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EXPERIENCE, MEMORY AND THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ARCHITECTURE

DOŚWIADCZANIE, PAMIĘĆ I METAMORFIZM ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Observational and methodological research employing an interpretative approach demonstrates the relationship between the construction of architectural space and philosophical interpretations of concepts, as well as established theories of perception, including those of Marshall McLuhan, Martin Heidegger, Jean Baudrillard and Juhani Pallasmaa. The essence of architecture, when interpreted as a *medium*, lies in conveying information that shapes how the user and the observer perceive it. The essence of metamorphosis is reinterpretation.

Keywords: *architecture as a medium, conveying content in architecture, metamorphosis of architecture*

Streszczenie

Badania metodologiczne obserwacyjne, przy zastosowaniu metody interpretacyjnej, dowodzą zależności między konstruowaniem przestrzeni architektonicznej a filozoficznymi interpretacjami pojęć, przyjętymi teoriami postrzegania, w tym teorii Marshalla McLuhana oraz Martina Heideggera, Jeana Baudrillarda, a także Juhaniego Pallasmy. Istotą Architektury w przypadku interpretowania jej jako *medium* jest przekaz informacji formatujący jej postrzeganie przez użytkownika i obserwatora. Istotą metamorfizmu – reinterpretacja.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura jako medium, metamorfizm architektury, przekaz treści w architekturze*

The city itself is the collective memory of its people
[*The Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi]

When old people are gone, old houses remain, filled with sadness
and memories that have nowhere to flee…
[*Piastunka letnich snów*, Joanna Szarańska]

1. PERSONIFICATION

Architecture has been anthropomorphised for centuries. Vitruvius gave it the proportions of the human form. Leonardo da Vinci and Francesco di Giorgio Martini associated it with the shapes of the human body. Antonio Gaudí drew inspiration from biomimicry and the

principles of biomechanics, particularly the skeletal structure, while Juhani Pallasmaa used the metaphor of skin.

Aldo Rossi, comparing a city's memory to that of a man, suggested that its value lay in its role as a kind of hippocampus for civilisation… The anthropomorphisation of architecture, however, is more than simply the personification of its physical form as created upon completion of the original design. It stems from the recognition that an architectural object or an urban development, much like the changing human body and personality, is never fully complete – it is subject to constant evolution and should be analysed as such.

Experience, memory and metamorphosis are categories characteristic of humankind. Anthropomorphised architecture, as a kind of hippocampus of civilisation, constitutes, on the one hand, a narrative metaphor for its record[1] and, on the other, evidence of a metamorphosis that unfolds historically over time and in a state of perpetual flux.

We experience events every day: some remain in our memory, while others serve as unnoticed contextual staffage to the moment we are currently perceiving, whether significant or not. In such circumstances, Architecture can be viewed in two ways: as an archive of recorded events or as their context. In both cases, its objects are never complete. This applies to urban planning principles as well as to complexes and individual buildings, however small they may be.

In the first instance, it speaks, in a metaphorical sense, to its equally metaphorical final interlocutor. Sensitive to the multifaceted context in which it exists and which shapes it, it conveys the result of this transformation, engaging with the consequences of its continuously dynamic interrelationships with users and observers. This constantly unfolding metamorphosis of the space of an architectural object or an urban development dynamically reinterprets these correlations as a result of sudden transformations in their content, housing, or structure, or – when occurring gradually – transforms them successively as a result of processes unfolding over time. This slowly unfolding *metamorphic duration* – which is, in essence, a gradually progressing reinterpretation – is a negation of *durability as such*: of the original appearance, the original utility, and perhaps even the original beauty. The replacement of content, or the transformation of a specific 'container' – namely, a structure imbued with the content previously used – as well as the permanent replacement of parts of the object, ensures that architecture persists beyond the material realm: in the imagination, in memories, and in myths[2]. In the second instance, as staffage, it functions as a kind of 'wallpaper' that conveys the narrative. It frames the space of the perceived events, evoking associations for those involved primarily within a nostalgic and historical context: as a complement to the smells they experienced at the time, the music they heard, the weather they felt… Interpreting space both as flat, scenographic images and as a multidimensional journey recorded in memory, in which the observer opens themselves up to successive experiences, assimilating the information that emerges one after another, intensifies the *uninterrupted stream of perceived images*. This phenomenon brings to mind the words of Jane Jacobs, who claims that users of urban parks are not looking for a backdrop for buildings, but for themselves[3].

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[1] S. Gzell, in the original: "The Architect's Work is a metaphor for our civilisation" [in:] S. Gzell, *O Architekturze. Szkice pisane i rysowane*, Wydawnictwo Blue Bird, Warsaw 2014, p. 45

[2] G. Nawrot, *Architecture – The Myth of Interpreting Identity of Images* [in:] W. Celadyn, T. Kozłowski, A. Mielnik (eds.), *Defining the Architectural Space. The Myths of Architecture*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2021, pp. 109–120.

[3] J. Jacobs, *Śmierć i życie wielkich miast Ameryki*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2015, p. 121.

2. NARRATIVE ADEQUACY

Every time an architectural object or an urban development is designed – whether it involves building something new or redeveloping existing structures – it entails a reinterpretation of space. Martin Heidegger concretised the meaning of human life through the categories of *building*, *dwelling* and *thinking*, and regarded the order in which he arranged them as crucial[4]. All dwelling is therefore linked to the broadly understood act of building everything. This, in turn, is a consequence of reinterpreting space. The construction of architecture is therefore, in every case, a reinterpretation of space for dwelling.

Marshall McLuhan, in arguing that the *medium is the message* in the chapter of the same title from his book published in 1964[5], in his own way continues the thoughts of Martin Heidegger from 1954, who claimed that the threat lies not in technology or its individual products, but in the unawareness of the way in which, by presenting the world as a resource to be exploited, they channel us into specific patterns of thought and action[6]… In the internet age, one can identify – in line with the ideas presented in both books – linguistic models that optimise communication in terms of engagement, recommendation systems that reward emotional extremes, and interfaces designed to make users reluctant to leave. Architecture, being itself a form of information transmission – that is, McLuhan's *medium* – consciously or intuitively directs behaviour and feelings, and thus constitutes a kind of emanation of these indications.

Truth, in the common understanding of the term, cannot be redefined – it is unambiguous: there are no shades of truth, but there are subjectively expressed shades of its narrative interpretation. Encapsulating truth in formulas is precisely what relativises it. Whilst for Thomas Aquinas *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus;* for Oscar Wilde this *veritas* is a matter of form, and for William Blake …*whatever one can believe in*; for the American science-fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin, it is imagination. All of them can be found in architecture[7]. We can subsequently associate these four interpretations with the symbols representing the successive stages of Jean Baudrillard's simulation[8].

The identified variants of spatial transformation for an architectural object or an urban development concern their content and matter. The next three categories concern the metaphorical expression of their reinterpretation. In the first, the object's matter is modified while its content remains unchanged. In the second, the matter and the object's formal

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[4] M. Heidegger, *Budować, mieszkać, myśleć. Eseje wybrane*, Czytelnik, Warszwa 1977.

[5] M. McLuhan, *Zrozumieć media. Przedłużenia człowieka*, Wydawnictwa Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2004.

[6] The first edition of *Die Frage nach der Technik* was published in 1954 in the book *Vorträge und Aufsätze*.

[7] G. Nawrot, *Shades of Interpreting the Truth of Architecture*, [in:] W. Celadyn, T. Kozłowski, A. Mielnik (eds.), *Defining the Architectural Space. The Truth and Lie of Architecture*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2020, pp. 55–66.

[8] The first simulacrum is a faithful reflection of a reality. The second is its distortion; however, pointing to its existence, it reflects the connections between the constructed copy and reality. The third masks the absence of a profound reality, pretending to be its faithful copy: a copy without an actual original. The fourth bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum: signs of hyperreality merely reflect other signs that claim to be reality, see: J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacja,* Sic!, Warszawa 2005, pp. 11–12.

structure –an emanation of that matter – are seemingly continued, while the content is redefined. In the third, both undergo a metamorphosis. Each user and observer of the architectural object holds a unique archive of memories. Subjective associations and the resulting perceived metaphorical message, as long as they reflect individual experiences, need not therefore be adequate.

3. REALITY

Architecture – as a vehicle for collective memory – records collective memory in both intended and unintended artefacts. Two phenomena that reflect the universal nature of transience are creative translation and ubiquitous chance. The first – by inspiring intellectual exploration of new concepts in architecture – serves as a potential archive of resources to be drawn upon. The second is the chaos of a haphazard repository of unnecessary memories, a multifaceted collection of recollections of what is past and gone, carried over to those living today. A dying world of absent content transforms its material representation into a cemetery of matter, an archive of unnecessary things, a lapidarium of signs of remembrance, or into a redefined, new form of space in which material form houses content that is now different. Widespread, scattered lapidaria of architecture mark the past with out-of-context signs of defunct content: freestanding chimneys appearing out of nowhere, preserved façades of non-existent tenement buildings, cobbled streets converted into cycle paths, and town squares transformed into gardens. Reinterpreted for the present day, these cemeteries of meaning generally embody Baudrillard's four images of represented truth in architecture.

Both of these phenomena can be interpreted in various ways. The first possibility is a collection of past elements remaining in random dispersion, thereby exacerbating the chaos of a space that lacks meaningful organisation. The second is the subordination of the whole to contextual tectonics – the establishment of a concept of a consciously organised spatial structure, coherent with the new elements. The third is the use, as additional scenography, of this staffage constructed from elements of the past. They complement a deliberately organised space – distinct from them – with icons created from the recovered past. In each case, phenomena perceived in terms of content or the form of the matter are subject to interpretation depending on the social, historical and spatial context.

4. SUMMARY

When consciously developing an architectural concept, it is vital to create a new archetype for the designed object or urban development. In Heidegger's understanding of this process, it begins with construction in the supra-architectural sphere, the emanation of which is creation in the written record and in communication. This construction – whether it concerns new or existing objects – involves reinterpreting the meaning of space, its content and its matter.

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