DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.3-15

PAWEŁ ŻUK
ORCID: 0000-0002-4602-2884
PK Krakow University of Technology, Poland

ARCHITECTURE AND HUMOUR

ARCHITEKTURA I HUMOR

Abstract

Is architecture an art without humour? Indeed, examples of humorous architecture can be found, but they are either not numerous or not part of the mainstream. This article explores the phenomenon of humour in architecture, which, as art, should evoke emotions, and also amuse. The author describes the logical mechanism of humour according to philosophical theories, then attempts to identify potentially humorous examples in the history of architecture, from ancient times to contemporary architecture, while also considering whether these examples are truly humorous, what makes them humorous, and why there are so few of them.

Keywords: *architecture, humour, postmodernism*

Streszczenie

Czy architektura jest sztuką pozbawioną humoru? Owszem, chociaż można znaleźć przykłady zabawnej architektury, jednak nie są one liczne, albo nie znajdują się w jej głównym nurcie. Artykuł przybliża zjawisko humoru w architekturze, która jako sztuka powinna budzić emocje, czyli również rozbawiać. Autor opisuje mechanizm logiczny humoru według teorii filozoficznych, następnie próbuje odnaleźć potencjalnie humorystyczne przykłady w historii architektury od czasów starożytnych, po współczesność, zastanawiając się jednocześnie, czy te przykłady rzeczywiście są zabawne, co sprawia, że są zabawne, a także dlaczego jest ich tak mało?

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, humor, postmodernizm*

1. INTRODUCTION

The conference thesis states that "What matters most are the emotions that architecture evokes. (…) If architecture evokes nothing or is neutral (which is sometimes desirable), it may mean that it is simply lifeless." In previous editions, we considered whether architecture is art, and most concluded that it is. In many fields of art: literature, music, painting, and film, humour in its various forms plays a significant role: jokes, irony, sarcasm, black humour, the grotesque, or absurdity. We love to laugh. Laughter is healthy, reduces stress, oxygenates the body, and stimulates the release of endorphins. In 1984, Frank Zappa released an album titled "Does Humor Belong in Music?", suspecting that music lacks a sense of humour. A similar, perhaps even deeper, problem applies to architecture. Unfortunately, it is quite difficult to find examples of architecture that provoke laughter. Why is this? Is architecture an art without a sense of humour?

2. THE LOGICAL MECHANISM OF HUMOR ACCORDING TO PHILOSOPHERS

What makes something funny? What is the logical mechanism of humour? There are many theories on this subject. Three main theories dominate philosophy[1]: *1. The incongruity theory* advocated by Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. According to this theory, laughter results from the sudden clash of our expectations with a surprising reality. Humour appears when we perceive conflict, inconsistency, or ambiguity between the messages. This can also be called an unexpected punchline. *2. The relief theory*, which posits that laughter is a way to release hidden fear, stress, or social tension. The main authors of this theory were Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer. *3. The superiority theory* states that laughing at others' mistakes or stupidity makes us feel superior. The foundations of this theory were laid by Plato and Aristotle, and in modern times, it was further developed by Thomas Hobbes. These theories were not formulated specifically for architecture, but it is certainly safe to assume that the mechanism operates similarly, although its perception is subjective. It is clear that each of us experiences humour differently. There are various, often irrational, reasons why we laugh. Furthermore, there are also bizarre types of humour, such as black humour, irony, and absurdity, that defy theory.

3. ANTIQUITY

Ancient architecture, probably because of its rationality, seems to be almost entirely devoid of humour. The claim that the optical illusions used by Greek architects were a play on the viewer's perception is unconvincing. The viewer is usually unaware of the illusion, and therefore the situation is not amusing. In antiquity, examples of anthropomorphic architecture appear, such as mascarons, caryatids, and gargoyles, which we also encounter in later eras. Giving building elements human shapes usually makes us laugh. However, this case is different. The element of surprise is likely missing, as drawing on legends, in a sense, rationalises anthropomorphism. According to legend, caryatids symbolise women from the city of Caryae, punished for betraying their allies. Mascarons and gargoyles, on the other hand, evoke fear rather than laughter. Grotesque faces were believed to scare demons. Everything here is rational and justified, and therefore does not fit into the mechanism of the incompatibility theory or the superiority theory.

4. MIDDLE AGES

In European medieval architecture, especially Gothic architecture, alongside the sacrum, we often find the humorous profanum. These are often small details, jokes, hidden in unexpected places, not easy to find. A very famous example is "The Watcher" also known as "The Voyeur of Conques" (Ill. 1) – a small 12th-century sculpture hidden in the west façade of the Abbaye de Sainte-Foy church in Conques. The figure peering out from under the stone tympanum has a mischievous smile – only its eyes, nose, and hands are visible. Another example is the Cathedral of St. Stephen in Bourges. Its façade, as well as its interior, contains many obscene details:

[1] D. Brzozowska, *Logiczne aspekty języka a teksty humorystyczne. Rola mechanizmu logicznego w dowcipach*, "Investigationes Linguisticae" 2012, no. 25, pp. 15–26.

phallic motifs and buttocks. In the crypt, there is a buttock-shaped support. This obscenity is amusing when juxtaposed with the solemnity of the church. In the Middle Ages, Bourges was associated with the sin of sodomy, and this was reflected in the cathedral's details. According to Michael Camille, the word "cathedral" (cathedra) means the bishop's seat – also in the bawdy sense of the word "seat". A secular example of medieval humour is the Gothic tower of the Old City Hall in Cologne, which houses a sculpture depicting protruding male buttocks, attributed to Archbishop Conrad. He was in bitter conflict with the city authorities. These downward-pointing buttocks were meant to mock ecclesiastical authority[2]. Medieval obscenity often expressed a sin that was condemned through ridicule. A modern perspective intensifies the humorous contrast between sacrum and profanum, which perfectly aligns with the theory of incongruity.



Ill. 1. "The Watcher", also known as "The Voyeur of Conques", photo by Vlad Mandyev, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Abbatiale_Sainte-Foy_de_Conques#/media/File:La_Curiosit%C3%A9,_Abbatiale_Sainte-Foy_de_Conques_0827_modifi%C3%A9-1.jpg (access: 15.07.2026)

5. FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Examples of humorous architecture are not common in the Renaissance, Baroque, or Enlightenment periods, but single works can be found that break with mainstream trends, such as the Mannerist Palazzo Zuccari (known as the House of Monsters) in Rome on Via Gregoriana, built around 1592 by Federico Zuccari[3]. The building is distinguished by its grotesque details

[2] M. Camille, *Dr. Witkowski's Anus: French Doctors, German Homosexuals and the Obscene in Medieval Church Art*, [in:] N. McDonald (ed.), *Medieval Obscenities*, York Medieval Press, Woodbridge 2006, pp. 18–23.

[3] Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna,* Arkady, Warszawa 1987, p. 116.

– the entrance and windows are framed by large, gaping monster mouths. Zuccari drew inspiration from the late Renaissance Park of Monsters (Sacro Bosco) in Bomarzo (Lazio region, Italy). This 16th-century surrealist park features numerous anthropomorphic and zoomorphic objects, including the sculpture "Gate of Hell." They are more terrifying than funny. In Palazzo Zuccari, the monster mouths seem somewhat more amusing; the urban context adds to their grotesqueness, and the element of surprise necessary for the mechanism of the incongruity theory is more effective. The works of Jean-Jacques Lequeu, a French architect of the Age of Enlightenment, are intriguing. He created paper designs of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic buildings, such as stables in the shape of a cow. Unfortunately, most of his works were never implemented, but drawings are housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Some of them are pornographic in nature and are kept in the Enfer (Hell) collection, which is not publicly accessible. Among them is a design for a guinguette (a popular French suburban tavern and outdoor cabaret) with a Hammock of Love in the shape of a copulating couple[4]. Jean-Jacques Lequeu's utopian designs lie far outside the mainstream of typical Enlightenment architecture. Even today, they evoke a sense of outrage rather than amusement, although they undoubtedly align with the theory of incongruity.

6. ART NOUVEAU

Art Nouveau architecture, drawing inspiration from nature, often moves towards organic fantasy, fairy-tale absurdity, caricature, and self-irony. Therefore, we find a relatively large number of humorous examples here, such as Gaudí's bold experiments with organic form. The chimneys at Casa Milà look like helmeted warriors. The roof of Casa Batlló resembles a dragon's body[5], its organic shape is not entirely literal, but the ceramic roof tiles evoke clear associations with reptilian scales. The legend of Saint George, the patron saint of Catalonia, slaying the dragon provides the background. Gaudí's works are undoubtedly surprising and fairy-tale-like, perhaps a bit naive. They employ the theory of incongruity, but also the theory of superiority. A touch of humour can be found in Vienna Secession. In 1898, Joseph Maria Olbrich designed a pavilion whose golden dome, made of laurel leaves, was nicknamed the "Krauthappl" (cabbage). Otto Wagner's work is full of irony and self-irony, as well as mockery of the seriousness of the Viennese bourgeoisie. In his works, Wagner was able to ironically expose symbols of power and bureaucracy, imbuing them with a theatrical grotesqueness. In the Vienna Savings Bank building (Postsparkasse), he deliberately left aluminium rivets exposed, taunting the desire for ostentation. The modern façade of the Majolika House (Majolikahaus), covered with intense floral motifs, is overly ornate, a mockery of bourgeois tastes. Wagner was also famous for his many ironic comments on the ornateness and false luxury of the Franz Joseph era[6]. In Poland, the "Galician Gaudí," as Teodor Talowski was known, wove jokes, surprising symbols, and wordplay into building façades. Above the entrance to the "Under the Singing Frog" tenement house, we find the playful motif of the titular frog. At the top of the "Under the Donkey" tenement house is a large donkey's head, a self-deprecating symbol of stubbornness. In the "Under the Spider" tenement house, in addition to the large spider in the circular opening of the attic,

[4] E. Boeri. *Jean Jacques Lequeu. Un atlas des mémoires*, Éditions des Cendres, Paris 2018, p. 240.
[5] Ch. Jencks, *op. cit*., p. 117.
[6] M. Wallis, *Secesja*, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warszawa 1974, pp. 135–136.

we find motifs of peacocks, owls, and other birds[7]. The surprising use of zoomorphic detail places Talowski's work somewhat within the mechanism of incongruity.

7. MODERN ARCHITECTURE

The modern movement, in its rationality and orderliness, is very similar to antiquity. Furthermore, modern movement assumed a lack of ornament. The only significant metaphor is Le Corbusier's famous slogan that "a house is a machine for living in" (French: l'habitation est une machine-à-habiter). Mainstream modern movement is essentially devoid of humorous examples. Critics have accused modern architecture of lack of expression and soullessness. Robert Venturi said that "less is bore.[8]" This criticism can be extended to include a lack of humour.

8. POSTMODERN ARCHITECTURE

Postmodern architecture is a movement in which architecture opens itself up to humour, perhaps the most in its history. The use of metaphors, quotations, irony, absurdity, and intellectual play with the viewer – all of this creates the opportunity to create architecture full of humour. Indeed, there are quite a lot of postmodern examples of humorous architecture. Venturi's terms, "duck" and "decorated shed"[9] are funny themselves. Let's take a look at the icons of postmodernism. A key symbol of postmodern architecture is somewhat amusing – New York's AT&T[10] skyscraper (Philip Johnson, 1984), whose top resembles an ornate filing cabinet. This association isn't entirely literal, but the idea is striking. It is a clear mockery of the asceticism of modern architecture. Another icon of postmodern architecture, Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, is subversive and ironic: the bas-reliefs, with water gushing from their mouths, are images of Charles Moore himself, mocking his role as a "great creator." The outline of the St. Joseph Fountain literally replicates the shape of the Italian Peninsula[11]. The clash of the gravity of antiquity with the neon aesthetic of Las Vegas is grotesque. Another iconic example is the house designed by Robert Venturi for his mother in Philadelphia[12] (Vanna Venturi House, 1964). It looks like a house from a child's drawing – the proportions are distorted, the shape is asymmetrical, and the window openings are of varying sizes. Inside the house there are stairs leading to nowhere, and above the entrance, Venturi placed a decorative arch that serves no structural function, a clear violation of the modernist prohibition against ornament. Postmodern architecture strongly responds to the "boredom" of modern architecture. A wealth of bizarre architecture is created, both amusing and kitschy. The incongruity theory mechanism operates here for surprising or shocking works, but the humour often stems from the superiority theory mechanism for works that border on kitsch.

---

[7] W. Bałus, *Dom – przybytek – „nastrój dawności". O kilku kamienicach Teodora Talowskiego*, [in:] R. Godula (ed.), *Klejnoty i sekrety Krakowa*, Kraków 1994, pp. 215–238.

[8] R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* Museum of Modern Art, New York 1966, p. 16.

[9] R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Uczyć się od Las Vegas*, Karakter, Kraków 2013, p. 115.

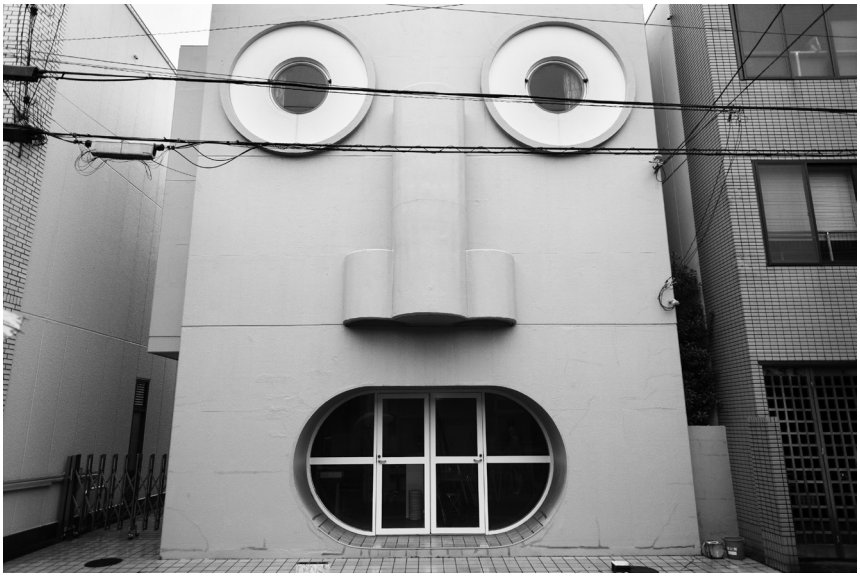
[10] Ch. Jencks, *op. cit*., p. 131.

[11] Ch. Jencks, *op. cit*., p. 126.

[12] R. Venturi, *op. cit*., p. 132.

9. ANTHROPOMORPHIC ARCHITECTURE

The origins of anthropomorphic architecture date back to ancient Greece. We remember caryatids and mascarons. Anthropomorphic decoration is permanently visible in architecture, with a break during modern movement. We see a lot of anthropomorphic examples among postmodern architecture. A humorous phenomenon is "face houses" sometimes designed consciously, but often unintentionally. The archetype of the human face, encoded in our brains, translated into architectural design almost always makes us laugh. The mechanism of inconsistency theory operates here, and very often, the mechanism of superiority theory, as well. Probably the most famous example of this type of architecture is the "face house" (Ill. 2) designed by Kazumasu Yamashita in 1974 in Kyoto[13]. The building, which still exists today, has eyes, a mouth, ears, and even a nose. Despite its avant-garde appearance, each element of the "face" serves a real architectural function. The mouth



Ill. 2. "Face house" designed by Kazumasu Yamashita, photo by Addison Godel, source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/doctorcasino/14711291323/sizes/o/ (access: 15.07.2026)

is the entrance, the eyes allow light into the living area, the nose conceals the building's ventilation openings, and the ears are the side balconies. The literal rendering of the human face is highly amusing in this case. "Faces", though less amusing, are visible among the works of Hungarian master of organic architecture, Imre Makovecz. One example is the Evangelical Church in Siófok on Lake Balaton, built between 1986 and 1990[14]. The entrance to the church resembles the face of a mythical creature or a warrior's mask, with windows resembling eyes. Makovecz also draws inspiration from the shapes of the human body,

[13] Ch. Jencks, *op. cit*., p. 116.

[14] *Lutheran chirch and Clergy house, Siófok*, "Makovecz", https://www.makovecz.hu/en/epuletek/siofok-lutheran-church-and-clergy-house/ (access: 15.07.2026).

as seen in the design of the Farkasrét cemetery chapel in Budapest, built in 1977. As the artist himself describes: "I wanted to create a space in the chapel resembling a human rib cage, whose 'ribs' are made of hardwood. The corpse is placed where the heart is.[15]" Subjectively, Makovecz's designs, while surprising, aren't very funny. Much funnier is the very literal anthropomorphism seen in the CORPUS project, opened in 2008 in Oegstgeest, the Netherlands. This object is a 35-metre sculpture of the human body connected to an ordinary office-museum building. The tour begins at the knee and leads through various organs (including the uterus, intestines, heart, lungs) to the brain. A Krakow example of anthropomorphic architecture is the Hean cosmetics factory – the House of Alchemists in Krakow, designed by Dariusz Kozłowski[16], built in 1988–1990. The entrance to the facility is located under a form shaped like an exaggerated pair of female lips, intended to evoke the image of Greta Garbo. The irony of this example is clear and amusing.

10. MIMETIC ARCHITECTURE

Mimetic architecture, literally representing everyday items, gained popularity in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. There really is a duck-shaped architecture that inspired Venturi. The Long Island Duckling building[17] (built in 1931 in upstate New York and later moved to various locations) was designed by farmer Martin Maurer. The interior housed a poultry store. In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, there is a Shell gas station from around 1930 in the shape of a giant seashell, resembling the Shell logo. In Newark, Ohio, a building shaped like a wicker shopping basket was built in 1997 – the headquarters of the Longaberger Basket company. Thousands of hamburger-shaped buildings can be found in the United States. Gehry's "Binoculars" (Ill. 3) are widely known, serving as the garage entrance and main entrance to the Binoculars Building in Los Angeles (1991). Frank Gehry designed this structure in collaboration with artists Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen[18]. The same pair of artists is responsible for the "Buried Bicycle" ("La Bicyclette ensevelie") project located in La Villette Park in Paris. This installation is divided into four separate parts, painted in naturalistic colours: a wheel with spokes, a pedal, a saddle, and a handlebar with a bell. Everything is half buried in the ground, but with imagination, it can be assembled into a giant bicycle, which is surprising. The Meitan Tea Museum in China is undoubtedly amusing, shaped like a huge, 70-metre-long teapot, completed in 2006. A smaller structure in the shape of a teacup was built next to the main building. From a distance, the object looks like a monolithic sculpture; up close, only the rows of evenly arrayed windows indicate that it is a building. The Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres (Ill. 4) reflects the artist's eccentric and surrealist personality with surprising accuracy. The museum was designed by Salvador Dalí himself[19]. The building is full of mimetic details. Dalí

[15] *Makovecz-mortuary, Farkasrét Cementary, Budapest*, "Makovecz", https://www.makovecz.hu/en/epuletek/makovecz-mortuary-farkasret-cemetery-budapest/ (access: 15.07.2026).

[16] A. Cymer, *Architektura w Polsce 1945–1989,* Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2018, pp. 383–384.

[17] R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *op. cit.* p. 31.

[18] E. Valentin, *Claes Oldenburg et Coosje van Bruggen. La sculpture comme subversion de l'architecture (1981–1997)*, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon 2012, pp. 66–70.

[19] A. Pitxot, M. Aguer Teixidor, *The Dalí Theatre-Museum*, Triangle Postals, Sant Lluís, Menorca 2007, pp. 11–21.



Ill. 3. The Binoculars Building designed by Frank Gehry in collaboration with Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, photo by John Sequeira, source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/basic_la/28960661180/sizes/o/ (access: 15.07.2026)



Ill. 4. The Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres, photo by Michalis Fotinakis, source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/fotinakis/3040172945/sizes/o/ (access: 15.07.2026)

considered eggs and bread to be symbols of beginnings, which is why the attic and tower are topped with giant eggs, the façades are covered with Catalan breads, and the roof is adorned with figures of knights with baguettes on their heads. Dalí compared art to "daily bread," and bread appeared frequently in his works. The symbolism is disarmingly literal, and the building's solemnity is reduced to zero.

Mimetic architecture often surprises and amuses, thanks to the mechanism of inconsistency theory, while more naive examples additionally execute the mechanism of superiority theory.

11. SUMMARY

Architecture is not entirely devoid of humour; it contains quite a few amusing examples. It is clear that rational historical periods, such as antiquity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and modernism, which emphasise wisdom and science, are virtually devoid of humorous examples. Irrational or emotional periods (emphasising faith, feelings, mystery, and imagination), on the other hand, are full of examples that could be described as humorous. According to Nietzsche's conception of the sources of artistic creativity[20], Apollo and Dionysus represent two different approaches to creation: Apollo symbolises order, wisdom, and harmony, while Dionysus is the god of emotions and the transcendence of boundaries. In the eras symbolised by Apollo, architecture displays little humour. Comparing architecture to other art forms, especially literature or film, does it no favours. Outside of architecture, intellectual play is more sophisticated, humour cleverer, and metaphors are more difficult to understand, aimed at the conscious viewer rather than the general public. The dualism of elitism and populism in architecture[21], noted by Charles Jencks, shapes a less radical approach. The world is ruled by money and the expensive realisation of an architectural work discourages architects from pursuing emotions and crossing boundaries. This makes the relatively few examples of amusing architecture seem all the more valuable.

References

[1] Bałus W., *Dom – przybytek – „nastrój dawności". O kilku kamienicach Teodora Talowskiego*, [in:] R. Godula (ed.), *Klejnoty i sekrety Krakowa*, Kraków 1994, pp. 215–238.

[2] Boeri E., *Jean Jacques Lequeu. Un atlas des mémoires*, Éditions des Cendres, Paris 2018.

[3] Brzozowska D., *Logiczne aspekty języka a teksty humorystyczne. Rola mechanizmu logicznego w dowcipach*, "Investigationes Linguisticae" 2012, no. 25, pp. 15–26.

[4] Camille M., *Dr. Witkowski's Anus: French Doctors, German Homosexuals and the Obscene in Medieval Church Art*, [in:] N. McDonald (ed.), *Medieval Obscenities*, York Medieval Press, Woodbridge 2006, pp. 17–38.

[5] Cymer A., *Architektura w Polsce 1945–1989,* Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2018.

[6] Jencks Ch., *Architektura postmodernistyczna,* Arkady, Warszawa 1987.

[7] Nietzsche F., *Tako rzecze Zaratustra. Książka dla Wszystkich i dla nikogo*, Wydawnictwo Antyk, Kęty 2004.

[8] Pitxot A., Aguer Teixidor M., *The Dalí Theatre-Museum*, Triangle Postals, Sant Lluís, Menorca 2007.

[20] F. Nietzsche, *Tako rzecze Zaratustra. Książka dla Wszystkich i dla nikogo*, Wydawnictwo Antyk, Kęty 2004, p. 216.

[21] Ch. Jencks, *op. cit*., p. 6.

[9] Valentin E., *Claes Oldenburg et Coosje van Bruggen. La sculpture comme subversion de l'architecture (1981–1997)*, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon 2012.
[10] Venturi R., *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* Museum of Modern Art, New York 1966.
[11] Venturi R., Scott Brown D., Izenour S., *Uczyć się od Las Vegas*, Karakter, Kraków 2013.
[12] Wallis M., *Secesja*, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warszawa 1974.

Author's Note

Paweł Żuk, PhD, Architect

Architect, graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the PK Krakow University of Technology. He has been an employee of this faculty since 1997 and currently works as an assistant professor at the Department of Architectural Design A-6. He has published 17 scientific publications in Polish and English. A member of SARP (Polish Architects Association) since 1999.

pawel.zuk@pk.edu.pl