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ARCHITECTURE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SILENCE[1]

ARCHITEKTURA A DOŚWIADCZENIE CISZY

Abstract

The phenomenon of silence, often mistakenly reduced to the concept of soundlessness, exhibits a polymorphic nature, correlating as much with the state of physical space as with the individual condition of the observer. Depending on these fleeting contexts, it may appear as a desirable phenomenon – a remedy for overload, a synonym for peace – or as an unwanted one, confronting the human being with the terror of emptiness. Penetrating the levels of human existence, silence influences the perception of architecture, which, as a "sensitive vessel," radiates images full of tension. Encounters with these images can soothe the viewer, encourage mindfulness, but also torment and sting. The conviction that silence interferes physically and non-physically with architecture prompts the authors of this publication to attempt to touch upon this phenomenon by capturing its unique facets as well as its intimate cognitive meanings. The study is based on the linguistic construct of the prepositions of silence, referring to the ways it is experienced in the built environment: Silence exists in Architecture – from, to, before...

Keywords: *silence, soundscape, the experience of architecture*

Streszczenie

Fenomen ciszy, mylnie redukowany do pojęcia bezdźwięku, wykazuje polimorficzny charakter, korelujący tyleż ze stanem przestrzeni fizycznej co z indywidualną kondycją obserwatora. W zależności od owych ulotnych kontekstów może jawić się jako zjawisko pożądane – remedium przeciążenia, synonim spokoju, bądź niechciane – konfrontujące człowieka z grozą pustki. Przenikając do poziomów ludzkiej egzystencji, cisza wpływa na odbiór architektury, która jako „wrażliwe naczynie" promieniuje pełnymi napięć obrazami. Spotkania z nimi mogą odbiorcę koić, zachęcać do uważności, ale również dręczyć, kłuć. Przekonanie o fizycznej i niefizycznej interferencji ciszy w architekturze skłoniła autorki niniejszej publikacji do próby dotknięcia tego fenomenu poprzez uchwycenie jego unikalnych twarzy, ale również intymnych znaczeń kognitywnych. Badanie oparto o lingwistyczny konstrukt prepozycji ciszy, odnoszący się do sposobów jej doświadczania w środowisku zbudowanym: istnieje w Architekturze Cisza – od, do, przed...

Słowa kluczowe: *cisza, doświadczanie architektury, pejzaż akustyczny*

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1. INTRODUCTION PART I
ARCHITECTURE AS A MULTIMODAL EXPERIENCE

In the light of the psychology of perception, cognitive science and neuroscience, the perception of architecture is a creative experience that goes beyond the sensory realm and encompasses the full range of human physical, mental and spiritual activity. Architectural experiences are built upon sensory impressions and perceptions, which are subject to further transformation at "higher" cognitive levels[2]. The recipient of architecture, as an active and creative agent, ascribes meanings to elements of space, rooted in existential experience[3]. The range of possibilities afforded by the human cognitive apparatus further encompasses the aesthetic experience of space, which extends beyond material components.

In the centuries-long discourse on perceiving the built environment, the sense of sight has been given primacy, as it is regarded as the primary medium for perceiving architectural phenomena. This approach, however, falls short in comprehensively encapsulating the intricacies and multifaceted nature of the architectural experience. Architectural scenes are, in essence, multi-threaded patchworks composed of multimodal elements: visual, auditory, haptic, olfactory. The recipient of Architecture is therefore not only an observer, but also a listener and a sensory perceiver, utilising the full potential of their own sensory apparatus. In the spectacle of Architecture, these modalities complement one another, interpenetrate, and even reinforce each other synergistically[4]. Consequently, all the senses provide multidimensional, synaesthetic architectural experiences.

2. INTRODUCTION PART II
SOUND AND SILENCE IN THE ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCE. THE STATE, SUBJECT, AIM AND METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The authors' research forms part of the field of so-called acoustic ecology, which complements the discipline of architecture with an auditory perspective. Architecture owes this perspective to pioneering acoustic research carried out by the team of the Canadian composer R.M. Schafer, in the 1970s. This concern seems particularly relevant today, given the unprecedented overload of urban soundscapes, which are filled with noise[5], leading to chronic overstimulation of users[6].

An awareness of the importance and relevance of these issues[7] motivates the authors to undertake research into silence, which is, in its most basic sense, a specific acoustic phenomenon experienced auditorily. The concept of silence primarily refers to the absence

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[2] A. Kłopotowska, *Doświadczanie przestrzeni w rehabilitacji osób z dysfunkcją wzroku. Sztuka a tyflorehabilitacja*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 2016, pp. 85–87.

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[4] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły,* Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012.

[5] R.M. Schafer, *Strojenie świata*, Wydawnictwo Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2025, pp. 414–415.

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[7] A. Sygulska, *Dźwięk w planowaniu urbanistycznym – wybrane zagadnienia*, "Przestrzeń i Forma" 2021, no 47, pp. 173, 175.

of sounds and noise, a state in which no sounds are heard or complete silence prevails[8]. The literature on the subject also offers other explanations that go beyond the "physical" nature of silence, such as: "a lack of reaction to something", "calm weather", "no news of someone"[9], and finally "(…) a state of relaxation of the mind and body undisturbed by any stimuli"[10].

The phenomenon of silence is an extremely fascinating subject, revealing its diverse nature and the multitude of ways in which it affects the observer. Silence can appear to be a desirable phenomenon – a remedy for overload, a synonym for tranquillity, harmony and inner balance. On the other hand, silence can be experienced as an uncomfortable situation, confronting a person with the dread of emptiness, boundlessness and loneliness[11]. In threatening situations, one may experience moments of auditory dissociation – a mental withdrawal, a muting of sounds, even though they continue to flow from the surroundings. Silence can also provide an opportunity to encounter spiritual beings – to experience beauty and even union with the *sacred* [12].

The belief in the physical and non-physical interference of Silence in Architecture prompts the authors to attempt to explore this phenomenon by capturing its unique facets, as well as its subtle cognitive meanings. The subject of the research is the experience of Silence in architectural space. The research was based on an original method involving the observation of this phenomenon through the prism of the linguistic construct of the preposition Silence[13], which refers to the various ways in which it is experienced within the built environment. These issues were examined in the context of auditory (acoustic and non-acoustic) Silence, as well as "Silence" – a metaphor experienced in a synaesthetic manner, involving the sense of sight.

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF AUDIO SILENCE IN AN ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

3.1. PRELIMINARY NOTE

Architecture is imbued with a polyphony of sounds that bring life and change to the images perceived by the eye[14]. Silence, too, is often both a component and an actor within the space of human habitation. Or rather: Silence occurs within the architectural environment, like everything else in life. Although the need for silence has a profound social dimension, the experience of it can be thoroughly subjective, linked to sensory sensitivity and the

[8] *Cisza*, "Słownik języka polskiego PWN", https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/cisza;2449472.html (access: 26.06.2026).
[9] *Ibidem*.
[10] I. Kabzińska, *O ciszy i hałasie, ich doświadczaniu, definiowaniu i sposobach opisywania*, "Etnografia Polska" 2018, vol. 62, no. 1–2, p. 9.
[11] R.M. Schafer, *Strojenie świata*, *op.cit*., pp. 239, 417.
[12] A. Karbasi, M. Talebi, *Phenomenological Silence as the Phenomenal Field of Dwelling in Architectural Phenomenology,* "Bagh-e Nazar" 2026, no 22, p. 60.
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[14] See: R.M. Schafer, *Muzyka środowiska*, trans. D. Gwizdalanka, "Res Facta" 1982, no 9.

psychophysical state of the individual listener. This phenomenon is intriguing because of the variety of auditory impressions that resonate (only seemingly silently) in cities, on streets, in squares, inside buildings and... in people's minds, because Silence can be a purely internal sensation. The authors of this text explore their own experiences of auditory Silence, convinced that Silence exists in Architecture - from, - to, - before, - after, - between.

3.2. SILENCE FROM

Silence from – a conscious desertion, an escape into silence from a place where nothing can be heard any more. Or from a place one no longer wishes to listen to, because it is tedious, exhausting, and grates on the ears. A longed-for absence of sound, the opposite of megaphone noise, of cacophony – the city's unbearable symphony. A side street – offering relief and a chance to catch one's breath after the claustrophobic experience of the crowds in the bustling Kazimierz Market Square. Auditory isolation – shutting out the tiresome, irritating music or the chatter of a talkative neighbour – with a single slam of soundproof windows. The "manners mode" switch – the strict etiquette of silence on the Japanese underground. A Sunday trip out of town, or perhaps even a radical move to the countryside. A ritual immersion – right up to your ears – in the soothing murmur of bumblebees and grass. Sleepy Augustów, regaining its strength after the summer's tourist frenzy.

3.3. SILENCE TO

Silence to – this is the silence that creates opportunities and a backdrop for life-giving, soothing experiences, for connection with nature, with another person, with myself. It is like a vessel to be filled with some calm, quiet activity, thoughts, imaginings, a dream. A respite, a pause, mindfulness, contemplation – the sort of silence one would like to melt into, to breathe in its rhythm. Muffled conversations, the intimacy of a whisper between two people in a park gazebo. An epiphany, a sudden flash of insight in a mind quietened by a stroll, or the Silence of adoration – the sacredness of duration, eternity, the Absolute in a city cathedral. You are afraid to disturb it with a careless gesture or a sigh, for it will carry on endlessly, a steady rumble of reverberation. There is also the silence for concentration and work, found in libraries, lecture theatres and schools. Small silence in a museum or a place of remembrance. Or health-promoting silence for convalescence – in hospitals or therapists' offices. Finally, quiet hours in a hypermarket and a school without ear-piercing bells, so that someone might at last enter without fear.

3.4. SILENCE BEFORE

Silence before – we say: "the calm before the storm", meaning an apparent calm, when in fact it is a state of suspense, full of electric tension. Uncertainty, vigilance, holding one's breath whilst awaiting an important diagnosis in a doctor's surgery. A stifling atmosphere and fear of what is about to begin – a violent outburst of a storm, a crisis, a conflict, destruction. The eerie, spine-chilling silence of the shelter – prepared just in case. Or the silence of the backrooms, hidden for now, yet ready to fill with human screams. The city, still quiet, protecting whatever it can from the invasion of rowdy football hooligans. The city shopping centre at nine o'clock, raising its shuttered shopfronts, through which a buzzing human flood is about

to pour in. Or, conversely – someone's hopeful anticipation of the sleepy resort coming to life once more, ahead of the next season.

3.5. SILENCE AFTER

Silence after – is always an auditory void left in the wake of something. A trace of a life that once resounded, now extinguished forever or merely for a time. Such silence may sound like non-existence, a void, an absence. A memory of intensity, vitality, energy – the very essence of existence. A deserted municipal stadium once the human tide has poured out of it, or Expo Milano, but a year later. The clamour of shrill market women and the clatter of horses' hooves on the cobblestones have long since faded, and today there are only silent stones in the Sienny Market Square in Białystok… Sometimes a void remains in the memory of hearing, because something terrible has happened. The lifeless monuments to the victims of Vesuvius, merged with the apocalyptic landscape of Pompeii, and the silent shadows in Hiroshima… In spaces forcibly silenced, one is almost tempted to lower one's voice, for new sounds seem to ring out of tune, out of place. Sorrow, nostalgia and melancholy – the sacred silence in a city cemetery for ordinary, non-saintly people, perhaps a little too talkative in life. The empty room of a grown-up child. A sense of regret that it is so quiet here…

3.6. SILENCE BETWEEN

Silence between – it is a rhythm, "music", like the steady pulse of the city – daily, weekly, yearly. Intervals of calm, between what has already fallen silent and what has not yet faded away. The moment after and the moment before, like a countdown to something important whilst holding one's breath. A fleeting sense of relief between one wail of an alarm siren and the next in bleeding Ukraine, the roar of vehicles set off, or the dull rumble of a hammer – when you have to cover your ears. Plunging into the depths of a tunnel beneath a busy junction. A block of flats falling silent on a Sunday, between one neighbourly row and the next. The Covid lockdown and a bewildered, deserted city, evacuated online. The fading twilight outside the window – a harbinger of the birds' chorus that will soon herald another morning.

4. ARCHITECTURE AS A METAPHOR FOR SILENCE

4.1. PRELIMINARY NOTE

Architecture shapes our perception of events whilst also serving as a metaphor for existence. It imbues ordinary physical objects with deeper meanings. It elevates human experiences to the level of allegory and symbolism. It draws inspiration from what is perceived by the senses, and thus also from silence, which it deliberately imitates and reflects like an echo. This "Silence" can become the building block of compositions, forms and narratives, and can even embody the essence of an architectural object. Although no longer acoustic, it continues to resonate through the visual language of Architecture. This can be seen in urban planning concepts, on building façades, in interiors, and even in the smallest details. It, too, can be "Silence" – from, to, before, after, between...

4.2. “SILENCE” FROM

“Silence” from – a conscious cleansing, a respite for the eyes – from kitsch, sameness, the constant repetitions of the “decorated shack”, changing its costumes. Exile from the stifling “law of the Frame”. An escape from excess, glitz, and the Baroque *horror vacui*, all the way to the very edge of the spectrum – into uncompromising modernism, which is deliberately reductive. An international manifesto of silence, stripping away superfluous ornamentation to reveal bare, flat walls and glazing integrated into bands. Minimalist panes of silence – calm and soothing, in contrast to the clamour of historicisms, mannerisms and “ducks”. It is also a cleansing of the city from visual chaos, cluttered views and façades, and screaming advertisements. The largely ineffective prohibitions and mandates of local law, attempting to silence, or to take away the voice of that which should have fallen silent long ago. Or the painstaking removal of the accretions of time from a monument thick with layers, so that the beauty of its proportions, hidden beneath, might be revealed.

4.3. “SILENCE” TO

“Silence” to – is the art of building from nothing – glass, proportions, moods. Architectural virtuosity in subtraction, in getting to the very essence, the core of form, from which nothing can be taken away. Moderation, restraint, clarity of composition. The Japanese concept of amor vacui, a celebration of the non-existent, which most beautifully expresses what is important yet left unsaid, hidden between the lines. The silence of the boundless White of Campo Baezy, like an untouched Arctic landscape, or Richard Meier’s light white-on-white. It is also a silence – a harmony that balances the masses or forces of architectural matter. The silence of closed, cohesive, finite compositional plans, or of a linear form flowing towards the horizon. Silence structured to allow the poetry of the material to resonate – the subtlety of wood, the austerity of steel, the restraint of concrete. Smooth, without a single wrinkle, the silk of concrete by Tadao Ando. An opening onto the market square – a sweeping view of the river valley.

4.4. “SILENCE” BEFORE

“Silence” before – this is the perceptual foreground. Preparation; focusing one’s attention on observing something important. The guiding plane or directional line in the Barcelona pavilion – a flawlessly marked-out trajectory for the searching eye. A space free from distractions, allowing one to highlight an accent, the tension of forms, an encounter between volumes, or to quiet one texture in order to suddenly focus on another. To examine a wall, scrape away flaking paint, touch the trace of formwork, or physically explore a stain – as in a brutalist theatre of silence and the voice of matter. Sometimes a path that prepares one for the perception of a place, heightening the sense of excitement and anticipation. The monumental staircases leading up to the entrance to a theatre or opera house, or the Egyptian temple axis, offering no promise of an encounter with the *sacrum*. An empty plot or a gap in the building line, awaiting fulfilment.

4.5. “SILENCE” AFTER

“Silence” after – something that was once a complete, finished composition, but today is nothing more than a stump. Bricked-up entrances, distorted window patterns, like knocked-out

teeth. Modernist façades stripped of neon signs long since obsolete. In Łódź, yet another gap in the street frontage, left by a collapsed tenement block. Such silence can be like the echo of a scream, reverberating off the walls of Radogoszcz Station, or the silence of the empty chairs on Ghetto Heroes' Square in Kraków. A dramatic, ominous void, filled with silence, designed as a memorial to the World Trade Centre, and which has, with a light touch, filled the void left by the devastated, beautiful Supersam. A poignant, static Silence – a sublime solitude in a frozen frame by Louis Kahn. As if watching one's own life in reverse, from the perspective of the passing years. The sorrowful Silence of an ageing monument, for whose conservation there is a lack of funds and courage. Forgotten values, still smouldering quietly within the decaying details and rotting wood of the joinery.

4.6. "SILENCE" BETWEEN

"Silence" between – there is a void which takes on a shape, or which establishes that shape. Invisible matter – the positive, not the negative, aspect of space. It is the potential of a pause, a halt, a distance or a gap between elements. At the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, most of what happens takes place in between. The gaps between the pillars of a classical colonnade. A fleeting pause; a game of appearing and disappearing. It is a spectacle of light and shadow that conceals and reveals views, highlighting what is beautiful and worthy of attention whilst offering glimpses into dust-covered corners at times. The tedium of the walls in a sequence of identical hall of residence doors, or the invigorating rhythm of gardens amongst a row of repetitive houses. The charm, or the monotony, of a row of trees, the rhythm of street lamps, planters and benches. The Architectural Silence of symmetry and order.

5. THE DICHOTOMY OF ARCHITECTURAL SILENCE

5.1. PRELIMINARY NOTE

The facets of Silence described here have their own nuances, gradients and contexts. There is an objective, physical, real form of Silence, and there is also a subjective, internalised form of silence that occurs when an individual shuts out background sounds. The phenomenon of silence can envelop us gently or overwhelm us with great intensity, whilst its nature may be rooted in the natural world or entirely artificial. It may appear as the boundless Absolute, or as the comfort of one's own home. An acoustic refuge or a soundless oppression. Silence, even the densest kind, never stands still – it vibrates, pulsates, swells or fades, constantly transforming. It triggers various emotions within us – it can be restrained, clear, dramatic, lonely. Each of us may experience silence differently. There are therefore no two Silences that are the same. At the same time, however, the authors recognise the dual consequences of Silence in the architectural experience. The obverse and reverse of Silence in Architecture – Non-existence or Form, woven from the same antimatter.

5.2. THE APHONIA OF SILENCE IN THE ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCE

Such silence is usually caused by some factor – something unwanted, sudden, unexpected. Something that alters the established order, disrupting the spatial *status quo*. This silence

serves to reduce Architecture to its purely visual aspect. The effect of the piece is to render the architecture incomplete, stripped bare, and mute – akin to a film without sound. In such experiences, the absence, the void, the gap, the emptiness of silent concrete, wood and stone is revealed. Abandoned structures, deserted houses, ghost towns. Sadness, longing, dread – the tragedy of Silence within an architectural setting designed for life. In architecture, too, this is a failed silence. Unfinished, almost neglected walls – "side façades" – lacking any decorative elements, windows or doors. They haunt with their emptiness and seem to be waiting for some kind of conclusion, some filling. It is no wonder that sometimes they practically beg for the "creativity" of a local vandal. In the unnatural world of architecture, just as in nature, there cannot be empty emptiness…

5.3. A SYMPHONY OF SILENCE IN THE ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCE

This kind of Silence is not a void, a soundless frame, or an anechoic chamber within Architecture. Instead, it is a synaesthetic composition that requires attentive listening, with a sharp ear (or other senses). Such Silence is a silence that fills Architecture, like a vessel. It creates spaces for experiencing intimacy and closeness – even to the point where you can hear a person's whisper or the beating of their heart. There is still never enough of it in our overstimulated cities, yet we need to return to self-awareness, to breathing, to being grounded. It must be designed, nurtured and restored – so that we can find ourselves again. Metaphorically, it is also the Silence that gives voice to Architecture itself, allowing it to resonate, whilst enabling the viewer to discover the subtle codes of accents, dominant elements and the rhythms of composition. A masterful ability to create "out of nothing" – glass, proportions, empty spaces and atmospheres. An ethereal, subtle polyphony, the "song of Silence"[15], a catalyst for inner emotion.

6. SUMMARY AND FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This text sought to encapsulate a phenomenon of Silence in the context of architectural experience. As demonstrated, the language of Silence, derived from acoustics, also extends into the realm of associated non-acoustic and even non-auditory experiences – synaesthetic cognitive acts experienced through sight. The method of observation was through the prism of five cognitive categories, based on the prepositions: - from, - to, - before, - after and - between are employed to indicate the relationship between two nouns or verbs. This methodological approach facilitated the conceptualisation of the elusive and ambiguous phenomenon of silence within a range of exemplary spatio-temporal contexts. These variants are presented as diverse ways of interpreting Silence and as determinants of meaning, ascribed within specific spatio-temporal contexts.

The authors' primary focus was on auditory Silence, which they defined as both an objective, measurable acoustic state of the architectural environment and a subjective, internally experienced state of inner stillness, created by the recipient's psyche and mind, independent of the actual acoustic conditions.

In the subsequent phase of the study, the nature of non-auditory Silence was examined. This manifests itself visually and constitutes, as it were, a shadow and a metaphor for the

[15] J. Mishra, V. Shrivastava, A.K. Singh, *Silence of Architecture*, "International Journal on Emerging Technologies" 2017, no 8(1), special iss., p. 68.

phonic experiences described above. The researchers conducted a similar review of Silence: - from, - to, - before, - after, - between. This study established a correlation between experiential phonics and internalised metaphors, as manifested in architectural compositions.

These variants, identified in both stages, collectively unveiled the dual nature of experiences of Silence: Silence – Voicelessness, which impoverishes the experience of Architecture and Silence – Symphony, which enriches encounters with Architecture with valuable phonic elements, or para-acoustic references drawn from cognitive ways of experiencing phonic phenomena.

As the authors sought to demonstrate, the experience of Silence in Architecture, much like the experience of its metaphorical counterpart, can take on diverse tones and dimensions. It is evident that Silence, by permeating every level of human existence, exerts a profound influence on the perception of Architecture. Architecture, in its capacity as a "sensitive vessel,"[16] radiates images characterised by tension. Viewers have been shown to experience a range of emotions, from soothing and uplifting to tormenting and boring, upon encountering these images.

If we accept the above reflections as true, it can be deduced that silence does not manifest as a passive state of space, but rather as an active and creative human experience of the architectural environment. The identity of Silence, therefore, is expressed not so much in the decibels of appropriately reduced, pleasant sound, but in the emotional, sensitive experience of this phenomenon – through the full range of human cognition.

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