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GRZEGORZ TWARDOWSKI
ORCID: 0000-0001-6518-7580
PK Krakow University of Technology, Poland

IS BUILDING A CONDITION OF ARCHITECTURE? ON UNREALIZED ARCHITECTURE, THE IDEA, MATTER, AND EXPERIENCE OF IMAGINED SPACE

CZY BUDOWANIE JEST WARUNKIEM ARCHITEKTURY? O ARCHITEKTURZE NIEZREALIZOWANEJ, IDEI, MATERII I DOŚWIADCZENIU PRZESTRZENI WYOBRAŻONEJ

Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine whether material realization constitutes a necessary condition for the existence of architecture. The study analyzes selected theoretical concepts, unrealized architectural projects, and modes of architectural representation through drawings, models, and images, relating them to the problem of architectural experience. The research indicates that architecture can exist beyond the material building as an idea, a project, and an imagined spatial environment. Building should be understood as one of the ways of realizing architecture rather than as a condition of its existence. Unrealized architecture constitutes a legitimate field of architectural experience, reflection, and spatial design.

Keywords: *architecture, design, experience, imagination, space*

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie, czy materialna realizacja stanowi warunek konieczny istnienia architektury. Analizie poddano wybrane koncepcje teoretyczne, projekty architektury niezrealizowanej oraz sposoby jej przedstawiania w rysunku, modelu i obrazie, odnosząc je do problemu doświadczenia architektonicznego. Badanie wskazuje, że architektura może istnieć również poza materialnym budynkiem jako idea, projekt i wyobrażona przestrzeń. Budowanie należy traktować jako jeden ze sposobów urzeczywistniania architektury, a nie jako warunek jej istnienia. Architektura niezrealizowana stanowi pełnoprawny obszar doświadczenia, refleksji i projektowania przestrzeni.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, doświadczenie, projekt, przestrzeń, wyobraźnia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture is usually associated with building. There is a building, therefore there is architecture; there is no building, only a design, a drawing, a model, or a vision. This understanding seems obvious, because architecture, unlike many other art forms, is connected to matter, structure, and physical presence in space. We can enter a building, touch its walls,

feel its scale, hear the sound of our own footsteps, see how light transforms the interior. Building, therefore, seems not only a way of materializing architecture but also a condition for its existence. However, if architecture begins earlier – in the idea, design, drawing, and imagination of space – the unrealized project becomes an independent form of thinking about architecture, one that requires no material confirmation to exist as its specific, albeit incomplete, state.

The history of architecture provides many examples that challenge the simple relationship between architecture and construction. The designs of Leonardo da Vinci, Étienne-Louis Boullée, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, the visions of Archigram, and Superstudio never had to be realized to enter the history of architecture. Their significance stems precisely from the fact that they created the possibility of thinking about space differently. Architecture, therefore, need not be solely what can be experienced directly through the body; it can also encompass what is experienced through the imagination. Space does not need to have material walls to be conceived, defined, and presented as architectural space. An architectural drawing not only represents a future building but, in a sense, establishes its possible space. However, not every fantasy about a building is architecture. To speak of unrealized architecture, a specific organization of space is necessary: relationships, scale, boundaries, directions of movement, hierarchy, and composition. Architecture may remain fiction, but it cannot be a fiction devoid of spatial order.

2. IS BUILDING A CONDITION OF ARCHITECTURE?

The question of the origins of architecture leads to the classic definition by Vitruvius. In his theory, architecture is defined as the art of building[1], and subsequent traditions developed it primarily through the relationship between idea, structure, and matter. This definition seems natural: since architecture is associated with the creation of buildings, construction can be considered its fundamental distinguishing feature. However, if construction is treated as a necessary condition, we must answer a number of difficult questions. Is a competition design that won first prize but was never realized architecture? Should a structure whose foundations were begun, but whose concept was changed during construction and ultimately abandoned, also be considered architecture? Does a drawing depicting a space that will never be built belong to the history of architecture merely as a document, or is it an architectural work in itself? This problem was posed with remarkable clarity by Boullée, who notes that construction was neither the purpose nor the cause of architecture, but rather a means of its realization. The true source of architecture lies earlier – in conception and composition[2]. Boullée formulates his critique of the traditional definition in an unambiguous manner: "What is architecture? Would I define it, as Vitruvius would, as the art of building? Certainly not. There's a serious flaw in this definition; Vitruvius takes the effect for the cause. The conception of a work precedes its execution."[3]

[1] Witruwiusz, *O architekturze ksiąg dziesięć*, PWN, Warszawa 1956, p. 24.

[2] R. Neri, *Oparte na wiedzy*, "Pretekst. Zeszyty Zakładu Architektury Mieszkaniowej i Kompozycji Architektonicznej" 2019, no. 9, p. 50.

[3] É.-L. Boullée, *Architecture: Essay on art*, Hermann, Paris 1968, Italian ed. *Architettura. Saggio sull'arte*, trans. C. Casonato, Marsilio, Venezia 1967, pp. 55, 151; cit. in: A. Monestiroli, *Tryglif i Metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o Architekturze*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2008, p. 23

This statement is crucial for the following discussion. Boullée reverses the traditional cause-and-effect order. Building is not the cause of architecture, but its effect. This does not mean, of course, that Boullée rejects materiality. His considerations concern, after all, the composition of masses, light and shadow, and the relationships between building elements[4]. However, the sequence is crucial. Concept precedes execution. If so, then architecture must, in a sense, exist before the building. Boullée himself is the best proof of this thesis. His monumental designs, including Newton's famous *cenotaph*, were never realized. Therefore, we cannot enter their interiors or experience them in the way a building would. We cannot verify the actual effects of light, acoustics, or scale. And yet, these designs remain among the most important works of architectural thought. Simply put: building is a way of realizing architecture, but not a condition for its existence. This does not mean, of course, that matter is unimportant. That would be equally wrong. Architecture without matter is a different kind of experience than architecture built. The problem lies elsewhere: identifying architecture with its material end and ignoring everything that comes before it.

3. ARCHITECTURE BEGINS BEFORE CONSTRUCTION

Dariusz Kozłowski describes architecture as a world of ideas, images, drawings and imagination – a world existing both *in the imagination of the creator and the passer-by*[5]. Architecture understood in this way doesn't begin with brick, concrete, or steel. It begins with the establishment of spatial relationships, which can be recorded on paper, presented in a model, or merely conceived. An architect can also "build" through drawing. Paper then becomes the site upon which a spatial world is created. In this sense, architectural drawing is not merely a preparation for construction. It allows for the communication of information regarding geometry, structure, dimensions, and the organization of space. But the history of architecture demonstrates that drawing can also possess autonomous artistic and cognitive value. For Dariusz Kozłowski, the ability to "build on paper" is particularly important. Drawing is not merely a stage preceding construction; it can be an act of creating space. A drawing not only represents space – it can establish it as a possibility. It is not a physical space; however, one can enter it mentally. By reading the layout of space, the viewer reconstructs possible movement, scale, and relationships between elements, thus constructing in their imagination a space that physically does not exist. Architecture thus occurs between notation and imagination. Unrealized architecture is not an "unfinished building," but a spatial possibility recorded in a specific medium. This is the essence of "building on paper." A plan, a cross-section, a perspective, a model, or a text all function in different ways, but each can contribute to the creation of an architectural world. "Building on paper" is therefore not a metaphor, but a real creative activity, though its material is different from that of a building. Paper is not concrete. A drawing is not a building. A line is not a wall. But the idea of space can be present in all of them.

Recognizing an unrealized project as architecture should not lead to a juxtaposition of idea and matter. This is not to say that a building is unnecessary, and that the idea alone is sufficient to create architecture. Architecture arises from the relationship between what is

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] D. Kozłowski, *7 przypadków architektury*, "Pretekst. Zeszyty Zakładu Architektury Mieszkaniowej i Kompozycji Architektonicznej" 2004, no. 1, p. 17.

conceived and what is material. Of particular importance here are Marcin Charciarek's reflections on the "search for an idea", leading to the "discovery of matter", and the process of "materializing an idea". The author points to "the belief in the existence of a semantic relationship between the ideological message of architecture and its implementation in the physical materia [...][6]." This approach avoids the simple opposition of idea versus matter. In architecture, the more appropriate definition is idea versus matter. Matter influences the way an idea is realized, and the specific material defines its boundaries[7]. In this sense, an architectural design is not yet a building, but neither is it something entirely independent of it. A design contains potential materiality. This is precisely why an unrealized design can be understood as architecture in the pre-materialization phase. And here another contradiction emerges: a design is a possibility, a building is a fact; a design anticipates experience, a building actually evokes it; a design can be changed at any moment, a building is subject to the laws of matter. However, this does not mean that one is architecture and the other is not. These are two different states of the same domain. A building is one possible outcome of this relationship, but it does not exhaust its meaning.

4. ARCHITECTURE THAT WASN'T BUILT

Philip Wilkinson, writing about unrealized visions, presents a second history of architecture – the history of what could have been but was not. This is a special history because it does not solely tell of failures. An unrealized project can be an experiment, a laboratory of ideas, a critique of reality, or an attempt to create a world that was impossible at the time. Leonardo da Vinci, Boullée, Ledoux, Archigram, or Superstudio are not interesting because they failed to build their projects. Their significance lies in the fact that they exceeded the limits of what was possible at the time. And precisely because of this, unrealized architecture should not be treated as an inferior variety of realized architecture. It is different – it is not subject to all the constraints of matter, technology, and economics, and thus can present a possibility that could not be realized in the real world. Of course, the question of limits arises here. If we call every vision of space architecture, the concept becomes too broad and loses its meaning. Fantasy alone is not enough. Unrealized architecture must be an organized fiction. It must possess space, geometry, scale, relationships, boundaries, hierarchy, and composition. It must create a defined spatial world, even if this world never takes material form. In this sense, an unrealized project can be more radical than a building. A building is connected to reality, a project can question reality.

5. EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE BEYOND ITS MATERIAL PRESENCE

However, the most difficult question remains: if architecture is an experience of space, how can one experience a space that doesn't physically exist? This question leads directly to the

[6] M. Charciarek, *Związki idei i materii w architekturze betonowej*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2015, p. 185.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

problem of architectural experience. Contemporary architectural phenomenology emphasizes that humans don't perceive a building solely through sight. Juhani Pallasmaa emphasizes the importance of the entire body, touch, hearing, smell, movement, and memory[8]. Architecture is not an image viewed from the outside, but a space in which humans participate through their own presence. We enter it, move around, examine materials and their textures[9], hear sounds, feel temperature, and observe changing light. The experience of architecture is therefore immediate, corporeal, and extended over time. In the case of an unrealized project, the situation is different. We cannot enter its interior, touch the walls, hear the reverberations, or check the actual temperature of the material. However, this does not mean that the project remains outside of experience. Experience has a different character – it is mediated by representation. A plan allows us to reconstruct a possible path through the designed space, a cross-section allows us to imagine its height and level differences, perspective allows us to view the project as if we were inside it, and a model allows us to capture a space that cannot yet be experienced at real scale. A painting can convey its atmosphere, and text its use. A drawing is therefore not merely a representation of space, but a place where it begins to exist as a possibility. The viewer constructs a space in their imagination that they cannot physically experience: they read the layout of rooms, reconstruct possible movement, interpret scale and the relationships between elements. Thus, an architectural drawing becomes not only a tool for design and communication but also a tool for imagining space. The experience of a representation should not be equated with the experience of a real building. However, a representation can trigger memories of previous experiences. People do not experience architecture as a "blank slate." Everyone has their own set of remembered spaces, materials, sounds, smells, and images. We remember the darkness of a basement, the height of a church, the smell of wood, the coolness of stone, or the echo of an empty corridor. These experiences can be triggered by the representation of a space we have never seen before. This also applies to unrealized architecture. We may have an image of Boullée's cenotaph for Newton in our minds, even though we have never stood inside it; we may imagine Walking City, even though we have never encountered it in our neighborhood; we may be familiar with Superstudio projects that cannot be visited. However, they are not entirely devoid of experience. Their spatiality is activated through images, drawings, models, descriptions, memory, and imagination. The experience of unrealized architecture can therefore be multi-sensory, though mediated. We do not receive stimuli directly from the building's material, but draw on our own experience, memory, and imagination to create its spatial representation. Imagination doesn't replace the actual experience of architecture, but allows us to transcend its material presence. Through it, we can experience not only what exists but also what could exist. The experience of architecture, therefore, doesn't have to begin the moment we cross the threshold of a building. It can begin earlier – when a drawing, model, painting, or description allows the viewer to imagine the space and their own presence within it. While a building affects the body through direct contact with matter, a design operates through imagination, memory, and expectation. Unrealized architecture, therefore, allows us to experience not a finished reality but the possibilities of space. This ability to evoke the experience of a space that doesn't yet exist or will never materially exist reveals one of its most compelling properties.

[8] P. Wilkinson, *Architektura – wizje niezrealizowane*, trans. M. Szymański, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2019.

[9] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły*, trans. M. Choptiany, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012.

6. CONTEMPORARY CHAOS AND THE LOSS OF IDEAS

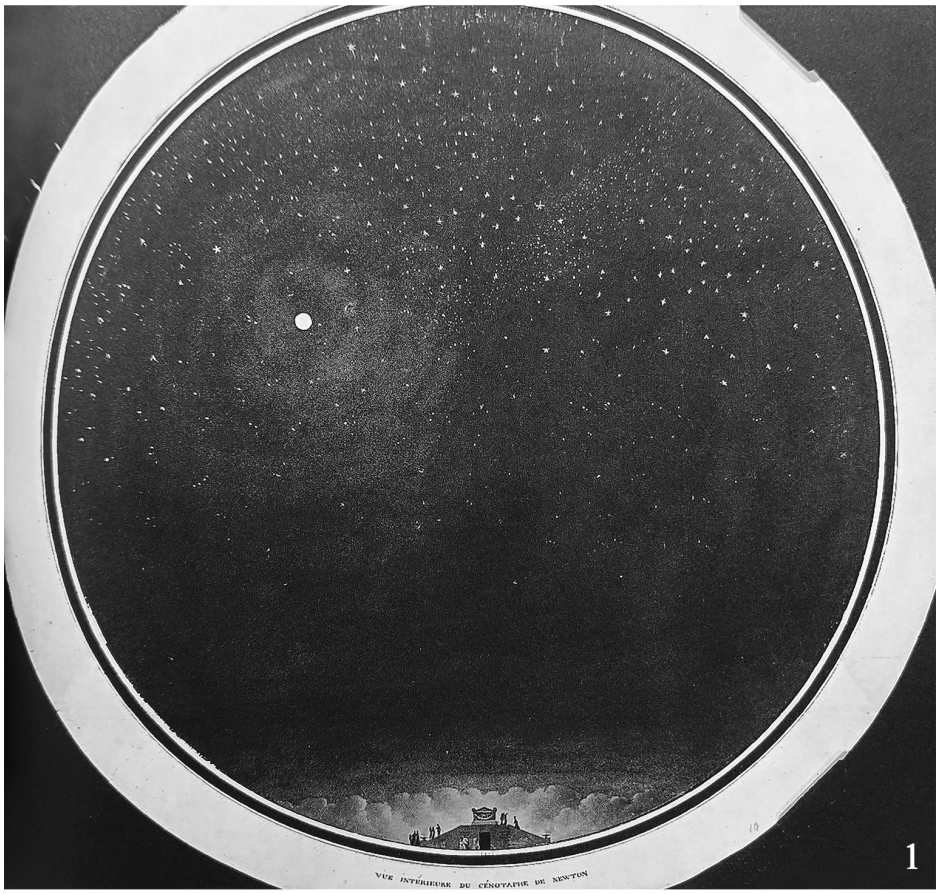
This problem takes on additional significance in the context of contemporary culture. For centuries, architecture has been linked to the concepts of order, proportion, hierarchy, permanence, and purpose. This did not mean that all architecture was harmonious, but even opposition to order first required recognizing it. Today, the situation is more complex. Contemporary culture increasingly challenges the very notion of lasting order. What was previously a principle can be presented as limitation; what was a canon as oppression; what was hierarchy as exclusion; what required mastery can be replaced by chance and a declaration of freedom. Chaos and chance can be presented as tools for liberation from traditional principles of composition, beauty, and craftsmanship. However, the question remains relevant also in relation to architecture: what remains of a work if we reject the principles that distinguish order from chaos, construction from destruction, work from chance? This is where Krzysztof Karoń's perspective and his concept of anticulture become useful[10]. The point is not to accept its entire understanding as the sole explanation of modernity, but to treat it as a critical tool, allowing us to view culture through the opposition of construction and destruction, composition and decomposition, ideas and their negation. The problem of culture is not reduced to a change of style, but concerns the way in which people understand their own creativity, work, heritage, and the possibility of establishing values. If traditional culture is a culture of construction – both literally and symbolically – then anticulture can be understood as a process of undermining the principles that enable the construction of a shared world. Isn't this also a problem for architecture? Architecture is, after all, a special case of culture, because it almost literally involves building. One builds a house, a city, a space, but simultaneously constructs a way of life, social relations, and the memory of a place. Architecture can therefore be understood as one of the most material forms of culture. However, if construction is replaced by the constant transgression, deconstruction, and negation of the existing order, the question arises as to what exactly should be built in its place. And it is here that unrealized architecture takes on a paradoxical significance. It is not devoid of matter because it rejects matter. It remains unrealized because it still lies before it. It retains possibility, and possibility is something other than chaos. An unrealized project may be radical, it may reject existing principles, it may propose a world entirely different from the real one, but it must still establish something. It must create relationships. It must define space. It must give direction to movement. It must propose some order, even if this order is completely different from the previous one. Architecture cannot exist without the idea of space. It can exist without a building, but it cannot exist without establishing some spatial order.

7. SUMMARY – ARCHITECTURE OUTSIDE THE BUILDING

Is building a condition for architecture? The analysis demonstrates that architecture can exist as an idea, design, drawing, model, image, and imagination before it takes on material form. This does not mean, however, that a building is unimportant. On the contrary, materialization changes the nature of architecture, allowing it to enter into a direct relationship with the

[10] K. Karoń, *Historia antykultury 1.0*, K-LIBER Krzysztof Karoń, Warszawa 2021.

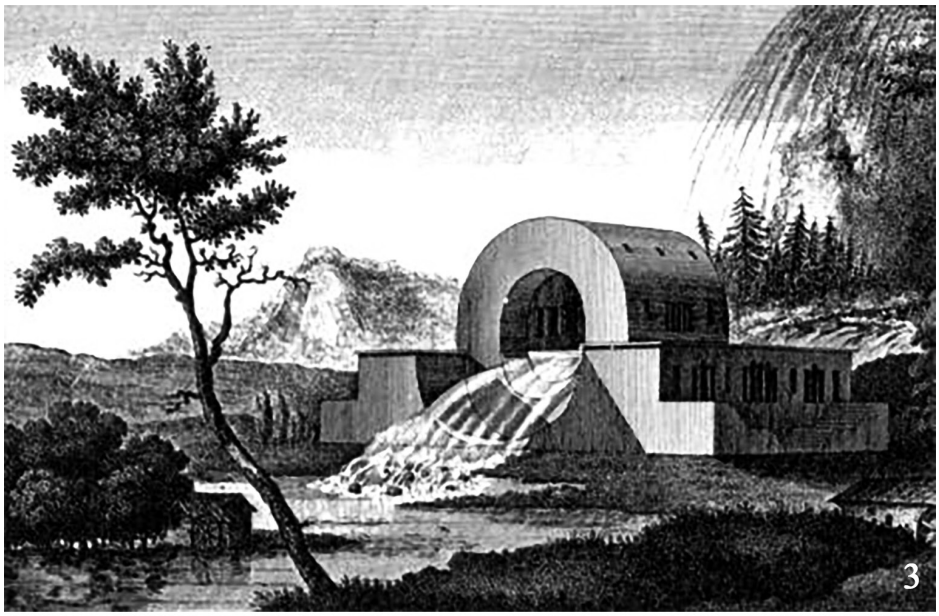
body, matter, light, sound, temperature, time, and the user. Therefore, design and building should not be contrasted as if one were “real” architecture and the other merely a substitute. These are two different ways in which architecture can exist. Design is a possibility. Building is a fact. Design anticipates experience, building materializes it. Design can remain imaginative, building subject to matter. However, there is a continuity between them: an idea is recorded, presented in a model, materialized, and ultimately experienced. However, not every idea necessarily reaches the end of this process. Perhaps this is why unrealized architecture is so important for understanding architecture as such. It demonstrates that architecture does not begin with a building, but with the decision that a specific space can be conceived, organized, and imagined. In this sense, an unrealized project is not a lack of architecture. It is architecture deprived of the final stage of materialization. And perhaps this is precisely why, in an age where we increasingly speak of transgressing rules, deconstruction, chaos, and freedom without a defined purpose, it is worth re-asking the question of the very essence of building. Not just building with concrete, steel, or wood, but building ideas, relationships, spaces, and meanings. For if architecture is only what is built, we are left with the history of buildings. However, if architecture begins earlier – in the idea, the drawing, the imagination, and the possible – then its history also encompasses what was not built. And perhaps it is precisely there, between idea and matter, between possibility and fact, between imagination and experience, that architecture begins.

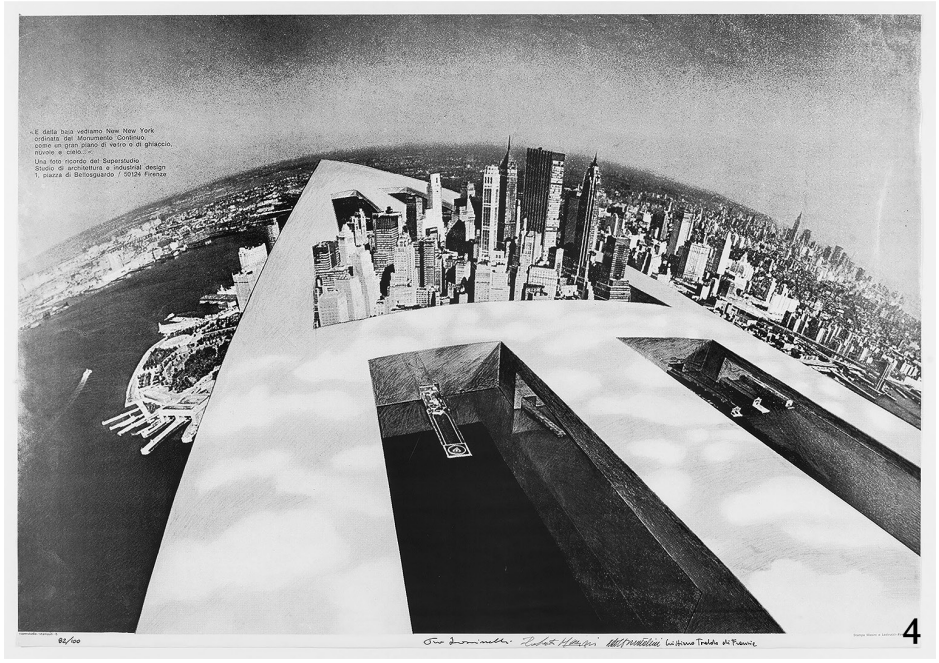




Ill. 1. *Étienne-Louis Boullée's most famous drawing of a mausoleum: the edifice is bathed in theatrical light designed to accentuate its spherical shape. Groups of figures on the lower and middle levels further emphasize the structure's immense scale*, [in:] P. Wilkinson, *Architektura – wizje niezrealizowane*, trans. M. Szymański, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2019, pp. 60–61

Ill. 2. *Walking City, Ron Herron, 1964. A robot city capable of traversing the Earth to reach wherever it is needed*, [in:] P. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 206–207





Ill. 3. Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *Project for the ideal city of Chaux: House of supervisors of the source of the Loue. Published in 1804*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Nicolas_Ledoux (access: 02.06.2026)

Ill. 4. *Superstudio. Manifesto New New York (in nero e azzuro), 1969. Coll. Frac Centre-Val de Loire*, https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/architecture-story-fiction-and-ritual-life-after-architecture-exhibition-superstudio (access: 02.06.2026)

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[6] Pallasmaa J., *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły*, trans. M. Choptiany, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012.

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[8] Witruwiusz, *O architekturze ksiąg dziesięć*, PWN, Warszawa 1956.

Author's Note

Grzegorz Twardowski, PhD, Architect

Research and teaching assistant at the Faculty of Architecture of the PK Krakow University of Technology. His scientific interests focus on selected issues concerning the composition of form and the influence of ideology on the world of European art and culture. Member of the Association of Polish Architects. Editor-in-Chief of the website of the Faculty of Architecture of the PK Krakow University of Technology. Secretary of the Faculty Recruitment Committee, Faculty of Architecture, PK Krakow University of Technology.

grzegorz.twardowski@pk.edu.pl