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"MINIMALISMS" AND EXPERIENCE

„MINIMALIZMY" A DOŚWIADCZANIE

Abstract

This article analyses Minimalism in art and architecture through a phenomenological lens. Rejecting the view of Minimalism as a closed style, the text frames it as a means of activating relational space, where the perceptual process and the viewer's embodied presence take centre stage. By examining materiality, light, pure geometry, and the void, the study demonstrates how an economy of means paradoxically heightens multisensory experience. These concepts are exemplified through the analysis of the "Minimal" exhibition in Paris and James Turrell's *Skyspace* installation in Salzburg. Ultimately, Minimalism emerges not as a sterile abstraction, but as a compelling call for mindfulness and deeper engagement with the world.

Keywords: *minimalism, perception, phenomenology*

Streszczenie:

Artykuł analizuje minimalizm w sztuce i architekturze przez pryzmat fenomenologii. Odrzucając traktowanie minimalizmu jako zamkniętego stylu, autorzy ukazują go jako narzędzie uaktywniania relacyjnej przestrzeni, w której kluczowy staje się sam proces percepcji oraz cielesna obecność odbiorcy. Poprzez analizę materialności, światła, czystej geometrii oraz pustki wskazano, jak redukcja środków ekspresji prowadzi do intensyfikacji wrażeń wielozmysłowych. Egzemplifikacją tych założeń są analizy wystawy „Minimal" w Paryżu oraz instalacji *Skyspace* Jamesa Turrella w Salzburgu. W konsekwencji minimalizm jawi się nie jako sterylna abstrakcja, lecz jako apel o uważność i głębsze zakorzenienie człowieka w świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: *fenomenologia, minimalizm, percepcja*

1. INTRODUCTION

"Minimalism", understood as a way of thinking, an open language rather than a closed style, offered and continues to offer a toolkit and forms for artists across various mediums of artistic expression. When analysing the affinities between Minimalism in art and architecture, one should not focus solely on their formal similarities. Labels such as "Minimalism" attempt to describe a visual experience through language, offering a deceptive sense of comprehension. This apparent clarity, however, often becomes a trap, leading

to the reduction of the concept and its unreflective misuse. The works of visual art and the buildings designated by this term possess a complexity that eludes one-dimensional definitions.

Undoubtedly, despite differing motivations and objectives, Minimalist art and architecture converge around issues related to the experience of space. They demonstrate deep, direct connections with phenomenology, particularly with the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. Phenomenology turns our attention back to experience itself; it suspends questions regarding the absolute, objective nature of things to examine how the world unveils itself to human cognition. Rather than inquiring into what reality is "in itself", it investigates how it becomes part of our conscious being, how sensory experience translates into knowledge of the world and human operation within it. It forms part of the enduring debate over whether the truth about the world is comprehended through reason or through the senses. Phenomenological philosophers and artists following in their footsteps strive to "see things as they are", while acknowledging that different individuals may experience the same phenomena in slightly different ways[1]. This mode of experience, expanding the relationship between the artwork and the viewer, is precisely what we encounter in Minimalist practice. Inhabitation is inherently a sensory experience, and architecture always concerns itself with the organisation of space; yet, the subtle sensuality, and even multisensoriality, of the Minimalist movement uniquely expands our embodied capacity to grasp the world and reopens the individual to the surrounding space.

Art serves as a laboratory of experience, which we can subsequently test in everyday life, including in our encounters with architecture. The exhibition dedicated to Minimalist art held at the Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection in Paris (08.10.25–19.01.26), entitled "Minimal", presented an impressive survey of the movement and its global evolution. Curator Jessica Morgan organised the show around seven thematic sections, bringing together the richness and diversity of Minimal Art in a single venue. Categories such as Light, Grid, Materiality, Surface, Monochromatism, and Balance[2] served as the inspiration for the present study's reflections on the phenomenological aspects of Minimalism.

Works of Minimal Art are characterised by an economy of means. However, this simplicity of form carries a highly complex message. For its creators, a crucial aspect becomes the redefinition of the artwork's placement in relation to the spectator. By challenging traditional exhibition methods, they encourage a more direct, physical interaction with art, integrating the viewer and the surrounding environment into the work itself. They privilege a physical over an emotional relationship with the object. The artwork is meant to generate a space within which deeper comprehension occurs; it initiates sensory contact with the world, giving rise to particular relationships and sensations that escape our everyday experience. The meaning of the artwork emerges through the experience rather than residing in the object alone. As Dorota Wojciechowska notes, the exhibition itself is "...an encounter with embodied phenomenology, focusing on the direct experiences of individual consciousness and attempting to describe them as objectively as possible, without layering them with personal interpretations or theoretical assumptions"[3].

[1] D. Wojciechowska, *Minimal, konstelacja sztuki*, "W sztuce", 30.11.2025, https://wsztuce.net/2025/11/30/minimal-konstelacja-sztuki/ (access: 15.06.26).

[2] The seventh section, *Mono-ha*, refers to a specific Japanese movement within the broader trend.

[3] D. Wojciechowska, *op. cit*.

Minimalist architecture is similarly relational. It exists solely in reference to the specific site it occupies; it is contingent upon context and light, and subject to transformations conditioned by human movement. Indeed, minimalist thinking can be understood as an attempt to translate phenomenology into spatial experience.

2.

2.1. ENCOMPASSING SPACE

In Minimal Art, the essential shift lies in redirecting attention from the artwork itself to the relationship between the object, the space, and the spectator's body. By rejecting the metaphysics of art and focusing instead on the concrete experience and perception of the work, the roles of both the viewer and space were transformed. What matters is not what things mean, but how they are perceived. The object annexed space alongside the viewer's body; an active dialogue between the work and the spectator became fundamentally indispensable. Space serves as both content and context. The critic Michael Fried even characterised Minimal Art as "theatrical", arguing that without an audience, it remained incomplete[4]. At the core of these artists' practice was the discovery of a new, "encompassing" space, which they sought to create by dissolving the boundaries around the artwork, allowing it to permeate its surroundings. Its ultimate expression is defined by the very dimensions of the architectural space itself, blurring the line where the artwork ends and architecture begins.

In the objects created by Minimalist artists, architecture also functions as a measuring apparatus for the human body. The scale of the structures, pedestrian pathways, and controlled lighting compel the viewer to become aware of their own physical presence within a given space. An active space is generated, dynamically engaging the body in the architecture. Moving through a directed architectural environment, the user gains an auto-reflective awareness of their own perceptual processes.

2.2. PURE EXPERIENCE AND LITERALISM

Minimalism rejects symbolism, narrative, and metaphor. Frank Stella famously summarised his reflections with the tautology: "what you see is what you see"[5]. Here, phenomenology focuses on direct sensory experience stripped of any prior assumptions. All that was to be seen in the object was its actual existence, hence the turn toward a universal, neutral geometry. "No illusions, no illusions,"[6] stated Donald Judd. To eliminate the process of interpretation, artists sought "vehicles" so obvious and banal (elementary shapes and solids) that they carried no intrinsic meaning. Robert Morris spoke of the power of an immutable, familiar shape against which the artwork's appearance is compared: "Simple forms like the cube or pyramid do not require walking around them to grasp the sense of the whole; we immediately know everything about them"[7]. Minimalism was built on an abstract-geometric foundation.

[4] M. Fried, *Sztuka i przedmiotowość*, "Arteon" 2008, no. 1, trans. M. Ślifirz, p. 19.
[5] A. Zabalbeascoa, J. Rodriguez Marcos, *Minimalisms*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2000, p. 27.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 26.
[7] M. Hussakowska, *Minimalizm*, Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2003, p. 93.

Once reduced to a geometric outline, the work was intended to reveal the "primary structures" of knowledge (*Primary Structures*, the title of a landmark group exhibition in New York, 1966). By this term, Morris designated the basis of visual perception, the psychological foundation of all aesthetic experience. For Richard Serra, in turn, the only path that can bring us closer to a primary, pre-objective world leads through the use of a form that, although tangible, material, and directly engaging the viewer's body, remains "rigorously non-figurative, persistently abstract"[8].

In objects devoid of narrative and symbolic ambitions, the viewer can immediately grasp the idea and form of the work. The meaning and potential beauty of these primary structures lay in their formal aspects: order, proportion, measure, and rhythm. As Meg Webster observed at the *Minimal* exhibition opening: "Minimal is a way to make something so essential and simple, but with material and form that embraces your experience in a non-contact way. It doesn't talk to you. It talks to many things and allows you to almost be non-verbal".[9]

Likewise, a building stripped of narrative, metaphor, and historical or contextual references (in the form of decoration, as well as structural elements that might otherwise seem indispensable) becomes an abstract object that refers to nothing beyond itself. It forces the observer to focus on the pure perception of forms, shapes, material textures, light, and composition. Appealing to the immutable logic of universal geometry produces things that are transparent, clear, and easy to perceive. Mathematically ideal forms – spheres, cubes, cones, and pyramids – possess a sense of calmness and solace that is lost in more complex, less pure shapes. Meaning resides not in the forms themselves, but in the impressions they convey. Elementary solids act powerfully upon the viewer's feelings by appealing to primal impressions. "It seems that we grasp the whole before we notice the details"[10], writes Juhani Pallasmaa. Creators seek phenomenologically authentic feelings essential to architecture. The experience of architecture is paramount, as opposed to analysing the building's physical attributes or stylistic references. The reception of the work springs from the whole; thus, the fewer elements that constitute a work, the easier it is to perceive and comprehend. "The richness of a work of art lies in the vitality of the imagery it evokes, and paradoxically, impressions open to the richest interpretations are stimulated by the simplest, most archetypal forms"[11]. Creators aim to extract the essence from shapes, separating their foundation from decoration. This also allows one to sense the presence of mathematics, which, although embedded in our reality, remains elusive[12]. Admiring

[8] R.E. Krauss, *Richard Serra/Rzeźba*, [in:] B. Kosińska (ed.), *Richard Serra*, wystawa w Narodowej Galerii Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta, Narodowa Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta, Warszawa 1994, p. 25.

[9] D. Lauter, *How the Pinault Collection Has Redrawn the Global Map of Minimalism*, "ArtNet", 24.10.2025, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/bourse-de-commerce-minimalism-2697864 (access: 12.06.2026).

[10] J. Pallasmaa, *Krajobrazy zmysłów. Dotykanie świata przez architecturę*, [in:] D. Leśniak-Rychlak, M. Wicha (eds.), *W przejściu. 43 teksty o architekturze i przestrzeni*, Autoportret, Małopolski Instytut Kultury w Krakowie, 2022, p. 528.

[11] J. Pallasmaa, *The Geometry of Feeling: A Look at the Phenomenology of Architecture*, [in:] K. Nesbitt (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture – an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965–1995*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1996, p. 449.

[12] K. Kłosin, *Esencja kształtu*, "Pismo" 2026, no. 3, https://magazynpismo.pl/idee/esej/krzysztof-klosin-czym-jest-ksztalt/?seo=pw (access: 16.06.26).

the literalness of form, simplicity of combinations, and physical presence of material in Richard Serra's work, Peter Zumthor notes: "One gets the impression that every element and every arrangement reinforces the idea of a silent presence in his work. When I design buildings, I try to give them this kind of presence"[13].

2.3. MATERIALITY

In Minimal Art, material is treated nominally – it is "literal" and does not pretend to be something it is not. Artists emphasise the authentic, direct physical presence of matter. The use of industrial and raw materials – bricks, wooden panels, steel, aluminium, plastic, copper, fluorescent lights, mirrors, sheets of glass – alongside industrial fabrication techniques led to an ideal, controlled abstraction of finish, erasing any traces of the artist's hand. The artist's process converges with that of the architect, leaving nothing to chance. The purity and primal nature of the matter through which the artist communicates with the viewer guide the human mind toward either a deadening void or a transcendent truth[14].



Ill. 1. L. Mies van der Rohe, Villa Tougendhat, Brno, 2025, photo by Z. Śnieżek

Similarly, the "less is more" principle in architecture highlights the inherent beauty of materials and their surfaces. In seeking the essence of architecture, creators aim to extract the fundamental nature of their chosen medium. They leverage the intrinsic potential of the material in accordance with Adolf Loos's dictum that "every material possesses its own

[13] M. Hussakowska, *Rozbrojony sześcian*, "Architektura & Biznes" 2004, no. 3, p. 61.
[14] D. Wojciechowska, *op. cit.*

language of forms, and no material can lay claim to the forms of another"[15]. In the absence of ornament, its role is frequently assumed by the material's distinct texture. Architects harness the immanent qualities of materials – divisions dictated by their physical properties, colour, the play of light, and the effects of time. Here, phenomenology emphasises the multisensory experience of the world's matter. Minimalist architecture, contrary to appearance, is not exclusively sterile or visual; it is often profoundly haptic. Raw materials such as concrete, wood, and stone retain the traces of their creation, use, and ageing (weathering) – a process that is embraced rather than concealed. This enables an authentic experience of time. In *Thinking Architecture*[16], where Peter Zumthor directly draws upon a life-centred phenomenology focused on matter, he evokes the sound of flooring underfoot, the scent of wood, the roughness of stone, and the thermal quality of concrete.

2.4. LIGHT

Time and light are key structures of perception. Indeed, one of the most elusive mediums employed by Minimalist artists is light itself. California artist Robert Irwin used light in his works to erase the physical object and foreground the role of pure perception. Meanwhile, the installations of James Turrell, an artist associated with the Light and Space movement, a regional inflection of Minimalism, employ light itself as physical matter, compelling the viewer to observe their own perceptual process (the phenomenon of "seeing yourself see").



Ill. 2. M.J. Štěpán, Church of the Blessed Mary Restituta, Brno, 2020, photo by Z. Śnieżek

[15] A. Forty, *The material without a History*, [in:] J.L. Cohen, G.M. Moeller Jr. (eds.), *Liquid Stone. New Architecture in Concrete*, Birkhäuser, Basel–Berlin–Boston 2006, p. 34.

[16] P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, Kraków 2010.

In architecture, the interplay of light and shadow becomes a means of revealing space and material, or transforms into a building material in its own right. A dramatic chiaroscuro emphasises the raw clarity of simple volumes, heightening the reception of form. Conversely, light penetrating the interior through various openings becomes the very substance out of which architectural space is constructed. In many of his works, Tadao Ando utilises light slots so that the shifting sunlight throughout the day reveals the temporal and dynamic dimension of heavy concrete forms. For the Spanish architect Alberto Campo Baeza, light is the crucial element shaping the form, mass, and atmosphere of space. He compares light in architecture to sound in music: while stone, concrete, or steel constitute the physical structure, it is only the incoming light that brings it to life and allows it to "resonate." The seamlessly smooth, white surfaces of his walls function as projection screens; by registering the subtlest nuances of weather and time of day, they transform flat planes into dynamic canvases. The experience of light itself and the space it shapes is inherently fluid, contingent upon the observer's position and movement. Thus, seemingly empty, simple, and static spaces become active, embodying the Minimalist imperative that art is not merely an object for contemplation, but a constantly renewed perceptual experience.

2.5. EMPTINESS

In Minimal Art, a crucial dimension is the space that opens up between form, material, the interior, and the spectator. It leaves no room for emotional projection, symbolism, or narrative content other than the object itself. Yet it transforms into an active space, allowing something to occur. On the one hand, physical emptiness affords unencumbered experience, allowing one to perceive something beyond the immediate; on the other hand, an emotional or symbolic absence creates space for the viewer's own unburdened reflection. It prompts mindfulness. Looking at the light works of Robert Irwin, among others, the viewer does not merely perceive the physical object, but enters the interval between the work, space, and time[17].

In Minimalist architecture, preserving and accentuating the void – the space between – is similarly vital. Space ceases to be something that must be conquered or filled. Emptiness allows architecture to be perceived in its purest state, shielding it from redundant elements and excess. Consciously shaped, it becomes a powerful instrument of architectural creation and expression. The concept of the void in architecture encompasses both a mental emptiness –signifying a vacuum of predetermined meaning, an absence of associations, a *tabula rasa*, and impersonality – and a physical emptiness: a deliberate absence of excess, a distance. In his essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*[18], Martin Heidegger defines space not as a three-dimensional vacuum waiting to be filled, but as a place made free for human existence. Emptiness is not a lack; it is an active phenomenological space that enables human beings to establish a relationship with architecture. The "usefulness of the void" releases the full intensity of the architectural experience.

[17] D. Wojciechowska, *op. cit.*

[18] M. Heidegger, *Budować, mieszkać, myśleć. Eseje wybrane*, Czytelnik Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1977.



Ill. 3. J. Turrell, *Sky-Space*, Salzburg, 2006, photo by A. Mielnik

2.6. SKY-SPACE

An apt summary of the themes discussed here is James Turrell's 2006 work at the intersection of art and architecture, *Skyspace* (Ill. 3). The installation, designed as an elliptical cylindrical pavilion, is situated on the Mönchsberg hill in Salzburg, adjacent to the Museum der Moderne. Constructed externally from local rock, its interior is smooth and dazzlingly white, lined with granite benches along the walls that invite visitors to sit and cast their gaze upward towards an elliptical oculus in the roof.

The work offers two distinct modes of experiencing space and light. During the day, the framed sky becomes an integral component of the piece. The natural play of sunlight, shifting angles, and cloud formations visible through the roof opening at different hours evoke evolving visual sensations. Light becomes an architectural element, something to be physically experienced. At dawn and dusk, hidden, integrated LED lighting within the pavilion activates, slowly and imperceptibly changing colour (from soft hues of purple, through pink and green, to intense blue). The muted artificial light interacts with the ambient twilight, triggering an optical illusion: the sky seen through the opening appears to alter dramatically in hue, density, and saturation. External stimuli are stripped away, allowing the viewer to focus entirely on the act of seeing and their own perception. Turrell has created a work in which light, nature, and observers are integrated into a process of continual change, "art as part of an eternal cycle"[19]. By drawing us into an active expansion of our perceptual capacities, the artistic experiments of Minimal Art can serve as a profound source of inspiration for architectural design (Ill. 1, Ill. 2).

[19] *James Turrell, 2006*, "Salzburg Foundation", https://salzburgfoundation.at/salzburg-art-project/james-turrell-2006/ (access: 12.07.2026).

3. CONCLUSION

Minimalism, as one of the most intellectually demanding movements in art history, is frequently rejected. Likewise, Minimalist architecture, often accused of radicalism and formalism, remains widely misunderstood or reduced to surface aesthetics. It is undeniably a challenging philosophy of architecture, one that demands restraint and should be employed by a conscious creator for a conscious recipient. Yet Minimalism, a deeply aesthetic movement, is by no means lacking in depth. Both Minimalist art and architecture touch upon the very essence of human cognition, perception understood not merely as a way of reaching out to the world, but as a mode of active engagement with it. Intellectual and sensory cognition are here mutually conditioned and correlated, with works explicitly oriented towards stimulating multisensory experience.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts that perception is an acquired repertoire of skills, a certain bodily "style" of behaviour, a mode or way of being, that responds to what he termed the solicitations of the surrounding world[20]. Thus, one might argue that minimal art and architecture offer a compelling invitation to heightened sensation. They facilitate an extraordinary encounter with the world, a meaningful bodily engagement within it.

A complete experience of Minimalist architecture and art requires intense concentration from the viewer and the elimination of all stimuli that disrupt the act of observation. The movement demands a mindfulness that presents a formidable challenge in today's hyper-stimulated environment. The economy, restraint, sobriety, and quietude of this architecture open up a space for attentive seeing, feeling, and listening. The building and its interior become instruments enabling us to experience the world in a deeper or novel way, encouraging us to slow down and dedicate time to noticing subtle details. Paradoxically, despite its economy of means, Minimalist architecture is neither dull nor unengaging to human perception. A simple, empty space can become a remarkable site for triggering delicate multisensory impressions and fostering reflection upon those very experiences.

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