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ON THE EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE AND THE MEMORY OF MATERIAL

O DOŚWIADCZENIU ARCHITEKTURY I PAMIĘCI MATERIAŁU

Abstract

The modernisation of iconic buildings increasingly raises not only technical issues, but also questions of memory, authenticity and architectural experience. This article addresses issues arising from modernisation work on the 'Spodek' Sports and Entertainment Arena in Katowice. The author reflects on what today defines the 'original' appearance of an architectural icon: documentation, surviving material, photography, or users' collective memory. The modernisation of Spodek becomes an experience of interpreting architecture inscribed in material, technology and emotion.

Keywords: *architectural identity, architectural modernisation, architecture*

Streszczenie

Współczesna modernizacja obiektów ikonicznych coraz częściej staje się nie tylko problemem technicznym, lecz również pytaniem o pamięć, autentyczność i doświadczenie architektury. Artykuł dotyczy zagadnień związanych z pracami modernizacyjnymi Hali Widowiskowo-Sportowej Spodek w Katowicach. Autorka podejmuje refleksję nad tym, co dziś definiuje „oryginalny" wygląd ikony architektury: dokumentacja, zachowany materiał, fotografia czy zbiorowa pamięć użytkowników. Modernizacja Spodka staje się doświadczeniem interpretowania architektury zapisanej w materiale, technologii i emocjach.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura, modernizacja architektury, tożsamość architektury*

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows what Katowice's Spodek looks like. The 'Spodek' Sports and Entertainment Arena is one of those buildings that quickly transcended the limits of its original function. It is not only a sports and entertainment venue or an example of bold structural thinking from the second half of the twentieth century, but also a symbol of Katowice and an important element of the collective memory of the region's inhabitants.

Its architectural form is exceptionally recognisable. The distinctive silhouette of an inverted cone, the recognisable roofline, the building's relationship with the surrounding city centre, and the history of its construction have made Spodek not merely a building, but an icon. The building has been extensively discussed in the context of architectural history, technology, structural design and the design process. Its form, the origins of the design

competition, the role of the designers and structural engineers, as well as the innovative technical solutions employed, have all been analysed[1].

The situation changes when the question of Spodek shifts from its history to its future. A building that is merely being described is viewed differently from one that requires design, technical and conservation decisions. What seems obvious from a user's perspective becomes complex and open to interpretation from a specialist's perspective.

The starting point for these reflections is the author's experience in preparing the Functional and Utility Programme for the modernisation of part of the 'Spodek' Sports and Entertainment Arena. The subject of this article, however, is not the scope of the documentation or the course of the work, but a reflection on what happens to iconic architecture when it becomes the subject of modernisation.

The modernisation of a building deeply rooted in public consciousness is not merely a technical task. Every intervention also raises questions of authenticity, memory and responsibility. How can architecture that is widely perceived as familiar be preserved when its material and technological reality proves ambiguous?

In a 2024 article entitled *A Technique of Creating Architecture?*, the relationship between architecture and technology was examined in the context of Spodek's design process. The analysis asked whether technical innovation can determine architecture and whether architectural form can be defined through technology[2]. The present text can be regarded as a continuation of those reflections, approached from a different perspective. Whereas the earlier article concerned the technique of creating architecture, the present text concerns the experience of preserving it.

2. TECHNOLOGY AND AUTHENTICITY

The Functional and Utility Programme is, by its very nature, a practical document: it defines the client's needs, the technical, utility and functional requirements, and sets out the basis for further design work. In the case of Spodek, this apparent clarity quickly proved insufficient.

One of the issues concerned the modernisation and reinforcement of the balustrades on the external terraces. Initially, the problem appeared purely technical: the existing condition had to be assessed, damage identified, and methods of repair and protection determined.

However, the question of how to repair the balustrades soon led to a more difficult one: what should they look like? It was not merely a question of their geometry, dimensions or safety function. The issue concerned the material and visual character of the detail. Archival documentation existed, as did photographs, surviving fragments of the building and traces of successive alterations. Yet the answer remained unclear. Of particular significance was the archival description of the finish: 'scraped plaster made with white cement'[3]. This phrase,

[1] M. Gintowt, M. Krasiński, *Hala widowiskowo-sportowa w Katowicach*, "Architektura" 1972, no. 8–9, pp. 307–318; A. Żórawski, *Ewolucja projektu konstrukcyjnego Hali Widowiskowo-Sportowej w Katowicach*, "Inżynieria i Budownictwo" 1969, no. 10, pp. 381–386; I. Kozina, *Spodek rozciągany i ściskany*, "Architektura-Murator" 2012, no. 2, pp. 18–19.

[2] M. Sroka-Bizoń, *A Technique of Creating Architecture?*, [in:] T. Kozłowski (ed.), *Defining the Architectural Space*, vol. 4, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2024, pp. 61–68.

[3] Such a description of the finish of the balustrades on the external terraces and external staircases of the 'Spodek' Sports and Entertainment Arena is found in the surviving fragments of the building's

written in the technical language of the period, became the starting point for contemporary debate. What was the plaster finish on the hall's balustrades intended to look like, given the laconic description in the design documentation? What texture was it intended to create? What was its composition, application method, and visual and tactile effect? Does our contemporary understanding of the term correspond to the intentions of the designers and builders several decades ago? Do the surviving fragments represent the original condition, or later repairs, alterations and additions? (Ill. 1, 2, 3). Does an archival photograph reveal the material as it truly was, or merely its often accidental trace in light? (Ill. 4).

The technical issue thus became one of interpretation. The balustrade ceased to be merely an element in need of repair and became a point of convergence for documentation, memory, technology and design responsibility. A seemingly minor detail revealed a fundamental problem in the modernisation of iconic buildings: who determines what constitutes their authenticity?

3. ARCHITECTURE AS A SPECIALIST'S EXPERIENCE

In architectural discourse, it is increasingly emphasised that architecture is not perceived solely through sight. The experience of space encompasses movement, the body, memory, touch, acoustics, light, scent, temperature, scale and rhythm. Architecture therefore exists not solely as an image, but as a complex perceptual experience[4]. The user does not merely look at a building, but moves through it, remembers it and interprets it.

The experience of architecture concerns not only users but also designers, researchers, structural engineers and conservators. In modernisation projects, it ceases to be merely an aesthetic or functional experience and becomes an experience of responsibility.

A specialist is not a neutral observer: the decisions they make affect the building's future form and existence. The experience of architecture thus also becomes an experience of the limits of knowledge. The more strongly a building is embedded in collective memory, the more difficult it is to determine which of its characteristics are original, essential, or merely perpetuated by time.

Work on Spodek revealed this particularly clearly. A building so widely known and photographed proved difficult to define unambiguously in material terms. Viewed up close – through detail, texture, traces of workmanship and technology – architecture becomes far more complex than its image as recognised from afar.

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archival documentation. At present, the balustrade surfaces consist of stones and pebbles embedded in a cement render. During discussions held in the course of site visits relating to the drafting of conservation guidelines for the modernisation works on Spodek's external terraces, a question was raised: WHO remembers what these balustrades looked like when the building was first opened? This question forms the starting point for the considerations presented in this article, see: A. Kelar, *Wojewódzka Hala Widowiskowo-Sportowa w Katowicach. Taras – konstrukcja*, Biuro Studiów i Projektów Typowych Budownictwa Przemysłowego "Bistyp", project no. 11533, 30.05.1969; M. Gintowt, M. Krasiński, *Wojewódzka Hala Widowiskowo-Sportowa w Katowicach. Hala Główna – Taras*, Biuro Studiów i Projektów Typowych Budownictwa Przemysłowego "Bistyp", project no. 11533, 30.05.1969, Archiwum Urzędu Miasta Katowice.

[4] J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2005, pp. 41–59, 67–70; P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres. Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2006, pp. 21–33, 56–59.

A specialist's experience therefore also involves acknowledging uncertainty. In the modernisation of an iconic building, such uncertainty is not a weakness; it may be a prerequisite for responsible action.

4. THE MEMORY OF MATERIAL

One of the concepts that helps describe the experience of modernising Spodek is the memory of material. Material preserves traces of time: methods of execution, technology, repairs, damage, soiling and subsequent interventions. It is a carrier of information, although that information is not always easy to interpret unambiguously.

In the case of the balustrades, the relationship between archival records and the surviving material acquired particular significance. The term 'scraped decorative plaster' became evidence of a particular construction vocabulary and culture of craftsmanship that were readily understood when the building was erected but today require reinterpretation.

Documentation remembers words, but not the experience of execution. A photograph remembers an image, but not texture. A surviving fragment preserves material, but does not always allow the original state to be distinguished from later alterations. Users' memories preserve the atmosphere of a place, but they too are subject to distortion and emotional overwriting.

The memory of material is therefore a field of negotiation among different traces of the past. Archives, photographs, relics, technology and collective memory may complement or correct one another, or remain in tension.

The memory of material also concerns vanishing technological knowledge. A designer may be able to decipher an old description, yet not necessarily recreate the craft practice behind it. Technology is also a form of craft-based experience: knowledge of material, tools and working methods. When this knowledge disappears, technical descriptions cease to be as self-explanatory as they once were.

That is why 'scraped decorative plaster' is more than a description of a finish. It is a trace of a bygone technological order and a sign that architecture exists not only in form but also in the manner of its making.

5. WHO REMEMBERS SPODEK?

The question of material memory leads to another: who actually remembers Spodek?

Archival documentation forms the basic body of knowledge about the building, but it is not a complete record of its architecture. It was created for a specific purpose and in the language of its time; it may therefore omit what was obvious to its authors and fail to answer questions that arose only decades later.

Photographs are invaluable but fragmentary: they capture a frame, light, perspective and a particular state of the building. They document its appearance, but not touch, roughness, temperature or the way the material ages.

Nor does the surviving material speak with one voice. It is subject to degradation, repairs and transformations; a fragment may be a relic of the original design or a trace of later intervention. It therefore requires investigation and interpretation.

The residents of Katowice also remember Spodek. It is this collective memory that makes the building more than a material artefact, although memory itself remains emotional, selective and changeable.

In a sense, Spodek also 'remembers' itself: its history remains inscribed in its structure, materials, spatial layout and successive layers of transformation. The building is a palimpsest of decisions, technologies, repairs and chance events.

Modernisation is where these different forms of memory meet. Responsible action requires bringing them together and interpreting them rather than treating any one of them as definitive.

6. AUTHENTICITY – BETWEEN RECONSTRUCTION AND REINTERPRETATION

Authenticity in architecture is a complex concept because buildings are used, age and undergo repairs and functional, technical and regulatory changes. In modernist architecture, the issue is further complicated by the historical dependence of materials and construction methods on the conditions of their time.

In international conservation discourse, authenticity is no longer understood solely as the preservation of original fabric. The Nara Document states that the assessment of authenticity should draw on a range of sources of information, including form, material, use, traditions, techniques, location, spirit of place and other factors that help identify heritage value[5]. Such an approach is particularly important for twentieth-century architecture, whose value often lies not in a single material element but in the relationship between idea, form, technology, function and social perception.

Authenticity does not mean simply freezing time. It is not always possible to preserve every element or literally recreate a historical technology, and the original condition itself may be ambiguous. In the case of Spodek's balustrades, the question therefore concerns not only whether to 'preserve' or 'replace', but how to understand the character of the detail and its significance for the building as a whole.

Does the authenticity of a balustrade lie in preserving its material substance, recreating its visual effect, replicating the original technique, or perhaps maintaining the relationship between texture, light and sensory perception? The answer may require contemporary reinterpretation.

An overly literal reconstruction may create the appearance of authenticity if it is based on an incomplete understanding; conversely, an overly free reinterpretation may compromise the character of the building. The modernisation of an iconic building therefore requires technical expertise and interpretative sensitivity.

Modernisation affects how the building will be perceived by future generations. It can reinforce or blur the memory of a place, restore the legibility of a detail, or replace it with a technically correct solution devoid of meaning.

That is why the question 'what should the balustrades look like?' is not a secondary one. In iconic architecture, a detail remains part of a larger narrative.

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[5] *The Nara Document on Authenticity*, ICOMOS, Nara 1994, p. 2, point 13, https://landscapes.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/1994-NARA-document-on-authenticity-International-Council-on-Monuments-and-Sites-1.pdf (access: 13.06.2026).

7. TECHNIQUE OF CREATION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESERVING ARCHITECTURE

Spodek was created through a distinctive interplay of architectural imagination, structural knowledge and the technical capabilities of its time. Its form was not merely an aesthetic decision, but resulted from a design process in which technical challenges helped to shape the architecture.

The hall was officially opened on 8 May 1971[6]. The design and construction process was multi-stage, and the final form of the building resulted from the evolution of the architectural and structural concept. The literature emphasises the particular role played by structural engineers, including Wacław Zalewski, Andrzej Żórawski and Aleksander Włodarz, in shaping the building's spatial form[7]. The hall's structural system, based on an inverted cone, a foundation ring, rocker columns and a cable-strut roof structure, was an example of bold technical thinking for its time[8]. Technology therefore played a part in the birth of Spodek as an icon. It was not an addition to the architecture, but one of the conditions for its creation. The building's form, structure and spatial expression grew out of technical responses to complex design challenges.

After several decades, a different kind of technique is required – not the technique of creation, but the technique of preservation. It asks different questions: how to repair without obscuring; how to reinforce without simplifying; how to replace without falsifying; how to adapt the building to contemporary requirements without depriving it of its character?

Modernisation thus reveals a continuity between creating and preserving architecture. Both processes require technique, but the technique of preservation must also account for time, memory, uncertainty and responsibility. What is protected is not only the physical fabric, but also the relationship between material, form, technology and the building's social significance.

8. MODERNISATION AS A PROCESS OF INTERPRETATION

The modernisation of iconic buildings is a process of interpretation, but not an arbitrary one. It requires sources, research, discipline and responsibility; it is an attempt to read existing meanings, even when they are obscured or ambiguous.

In the case of Spodek, this interpretation encompasses archival documentation, surviving material, construction technology, spatial experience and collective memory. Only by considering these elements together can decisions be reached that are both technically sound and architecturally responsible.

This is why dialogue between the architect, structural engineer, conservator, technologist, materials researcher, user and building manager is of particular importance. Each perspective is partial, yet together they provide the basis for a responsible assessment.

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[6] M. Gintowt, M. Krasiński, *op. cit*., p. 307.

[7] I. Kozina, *op. cit*., pp. 18–19; M. Mozga-Górecka, *Wacław Zalewski – intuicja inżyniera*, "Architektura-Murator", 30.12.2016, https://architektura.muratorplus.pl/krytyka/waclaw-zalewski-intuicja-inzyniera-aa-peyF-cmSs-QFfi.html (access: 13.06.2026).

[8] A. Żórawski, *op. cit*., pp. 381–386; R. Szydłowski, B. Łabuzek, *Kondycja dachu katowickiego Spodka w świetle aktualnych pomiarów sił w dźwigarach linowo-prętowych*, "Przegląd Budowlany" 2022, no. 5–6, pp. 88–92.

Such a dialogue does not always lead immediately to an unambiguous answer. In the case of buildings of high architectural and social value, acknowledging the complexity of the problem and slowing the decision-making process can be an expression of respect for the building.

9. ARCHITECTURE INSCRIBED IN EMOTIONS

Architecture is also about meaning and memory. In the case of Spodek, emotions play a particular role because the building functions in the collective consciousness of the residents of Katowice and Upper Silesia as a symbol associated with sporting events, concerts, personal memories and the image of the city.

The modernisation of such a building is not emotionally neutral. Even a change to a seemingly minor element can be interpreted as an intrusion into the memory of the place. Users need not know the composition of the plaster or the technique of its execution to sense that 'something is different'.

This reaction does not replace technical knowledge, but it serves as a reminder that architecture also exists within the realm of social experience. An iconic building belongs not only to its designers, owners and managers, but also to the collective memory of the community. The question of Spodek's balustrades thus becomes a question about the relationship between specialist knowledge and users' experience, and about how to take memory into account without succumbing to nostalgia.

10. SUMMARY

The experience of working on the documentation for the modernisation of parts of Spodek leads to the conclusion that architecture does not end with the completion of construction, nor is it confined to archival drawings or photographs. It endures as long as it is interpreted, used and preserved.

Modernisation work particularly clearly demonstrates the vitality of architecture. A building in need of repair is not a dead artefact. It is a present, functioning entity that evokes emotions and demands decisions. Modernisation is not merely a technical intervention in the building's fabric; it is a moment of encounter with architecture.

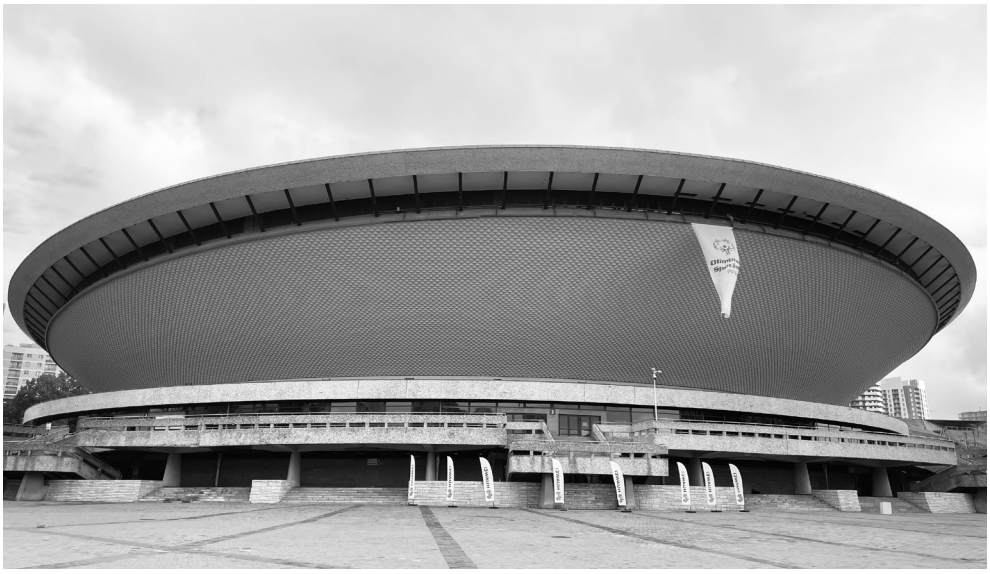
In the case of Spodek, this encounter takes place at the intersection of history, technology, memory and experience. The detail of the balustrade and the description 'scraped decorative plaster' raise questions about the building's authenticity and vanishing craft knowledge.

Whereas in the 2024 article[9] the question posed by the author concerned whether architecture can be created through technique, the present reflections lead to a further question: can it be preserved through experience? The answer is not clear-cut, but it seems that without experience – understood as memory, sensitivity, technological knowledge, responsibility and a readiness to interpret – the preservation of iconic architecture becomes impossible.

Technology made it possible to create Spodek; experience may help to preserve it. What is needed is an active and critical form of experience, combining memory, technical knowledge, sensitivity and responsibility for the future.

[9] M. Sroka-Bizoń, *op. cit.*

This is where architecture and experience converge: when faced with a familiar building, one must sometimes acknowledge that one's knowledge requires further verification. Architectural icons are modernised not only so that they may endure as physical structures, but so that they may continue to be recognised, experienced and remembered.



Ill. 1. The "Spodek" Sports and Entertainment Hall, viewed from the south; in the foreground are the terraces and external staircases in the "3" and "4" entrance areas, November 2025. Photo by Monika Sroka-Bizoń



Ill. 2. A section of the balustrade on the outdoor terrace of the "Spodek" Sports and Entertainment Hall, November 2025. Photo by Monika Sroka-Bizoń



Ill. 3. A detail of the surface finish of the outdoor terrace balustrade at the “Spodek” Sports and Entertainment Hall, November 2025. Photo by Monika Sroka-Bizoń



Ill. 4. The “Spodek” Sports and Entertainment Hall, viewed from the south-west, 1979. Source: National Digital Archives, Grażyna Rutkowska Archive, Katowice – Koszutka Spodek 3 40 0 15 43 162948, public domain

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