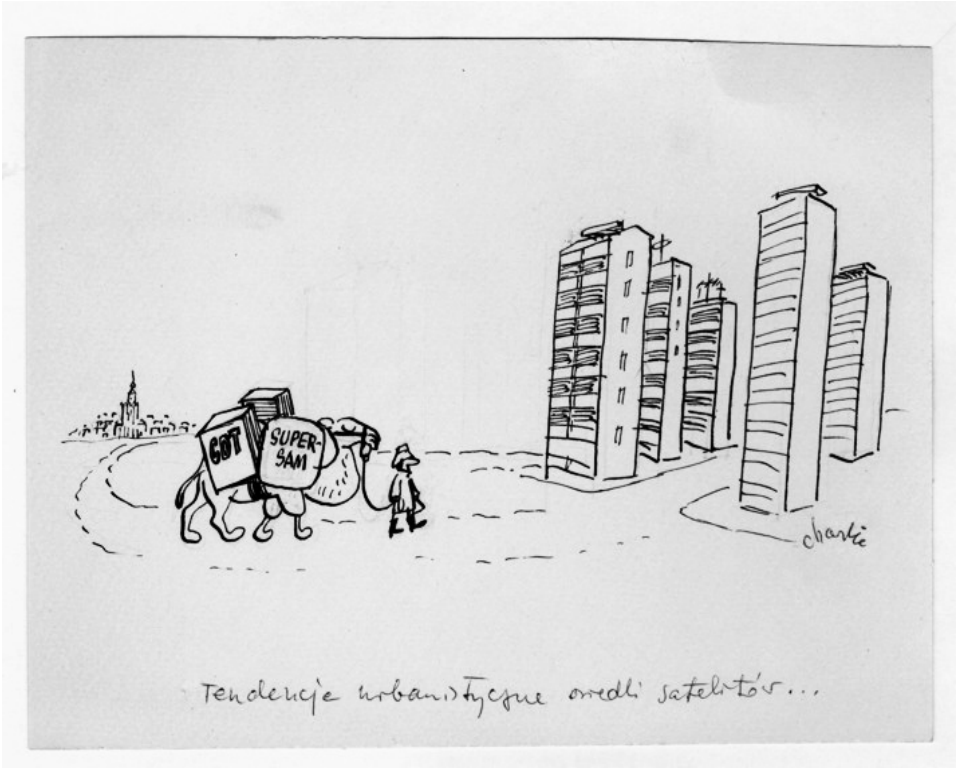
Ill. 3. A caricature by Szymon Kobyliński entitled ‘Believe me, there is beautiful architecture underneath this’. The drawing depicts a group of tourists visiting a historic monument that is completely ‘obscured’ by signage, offering an ironic commentary on the inability to experience the architecture and the loss of direct contact with the historic architectural fabric. The Eryk Lipiński Museum of Caricature in Warsaw. Inv. No. MK 20 157. Circa 1960. Technique: ink on cardboard

Graffiti and handwritten inscriptions covering the scaffolding create an additional layer of interpretation. These spontaneous traces of human presence obscure the opportunity to experience the authentic texture of the monument, whilst at the same time testifying to the need to physically leave one’s own mark on the space. Kobyliński demonstrates that the experience of architecture is not limited to merely viewing it. It is linked to the materiality of the building, the opportunity to engage with its substance, and the interpretation of the traces of time inscribed upon it. When contact with the authentic material is lost, architecture ceases to be merely a historic monument and becomes a symbol of unfulfilled expectations and endless makeshift solutions.

4. MEMORY AS INTERPRETATION

The newly built housing estates were among the most recognisable and memorable features of the urban landscape of People's Poland. They were designed as modern housing complexes with a well-organised spatial layout, intended to symbolise civilisational progress and the success of the state's housing policy. However, the public experience of these places differed significantly from their official image. From the perspective of collective memory, these estates are remembered not only as new places to live, but above all as places of everyday hardships, long commutes and a lack of basic services.

This interpretation of reality is aptly captured in a 1970 caricature by Karol Ferster (Charlie) (Ill. 4). The artist depicted a caravan with a camel travelling from the centre of Warsaw towards a newly built estate of high-rise blocks of flats. Placed on the animal's back are parcels labelled with the names of Warsaw's department stores, 'CDT' and 'Supersam', which clearly indicate that residents were forced to transport their daily shopping from the distant city centre.



Ill. 4. A caricature by Karol Ferster (Charlie) satirising the consequences of building new housing estates on the outskirts of major Polish cities. Using Warsaw as an example, the artist highlights the problems arising from the lack of basic service and retail infrastructure in new housing estates, as well as their poor commuting links to the city centre. The Eryk Lipiński Museum of Caricature in Warsaw. Inv. No. MK 14249. Circa 1970. Technique: ink on Bristol board

The humour in the cartoon is based on a deliberate exaggeration of reality, but its power stems from experiences that are familiar to contemporary viewers. The camel becomes a metaphor for the long and arduous journey that residents of new housing estates had to undertake to reach their workplaces, schools, government offices or shops. In this way, the satire not only comments on the shortcomings of urban planning, but also interprets the social experience of space, securing it a lasting place in the collective memory.

The caricature highlights two fundamental problems characteristic of urbanisation during the People's Republic of Poland era. The first was the lack of adequate transport links between new housing estates and historic city centres. The second was the underdeveloped commercial and service infrastructure, the construction of which was postponed to later stages of the development. As a result, residents were provided with flats, but not a space that was fully equipped for everyday life.

From today's perspective, Ferster's drawing can be interpreted not only as a satirical commentary on the urban planning policies of the 1970s, but also as a record of the workings of memory. It is precisely thanks to such depictions that the public perception of large housing estates as remote, incomplete places requiring the constant overcoming of spatial barriers became entrenched. Memory, therefore, does not merely reproduce facts, but interprets the experiences of residents, endowing architecture with meanings that extend far beyond its physical form.

5. SUMMARY

The examples presented in this article show that post-war satirical drawings represent much more than a mere testament to their creators' sense of humour. Above all, they are records of the social experience of architecture, which is not limited to the aesthetic assessment of buildings or the quality of urban planning solutions, but encompasses emotions, everyday practices and the way in which space was perceived and interpreted by its users. In this sense, architecture becomes a language describing social reality, and satire a tool enabling us to decipher that language.

The drawings depict architecture as a carrier of meanings that extend far beyond its physical form. The Palace of Culture and Science ceases to be merely a dominant feature of Warsaw's skyline, becoming a symbol of political dominance and civilisational aspirations instead. Large housing estates are not merely complexes of buildings, but a metaphor for everyday hardships, isolation and the unfulfilled promises of modernisation. Castles and palaces hidden behind scaffolding cease to be historic monuments and become an image of suspended memory, in which the physical substance of architecture remains inaccessible to the viewer. In turn, the problem of a chronic housing shortage demonstrates that architecture can also be a source of expectation, frustration and social tensions. Each of these examples confirms that the significance of architecture arises, above all, from the relationship between space and people.

The particular value of the satirical drawing lies in its ability to condense complex social phenomena into a single image. Humour, the grotesque and deliberate distortion serve not merely as entertainment, but become a method of interpreting reality. Paradoxically, it was precisely through exaggeration that satirists achieved extraordinary accuracy of observation. With just a few strokes, they were able to describe problems which official political discourse

was unable or unwilling to name. Caricature did not, therefore, document reality in a photographic manner, but revealed its deeper meaning. This is where its unique value lies, as a source for research into the social history of architecture.

Equally important is the fact that the memory captured in these drawings does not function as an archive storing objective information about the past. On the contrary, it selects experiences, organises them and imbues them with meaning. This is precisely why many of the caricatures analysed remain relevant even today, despite referring to specific political and economic events. For they preserve not so much facts as the emotions associated with the experience of space: a sense of the absurd, disappointment, pride, irony or powerlessness. Architecture is remembered not as a set of technical parameters, but as an experience of everyday life.

Another interesting aspect is the physical nature of the drawings themselves. They were created on card, Bristol board or cardboard, using ink, watercolour or felt-tip pens, often with materials available under conditions of economic scarcity. Their physical form serves as a reminder that cultural memory does not exist solely in narratives and texts, but is also recorded in material artefacts. The texture of the paper, brushstrokes, pencil corrections and the artist's own annotations are just as important a testament to the era as the buildings depicted in the drawings. By touching these objects and examining their material qualities and craftsmanship, we engage not only with a graphic work but also with an authentic fragment of history.

At the same time, it should be noted that the way these representations are interpreted is constantly changing. For the generation that remembers the realities of People's Poland, many of the allusions contained within them remain self-evident, whilst for younger audiences they increasingly require historical commentary. This means that the memory of architecture, too, is subject to processes of reinterpretation. This does not, however, diminish the value of the works under analysis; on the contrary, it makes them even more valuable research material, enabling us to trace changes in social sensibilities and ways of understanding space.

Contemporary research into architecture is increasingly moving away from viewing buildings solely as design objects. Greater attention is being paid to the user experience, emotions, the memory of a place and the cultural significance of space. Post-war satirical drawings fit perfectly into this line of research. They show architecture from the perspective of its audience – the people who lived in new blocks of flats, waited for their own flats, travelled through poorly designed cities or viewed historic monuments hidden behind scaffolding. It is their experiences, rather than solely the architects' designs or the planners' decisions, that paint a complete picture of the history of architecture in the second half of the 20th century.

It can therefore be argued that the satirical drawing constitutes a particular kind of historical source – one that documents not so much the architecture itself as the social life of architecture[8]. It shows how buildings functioned in the collective imagination, what emotions they evoked, and what meanings were attributed to them. In this way, it allows us to view architecture as a dynamic cultural process in which material form, memory and experience intertwine. Architecture only truly comes to life when it becomes a part of human experience and collective memory.

[8] B. Zevi, *Architecture as a space. How to look at architecture*, rev. ed., Horizon Press, New York 1974, p. 52.

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