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ON CREATING SPACE THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF MEMORY

O KREOWANIU PRZESTRZENI POPRZEZ DOŚWIADCZENIE PAMIĘCI

Abstract

Memory as a motif and a value in architecture is an elemental matter. Building is a recording of both the present and the past – a drawing upon the current state of affairs as well as the history of events, human memories, and experience. The creation of memory is typically bound to a place. This enables the stabilisation of its record, which, being subject to constant modification and transformation, blurs and shifts over time.

The conducted analysis of selected ways of perceiving memory, along with its significance in shaping consciousness and culture, constitutes a search for the diversity of its recording and an inquiry into the understanding of its role in modernity. Naturally, this finds its reflection in architecture, not only within the realm of monuments, memorials, or sites of collective memory. It also finds a universal expression as a fundamental value of culture and identity. Memory is subject to experience and continuous creation; thus, we constantly search for an appropriate form to perpetuate it.

Keywords: *architecture, experience, memory, place*

Streszczenie

Pamięć jako motyw i wartość architektury jest sprawą elementarną. Budowanie jest zapisem teraźniejszości i przeszłości, czerpaniem z aktualnego stanu i z historii wydarzeń, wspomnień ludzi, doświadczenia. Kreowanie pamięci zazwyczaj związane jest z miejscem. Pozwala to na utrwalenie jej zapisu, bo podlegając stałej modyfikacji i przetwarzaniu, z czasem zaciera się i zmienia.

Przeprowadzona analiza wybranych sposobów postrzegania pamięci, jej znaczenia w kształtowaniu świadomości i kultury jest poszukiwaniem różnorodności zapisu i rozumienia jej roli we współczesności. Naturalnie ma to swoje odzwierciedlenie w architekturze, nie tylko w obszarze monumentów i pomników czy miejsc zbiorowej pamięci. Ma również uniwersalny wyraz jako podstawowa wartość kultury i tożsamości. Pamięć podlega doświadczeniu, ciągłemu kreowaniu, dlatego wciąż poszukujemy odpowiedniej formy jej utrwalania.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, doświadczenie, miejsce, pamięć*

1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of memory in architecture appears intentionally or collaterally in many studies on architecture – after all, architecture records time, space, emotions, and memory within built space. The article concerns experimentation and the experience of memory in architecture

and through architecture. It is not connected with traditional archiving, reconstruction, or conservation, but rather with the creation of this memory. Following the words of Wiesław Myśliwski: "everything is memory", every current thing shares a kinship with memory and experience – with the past. This literary perspective applies to a certain extent to architecture as well. The shifting context of memory is significant for its continuity, shape, and content. Similarly for architecture, which serves as its vehicle – it is subject to the evaluation of time. The most enduring traditional forms are monuments and memorials. However, contemporary architecture has expanded the possibilities for creating spaces of memory. This provides a field for new experiences and experiments.

2. MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

The memory of architectural forms from the past shapes the conception of the contemporary. The continuity of tradition is a natural path of development. Yet its negation, its disruption, opens a field for new experiences. As Myśliwski wrote: "I would not advise trusting memory, as memory is subordinate to our imagination, so it cannot be the oracle of truth about us."[1] This statement defines the plasticity of the memory record, its susceptibility to modifications, creations, erasure, fiction, overinterpretation, and so on. Memory in this view is also associated with rewriting, deleting and adjusting, experimenting... experiencing. And here one can search for new ways of commemorating and preserving through creation.

> We were taught that our memory is a kind of energy, or rather a trunk in which events remain in an unaltered form. And we reproduce these events. Well, I have never agreed to such a formula of memory. I believe that in a human being memory is in constant motion, that memory actually mythologizes reality, that memory constantly creates reality. I would say that this is a wonderful feature of memory –it is creative[2].

Such a characterisation of memory broadens our perspective on this issue significantly. For it remains most understandable when expressed in the materiality of architecture, enduring in unity with the site of commemoration. But by opening itself to the recipient – a person embedded in a given place connected with their own memory and experience it changes the context of the universality of recording, transmission, and interpretation of memory. It thus becomes, as Myśliwski would have it, a creation.

Jeff Malpas captures the matter similarly: "By this, I mean that memory is not something that is to be understood as merely a product of subjective experience. Memory arises through our interactive engagement with the world in which we find ourselves – an involvement that does not come after the formation of the self but is the very means by which the self is formed."[3]

Thus, memory is subjected to changes; it is created, modified over time, and interpreted by the recipient. Relating these properties to architecture confirms these phenomena. Modifications of memory are like modifications of architecture – forms and shapes from the past are

[1] W. Myśliwski, *Ostatnie rozdanie*, Znak, Kraków 2013, p. 85.
[2] T. Bocheński, *Myśliwski–Bocheński. Rozmowy istotne*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2021, p. 116.
[3] J. Malpas, *Building Memory*, "Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts" 2012, no. 13, pp. 11–21, https://doi.org/10.24135/ijara.v0i0.433 (access: 05.05.2026).

subjected to changes, transformations, distortions – creation. "In Myśliwski's work, memory is harnessed in the service of imagination, rather than the other way around."[4]. Therefore, there is no single memory; everyone will remember or, in accordance with the above, will create differently a given event or person. Individual memory is not collective memory.

Buildings, streets, and spaces are vehicles of cultural and social memory. This raises problems of universality and legibility. Skopje, as a result of the tragic events of 1963 and the necessity of saving a city destroyed by an earthquake, became a site of intensive work related to reconstruction and the creation of new buildings. The sudden need to recreate the previously existing urban fabric confronted architects, among others, with a choice – reconstruction, creation, or the erection of new volumes. And so, the ruins of the city became a vast testing ground for contemporary architecture. The resulting impressive modernist public buildings, though modern and functional, were not fully accepted into the identity of the city's inhabitants. "The personality of a city is formed under the influence of its inhabitants' behaviour – how they move around it, how they speak about it, and finally, how they treat it."[5] Kenzo Tange's vision of a grand urban development in the form of a symbolic city gate utilising the urbanism of Metabolism was likewise not realised. A sentiment for history, an intensified desire to recreate the city's identity based on the past and the memory of former structures, and above all, aspirations to create a new and deeper historical legacy resulted in the initiative of the *Skopje 2014* project. This led to mass rebuildings of existing structures, cloaking them in ancient and historicising costumes, transformations of districts, and the erection of countless monuments.

Skopje became an experimental field for memory – a repository and a patchwork of what was, what survived, what was rebuilt, what was built anew, and what was altered. In the attempt to search for identity, spatial chaos prevailed. As Andrzej Stasiuk says, "Memory is a choice. A choice of what is necessary for us", here displaying its uncoordinated face. Just as Stasiuk combines personal threads with collective history, Skopje mixes and creates the memory of the former city.

This problem can be connected to the relationship between memory and place. Place builds identity, solidifies memory, and binds it permanently to a specific space. Myśliwski noted that today we have lost this sense: "The most essential element of the sense of human existence used to be place. Not time, but place inherited from generation to generation, where the same lineages – noble, burgher, or peasant – lived for centuries. Place is the highest state of metaphysics."[6]

Jeff Malpas confirms this connection, relating it more broadly to architecture:

> The claim I advance here is that any such inquiry must pay special attention to the connection of place and building with memory. The connection of place with memory is neither peripheral nor contingent. Place and memory are integrally connected such that they cannot be understood independently. Place and building are likewise tied, because architecture is always a response to place[7].

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[4] P. Biłos, *Powieściowe światy Wiesława Myśliwskiego*, Znak, Kraków 2017, p. 504.

[5] K. Nettmann-Multanowska, *Warszawa rysuje Skopje*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2022, p. 384.

[6] W. Myśliwski, *W środku jesteśmy baśnią*, interview by A. Franaszek, J. Strzałka., "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2006, no. 22, p. 26.

[7] J. Malpas, *op. cit*.

It can therefore be confirmed that memory and place are usually inextricably linked. The architecture of memory is erected at the site of a given event, especially when commemorating tragic occurrences. Consequently, the durability of this relationship is crucial for the architecture of memory. As Malpas would have it:

> The inquiry into the ontology of architecture must therefore include an inquiry into the relation between memory and place. Simply stated, there is no place without memory, no memory without place, and, since there is no architecture without place, neither is there architecture that is not engaged with memory[8].

In the designed Tirpitz Museum on the west coast of Denmark in Blåvand, architects from the BIG team transform an existing Nazi bunker and the surrounding nature reserve into a realm of memory. The dune landscape allows the main museum building to remain "hidden". Tunnels – passages hollowed into the elevation intersect in a square central area, forming the main entrance to the exhibition space. "With four precise incisions into the topography, it's the antithesis of the concrete block, and a dramatic counterpoint to the war history of the site. At first, visitors only see the German bunker until they walk along heath-lined paths and descend into a sunken plaza at the heart of the complex."[9] The memory of the site's events is created, preserving the memory of these dramatic events.. Through the transformation of the place, it creates a space facilitating the reception and contemplation of this history. "Where the original artillery fortress is an immense structure rejecting its surroundings, the new museum is inviting and open like a bunker in reverse. It becomes an architecture that contrasts new with old, openness with protection, landscape with object, and light with darkness."[10]

One can easily point to a significant number of similar sites where the commemoration of dramatic history, usually connected with World War II, creatively combines not only documentation and remembrance, but also processing and building awareness, without limiting itself to the museum-style reception of an exhibition, but extending to the active experience of a given site.

When designing the Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów, the architects from Nizio Design searched for the memory of the site and its events. The symbolism of the architectural form is expressive; the architecture acts directly upon the recipient, inducing an appropriate mood of dread and gravity, a feeling that something important and terrifying transpired. It is a narrative and commemorative architecture with an appropriate framing of solemnity. The Mausoleum is a complex building structure created as an object in which a sense of austerity, the timelessness of memory, and the capacity to form intricate shapes were achieved. The structure reinforces the impression of a captivating void, the gravity of the site's context, and the commemorated events. The concrete elements standing in contrast to the natural landscape are forms with the archetypal shape of cottages, which, as they fragment, form a metaphor for the ruins and ashes of a burned village.

One must also consider non-memory here: is it possible to forget tragic events? Perhaps it is also a pretext to shape a museum through a figuratively decaying space – a sculpture of void. Such a metaphor would be direct, yet accurate in sites of memory. Void is a profound form of commemoration.

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[8] *Ibidem.*

[9] BIG*, Formgiving. An Architectural Future History,* Taschen, Köln 2020, p. 216.

[10] *Ibidem.*

To the above description, one must add the fallibility of memory, which may be associated with forgetting or misrepresentation. But we are also speaking here of selective memory – remembering chosen fragments. In a similar manner, Myśliwski assists in mastering difficult memories: "memory is not for remembering, but for recollecting, and that is not the same thing."[11] Nevertheless, for architecture, the precise transmission of a given story, event, or emotion is important, even though it will always be selective and unobjective.

Perhaps this will serve as an example of *counter-monuments*[12], as James E. Young intended – an architecture that defines memory in a new way by abandoning traditional forms of memorials and monuments, forcing the recipient to actively "experience" memory.

Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler in *The Art of Forgetting*[13] refer to living memory and indicate that monuments and sites can heighten the active experience of memory. They do not have to exist merely as stationary testimonies. One can delve here into the ontology of architecture, asking generally about the boundaries of architecture, recognising that it is not merely a technical issue, but also a semantic and metaphorical one. Within this field lies memory, which can be cultural, collective, social, but also performative.

The materiality and physical shape of the monument known from the past seems to be too static for contemporary aspirations and capabilities. Adrian Forty in *Concrete and Culture* conducts an important analysis of the history of concrete and its role in the architecture of memory. Traditional materials used for erecting monuments – wood and stone – were replaced by concrete, which was crucial during post-war reconstruction. From a common, mass-produced construction material, it transformed into the building block of memorials and the architecture of memory. He notes that:

> It has to be said that the large majority of concrete memorials betray a naive optimism about the capacity of solid objects to preserve memory: all too often concrete has been used for, apparently, no better reason than that it offers the appearance of dense mass and indestructibility, as if an excess of these properties would be enough to guarantee the prolongation of human memory.[14]

He thus draws attention to the insufficient role of transmitting memory through its deeper experience. The formal creation of space should not be limited to evocative shapes built at the site of commemoration, but must account for memory's susceptibility to change.

3. CONCLUSION

The architecture of memory constitutes an important element in building identity, recollections, and history. Its social function in creating collective memory is obvious. Memory must be creative – despite tragic experiences and the desire to forget, attempts are made to raise awareness and convey memory by utilising its selective elements. And this is an important aspect – a certain narrative, selection, creation. It should not, therefore, be treated as documentary work – it is not archiving or an objective recording of fact. This is accompanied

[11] W. Myśliwski, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
[12] J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 1993, p. 27.
[13] A. Forty, S. Küchler (eds.), *The Art of Forgetting*, Berg, Oxford 2001, pp. 1–16.
[14] A. Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History*, Reaktion Books, London 2012, p. 221.

by the rejection of pathos and a certain anti-monumentalism, a departure from the classical memorial. This architecture demands from the contemporary recipient a different perspective on the issue. It forces them to join the search for the appropriate site of memory, often guiding them through dark corridors to underground portions of buildings. It engages the recipient's senses, dislodging them from the classical comfort of museum visiting. Experiencing memory becomes a living stimulus.



Ill. 1. Nizio Design – Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages, Michniów, Poland, 2020, photo by M. Początko



Ill. 2. Nizio Design – Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages, Michniów, Poland, 2020, photo by M. Początko



Ill. 3. Nizio Design – Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages, Michniów, Poland, 2020, photo by M. Początko

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[7] Myśliwski W., *W środku jesteśmy baśnią*, interview by. A. Franaszek, J. Strzałka., "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2006, no. 22, p. 22.
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