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THE ARCHITECTURE OF THREE STAGES. THE ARCHITECT'S EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF THE EXPERIENCE OF ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITEKTURA TRZECH ETAPÓW. DOŚWIADCZENIE ARCHITEKTA JAKO ŹRÓDŁO DOŚWIADCZANIA ARCHITEKTURY

A b s t r a c t

The experience of architecture requires physical presence. The atmosphere of a place is as important as the Vitruvian triad. Over the past century, ocularcentrism has dominated the way architecture is perceived, with photography becoming a substitute for its true comprehension. Sensory perception, which engages all senses, is no longer the leading criterion of quality. One of the causes of this "new perception" is a paradigm shift in the shaping of space. Indispensable to this process is the role of the architect, which may be divided into three stages. The first is to design a search for an answer to the problem posed. The result of this activity is a record, which becomes the basis for the subsequent stage: construction. At this point, the record becomes material reality. The third stage, equally important though often overlooked, is the observation of the completed project's life in use. The consequences and conclusions drawn from this process constitute an experience of the very essence of architecture and, just as importantly, a continual rediscovery of the meaning of our profession.

Keywords: *architect's experience, architecture of three stages, design process, experiencing architecture, perception, phenomenology of architecture*

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Doświadczanie architektury wymaga fizycznej obecności. Atmosfera miejsca jest równie ważna jak witruwiańska triada. W ostatnim stuleciu okulocentryzm zdominował sposób postrzegania architektury, a fotografia stała się substytutem dla jej poznania. Odczuwanie, które angażuje wszystkie zmysły, nie jest dziś wiodącym kryterium jakości. Jedną z przyczyn „nowej percepcji" jest zmiana paradygmatu w kształtowaniu przestrzeni. Nieodzowna w tym procesie jest rola architekta, którą można podzielić na trzy etapy. Pierwszym jest projektowanie, czyli poszukiwanie odpowiedzi na postawione zadanie. Efektem tych działań jest zapis, który staje się podstawą kolejnego etapu, czyli budowania. Wówczas zapis staje się materialną rzeczywistością. Trzeci etap, równie ważny, choć często pomijany: obserwacja życia zrealizowanego projektu. Konsekwencje i wnioski są doświadczaniem istoty architektury i, co równie ważne, ciągłym odkrywaniem znaczenia naszej profesji.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura trzech etapów, doświadczenie architekta, doświadczanie architektury, fenomenologia architektury, percepcja, proces projektowy*

1. INTRODUCTION

"True architecture requires thought and reflexivity. The author should be capable of critical reflection upon his own premise. He becomes a mediator between the idea and reality."[1] This statement, which inspired the conference "Architecture and Experience," directs attention not only to the work itself but also to its author. The architect mediates between the idea, human needs, technical, economic, and social conditions, and material reality. His responsibility does not end with the handover of the design to contractors, nor with the issuing of an occupancy permit. It is at that point that the longest stage in the life of architecture begins – its actual experiencing.

Contemporary architectural discourse devotes considerable attention to the experience of the user. Phenomenological currents emphasize the bodily and multisensory reception of space: the significance of light, material, acoustics, smell, temperature, and scale. At the same time, they criticize the dominance of the image, which reduces architecture to an aesthetic representation consumed through photography, visualization, and digital media. Architecture, however, cannot be known through the image alone. Its essence is revealed in a person's direct contact with a place: in the atmosphere of an interior, the changeability of light, the sound of footsteps, the relationship between the scale of a building and the human body, and the way materials age. Architecture is a temporal, dynamic, and multisensory phenomenon.[2]

Less often is the question asked about the experience of the architect. Where does knowledge come from that allows one to consciously shape the environment of life? Academic education, familiarity with technology, regulations, and digital tools are necessary but not sufficient. The most valuable knowledge arises from the confrontation of the design with reality: during construction, and above all through the long-term observation of a completed building. Users, the changing surroundings, the passage of time, and use verify earlier decisions. Every realization can thus become a laboratory of knowledge for subsequent undertakings.[3]

The proposed concept of the "Architecture of Three Stages" treats architecture as a process comprising design, construction, and the observation of the life of the realized object. The first stage serves the search for an idea, the interpretation of place, and the formulation of a response to the task at hand. The second denotes the materialization of the concept and its confrontation with technology, economics, and the realities of execution. The third – the longest and least often described – makes it possible to recognize the consequences of earlier decisions. Experience here is cumulative and cyclical in character: it is not reducible to the number of projects completed but rather deepens the understanding of the relationship between space and the human being. The thesis of this article is as follows: the architect's experience is one of the fundamental factors shaping the future experience of architecture by its users.

Such an approach goes beyond the traditional understanding of professional practice as the refinement of craft. It requires a critical attitude toward one's own realizations and the recognition that a completed building is not a closed work. The architect remains its attentive observer, and the knowledge gained across the full cycle influences the quality of future

[1] *Thesis in Polish 2026*, "International Conference – Defining the Architectural Space", https://dpa.arch.pk.edu.pl/thesis-in-polish-2026/ (access: 15.07.2026).

[2] *Ibidem*.

[3] Por. D.A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York 1983, p. 68.

decisions. Even the most advanced tools cannot substitute for this continuity, since it rests on personal responsibility and the capacity to correct one's own assumptions.

2. THE ARCHITECT AS CREATOR – THE FIRST STAGE OF EXPERIENCE

Every architectural work begins with a design, yet designing is not solely the creation of form. It is an attempt to understand a place, a person, and the future relationships between them. The architect's task is to create the conditions for the life of a building, whose value is revealed only in use. At this stage, experience has primarily an intellectual dimension: it stems from education, knowledge of the history of architecture, technology, law, and design craft. The process, however, requires the constant balancing of rationality and intuition, analysis and imagination, objective constraints and authorial vision.

The architect responds to the expectations of the investor, financial possibilities, formal-legal and technical requirements, while retaining the capacity for creative transcendence of these constraints. The best solutions often arise precisely because of them: constraints order the process, enforce selection, and lead to unobvious solutions. At the same time, a contemporary project is the result of interdisciplinary work. Structural engineers, installation specialists, acousticians, environmental experts, technologists, and economists co-create increasingly complex solutions, while the architect integrates numerous points of view into a coherent vision of space.

Parametric modeling, BIM, and artificial-intelligence tools make it possible to analyze numerous variants and to optimize structure, energy balance, and costs. They support decisions but do not substitute for the experience arising from responsibility for a project. An algorithm may generate solutions, but it does not observe the aging of materials, does not talk with users, and does not participate in construction. The boundary between tool and creator is thus marked by the capacity to experience the consequences of decisions.

Design experience does not result from the number of concepts developed, but from the confrontation of assumptions with reality. Every new project carries traces of earlier successes and failures. This knowledge is often intuitive and difficult to put into words: it makes it possible to anticipate how a space will be used, how users will react, how light will affect the atmosphere of an interior, or the consequences of seemingly minor material decisions. Designing can thus be understood as the formulation of hypotheses about the future life of a building; only its use will verify their accuracy.[4]

3. THE ARCHITECT AS EDUCATOR – SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The architect's experience is not limited to the refinement of craft. Every realization affects social awareness, becoming an element of education conducted not through words but through space. The architect's relationship with society has the character of a feedback loop: designers respond to the needs of users, while at the same time shaping their expectations of

[4] *Cf.* D.A. Schön, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–104.

the built environment. A building is a cultural message that influences how people perceive space, aesthetics, and the value of a shared environment.[5]

The architect thus plays the role of an educator, even when not directly engaged in teaching. Space teaches proportion, order, the relationship of a building to the landscape, ways of using public space, and an understanding of the common good. Good architecture raises the standards expected of subsequent realizations, whereas incidental architecture reinforces the conviction that the quality of space has no bearing on the quality of life. This process is a long one: society comes to know architecture through everyday experience, and every building leaves a trace in collective memory.[6]

The architect's experience thus also has a social dimension. The designer observes the reactions of users, analyzes how space is used, and confronts intentions with the reception of the work. The source of the user's experience is the earlier experience of the author, acquired through designing and through reflection on existing realizations. The fuller the creator's experience, the greater the chance that a space will not only function correctly but will also build lasting, positive relationships with its users.

4. THE ARCHITECT AS CONSULTANT – THE EXPERIENCE OF MATERIALIZATION

An architectural design is a record of intentions, not architecture itself, but rather its potential possibility. Only construction transforms an idea into material reality and subjects it to its first verification. The author becomes a participant in the process of realization, responsible above all for safeguarding the quality of the solutions adopted.

The construction site is a place where the design vision, the experience of the contractors, the expectations of the investor, and the constraints of technology, economics, and time all confront one another. A realization rarely proceeds entirely in accordance with the original concept: materials, technologies, details, schedules, and budgets change. The architect acts as a mediator and consultant, seeking compromises that do not undermine the integrity of the project. Every decision requires simultaneous consideration of spatial quality, safety, durability, feasibility of execution, and economic viability.

The knowledge gained during construction cannot be replaced by theory. Contact with matter makes it possible to recognize the properties of materials, the behavior of structures, the importance of precision in detail, and the influence of the sequence of works on the spatial outcome. Decisions made on screen take on new meaning at real scale. Construction also teaches humility: architecture proves to be the result of the cooperation of many people, and its success depends on trust, communication, and a culture of collaboration. Experience therefore encompasses not only craft but also the capacity to listen, to persuade, and to solve problems jointly. The construction site becomes a laboratory in which theory undergoes practical testing.[7]

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[5] C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York 1980, pp. 18–23.

[6] S.E. Rasmussen, *Odczuwanie architektury*, trans. A. Trzeciakowska, Murator, Warszawa 1999, pp. 10–11.

[7] *Cf.* D.A. Schön, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–162.

This does not mean an unconditional defense of the original design. Maturity consists in distinguishing the features that are constitutive of the concept from solutions that can be changed without harm to the whole. Sometimes a correction proposed by a contractor reveals a better way of executing the work; sometimes a false economy leads to a reduction in durability or spatial quality. Practical experience makes it possible to assess these differences and to make decisions under conditions of incomplete information and time pressure.

5. THE ARCHITECT AS OBSERVER – THE THIRD STAGE OF EXPERIENCE

In common understanding, the architectural process ends with the handover of the building. From a formal standpoint, this closes the investment, yet for the architect it opens the most important cognitive stage. Architecture exists fully once it is inhabited, used, and woven into everyday life. The presence of people reveals the properties of a building, its strengths and weaknesses, and the accuracy of earlier decisions.

The third stage of the "Architecture of Three Stages" consists of the conscious, long-term observation of the life of a realized object. It encompasses patterns of use, changes in the surroundings, the aging of materials, adaptations to new needs, and the emotional relationships people form with a place. Only then can it be established that certain solutions work better than assumed, others require correction, and still others produce unforeseen effects.

Observation is not control but a process of learning.[8] The architect becomes a researcher of his own work: analyzing the behavior of users, listening to opinions, noticing the spontaneous ways in which people appropriate space, and the relationships between the design and everyday life. The knowledge gained is primarily qualitative. It concerns the atmosphere of a place, the sense of safety, psychological comfort, identification with a building, and architecture's capacity to build community. These values are difficult to reduce to technical and economic parameters, though they determine the lasting quality of an environment.[9]

This experience has a phenomenological dimension: it concerns not only the object as a material structure but the way it exists within human experience. A building becomes a place of memory, ritual, meeting, work, and rest, acquiring a cultural and existential dimension.[10] If the architect observes the consequences of his decisions, the next project does not begin from zero. It arises on the foundation of knowledge accumulated in previous realizations.

The value of this phase depends on returning to the building after the completion of the investment. A single visit cannot replace observation extended over time, encompassing different times of day, seasons, and patterns of use. Both intended and spontaneous changes matter: the rearrangement of furnishings, the choice of unforeseen meeting places, the avoidance of designed circulation routes, or the adaptation of rooms. Such behaviors need not indicate an error; they often reveal a potential of space that the author had not previously recognized.

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[8] D.A. Schön, *op. cit*, p. 68.

[9] *Cf.* P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, trans. A. Kożuch, Karakter, Kraków 2010, pp. 18–19.

[10] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia percepcji*, trans. M. Kowalska, J. Migasiński, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 2001, pp. 275–304.

6. THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF EXPERIENCE – THE ESSENCE OF THE "ARCHITECTURE OF THREE STAGES"

Designing, building, and observing do not form a closed sequence. Their significance is revealed in a cyclical process: the experience of a completed object becomes the starting point for the next project. The architect approaches a new task with greater technical knowledge, but above all with a deeper understanding of the relationship between the human being and space. Professional development is not a simple sum of completed projects.

The structure of experience resembles a spiral.[11] Each cycle deepens knowledge, yet does not lead to a final state, since no design is perfect and no creator is free of error. What is possible, however, is continual learning through critical reflection on practice. Experience is not a by-product of the profession but its fundamental creative tool. The architect designs by drawing on imagination and on the memory of places, people, and spaces whose functioning he has observed over the years. The more fully he participates in all three stages, the greater his capacity to create places that respond not only to technical and functional requirements but also to the complex needs of human beings.

7. THE ARCHITECT AS PRACTITIONER – EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF REALIZATION

The concept of the "Architecture of Three Stages" grows out of many years of design practice and the observation of buildings after the completion of construction. This mechanism is particularly evident in music buildings, which combine demanding technical requirements with the need to create spaces of distinctive emotional quality. Acoustics, hall geometry, proportion, light, materials, and the relationships between public spaces and functional support areas form an interdependent system that cannot be separated from the experience of users.[12]

The first project in this group was the Academy of Music in Katowice. Important questions concerned the relationship between the teaching function, the concert spaces, and the everyday meeting places, as well as the connection of the existing building with the new part within its city-center context. Many solutions were verified only through use. It turned out that informal spaces – the foyer, circulation routes, and places of spontaneous meeting – were just as important as the concert halls, since it is within them that academic life develops in ways that could not be fully anticipated in the design.

These experiences were drawn upon during work on the project for the National Symphony Orchestra of Polish Radio in Katowice. The project required a deepened understanding of the relationship between acoustics, architecture, and the reception of music, as well as a response to the context of a post-industrial area. The aim was not merely to achieve high acoustic parameters for the concert hall, but to create a place that would build the atmosphere of an event from the moment of entry. Earlier realizations made it possible to more broadly understand the role of shared spaces as an integral part of the concert experience.

A similar mechanism accompanied the design of the Complex of State Music Schools in Warsaw and the Philharmonic Hall in Brno. Each realization posed different questions,

[11] D.A. Schön, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

[12] *Cf.* J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–83; P. Zumthor, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–37.

arising from local context, program, and the expectations of the investor, yet each drew upon earlier experience. What was repeated was not a set of forms but a way of thinking about the relationship between music, space, and the human being. The next link in this chain is the competition-winning design for the new campus of the Academy of Music in Kraków: it draws on knowledge accumulated so far and, once realized, will bring observations that will influence future undertakings.

These examples demonstrate that experience does not mean the mechanical repetition of proven solutions. Every project requires an individual response to its place and program. Experience instead makes it possible to recognize problems more accurately and to make decisions more consciously; it does not limit creativity but deepens it.[13] Practice becomes a research process, and the outcome of the experiment that is a realization can be known only after years of use.

8. EXPERIENCE AS A DESIGN METHOD

The architect's experience is not merely a consequence of practicing the profession; it gradually becomes a method of design. It signifies a shift from the search for form toward the conscious construction of knowledge about the relationship between human beings, place, and time. Every project begins with questions of function, context, technique, and economics, yet the most important questions remain constant: how will a person experience space, how will it change over time, will it retain its value after years, and will users wish to identify with it? Only practice provides the answers.

Experience is not the accumulation of realizations in a portfolio, nor a simple consequence of the passage of time. The condition for development remains reflection on the consequences of decisions. Critical analysis of existing buildings makes it possible to distinguish lasting solutions from incidental ones, and to transform intuition into knowledge.[14] Observations not found in textbooks and standards remain in the designer's memory: the way light models an interior, the influence of proportion on comfort, the significance of detail for the whole, or the reactions of users to solutions previously considered secondary. Design maturity is born of such observations.

Experience changes the way decisions are made. A young architect seeks above all answers; an experienced one seeks the right questions. The quality of a project depends on the accurate recognition of the problem, not merely on an effective solution. This does not mean abandoning imagination. On the contrary, knowledge of consequences makes it possible to consciously transcend patterns and increase creative freedom. Over time, durability, adaptability to changing needs, and values that extend beyond current fashions take on greater importance.

Time plays an essential role. A building reveals its true properties in use: it ages, changes together with its surroundings, undergoes adaptation and reinterpretation. Every change becomes a source of knowledge, and time itself becomes a co-creator of architecture.[15] In this way, a design memory is formed, composed of images of space, conversations with users,

[13] C. Alexander, The Timeless Way of Building, Oxford University Press, New York 1979, pp. 463–464.
[14] *Cf.* D.A. Schön, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–69.
[15] K. Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*, Thames & Hudson, London 2020, pp. 9–11.

observations, successes, and disappointments. It gives new projects depth, though none is a simple repetition of the one before it.

Design memory is not a catalog of ready-made answers. It is rather a resource of recognized dependencies that allows risk to be noticed earlier, priorities to be defined more precisely, and choices among alternatives to be made consciously. Its value is revealed in new situations, when an earlier solution cannot be mechanically applied. Experience then functions as a capacity for judgment: it helps maintain openness to context while avoiding the repetition of errors already verified by practice.

In architecture, experience plays a role akin to that of scientific research: the hypothesis is the design, the experiment is its realization, and the verification is the building's use over many years.[16] The conclusions become the starting point for the next hypothesis. Architecture is thus not merely the result of the designer's experience but also a tool for acquiring it. Every realization leaves behind knowledge that becomes the material for the next.

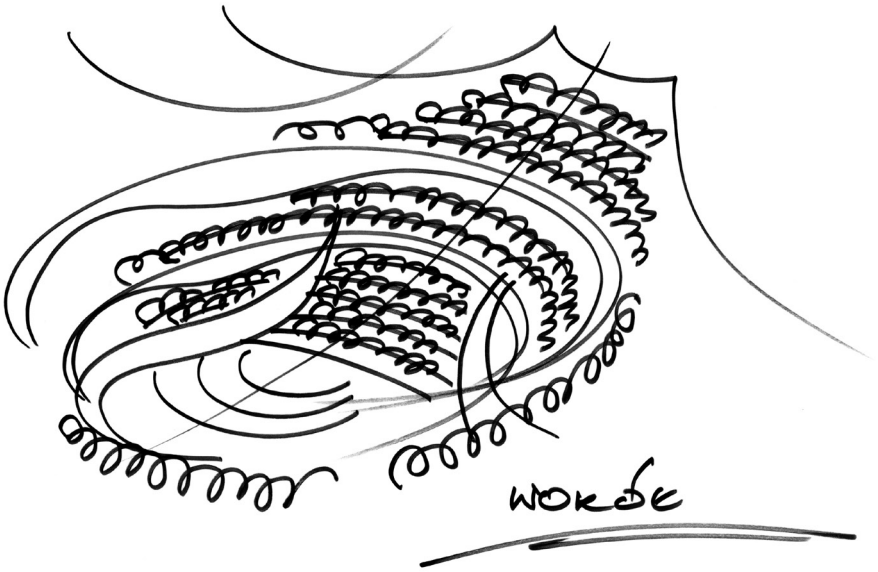
9. CONCLUSION

The "Architecture of Three Stages" treats designing, building, and the observation of a building's life as an inseparable, self-renewing cycle. Only participation in the entire process makes it possible to gain knowledge unattainable through education, literature, or advanced tools alone. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence can support analysis and decision-making, but they cannot replace the experience of responsibility for an existing place, the observation of a building's everyday life, and the interpretation of the relationship between human beings and space.

An architect's experience is not a measure of tenure or of the number of realizations completed. It arises from critical reflection on one's own work, from observing the consequences of decisions, and from a readiness to learn. The architect becomes in turn a creator, a participant in construction, an observer, and a researcher, and the knowledge gained at each stage feeds into the next project.

Adopting this perspective changes the understanding of the relationship between the architect and the user. A person's experience of architecture has its source in the designer's earlier experience, accumulated across successive projects, construction processes, and observations. The architect's experience thus contains within it the future experience of architecture. What remains at the heart of practice is not only form and function, but a continually renewed process of learning about the relationship between humans, space, and time: the hypothesis is the design, the experiment is its realization, and the verification is the building's use over many years.

[16] *Cf.* D.A. Schön, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 280.



Ill. 1. Author's sketch of the NOSPR Concert Hall, author: Tomasz Konior



Ill. 2. NOSPR Concert Hall under construction, 2012, photo by B. Barczyk



Ill. 3. NOSPR Concert Hall during a concert, 2024, photo by R. Kazimierczak



Ill. 4. Design of the new campus of the Academy of Music in Krakow, visualization by A. Chmielewski

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