DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.5-13

ADA KWIATKOWSKA
ORCID: 0000-0003-3269-2657
Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SELFIE-EXPERIENCE: BACKGROUND VS. ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

DRUGA STRONA DOŚWIADCZENIA SELFIE: ARCHITEKTURA TŁA A ARCHITEKTURA IKONICZNA

Abstract

The selfie is the deliberate creation of one's identity in the context of the digital world of the internet. The selfie blurs the boundaries between real and virtual reality, simultaneously serving as a testing ground for framing architecture viewed from a variable first- or third-person perspective. The study aimed to determine the influence of intermedia tools, which combine various forms of communication and expression, on the concept of architecture as scenography. The research also explored how the transition from analogue to digital influences the perception of this space and the behaviour of users – both spectators and participants – in this performance. The study was based on an analysis of selected theories from philosophy, sociology, and urban planning, as well as a critical analysis of contemporary concepts of intermedial aesthetics in the context of background architecture and iconic architecture. In the age of intermediality, smartphones, and AI, the staging of a performance in urban space (mise-en-scène) becomes a space of assemblage (mise-en-page).

Keywords: *cultural interface, intermediality, public space, scenography, spectacle*

Streszczenie

Selfie to świadome kreowanie własnej tożsamości w kontekście cyfrowego świata Internetu. Selfie oznacza rozmycie granic między rzeczywistością realną a wirtualną, będąc jednocześnie poligonem doświadczalnym w kadrowaniu architektury widzianej ze zmiennej perspektywy pierwszej lub trzeciej osoby. Celem badań było określenie wpływu narzędzi intermedialnych, łączących różne formy przekazu i ekspresji, na koncepcje architektury jako scenografii. A także określenie jak przejście od świata analogowego do cyfrowego wpływa na percepcję tej przestrzeni oraz zachowania użytkowników – widzów i aktorów tego spektaklu. Badania były oparte na analizie wybranych teorii z zakresu filozofii, socjologii i urbanistyki, oraz na krytycznej analizie współczesnych koncepcji estetyki intermedialności w kontekście architektury tła oraz architektury ikonicznej. Inscenizacja spektaklu w przestrzeni miejskiej (mise-en-scène) staje się przestrzenią asemblażu (mise-en-page) w czasach intermedialności, smartfonów i AI.

Słowa kluczowe: *interfejs kulturowy, intermedialność, przestrzeń publiczna, scenografia, spektakl*

1. INTRODUCTION

The selfie phenomenon – the habit of recording almost every minute of one's life in architectural or urban settings with a smartphone – says a lot about our times. On the one hand, it reflects a person's mental state; on the other, it reflects their expectations of the attractiveness of the

architectural context of the photographed events. The mental health of modern people is largely shaped by the world of online social media. These platforms promote the creation of a blogger's image by encouraging users to post photos and videos of themselves as the main character. This is considered part of building one's identity and personal brand, allowing for recognition on the Internet. In the case of achieving influencer status, this recognition can be monetised[1].

The selfie reinforces expectations of the attractiveness of architecture. The time and place at which a specific object or event is photographed is a conscious choice. Pointing the camera at oneself in the context of a specific event allows one to portray their role in existing reality from a first- or third-person perspective. This often involves searching for objects that will enhance the appeal of the narrative or possess a unique quality, thereby attracting the attention of social media followers. Digital technologies have significantly changed the way people perceive reality. People are no longer just careful observers, but creators of the reality around them. A smartphone enables significant modifications to be made when taking a selfie, such as improving the image quality, choosing a colour palette or changing the focus of the subject. It is also possible to add non-existent objects, change the background or its lighting, and place icons and text comments within the frame.

Subjected to the pressure of the selfie, human life becomes a kind of happening, blurring the lines between observer and creator, action and interaction, materiality and performance, and reality and virtuality. Architectural or urban interiors serve as settings for the spectacle of everyday life as it unfolds, complete with drama and planned and unforeseen events. This forces constant scrutiny of one's appearance in relation to the scenographic backdrop, as well as improvisation due to the dynamics of events. An inherent element of the selfie phenomenon is that, in everyday life, humans act as both photographer and subject. Most importantly, this is a permanent state in today's world[2].

The concept of urban public spaces as places of spectacle, where people act as both spectators and actors and architecture serves as a stage set, has been recognised since the 1960s. For instance, Erving Goffman employed theatrical terminology to describe everyday human activities in public spaces[3]. Richard Sennett defined city squares, along with their architectural scenography, as spaces for self-expression and performing various social roles[4]. Jan Gehl described the space between buildings as part of a spectacle in which architectural façades serve as a backdrop for everyday human activity[5]. These concepts were particularly popular among architects during the postmodern period. Defining architecture as scenography for the spectacle of everyday life enabled architects to express themselves artistically in the design of building façades, drawing on various scenographic traditions ranging from historicism (e.g. Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans and Michael Graves's The Portland Building) to playful allegory (e.g. Stanley Tigerman's Magritte – Watching the Pre-Paradise of Tigerman)[6].

---

[1] G. Kawasaki, P. Fitzpatrick, *The Art of Social Media: Power Tips for Power Users*, Penguin Books, New York 2014, pp. 99–122.

[2] L. Tilghman, *If You Don't Like This, I Will Die: An Influencer Memoir*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2025, pp. 217–220.

[3] E. Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, The Overlook Press, New York 1959, pp. 17–76.

[4] R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Penguin, London 2003, pp. 107–122.

[5] J. Gehl, *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, Island Press, Washington 2011, pp. 31–32.

[6] H. Klotz, V. Fischer (ed.), *Postmodern Visions: Drawings, Paintings and Models by Contemporary Architects*, Abbeville Press, New York 1985, pp. 65–75, 180–183, 285.

The spirit of postmodern narrative faded at the end of the 20th century. Contemporary architecture returned to the modernist concepts of abstract geometric forms and open, universal spaces, placing greater emphasis on architecture's aesthetic dimension. The various social roles in public spaces are less frequently discussed today. Instead, issues of democratisation, inclusiveness and accessibility have become leading themes in discussions about sustainable development. However, in the context of social media, the concepts of the society of the spectacle[7] are not only present but take on even greater significance given the real possibilities of self-creation on a global scale thanks to the latest digital technologies.

The chance to take part in a global spectacle is creating a new trend of interest in architecture, particularly the search for iconic selfie spots. Rankings of such locations are available online. The most popular include the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai and the town of Oia on the island of Santorini. The choice of setting largely depends on the narrative that the selfie taker wants to share with their audience. If the story is about the selfie taker, the set design serves more as a backdrop to complement the character's image (background architecture). If the story is about a special event in which the selfie taker is a participant or creator, the set design plays a significant role in reinforcing the story's message or becoming a character in itself (iconic architecture).

2. AIMS, SCOPE AND RESEARCH METHODS

The selfie redefines public spaces as performance spaces and architecture as scenography, while also reinforcing the importance of background and iconic architecture. This study aimed to determine the influence of intermedia tools, which combine various forms of communication and expression, on the concept of architecture as scenography. The research also explored how the transition from analogue to digital affects the perception of this space and the behaviour of its users. The research was based on an analysis of selected theories from philosophy, sociology and urban planning, as well as a critical analysis of contemporary intermedia aesthetics in the context of background and iconic architecture.

The basic elements of the intermedia context of human life, as well as the meta-narratives concerning the concept of architecture as scenography in relation to the selfie phenomenon, were defined:

- perception and intermediality: analogue images vs. digital,
- the smartphone as a cultural interface: meta-narratives,
- self-portrait: architecture as intermedia scenography,
- background architecture vs. iconic architecture.

3. PERCEPTION AND INTERMEDIALITY: ANALOGUE IMAGES VS. DIGITAL

People now interact with their surroundings through electronic devices such as computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones. These devices act as cultural interfaces, providing interactive access to information and stimulating human perception and activity. As Karina

[7] G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle and Other Films*, Rebel Press, London 1992, pp. 15–32.

Banaszkiewicz describes, this interface acts as a medium at various levels of communication: multimedia (combining messages from different electronic devices), hypermedium (transforming and multiplying messages and creating hybrids) and omni-medium (combining all narrative systems, including verbal, literary, visual, audio and kinetic)[8]. Consequently, thanks to the interactivity of the digital cultural interface, humans are not only recipients, but also co-creators of cultural messages.

The intermediality of contemporary civilisation also influences how people perceive the world. Digital technologies operating in augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) simulate existing realities or create new worlds. Integrated, interactive electronic tools that respond to touch and voice commands reveal a virtual representation of the surrounding context and the dynamics of its real-time changes. The world seen through digital devices differs significantly from that seen through analogue devices.

Analogue images represent mimesis, or the imitation of real objects, whereas digital images represent simulacra, or illusions that blur the boundaries between reality and virtuality[9]. While analogue images are representations of objects, digital images are expressions of the concepts behind those objects. Analogue images imitate human perception, whereas digital images symbolise human imagination. Analogue images are material and non-transformable, whereas digital images are immaterial and transformable[10]. In an analogue image, a real object is placed on a stage (mise-en-scène). The mise-en-scène defines the spatial relationships between objects and how they are lit. It is therefore closer to the concept of theatre, in that it possesses depth. In a digital image, a virtual object is placed on a page (mise-en-page). Mise-en-page expresses the principles of collage and assemblage, continuing the tradition of Renaissance image composition principles, which determine how text, drawings and objects are arranged on a page to create the illusion of space[11].

4. THE SMARTPHONE AS A CULTURAL INTERFACE: META-NARRATIVES

The smartphone is an extension of the human body. As an interactive cultural interface, it generates human creativity in public spaces. It encourages the creation of audio-visual meta-narratives incorporating dramatic scenarios often borrowed from film or gaming. These narratives are organised around the creation of meanings and signs, and are intended to maximise visibility on social media. They are both a commentary on existing reality and an attempt to impose one's own perspective on it.

These days, people have developed the habit of recording events around them. Taking photos with a smartphone in almost every situation has become commonplace. Most people do not fully engage with the existing reality using all their senses, but instead experience it indirectly through the prism of a smartphone screen and its diminished digital image. By taking photographs, we overcome the passage of time – we capture our

[8] K. Banaszkiewicz, *Audiowizualność i mimetyki przestrzeni: media, narracja, człowiek*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2011, p. 272.

[9] J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacja*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2005, pp. 35–45, 121–129.

[10] R.W. Kluszczyński, *Sztuka interaktywna: Od dzieła-instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010, pp. 31–61.

[11] K. Chmielecki, *Estetyka intermedialności*, Wydawnictwo RABID, Kraków 2008, pp. 156–183.

past. As the Japanese photographer Ryuji Miyamoto says, "When we take a photo, that moment passes from the present to the past. […] one could say that time waits for no one until it's photographed."[12]

The habit of recording events with a smartphone affects how a person perceives the world. It involves thinking in terms of photographs or potential photographs, taken or capable of being taken, in situations where the photographer is at the centre of a world that is simultaneously experienced and created. The photographer is simultaneously a spectator, actor and director. As the Argentine-Spanish photographer Amalia Ulman says, "Thanks to selfies and sharing them online, photography has given us what we so desperately need – –an identity. Except that this identity isn't ours. […] photography as a communication tool is more powerful than ever because it has transformed us all into marketing specialists – and the commodity we sell is ourselves."[13]

When taking photos in public spaces, it is important to consider the photographer's role: are they a passive observer (spectator), an active participant (actor), or a creator directing events. The photographer must also determine whether they appear in the frame (third-person perspective) or remain outside it (first-person perspective). At a societal level, a flood of images programmes our subconscious, imprinting what is beautiful or ugly, desirable or unwanted, valuable or worthless. As American photographer Olivia Bee notes in an interview: "My generation documents everything. It's difficult to take unique, valuable photos. […] We see thousands of photos every day. It's easier to reject photos. We see a lot of the same crap. […] We've become immune to images."[14]

5. SELF-PORTRAIT: ARCHITECTURE AS INTERMEDIA SCENOGRAPHY

In the era of intermediality, the photographer acts as both spectator and actor, as well as director. The selfie provides an opportunity to learn how to frame space, understand distance and depth, and recognise the importance of proportion, rhythm, and accents in the composition of the photographed scene. It also allows one to appreciate the significance of colour, detail, ornament, texture, and the interplay of light and shade in the background. Selfies allow visual messages to be combined with sound and movement, thus transforming photographed architecture into intermedia scenography. It is also an introduction to the history of architecture, teaching us about different styles, and an introduction to aesthetics, as we study what is valuable and iconic in architecture in search of interesting selfie frames.

A selfie taken from a first-person perspective creates the illusion that the viewer is seeing the world through the photographer's eyes. The lens focuses on the surroundings. In the frame, you can either see the whole person taking the photo, or just part of the body (Ill. 1). This makes the observer feel as if they are with the photographer and can share their emotions or project their own onto the image. First-person selfies are a form of storytelling

[12] H. Carroll, *Fotograficy o fotografii: Jak widzą, myślą i fotografują mistrzowie* (2nd ed.), Oficyna Wydawnicza Alma-Press, Warszawa 2023, p. 100.
[13] H. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
[14] H. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

about places visited and events in which the photographer participates or creates, lending the narrative a subjective and emotional character. Each captured object serves as a theatrical prop that builds the mood. It is a world of fragmented perception of reality, viewed up close and associated with the search for characteristic details. Architecture provides the backdrop, complete with all its rich ornamentation, decoration, texture, light, shadow and colour (Ill. 2).

A selfie taken from a third-person perspective creates the impression that the photographer is being observed by someone else. The wider field of view allows the viewer to experience the atmosphere of the scene and perceive the scale of the person in relation to the space (Ill. 3). This narrative approach is similar to film storytelling, where context is more important than props. This is also very similar to the way architects perceive architecture: the human being is the measure of architecture. This method of photographing buildings and spaces enables the depiction of entire structures in the urban context, as well as the exploration of their attributes, such as height, monumentality and iconicity (Ill. 4).

Pointing the lens at a specific object or event allows a person to enter into an interactive relationship with their surroundings. A smartphone provides feedback about the photographed object. It also enables the simultaneous uploading of images to social media platforms and the manipulation of transmitted images. Thanks to intelligent applications and AI, the image can be enhanced in terms of lighting or colour, and new virtual objects can be added or unwanted ones removed. Therefore, the moment of photographing is not only the documentation of an event in public space, but also its creation. As Konrad Chmielecki writes, "…a digital image is an immaterial, logical object, susceptible to metamorphoses and anamorphoses, to the point that it seems to self-generate, demanding constant transformations from its viewers."[15]

6. BACKGROUND ARCHITECTURE VS. ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

In the smartphone era, digital images of cities and open landscapes shape the human imagination. These images take on a life of their own, becoming independent of the real world and constituting a kind of simulacrum: "Territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. It is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it creates territory."[16]

In essence, this definition could be paraphrased to say that, like maps, digital images precede territory. The loss of reality of the territory is offset by the hyperreality of the image. When visiting a specific place in the real world, we experience déjà vu. Digital photography enables us to explore a world that is invisible at first glance and discover what we have missed. As in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*, zooming in reveals details that were in the frame but escaped our notice. The choice of scenery for a selfie is rarely accidental. It is usually deliberate because the background plays a significant role in conveying the meaning of the objects in the image. Depending on the message of the

[15] K. Chmielecki, *op. cit*., p. 172.
[16] J. Baudrillard, *op. cit*., p. 6.

selfie, the scenery can either serve as a backdrop for the subjects or be the main element that captures the viewer's attention and interest. Theories about background architecture vs. iconic architecture have a long history in architectural thinking.

The background architecture complements the events in public spaces, creating a harmonious and cohesive environment. According to Kevin Lynch[17], it provides a framework for human activity, while according to Aldo Rossi[18], it preserves the memory of a place. Christian Norberg-Schulz[19], on the other hand, believes that it creates atmosphere. This way of thinking emphasises the importance of the structural and stylistic coherence of public spaces. Architecture plays a secondary role in these spaces, enabling various human activities to take place within them. Background architecture as a backdrop can refer to a unified complex of historic downtown buildings, characterised by picturesque residential structures that reflect the location's cultural heritage. It can also refer to contemporary suburban areas that maintain stylistic unity. The appeal of these places lies not in the uniqueness of individual buildings, but in the architectural and urban coherence of the entire urban layout.

In contrast to background architecture, iconic architecture places particular emphasis on the unique significance of architectural form within an urban context. Iconic forms mark spaces in expressive and symbolic ways. They provide orientation according to Lynch, attract attention, introduce uniqueness according to Rossi and build identity according to Norberg-Schulz. This understanding of the role of form within a given context has its roots in modernism, for which the guiding principle was that form should reflect the Zeitgeist. In pursuit of this, new modernist forms negated their own context, imbuing it with modernity and becoming iconic in the process. In response to the complexity of global socio-civilisational processes, postmodernism promoted the idea of collage architecture. This resulted in public spaces losing their stylistic unity and coherence, instead becoming a mixture of different styles. Consequently, these spaces have become full of competing forms due to their uniqueness and iconicity.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Cities and metropolises compete with each other to build the most expressive and tallest architectural structures, thus reinforcing the demand for iconic architecture. This creates a strong demand for original and unique architecture that will attract the attention of residents and tourists on a large scale. This trend is also driven by the growing ambitions of investors and architects, who often treat buildings as a form of self-expression. One consequence of this trend is the increasing aesthetic chaos in public spaces. This trend also reflects the contemporary spirit of the selfie era, in which people travel the world in search of the most attractive photo locations. The selfie era can be defined psychologically as an era of collective narcissism. This means that the desire to display

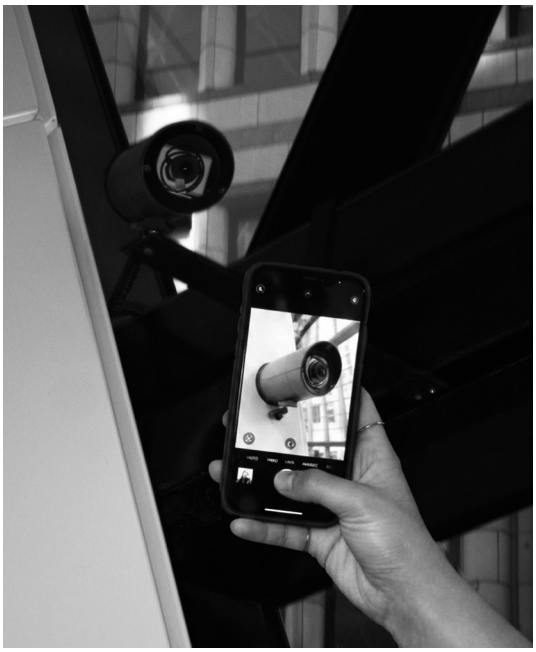
[17] K. Lynch, *The Image of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1960, pp. 46–90.
[18] A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1982, pp. 102–137.
[19] Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture,* Rizzoli, New York 1980, pp. 5–10, 22–23.

one's ego applies not only to politicians, architects and investors, but also to those who use architecture.

The traditional concept of public spaces as places of spectacle, where people act as both spectators and actors, has evolved – people are now the directors and actors of this show, and most of the audience is active on social media. Digital images now precede territory, creating a simulacrum and blurring the boundaries between reality and virtuality. This enables constant transformation and falsification of reality. Turning the camera on oneself can offer a sense of freedom of expression, as well as a sense of mastery over space and agency in the staged spectacle of everyday life. However, the problem is that there are thousands of cameras in public spaces. When we take a photo, we are simultaneously being photographed by others. The question remains: Do we control reality, or does it control us?



Ill. 1. Background architecture – first-person point-of-view selfie: The Gherkin, London, arch. Norman Foster (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska, selfie effect: AI Google Gemini)



Ill. 2. Background architecture – first-person point of view selfie: The Gherkin, London, arch. Norman Foster (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska, selfie effect: AI Google Gemini)



Ill. 3. Iconic architecture – third-person point-of-view selfie: Tokyo International Forum, arch. Rafael Viñoly (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska, selfie effect: AI Google Gemini)



Ill. 4. Iconic architecture – third-person point-of-view selfie: El Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía, Valencia, arch. Santiago Calatrava (photo: Ada Kwiatkowska, selfie effect: AI Google Gemini)

References

[1] Banaszkiewicz K., *Audiowizualność i mimetyki przestrzeni: media, narracja, człowiek*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2011.

[2] Baudrillard J., *Symulakry i symulacja*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 2005.

[3] Carroll H., *Fotograficy o fotografii: Jak widzą, myślą i fotografują mistrzowie* (2nd ed.), Oficyna Wydawnicza Alma-Press, Warszawa 2023.

[4] Chmielecki K., *Estetyka intermedialności*, Wydawnictwo RABID, Kraków 2008.

[5] Debord G., *Society of the Spectacle and Other Films*, Rebel Press, London 1992.

[6] Gehl J., *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, Island Press, Washington 2011.

[7] Goffman E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, The Overlook Press, New York 1959.

[8] Kawasaki G., Fitzpatrick P., *The Art of Social Media: Power Tips for Power Users*, Penguin Books, New York 2014.

[9] Klotz H., Fischer V. (eds.), *Postmodern Visions: Drawings, Paintings and Models by Contemporary Architects*, Abbeville Press, New York 1985.

[10] Kluszczyński R.W., *Sztuka interaktywna: Od dzieła-instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010.

[11] Lynch K., *The Image of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1960.

[12] Norberg-Schulz Ch., *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture,* Rizzoli, New York 1980.
[13] Rossi A., *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1982.
[14] Sennett R., *The Fall of Public Man*, Penguin, London 2003.
[15] Tilghman L., *If You Don't Like This, I Will Die: An Influencer Memoir*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2025.

Author's Note

Ada Kwiatkowska, PhD, Architect

Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Architecture of Wroclaw University of Science and Technology. She is the author of many publications on architecture and scientific studies under individual research grants. She has wide experience in architectural design, experimental teaching and organisation of conferences at the Scientific School of Habitat.

ada.kwiatkowska@pwr.edu.pl