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# PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE. A CASE STUDY OF A TENEMENT HOUSE IN THE CITY CENTER OF ŁÓDŹ

# POSTRZEGANIE I DOŚWIADCZENIE ARCHITEKTURY. STUDIUM PRZYPADKU KAMIENICY W CENTRUM ŁODZI

Abstract

Proper, skillful reading of architecture and its experience are important factors in the perception of a selected work. The aim of this article is to analyze factors that are important in the building-observer relationship and, simultaneously, in the process of architectural perception. The research method is based on the characteristics of the subject, literature research, and analysis of a subjectively selected object. A tenement house located in the center of Łódź at 32 Legionów Street was selected for analysis – a building designed by architect Stanisław Kowalski and considered one of the city's more interesting and distinctive corner buildings. The study results identify the elements that impact the observer.

Keywords: *architecture, experience, perception, tenement house*

Streszczenie

Właściwe, umiejętne czytanie architektury i jej doświadczenie stanowi ważny czynnik w postrzeganiu wybranego dzieła. Celem artykułu jest analiza czynników, które są istotne w relacji budynek–obserwator i jednocześnie w procesie odbioru architektury. Metoda badawcza oparta jest na charakterystyce zagadnienia, badaniach literatury oraz analizie subiektywnie wybranego obiektu. Do analizy wybrano kamienicę położoną w centrum Łodzi przy ulicy Legionów 32 zaprojektowaną przez architekta Stanisława Kowalskiego i uznawaną za jedną z ciekawszych i bardziej charakterystycznych obiektów narożnych w mieście. Wyniki badań określają elementy, które wywierają wpływ na obserwatora.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, doświadczenie, kamienica, postrzeganie*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture can be viewed through the lens of its communicative potential, highlighting the properties of the structure and examining its impact on the various levels of the observer's sensibility. Every architectural work – and indeed any building viewed from the outside – conveys a lot of information. An initial visual impression reveals individual and aesthetic characteristics, setting up an interplay between the creator's intentions and

the observer's expectations. Each person perceives a building differently, and the emotions evoked by the work can vary widely.

The perception of architecture is a multisensory cognitive process in which an individual perceives and interprets space while observing or using it. The perception and experience of architecture is a subject that lends itself to diverse interpretations. It is worth noting that an architectural object, perceived as an image, remains a multifaceted presence that accompanies a person at every stage of life. A deeper perception, arising from sensory interpretation, can play a significant role in how we experience the architectural environment – the context of our existence.

## 2. PERCEPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF ARCHITECTURE – BUILDING AND OBSERVER

Robert Venturi addressed the issue of the linguistic dimension of architecture in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, lamenting the simplification of forms while calling for the restoration of ambiguity and innovation to encourage viewers to "read" them. The issue of recognizing and categorizing architecture – along with the selection of perceptions based on specific conditions governing the shaping of architectural forms – pertains to the realm of sensory experience. It can serve as a significant element that facilitates not only the understanding of architecture but also the process of shaping it. The interdependencies and connections that arise during the interpretation of images influence the understanding of architectural spaces. Furthermore, our understanding of objects arises from sensory impressions. These form the basis for the corresponding mental representations – concepts – that we use to explain them. Even language, which is entirely symbolic, reaches us in a physical form that we perceive through the senses. All elements of this "language" serve a semantic function – that of conveying meaning. Architectural codes distinguish between two levels of communication: denotation and connotation. Denotation conveys a straightforward meaning that is grasped immediately; it answers the question: What is this building, and what is its purpose? It relies on a generally understood function and physical form. Connotation, by contrast, carries a more complex meaning that invites reflection; it encompasses the subjective associations, emotions, and symbols that the building evokes in the observer. According to Ralph Weber , meaning is not a property of form but is interpreted by the observer based on concepts derived from cultural conventions, individual experience, and learning. A key issue that should not be overlooked – and one that Kant also addresses in the context of understanding – is the nature of feeling and how it influences the process of understanding and, consequently, its outcome.

Słuchocka writes that understanding the fundamentals of coexistence between the two partners – human beings and architecture – is key to shaping the latter in a more conscious manner that better addresses the user's needs. Architecture, viewed as a partner, has its own principles, requirements, and expectations that must be respected. Violating them can disrupt the positive relationship between these partners and, consequently, diminish the quality of the broader context – encompassing the social, material, and economic conditions that directly impact our lives. In terms of the human–architecture relationship, this translates into a more conscious perception of spaces designed for people, a respect for space, and an attempt to understand the message the architect conveys through the realized structures.

When analyzing the cognitive process through which a person perceives and interprets space – whether while observing or using it – one must highlight, above all, visual, auditory, tactile, and emotional experiences. Architecture is a spatial art that engages all the senses; indeed, the image of architecture arises from the interplay of the senses and knowledge, just as reality is perceived through the senses yet understood through the mind . Interpreting the spatial contexts of everyday habits involves the relationship between conscious awareness and the message conveyed by the image of architecture – an image perceived differently by each of us. It is worth noting that this image acts as a form of communication, transmitting values and ideas. Its visual presence – defined by light and shadow, material textures, and spatial depth – dominates our experience. The dynamic interplay of light, shadow, and color shapes the mood and our perception of architectural forms, while our senses register the interior's temperature and acoustics. It is worth noting that, since the time of Leon Battista Alberti, Western architectural theory has primarily focused on issues of visual perception, harmony, and proportion . The Vitruvian triad, a classic definition based on utility (*utilitas*), durability (*firmitas*), and beauty (*venustas*) – remains the foundation for evaluating buildings. Władysław Strzemiński observes that seeing is not merely the passive reception of visual sensations . There is a reciprocal influence of thought on vision and vision on thought. The perception of reality is determined not by the biological reception of visual sensations, but by the interplay between vision and thought – that is, the conditioned development of visual consciousness.

## 2.1. AN EXAMPLE OF A ŁÓDŹ TENEMENT HOUSE FROM THE CITY CENTER

The residential tenement house located at 32 Legionów Street in Łódź's city center (Ill. 1) is one of the city's more interesting buildings. It was built in 1925 based on a design by architect Stanisław Kowalski. The building is situated on a corner plot at the intersection of Legionów and Gdańska Streets (formerly Konstantynowska and Długa Streets). It is worth noting that the land was purchased in 1888 by I.K. Poznański, Łódź's most renowned industrialist. A few years later, in 1896, the owner sold the site to his own company, which subsequently undertook a series of investments . A tenement house was built that contained apartments for the company's employees. The building exhibits Neoclassical forms and represents the type of tenement house featuring a rounded corner. This category encompasses the most impressive and decorative tenement houses – such as the one at 32 Legionów Street discussed in this article, as well as others in the city center, such as those at 11 Piotrkowska Street and 225 Piotrkowska Street. In his book *Nieobecna struktura*, Umberto Eco defines architecture as a set of signs that, through their inherent symbolism, communicate with and shape the user's consciousness . These townhouses are undeniable elements of the city's identity.

The tenement house in question belongs to a group of buildings characterized by a prominently distinguished corner section. It features balconies with decorative metal railings, flanked by two columns with capitals referencing the Ionic order (Ill. 2). The façade, meanwhile, is characterized by a rhythmic arrangement of windows and decorative elements projecting beyond the wall surface, such as window surrounds, cornices, and brackets (Ill. 3). The building rises four stories, with the ground floor clearly distinguished by rounded shop-window openings. The top of the corner section is adorned with a bas-relief depicting a spinner at a spinning wheel alongside three female figures (Ill. 4). It is worth noting that the interplay of light and shadow accentuates the building's structural form, while shifting

light patterns lend it a dynamic quality. Protruding elements of the façade reflect the light, whereas recesses and details – such as balconies, cornices, and pilasters – fall into shadow. Rhythm and repetition create a sense of harmony. The walls are finished in two shades of light-colored plaster. Materials used on the façade – such as smooth surfaces (window glass) – produce sharp reflections, while the rough textures of the walls (in this case, plaster) diffuse the light. Le Corbusier's famous credo – that architecture is the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of volumes in light – defines architecture, yet here it refers to the interplay of repetitive elements designed to focus primary attention on the corner . Architecture often appears to be primarily a visual art, as we frequently view buildings from the outside, like spectators of an image, rather than experiencing them firsthand. Yet, if a work truly captures a viewer's interest, they naturally wish to explore it more closely and in greater depth. In the case of the tenement house in question, the building's interior and its spectacular staircase in particular can surprise the visitor (Ill. 5).





Ill. 1. Tenement house at 32 Legionów Street in Łódź, architect St. Kowalski (photo by author, 2025)
Ill. 2. Corner of the tenement house at 32 Legionów Street in Łódź (photo by author, 2026)





Ill. 3. Details – north façade of building at 32 Legionów Street in Łódź (photo by author, 2026)
Ill. 4. A decorative relief at the top of the building serves as a reminder of Łódź's textile heritage (photo by author, 2026)



Ill. 5. An impressive staircase inside the tenement house at 32 Legionów Street in Łódź (photo by author, 2026)

In the book devoted to the typology of the Łódź tenement house[1]. The authors state that a tenement house can function as a work of architecture and serve as an artistic expression. Furthermore, according to classical architectural principles, the façade of a building within a continuous urban frontage should be viewed both as an individual composition and as part of an architectural sequence – *parataxis*. Order, hierarchy, stability, and a sense of dignity – all these elements can be found in the structure and ornamentation of the rental tenement. The decorative features and bas-reliefs convey significant information. The building is intended to provide aesthetic pleasure, relate to values, or convey messages[2]. Zumthor writes: "Whether the phenomenon that moves me is truly beautiful cannot be proven based on form alone; for it is not the form itself, but rather the spark igniting between me and it that generates that particular excitement and depth of emotional intensity inherent in the experience of beauty"[3].

The way we interpret buildings is significantly influenced by our experiences and cultural context. Understanding a structure as a bearer of symbols, traditions, and a sense of place is

[1] M. Domińczak, A. Zaguła, *Typologia Łódzkiej kamienicy*, Urząd Miasta Łodzi, Łódź 2016, p. 32.
[2] D. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna*, New Heaven–London 1986, p. 5.
[3] P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Karakter, Kraków 2010, pp. 77–78.

crucial. Architecture becomes a vehicle for storytelling, engaging the audience and prompting reflection on the past and its impact on the present – in this instance, specifically regarding the industrial heritage of Łódź.

## 3. THE NARRATIVE OF ARCHITECTURE: ITS EXPERIENCE AND REMEMBRANCE

Architectural narrative refers to the way buildings – through form, function, and context – tell stories and shape user experiences. The experience of architecture, gained through movement, creates a continuous sequence of views. These narratives are rooted in the identity of a place. Architecture creates "stories" – whether historical or contemporary – and influences how the surroundings are perceived. The environment, in turn, affects well-being. The psychological and social (cognitive) dimension encompasses the subjective experience of mood, safety, and the building's scale. It is worth noting the historical narrative in architecture, which reflects a place's past through historical elements, architectural styles, and materials. It can evoke emotions and memories, while shaping the identity of a place or city. Such a narrative can also encourage discussion and reflection on the history, culture, and significance of a given location. Architecture can strengthen the sense of identity and belonging to a place by telling the story of its inhabitants and their experiences.

In the book titled *Przestrzeń i miasto,* Wallis[4] observes that every architectural work and structure, when viewed from the outside, conveys certain information that must be considered fundamental to the building's social significance. This information relates to the building's purpose and current functions, the position it holds within the hierarchy of values associated with social prestige and status, and the qualities – particularly emotional ones – that it radiates. An initial visual impression allows us to perceive its individual and aesthetic characteristics. The building in question clearly communicates its residential function and occupies a prestigious location within the urban fabric. Its architecture intrigues us, drawing us inside to explore further. The interior does not disappoint, as we enter the impressive staircase hall, where we can sense the atmosphere and charm of the place.

Writing about the experience of architecture and art, Pallasmaa describes it as a unique encounter: "I lend the space my emotions and associations, and the space grants me an atmosphere that stimulates and unleashes my experiences and thoughts"[5].

Pallasmaa's thought stems from the experience of architecture and general reflection on the human being, taking into account a broad spectrum of cultural stimuli. Böhme also writes about architecture and the experience of space.[6] Atmosphere in architecture is thus a fundamental aspect of human perception – the way in which people, by virtue of their disposition, instantly sense the mood of a place. It is worth noting that not every building remains in our memory, nor does every building evoke an emotional response. The character of an architectural form that we remember is shaped by the following criteria:

[4] A. Wallis, *Przestrzeń i miasto*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1977, p. 223.
[5] J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[6] J. Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures, The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces,* Bloomsbury Academic, London 2017, p. 70.

– appropriateness of the expression of content – the spatial forms of the mass, expressing the essence of the content – a timeless idea (e.g., power, dignity),
– in terms of the impression it creates – the appropriate strength of expression indicating its distinctness,
– attractiveness of form – the power to fascinate, the ability to inspire,
– timeliness of form – expressing its time of creation,
– authenticity and originality of form – if it has a distinctive character, is not stereotypical, and represents a new solution (does not imitate or copy other solutions),
– cultural identity – formal characteristics indicating belonging to a specific cultural area.

## 4. SUMMARY

Specific principles governing the shaping of architectural forms can be translated into the realm of sensory experience, serving as an aid to both understanding and creating architecture. As Rasmussen writes, the architect's creative process is multifaceted: they must work with form and mass just as a sculptor does, and with color just as a painter does.[7] He must also remember that the excellence of a structure is expressed through functionality; thus, he must think in purely practical terms, for his work will be judged on the basis of its utility. Engaging with architecture and experiencing it through the senses creates a reciprocal relationship – one that, as previously mentioned, may differ for each individual. Architecture affects all the senses; the observer does not merely "look" at a building but experiences it. Every building conveys a message. The observer interprets the structure's form, materials, and scale, thereby fostering a sense of belonging. Understanding this dynamic enables architects to design buildings that are welcoming and intuitively understandable to people. Through historical elements, architectural styles, and materials, architecture reflects the past of a given place.

An analysis of the selected tenement house demonstrates that effective presentation requires a combination of spatial narrative and interpretive tools, while the preservation of the tangible historical fabric allows us to understand a work of architecture. Preserving authenticity enriches the relationship with contemporary use. Architecture that intrigues us reveals successive images and sequences, lingering in our memory; thus, as recipients, we experience the "record" of that image.

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