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HABITARE – INTENTIO – EXPERIENTIA. THE ARCHETYPE OF DWELLING IN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE – TWO NARRATIVES

HABITARE – INTENTIO – EXPERIENTIA. ARCHETYP ZAMIESZKIWANIA W ARCHITEKTURZE W DWÓCH NARRACJACH

Abstract

In the phenomenological tradition, architecture is understood not merely as a visual object but as an environment experienced through all the senses. In *On Adam's House in Paradise*, J. Rykwert demonstrates that the primitive hut is less a historical origin of architecture than its enduring archetype. The methodological core of this paper comprises two architectural narratives. The first is *Villa Aalto* in Helsinki (1936) – a house designed by the architect for himself and his wife Aino, an example of scenario-based design where the architect knows the user. The second is *the Barbican Estate* in London (Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, 1982), a multifunctional megastructure proposing a new archetype of dwelling. The two narratives are examined across three levels of analysis: the design level (*Intentio*), the experiential level (*Experientia*), and the existential level (*Habitare*), in which dwelling is always an act of transcending the designed scenario.

Keywords: *archetype of dwelling, scenario-based design*

Streszczenie

W tradycji fenomenologicznej architektura rozumiana jest nie tylko jako obiekt wizualny, lecz jako środowisko doświadczane wszystkimi zmysłami. W książce *On Adam's House in Paradise*, J. Rykwert dowodzi, że prymitywna chata stanowi nie tylko historyczny początek architektury, ale również jej trwały archetyp. Rdzeń metodologiczny artykułu tworzą dwie narracje architektoniczne. Pierwsza to *Villa Aalto* w Helsinkach (1936) – dom zaprojektowany przez architekta dla siebie i żony Aino, przykład projektowania scenariuszowego, w którym architekt zna użytkownika. Druga to osiedle *Barbican* w Londynie (Chamberlin, Powell oraz Bon, 1982) – wielofunkcyjna megastruktura przedstawiająca nowy archetyp zamieszkiwania. Obie narracje analizowane są na trzech poziomach: poziom projektowy (*Intentio*), poziom doświadczenia (*Experientia*) oraz poziom egzystencjalny (*Habitare*), na którym zamieszkiwanie jest zawsze aktem przekroczenia przyjętego scenariusza.

Słowa kluczowe: *archetyp zamieszkiwania, projektowanie scenariuszowe*

1. INTRODUCTION

Habitare (dwelling as an existential act), *Intentio* (intention as a design concept), and *Experientia* (the user's sensory experience) – these three Latin concepts establish the framework for further reflection on architecture, understood not merely as a formal object, but as a space of experience. This article seeks to present scenario-based design as a narrative practice in architecture, one that enables the architect to shape a sequence of future user experiences. The fundamental question that arises is: what is the relationship between human beings and the space they inhabit? In his essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Martin Heidegger answers this question as follows: 'When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them, space (…)'[1]. Human beings inhabit space, and thereby create it as a place.

Contemporary architectural design is frequently dominated by the sense of sight. However, architecture is not merely a visual object; it is an experiential environment in which one dwells. When discussing the multisensory experience of architecture, one cannot overlook Juhani Pallasmaa, who devoted a significant portion of his work to haptics in an effort to shift the experiential weight from vision to the sense of touch. In his seminal book, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, he writes the following about the senses in architecture: 'One can distinguish several types of architecture based on the sensory modalities that dominate them. Alongside the prevailing architecture of the eye, there is a haptic architecture of the muscle and the skin'[2]. Pallasmaa does not entirely dismiss the role of vision; rather, he rejects its hegemony. In his reflections, he attributes specific dominant sensory realms to various leading architects. According to Pallasmaa, the architecture of Le Corbusier and Richard Meier places sight on a pedestal, Hans Scharoun's architecture is dominated by hapticity, while Steven Holl and Alvar Aalto ground their designs in an acknowledgement of the 'embodied human condition'[3]. In his groundbreaking work, *The Architect's Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture*, Harry F. Mallgrave shares the observation that while architects may rationalise design variables in their creative approach, people will continue to perceive buildings emotionally, through their senses [4].

Writing about scenario-based design, Stewart Brand opens his text with the assertion: 'All buildings are predictions. All predictions are wrong'. He then goes on to argue that buildings can be designed and utilised in such a way that it does not matter in the long run whether these predictions turn out to be incorrect[5].

Scenario-based design posits that the architect creates a narrative about future dwelling – the utilisation of space. However, the sequence of functional solutions is formulated

[1] M. Heidegger, *Budować, mieszkać, myśleć. Eseje wybrane* [*Building Dwelling Thinking. Selected Essays*], trans. K. Michalski, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1977, pp. 328–329, cited in: Joanna Kusiak (ed.), *Miasto-Zdrój. Architektura i programowanie*, Bęc Zmiana Foundation, Warszawa 2013.

[2] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły* [*The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*], trans. Michał Choptiany, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012, p. 81.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 82.

[4] H.F. Mallgrave, *The Architect's Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 188–206.

[5] S. Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*, Penguin Books, New York 1995, p. 178.

differently for a future user known to the architect than for an anonymous occupant. This article examines these cases through two distinct architectural narratives: the Aalto House and Studio in Helsinki (1936) and the Barbican Estate in London (1965–1982), a multifunctional megastructure that constituted a new archetype of dwelling at the time.

2. THE ARCHETYPE OF DWELLING

In his work *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, Joseph Rykwert demonstrated that the notion of the 'first house' as a primitive shelter, from which architecture originated, is an enduring archetype, a conceptual figure to which architectural theory continually returns[6]. The concept of the archetype serves as a cultural and design code, a specific point of reference against which the architect defines their design intention. Architecture does not merely solve technical problems; it responds to the primal need for dwelling in both a physical and existential context. The act of building is simultaneously a rational and a natural act, stemming from the observation of how animals construct their habitats, nests, and shelters. Gottfried Semper considered the hearth to be a fundamental element of architecture, the primary point of reference around which human settlements formed. According to Semper's philosophy, the home begins with the act of gathering and cooking, a social and existential ritual[7]. Christian Norberg-Schulz introduced the concept of *genius loci* – the spirit of place – from Roman mythology into architectural language, where it became firmly established. He argued that every place possesses a unique identity and atmosphere. In this context, dwelling signifies an identification with a place, a sense of belonging, and the capacity to understand one's surroundings. A home is not merely a material shelter, but a form of rooting oneself in the world. The two architectural narratives presented below, Villa Aalto and the Barbican Estate, realise the act of dwelling through radically different forms, scales, and design scenarios.

3. TWO NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE

This chapter examines two architectural works that differ in nearly every dimension: scale, context, materiality, functional programme, and the relationship between designer and user. The first narrative focuses on Alvar and Aino Aalto's own house in the Munkkiniemi district of Helsinki (1934–1936). It is a space where the designer and the user are the same person. Aalto designed the house together with his wife, Aino, who was also a designer and architect; thus, the design intention here is as specific as possible. The second narrative centres on the Barbican Estate in London, designed by the firm Chamberlin, Powell & Bon and constructed between 1965 and 1982. This is a flagship example of a multifunctional megastructure designed not for a specific user, but for an abstract collective of residents. Here, the design intention is deliberately general: the architects established a functional framework within which the act of dwelling was left to unfold.

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[6] J. Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise. The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, The MIT Press, Cambridge–London 1981.

[7] G. Semper, *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst. Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Baukunde*, Braunschweig, Dresden 1851.

3.1. ALVAR AALTO'S OWN HOUSE

Intentio: Alvar Aalto's own house at 20 Riihitie in Munkkiniemi combines a residential space with an architectural studio. The young Aalto asserted: 'The only proper goal of architecture is: build naturally. Don't overdo it. Don't do anything without good reason. Everything superfluous turns ugly with time'[8]. The Aalto House exemplifies a restrained architecture, deeply embedded in its context, whose interiors are shaped by carefully framed views. In his design process, Aalto focuses on the relationship between the object, the architecture, and the user. He consciously engages all the senses within his architecture, prioritising the physical encounter between the object and the user rather than merely its visual and aesthetic aspects. His architecture and design work reflect a haptic approach through the interplay of textures, sound absorption, and the modulation of light and shadow[9]. A focus on detail, texture,



Ill. 1. View of the living room from the ground floor of Alvar and Aino Aalto's house at 20 Riihitie in the Munkkiniemi district. In the background is the studio, access to which was separated by a sliding wooden partition, photo by Anna Berbesz-Wyrodek

[8] Alvar Aalto Foundation (ed.), *The Aalto House, Helsinki*, Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2025, p. 5,
[9] J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–120.

the tactile connection between the hand and the object, and the sequence of spatial frames lies at the core of Alvar Aalto's design intention. Each interior constitutes a distinct narrative act, in which functionality meets refined aesthetics and sensory experience. Peter Reed, curator of the 1998 MoMA exhibition titled *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, highlights his exceptional mastery in handling materials, light, and space. The exhibition itself drew directly on one of his seminal lectures from 1955, *Between Humanism and Materialism*, which outlined the fundamental principles underlying his design philosophy[10].

Experientia: Upon entering the home of Alvar and Aino Aalto, one feels, at the threshold, a transition into the intimate sphere of its inhabitants. Although the house is currently owned by the Alvar Aalto Foundation, the materials, furniture, and everyday objects appear as if they had been placed there just yesterday by the former residents. Aalto's philosophy, grounded in humanism and a profound respect for natural materials, is evident in every functional sequence of the building. What a visitor experiences first and foremost is the maximum use



Ill. 2. View from the ground-floor living room toward the green patio. Large windows admit natural light and frame views of the exterior, photo by Anna Berbesz-Wyrodek

[10] P. Reed, *Alvar Aalto. Between Humanism and Materialism*, https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1998/aalto/ (access: 15.07.2026).

of natural light. The windows literally frame the outdoors, creating distinct visual sequences in every room. The living room, with its view of the green patio, constitutes one of the initial spatial experiences within the house. Another significant aspect of the experience is the variation in floor levels between specific rooms. The main workspace, featuring a mezzanine, is elevated a few steps above the living room floor. The library, in turn, is situated higher than the communal workspace. This spatial arrangement offers an intriguing experience when viewed from the perspective of contemporary architectural design, which is typically oriented toward barrier-free accessibility.



Ill. 3. The library, constituting the highest point of the ground floor, featuring a private staircase that allows for an "escape" from the rest of the household, photo by Anna Berbesz-Wyrodek

Habitare: The ground floor housed a living room and a dining room, along with adjacent sanitary facilities. The workspace, which originally served as a studio before Aalto constructed a separate office building, is separated from the living area by a sliding partition. The living room, in turn, is separated from the dining room by a curtain made of a light, natural fabric. Such spatial devices, which simultaneously divide and connect individual rooms, draw direct inspiration from Japanese architecture, which profoundly fascinated both Alvar and Aino. The kitchen constitutes a separate space, partitioned from the dining room by sliding

doors. The room divisions are arranged in such a way that it feels as though the designer is guiding the visitor through a sequence of specific framed views. The simplicity, coupled with a meticulous attention to detail and fully functional interiors and furniture, makes the observer feel as though they are experiencing a remarkably complete, holistic space. To this day, the Aalto house remains a source of inspiration and fascination for many architecture and design enthusiasts.

3.2. BARBICAN ESTATE – THE HOME OF THE ANONYMOUS RESIDENT

Intentio: The Barbican represents one of the most significant architectural projects in post-World War II Great Britain. The architects designed a multifunctional urban estate across varying levels, integrating residential towers, terrace blocks, elevated walkways and foot-bridges, gardens, artificial lakes, schools, and libraries. Developed over a 14-hectare site, the project encompasses apartments of diverse typologies and sizes, accommodating a population of 6,500 residents. The three founding partners of the firm, Peter (Joe) Chamberlin, Geoffry Powell, and Christoph Bon, established their joint design practice after Powell won the 1952 design competition for the Golden Lane Estate, which subsequently paved the way for the realisation of the Barbican project.



Ill. 4. The Labyrinths of the Barbican, photo by Anna Berbesz-Wyrodek

The ambition of the project was to create a fragment of the city that would celebrate urbanity in functional, formal, architectural, and social terms. The core idea was to draw residents back to high-density living in the very heart of the city. What is remarkable about the Barbican is that it was never intended to be merely an ordinary housing estate, but rather a community built around culture, cosmopolitanism, and the arts[11].

Experientia: The Barbican attracts and disorients. Specific frames, views, and narrative acts unfold for the visitor at every turn, at times overwhelming them with the sheer scale of the residential towers, at others opening up spaces that may evoke agoraphobia. The spatial experience here differs fundamentally between the resident, for whom the Barbican is a home and the setting of daily life, and the visitor, who arrives temporarily for cultural and recreational purposes. The materials are raw, on the verge of Brutalism. The bush-hammered concrete forming the building facades contrasts with the ceramic paving of the public squares.



Ill. 5. Artificial lakes, green niches, and the various levels of the Barbican, photo by Anna Berbesz-Wyrodek

[11] J. Alison, A. Ferrari (eds.), *Barbican: Life, History, Architecture*, Barbican Art Gallery, London 2014, pp. 6–25.

The environment of the Barbican invites exploration, only to quickly disorient the user and cause them to lose their way within its bounds. The space, conceived as monumental, becomes internally labyrinthine; its walkways, footbridges, and building entrances often defy intuition. This narrative holds value, in part, as a truly unique spatial experience. Greenery serves as a vital, complementary element of the Barbican, including gardens on elevated terraces, internal green courtyards, and an artificial lake surrounded by vegetation. Together, these elements create an enclave of tranquillity and nature in the heart of one of Europe's noisiest and most densely built cities.

Habitare: The Barbican, a megastructure designed as a repeatable system for an abstract urban collective, has over the years become one of the most sought-after residential addresses in London. Resident turnover here is extremely low, with many families having lived there for decades. Evolving from a social experiment, the Barbican has transformed into one of London's most expensive residential enclaves. It encompasses a full spectrum of dwelling, from the sense of community that comes with inhabiting such a unique location in London, to profound individualisation, where apartments originally designed for an unspecified user have been transformed into highly unique living spaces. Today, every apartment is different, filled with personal objects, furniture, artworks, and the results of numerous adaptations.

4. SUMMARY

This article has attempted to interpret two radically different architectural projects through the lens of a model based on the *Intentio – Experientia – Habitare* relationship. Both approaches possess their own strengths as well as inherent limitations. Every design scenario, regardless of its degree of specificity, represents a projection of events as imagined by the architect. At the level of *Experientia*, the Aalto House provides an experience of intimacy, natural materials, light, and details tailored to the human scale. The Barbican Estate, on the other hand, offers an experience of intensity through a scale that vastly exceeds human proportions, raw materials, and non-intuitive spatial circulation. Architectural experience is therefore neither one-dimensional nor merely a property of the architectural object itself; rather, it is a relationship that unfolds between the user and the space, assuming a distinct form in every instance.

References

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