DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.4-15

MACIEJ SKAZA
ORCID: 0000-0002-7461-5492
PK Krakow University of Technology, Poland

THE EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND INTERPRETATION. CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF THE RECEPTION OF TADAO ANDO'S WORK

DOŚWIADCZENIE ARCHITEKTURY POMIĘDZY PERCEPCJĄ A INTERPRETACJĄ. KULTUROWE UWARUNKOWANIA ODBIORU TWÓRCZOŚCI TADAO ANDO

Abstract

The article examines the discrepancy between the perception of architecture and its interpretation, which increases when the creator and the recipient function within different cultural frameworks. Using four works by Tadao Ando, Western spiritual and aesthetic readings are juxtaposed with functional-urban professional discourse, showing that the type of interpretation is determined by the place of creation of the work, and not by the identity of the artist. A model of layered reading is proposed, as a development of the author's earlier concept.

Keywords: *architecture, cultural conditioning, perception, Tadao Ando, theory*

Streszczenie

Artykuł bada rozdźwięk między percepcją architektury a jej interpretacją, pogłębiający się, gdy twórca i odbiorca funkcjonują w odmiennych ramach kulturowych. Na przykładzie czterech realizacji Tadao Ando zestawiono odczytania zachodnie, duchowo-estetyzujące, z funkcjonalno-urbanistycznym dyskursem profesjonalnym, wykazując, że o typie interpretacji decyduje miejsce powstania dzieła, a nie tożsamość twórcy. Zaproponowano model odczytania warstwowego, rozwijający wcześniejszą koncepcję autora.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, percepcja, teoria, Tadao Ando, warunkowanie kulturowe*

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture is experienced through the senses and the body – through movement, time, light, sound and memory – before it even becomes the subject of reflection. However, this sensory dimension of reception, which is currently being re-established in the theoretical discussion as an important factor, is only the first layer of architectural experience. Perception, understood as a sensory-bodily process, is overlaid by interpretation – a semantic process

in which the perceived impressions are incorporated into the system of concepts, associations and values specific to a particular culture. While perception remains largely universal, interpretation is always situated: the same spatial experience can lead to extremely different readings, depending on what cultural associations the recipient activates.

The article puts forward the thesis that the gap between the perception and interpretation of architecture is particularly pronounced when the creator and the recipient function in different cultural frameworks. In such a situation, the sensory experience of the work – available to virtually every user – does not guarantee interpretive convergence at all; on the contrary, it can lead to readings that have little to do with the artist's intention. Memory plays an important role in this, acting not only as an archive of impressions but as an interpretive mechanism – it is through memory that the sensory experience of space is translated into a meaning embedded in a specific cultural tradition.

This thesis is illustrated by the case of the reception of Tadao Ando's work outside Japan. The readings dominant in Western critical and popular discourse – oriented toward aestheticization, spirituality and concepts such as Zen or wabi-sabi – will be juxtaposed with Japanese discourse, in which the same works are described primarily in terms of utilitarianism, materials or urban planning. Ando, an artist who consistently combines compositional rigor with the local cultural context, is a particularly expressive case in this sense: his architecture, circulated in the media in isolation from the Japanese interpretive context, is subjected to secondary, often simplified readings.

The article is a direct development of the author's earlier concept, according to which the architectural form is co-determined by the characteristics of the recipient and the process of perception itself [Skaza 2019]. However, while this text focused on the mechanism of perception itself, this work shifts the emphasis to the stage following perception – to interpretation as a culturally conditioned process – and introduces the case of the intercultural reception of a single artist into this reflection.

The article then presents a theoretical framework combining the phenomenology of architecture, hermeneutics and research on the cultural determinants of spatial cognition, and then – on the example of selected Tadao Ando projects – an analysis of the interpretative discrepancies between Western and Eastern (Japanese) perceptions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. PHENOMENOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE AND MULTISENSORY PERCEPTION

The starting point for the proposed theoretical framework is the phenomenological approach to perception, in which the body – and not only sight – is the primary medium of experiencing space. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, perception precedes conceptualization: the world, including the constructed world, is first experienced bodily, and only secondarily conceptually grasped[1]. This perspective corresponds to the theses presented at this year's conference, which remind us that the perception of architecture varies according to the user's height,

[1] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia percepcji*, trans. M. Kowalska, J. Migasiński, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 2001, pp. 83–90.

step rhythm, or sensory sensitivity of the user, and that touch, hearing and smell remain as important as sight.

Pallasmaa develops his critique of the dominance of sight in modern architecture, pointing to the need to restore its multisensory dimension – the touch of texture, interior acoustics, the play of light and shadow[2]. However, this perceptual layer, which is largely universal, is only the starting point for further, culturally conditioned interpretation, discussed further.

2.2. ARCHITECTURAL HERMENEUTICS AND MEMORY AS AN INTERPRETATIVE MECHANISM

If perception provides raw sensory material, then giving it meaning is already an act of interpretation – in the hermeneutic sense: the encounter between the horizon of the work and the horizon of the viewer, leading, as Gadamer puts it, to their "fusion".[3] Architecture is never read in a conceptual vacuum; its experience is incorporated into the system of meanings that the viewer brings with them.

The key mechanism of this process is memory – not as a passive archive of impressions, but as an active interpretive mechanism, transforming what is sensual into what is meaningful. A particularly useful category for describing this phenomenon is the "afterimage" in Strzemiński's understanding: an image that, fixed in consciousness, overlaps with successive perceptions, co-shaping their interpretation[4]. Afterimages of space, fragmentary and often blurred, make it possible for the same architectural form to be read differently depending on what stock of images and associations the viewer activates.

2.3. CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF SPATIAL COGNITION

The third layer of the proposed theoretical framework is the cultural conditioning of spatial cognition itself. Edward T. Hall pointed out that the norms of distance, boundary and spatial context differ significantly between cultures, and what is read as openness in one cultural circle is perceived as a violation of privacy or illegibility of form in another[5]. This perspective, already signaled in the analysis of Ando's architecture set in an urban context, is developed here in the direction of a more general cognitive mechanism.

This approach is complemented by Nisbett's research on the difference between the cognitive styles of the East and the West: while analytical cognition isolates the object from the context, holistic cognition captures it relationally, in a network of connections with the environment[6]. This difference has a direct impact on the perception of Japanese architecture – while the Western viewer is inclined to distinguish form as an autonomous aesthetic object, Japanese discourse situates it primarily in relation to its surroundings and utility.

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[2] J. Pallasmaa, *Oczy skóry. Architektura i zmysły*, trans. M. Choptiany, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2012, pp. 81–82, 83–85.

[3] H.-G. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda. Zarys hermeneutyki filozoficznej*, trans. B. Baran, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2013.

[4] W. Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1958, p. 17.

[5] E.T. Hall, *Ukryty wymiar*, trans. T. Hołówka, Muza, Warszawa 2009.

[6] R.E. Nisbett, *Geografia myślenia. Dlaczego ludzie Wschodu i Zachodu myślą inaczej*, trans. E. Wojtych, Wydawnictwo Smak Słowa, Sopot 2015, pp. 66–73.

3. TADAO ANDO AS A BORDERLINE CASE

In earlier formal analyses of Ando's architecture, repetitive compositional means were indicated: the principle of contrast between geometry and light, modularity based on tatami proportions, and the consistent use of concrete as a construction material and a carrier of meaning at the same time. These means describe the artist's intention – the way in which Ando himself articulates the relationship between form and context[7]. The following four projects allow us to juxtapose this authorial intention with a separate body of material: the way in which these works are described by the Western architectural and popular press.

3.1. PUNTA DELLA DOGANA IN VENICE

In the transformation of the seventeenth-century customs building (2009), Ando used a strategy of minimal interference: he removed the later layers, leaving the brick structure and wooden truss visible, and made the concrete volume organizing the interior the only significant addition [8]. At the same time, this concrete *campo* is to be, in Ando's intention, the "beginning" of the entire complex. The material contrast – polished concrete, glass and steel juxtaposed with the raw, irregular texture of the old walls – is sometimes read by critics as a literal embodiment of the relationship between the past, present and future, although in the design layer it results primarily from the adopted strategy of limited interference. The architect himself described this relationship as a productive "clash" of the old with the new, which was the driving force behind creating[9] the future. The Western reception follows this trail almost literally – it emphasizes the dialogue between history and the present, but omits the Japanese genealogy of this strategy (reduction, emptiness, provisionality as values), present in Ando's own professional discourse.

3.2. BOURSE DE COMMERCE IN PARIS

The reconstruction of the eighteenth-century commodity exchange (2021) involves inserting a free-standing, concrete cylinder 9 meters high and 29 meters in diameter into the glass rotunda[10]. An additional dimension of this juxtaposition is the nineteenth-century panoramic painting decorating the dome of the rotunda – the concrete cylinder does not obscure it, but creates a viewing platform allowing visitors to see the fresco up close, which makes the dialogue between the old and the new literal in the viewing layer as well. Ando described the procedure as introducing a new space "in a way full of respect" toward the existing walls[11]. It is characteristic that press reports in the West describe this gesture almost exclusively in terms of the universal language of modernist architecture (adaptation, dialogue, non-interference), without references to terms such as *ma* or *wabi-sabi*, which are used to describe Ando's work realized in Japan – this suggests that the cultural reading of his work depends on the place where the work was created, not only on the identity of the author.

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[7] T. Ando, *Tadao Ando 0: Process & Idea*, TOTO Publishing, Tokyo 2019, pp. 284, 288, 302, 346.
[8] *Cf.* F. Dal Co, *Tadao Ando per/for/pour François Pinault: From Ile Seguin to Punta Della Dogana*, Electa, Milan 2009.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 105.
[10] *Cf.* T. Ando, *op. cit*.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 346.

3.3. CHÂTEAU LA COSTE IN FRANCE

The Art Centre (2010), designed as a wedge-shaped block of concrete and glass floating over a 4,000-square-meter pond, is an example of the inclusion of architecture in the commercial and wine-tourism context of the estate[12]. The Ando building functions here alongside pavilions designed by Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Renzo Piano and Oscar Niemeyer and works by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Ai Weiwei and Richard Serra, which additionally places it in the context of a dispersed art park with a collectible character, and not in the urban fabric characteristic of Venetian or Parisian projects. In this case, the Western reception situates the building primarily in the aesthetic and experiential register (landscape, water, tasting, art) – omitting the functional-urban sensitivity accentuated in the professional architectural discourse.

3.4. CHICHU ART MUSEUM, NAOSHIMA

The Underground Museum (2004) abandons the visible volume in favor of natural light as the main medium of experience – the institution itself describes the whole as a coherent *site-specific work*, in which architecture and art co-create a single composition[13]. The exhibition – including Monet's Nenufars series and installations by James Turrell and Walter De Maria – was conceived in such a way that the way it is perceived changes with the natural cycle of daylight and the seasons, which further reinforces the contemplative, almost ritualistic character of the experience attributed to the building in the Western reception. It is in this, the only Japanese example among the four discussed examples, that Western reception most willingly reaches for the spiritual and contemplative register – which leads to the conclusion that it is not the architectural form, but the place of its creation that determines what interpretive repertoire will be activated in relation to it.

4. ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETIVE DISCREPANCIES

The examples presented in the previous section allow us to distinguish two recurring types of reception of Tadao Ando's architecture. The first, dominant in Western popular discourse and a large part of criticism, is of a spiritual and aesthetic nature: it operates with the concepts of Zen, *wabi-sabi* or *ma*, reducing the work to a vehicle of a contemplative mood. The second, closer to professional architectural discourse, including Ando's own statements, is of a utilitarian and urban nature: it describes a building through its relationship with the context, utilitarian program and structure. This discrepancy corresponds to the previously described distinction between holistic and analytical cognition – what constitutes the context for the meaning of form in one cultural circle remains, for another, the background of the aesthetic contemplation of the object[14].

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[12] *Cf.* R. Ivy, A. Hicks, *Château la Coste: Art and Architecture in Provence*, Merrell Publishers, London 2020.

[13] *Cf.* Y. Akimoto et al., *The Chichu Art Museum: Tadao Ando Builds for Claude Monet, Walter De Maria, and James Turrell*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern–Ruit 2005.

[14] R.E. Nisbett, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

It is worth emphasizing that both types of reception are not randomly distributed between the discussed projects. Where Ando enters into a dialogue with the Western historical fabric (Venice, Paris), the functional-urban reading also dominates in the popular press – the historical context forces the language of adaptation and dialogue. On the other hand, where the building is located in Japan, but circulates internationally as an object of cultural tourism (Naoshima), the spiritual-aesthetic reading prevails, regardless of the functional complexity of the project itself. This suggests that the choice of interpretive register is determined not so much by the form itself, but by the culturally mediated context of its reception.

This discrepancy is exacerbated by non-architectural factors. The media circulation – photographs of buildings circulating in isolation from the spatial and textual context – is conducive to a superficial reception, oriented towards the visual effect, rather than the sequential or tactile experience mentioned in section 2.1. The translation of cultural concepts into Western languages leads to their flattening: "ma" is sometimes reduced to "emptiness" or "minimalism", losing its relational, processual character – this phenomenon can be considered as a special case of the broader problem of the intercultural intranslatability of high-context and low-context, described by Hall[15]. Finally, cultural tourism, which transforms realizations such as the Chichu Art Museum into an aesthetic pilgrimage destination, perpetuates the spiritual reading at the expense of the functional, creating a kind of feedback: the greater the media circulation, the more lasting the simplification. These three mechanisms do not so much distort the interpretation as they actively shape it – operating at the stage where the sensual impression is translated into meaning.

5. DISCUSSION

The presented material allows us to propose a model of layered reading of architecture, consisting of three related stages. The first is sensory perception – largely universal, depending on corporeality and physical conditions of reception. The second is a cultural filter – composed of memory, conceptual categories, language and the aforementioned non-architectural factors – which selects and organizes sensory impressions. The third is a semantic interpretation, i.e. a final reception, specific to a particular circle of recipients or a single recipient. This model explains why the same work can function simultaneously as a manifesto of spirituality and as a precise urban study, without the need to assume error on either side – both interpretations are equally a product of the same process, each having passed through different filters.

This model has a significance beyond Ando's case: it allows architectural criticism to more consciously recognize which cultural filter it operates and avoid presenting a single interpretation as a universal reading. It can also be of didactic importance – in the education of architects designing for recipients outside their own cultural circle, where the awareness of the existence of such a filter is sometimes as important as compositional proficiency itself. Finally, it is a starting point for further, more systematic research on the reception of architecture in intercultural conditions, going beyond the analysis of a single artist.

[15] E.T. Hall, *op. cit.*

6. CONCLUSION

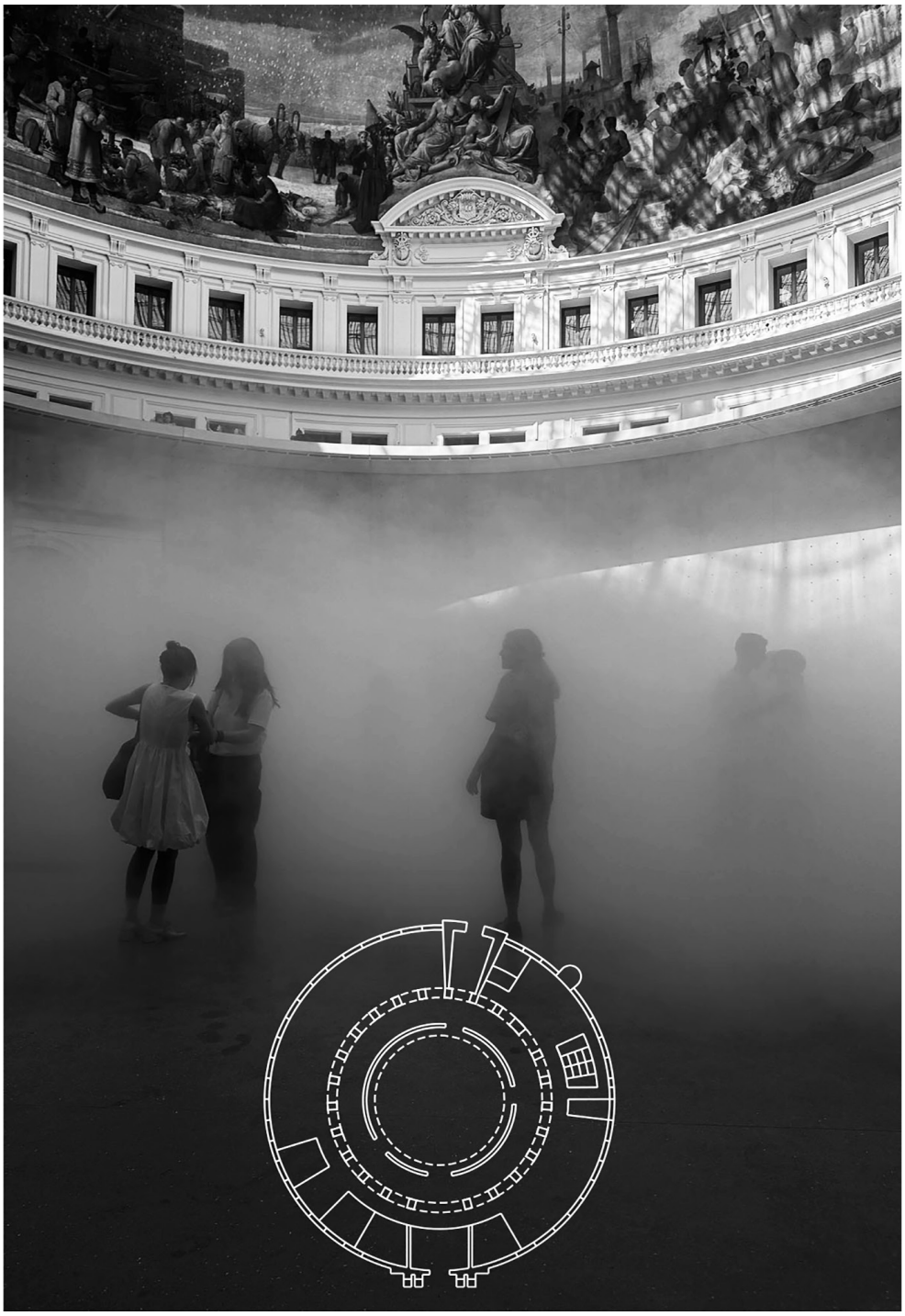
An analysis of the reception of Tadao Ando's selected works confirms the article's thesis: the gap between the perception and interpretation of architecture deepens when the creator and the recipient function in different cultural frameworks, and this mechanism is reinforced by non-architectural factors – media circulation, translational simplifications, and cultural tourism. Importantly, the type of reading is determined to a greater extent by the place of creation and circulation of the work than by the identity of its author – the same creative hand is sometimes interpreted extremely differently depending on where and in what context its realization functions.

The limitation of the analysis is that it is based on existing sources – the architectural press, institutional materials and the author's statements – and not on empirical research among actual recipients; moreover, the Japanese discourse has been reconstructed indirectly, mainly through the English-language statements of the architect himself. The analysis is also limited by the small number of analyzed projects and the one-directional nature of the phenomenon under study – only the reception of the Japanese artist outside Japan was analysed, and not the opposite case.

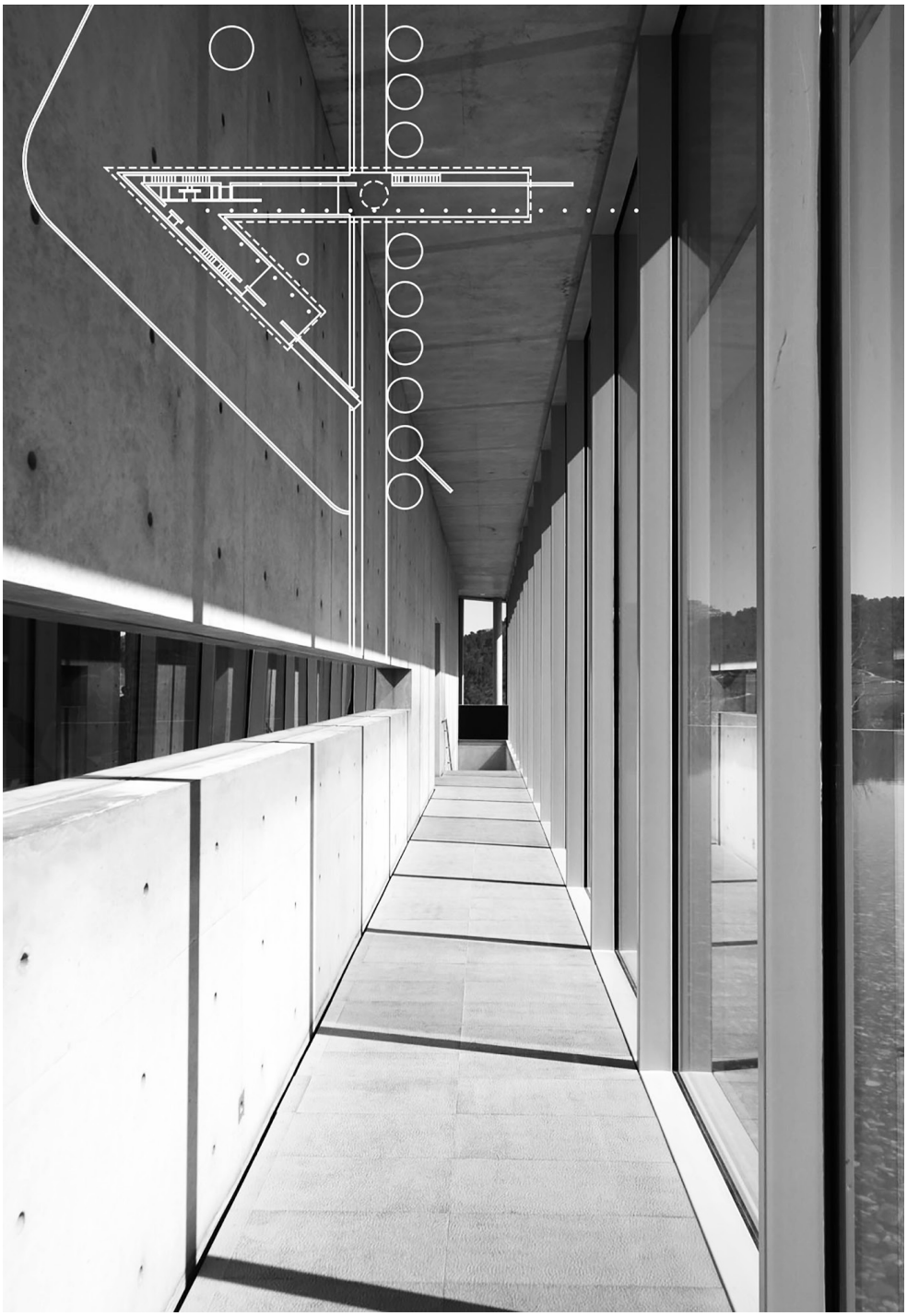
The next step in research would therefore be to study reception based on interviews, surveys or eye-tracking methods among culturally diverse groups of recipients, to expand the sample to include projects outside the museum and tourist circuit, as well as to apply the proposed model of layered reading to the work of other architects working at the intersection of cultures – both Western designers in Asia and Asian designers in the West.



Ill. 1. Punta della Dogana in Venice (proj. T. Ando), photo: author, 2025-09-03



Ill. 2. Bourse de Commerce in Paris (proj. T. Ando), photo: author, 2026-06-24



Ill. 3. Château La Coste in France (proj. T. Ando), photo: author, 2026-04-05



Ill. 4. Chichu Art Museum, Naoshima (proj. T. Ando), photo: author, 2026-08-08

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Author's Note

Maciej Skaza, PhD, Architect

Employed at the Faculty of Architecture, PK Krakow University of Technology, since 1994. Current position: assistant professor. Architect, a member of the Association of Polish Architects and the Chamber of Architects of the Republic of Poland. Author and co-*author of many projects (both implemented* and theoretical), as well as dozens of scientific and popular publications (also as an editor). Academic activity is combined with professional and didactic work, focused on the perception of contemporary architecture, with particular emphasis on its cultural conditioning. Winner of awards and distinctions in architectural competitions, a participant in architectural and photographic exhibitions, a keen traveler and observer of contemporary reality, and an amateur photographer.

maciej.skaza@pk.edu.pl