DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.5-15

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CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL SPACE AS A CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE

WSPÓŁCZESNA PRZESTRZEŃ ARCHITEKTONICZNA JAKO DOŚWIADCZENIE FILMOWE

Abstract

Contemporary architecture increasingly extends beyond the design of material form and shapes spatial experience through movement, time, perception, and user activity. The article examines this phenomenon from the perspective of film, scenography, and contemporary media. Its aim is to determine how selected concepts from film theory can support the interpretation of contemporary architecture. The study combines conceptual analysis with four case studies. The analysis shows that architecture's cinematic quality derives not from visual resemblance to film, but from the way space shapes perception and develops over time. Selected examples reveal a gradual shift from material form towards media, variability and interaction.

Keywords: architectural space, film, scenography, spatial experience, spatial narrative

Streszczenie

Współczesna architektura coraz częściej wykracza poza projektowanie materialnej formy i kształtuje doświadczenie przestrzeni poprzez ruch, czas, percepcję oraz aktywność użytkownika. Artykuł podejmuje to zagadnienie z perspektywy filmu, scenografii i współczesnych mediów. Jego celem jest określenie, w jaki sposób wybrane pojęcia zaczerpnięte z teorii filmu mogą służyć interpretacji współczesnej architektury. Badania oparto na analizie pojęciowej oraz czterech studiach przypadków. Analiza wskazuje, że filmowość architektury nie wynika z wizualnego podobieństwa do filmu, lecz ze sposobu, w jaki przestrzeń kształtuje percepcję i rozwija się w czasie. Wybrane realizacje pokazują stopniowe przejście od formy materialnej do mediów, zmienności i interakcji.

Słowa kluczowe: doświadczenie przestrzenne, film, narracja przestrzenna, przestrzeń architektoniczna, scenografia

1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture is understood not only as material form but also as space experienced through movement, time and the changing point of observation. In 20th-century architectural theory and practice, this issue was addressed, among others, by Le Corbusier, Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas. In their concepts, architecture was formed as a spatial sequence, a record of events, a changing functional programme or a structure open to the user's activity.[1]

[1] B. Colomina, *Prywatne i publiczne. Architektura nowoczesna jako medium masowe*, trans. D. Żukowski, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2023, pp. 231–235.

Contemporary practice does not, therefore, establish an entirely new way of thinking about space. Rather, it develops earlier tendencies and expands them through digital technologies, interactive media and new forms of participation. The reception of architecture is not a single act of perception but a process that develops over time and is connected with the movement of the user's body. It is shaped by shifts of perspective, the relations of light and shadow, the materials and the way space gradually reveals itself to the viewer. The experience of architecture reveals numerous similarities with film and scenography. Although these disciplines employ different means of expression, each of them shapes the relations between space, movement and time.[2] Film uses framing, sequentiality, montage and narrative. Scenography builds atmosphere and the relationship between space and event. Architecture, in turn, achieves similar effects through spatial sequences, light, material, visual axes and deliberately designed paths of movement. What matters is not the formal resemblance between these disciplines, but their shared capacity to shape the viewer's experience. Contemporary buildings thus develop earlier experiments with movement, event and programme. They enrich them with new media and technological tools. This phenomenon invites a new look at the relations between architecture, film, and scenography and calls for concepts that allow space to be described not only as an object, but also as a process. The aim of this article is to examine how selected concepts drawn from film and media theory can serve the interpretation of contemporary architecture. The research is based on a conceptual analysis and an analysis of selected 21st-century architectural works. The starting point is the question of how architectural form can simultaneously function as a script for an experience that develops over time.

2. FILM AND SCENOGRAPHY AS MODELS FOR INTERPRETING CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

The relations between architecture and film scenography result from their use of space, light, scale, composition and the point of observation. Scenography is not only a background for events. It co-creates their atmosphere and the way characters are perceived. Moreover, film makes it possible to experiment with space beyond physical constraints. It allows scale and perspective to be altered, interiors to be juxtaposed, and spaces to be created solely for the purposes of a particular narrative. As Dietrich Neumann points out, film architecture can serve as a commentary on contemporary transformations and as a field for experimenting with forms whose realisation would be impossible or severely constrained.[3] Similar means can be employed in architecture, which shapes the user's experience through the arrangement of spaces, light, visual axes and sequences. Space is then no longer a physical setting for activity. It guides the viewer's gaze, defines fields of vision and orders the sequence in which its successive fragments are revealed. Scenographic quality does not, however, imply decorativeness nor a formal resemblance of a building to a film set. It refers, rather, to the way a perceptual situation is created through the relations

[2] J. Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*, Rakennustieto, Helsinki 2001, pp. 17–18.

[3] D. Neumann (ed.), *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*, Prestel, Munich–New York 1996, pp. 7–12.

between space, movement, light, material and the point of observation. Such an understanding of scenographic aspects in architecture can be found in Barbara Stec's research. She links them to the features and operations that evoke a sense of a place's theatricality. Scenographic design, in this view, involves anticipating possible events, situations and the roles of the spatial users. Scenographic aspects can strengthen the impact of an architectural space through composition, light, the variability of perspective and the gradual disclosure of space.[4] The designer thus anticipates not only the building's functional layout but also what the user may see from a given position, in what order, and under what lighting conditions. Interiors and visual axes create a kind of script that develops with the viewer's movement. The same arrangement may be experienced differently depending on the direction of passage, the pace of movement and the changing point of observation. The meaning of architecture thus arises not only within a single view but also in the relations among subsequent disclosures of space. Digital media further accentuate the scenographic dimension of contemporary architecture. Projections, screens, interactive installations, and lighting can alter the boundaries of an interior, as well as its atmosphere. They can also influence the rhythm and intensity of experience. Cinematic ways of shaping image and space have found application in digital interfaces, where the recipient is no longer a mere spectator but an active user. Media can transform the surfaces of a building into screens, interfaces and complement its material structure with a layer of image, light and sound. The scenographic perspective, therefore, allows architecture to be seen as a space that influences how it is received, without imposing a single predetermined experience. The design creates conditions for perception and action, yet their use depends on the user's movement, behaviour, and individual sensibility.

2.1. HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Film theory provides concepts that allow the experience of space unfolding in time to be described more precisely. One of the most important authors to analyse the relationship between film montage and architecture was Sergei Eisenstein. In his essay Montage and Architecture, he interpreted the Acropolis as an example of space understood sequentially. He distinguished the filmic path, in which a motionless spectator watches images passing before them, from the architectural path, in which the viewer moves through deliberately designed spaces.[5] Eisenstein referred to the analyses of Auguste Choisy, who presented the Acropolis as a series of frames corresponding to the observer's movement. Eisenstein compared them to a montage sequence "shot by shot". Here, architecture is not presented as a closed form. It reveals itself over time, through the rhythm of steps, changes of direction and the relations between consecutive images of space. In this case, montage does not mean transferring a film technique into architectural design. It is rather a concept describing the way in which separate frames of space, contrasts and situations form a compact experience in the mind of the viewer. Rodrigo García Alvarado distinguishes three basic levels of the cinematic representation

[4] B. Stec, *Aspekty scenografii w architekturze współczesnej. Wzmocnienie oddziaływania formalnego architektury przez wprowadzenie elementów scenograficznych*, Wydział Architektury Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2012, pp. 44–46, 78–82, 135–139.

[5] S.M. Eisenstein, *Montage and Architecture*, "Assemblage" 1989, no. 10, trans. Glenny M., introduction by Bois Y.-A., pp. 110–131.

of the architectural environment: the composition of a single image, the shot or sequence of shots and the montage of an entire scene.[6] This division allows for the separation of framing, which concerns the composition of a single view, from sequentiality and montage, which describe the relations between views. Alvarado also stresses that the cinematic representation of architecture usually relies on fragmentation, and that the sense of a coherent space arises because the viewer joins the individual images into a whole. This distinction provides the conceptual basis for the subsequent division into framing, sequencing, and spatial montage. A related understanding of space was developed by Le Corbusier through the concept of the promenade architecturale, in which meaning is revealed gradually and movement becomes an element of the composition.[7]At Villa Savoye, the architecture was designed as a sequence of paths, leading from the entrance, through the ramps and upper levels, to the roof terrace with its garden (Ill. 1 and Ill. 2). The user does not view architecture as a single static image but experiences it through changing spatial frames. In the second half of the 20th century, this theme was continued by Bernard Tschumi, who shifted the emphasis from form to the relations between space, movement, and event. In The Manhattan Transcripts, these elements were presented as equal components of the architectural situation.[8] Architecture was thus treated not only as a static object but also as a relation between material structure and its use. In the Parc de la Villette project, Tschumi applied a strategy of superimposing independent systems of points, lines and surfaces. The park was not subjected to a single hierarchical composition or a single use scenario. Rather, it was meant to enable multiple events to arise, modes of movement, and new relations between the functional programme and space.[9] Architectural narrative therefore does not have to guide the user along a single path but may allow them to co-create the course of the experience. A similar direction was developed by Rem Koolhaas, who trained in film before beginning his architectural practice. In his projects, architecture is understood not only as a composition of form, but also as a way of shaping functional programme and changing user activities. In the essay *Typical Plan*, Koolhaas presents the plan as a flexible structure capable of accommodating different functions and contents without imposing a single, fixed form.[10] A common feature of these concepts is a departure from the notion of architecture as a completely closed and unchanging structure. The development of digital technologies has extended earlier experiments by enabling the creation of responsive and immersive environments. Space can change not only in the user's perception, but also through image, light, sound and movable architectural elements. In such works, the experience is not entirely inscribed in a permanent form but emerges during the user's interaction with space. The perspective of film and scenography does not mean that architecture should be treated like cinema, or that cinematic solutions should be transferred directly into design. Instead, it allows architecture to be seen as an experience that develops over time and changes under the influence of movement, perception,

[6] R. García Alvarado, *Analysis of Filmmaking Techniques for Architectural Animations*, "METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture" 2008, no. 25(2), pp. 133–134, 143–147.

[7] A. Vidler, *The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary*, "Assemblage" 1993, no. 21, pp. 22–24.

[8] B. Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, Academy Editions, London 1994, pp. 7–9.

[9] F. Migayrou (ed.), *Bernard Tschumi. Architecture: Concept & Notation, Éditions du Centre Pompidou*, Paris 2014, pp. 89–119.

[10] R. Koolhaas, B. Mau, *Typical Plan*, [in:] *S, M, L, XL*, The Monacelli Press, New York 1995, pp. 336–350.

events and the user's activity. In the further analysis, five categories are distinguished: framing, spatial montage, sequentiality, narrative, and immersion. These categories often overlap. Framing may create a sequence, a sequence may acquire narrative meaning, and spatial montage may deepen the sense of immersion. Distinguishing them, however, simplifies the analysis of specific design solutions.

3. CASE STUDIES

The previous chapter raised the question of how cinematic and scenographic ways of creating experience appear in contemporary architecture. To answer it, four works of the 21st century have been selected. Each of them shows a different way of shaping the relations between architectural form, the user's movement and the experience of space. They are arranged in an order that reflects the gradual increase in the roles of media, variability and interaction.

3.1. FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON – FRANK GEHRY

The Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, opened in 2014, belongs to those works in which architecture goes beyond the traditionally understood composition of form. The building is enveloped by twelve glass "sails", which enclose the central body of the galleries. They also create a multilayered spatial arrangement. Transparent façades, reflections, mezzanines and glazing make the building appear to change depending on the viewing position. The design was inspired by 19th-century glass garden pavilions, the natural forms of glaciers, and the sails of ships lifted by the wind. The project can be read not as an autonomous object, but as an element of the landscape that invites exploration and the gradual discovery of spaces. Its location within the Jardin d'Acclimatation is also important. Edwin Heathcote observes that the park-like character of the surroundings and the rhythm of strolling formed an important context for the design.[11] From the perspective adopted in this article, the Fondation can be read as an example of architecture based on framing and the gradual disclosure of space. The user's movement determines the sequence of views, while the terraces, mezzanines and viewpoints operate like frames. The cinematic quality of this work does not derive from the use of screens or projections, but from the way the building changes as the viewer moves. Here, material form becomes the scenario for experience (Ill. 3 and Ill. 4).

3.2. PHILHARMONIE DE PARIS – JEAN NOUVEL

The Philharmonie de Paris, opened in 2015, creates an experience through a series of consecutive spaces. The path leading from the open landscape of the Parc de la Villette to the interior of the concert hall can be read as a juxtaposition of contrasts between opening and enclosure, light and shadow, wide views and more intimate interiors. The building does not reveal itself at once but gradually discloses itself as one approaches and passes through the following zones. Stefano Casciani writes that Nouvel treats design as a mise-en-scène,

[11] E. Heathcote, *On the Good Ship Lollipop: Frank Gehry's Fondation Louis Vuitton*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2016, pp. 58–63.

comparing the architect's role to that of a film director.[12] The Philharmonie is thus not only an architectural object but also a script that influences how one moves through and perceives the space. One of the main objectives of the design was to combine fine acoustics with a sense of closeness between the musicians and the audience. The audience is arranged not only in front of the orchestra but also at its sides and behind it. As a result, the listener does not remain merely a spectator of a frontal performance but becomes part of a space gathered around the music. The building can therefore be read as an example of spatial montage. This is not a simple analogy with film montage, but a way of juxtaposing the following situations: changes of scale, direction of movement, light, and points of view. It is their order that builds the rhythm and dramaturgy of the experience (Ill. 5 and Ill. 6).

3.3. THE SHED – DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO

The Shed cultural centre in New York, opened in 2019, demonstrates a different kind of changeability. Here, it is not only the perception of space that changes, but the building itself. The telescopic shell can slide on rails over the adjacent square, creating an additional, covered space. When retracted, the square opens again. The movable structure is thus not merely a technical device, but the fundamental means of adapting the building to a changing programme.[13] This solution remains consistent with DS+R's interdisciplinary practice at the intersection of architecture, film, and media art. Edward Dimendberg emphasises that the studio treats film not only as a medium of the image, but also as a form of montage and a way of creating relations between space and the viewer.[14] In The Shed, a similar way of thinking is concerned no longer with the image, but with the very form of the building. The project can be read as an example of a narrative grounded in event and programmatic change. The building is not only a setting for events but it actively takes part in them. It changes its scale, its relation to the surroundings and its mode of use. The movement of the outer shell affects both the space and the tectonic character of the structure. The cinematic quality of this work cannot be described as imitating the film image, but rather as introducing time and subsequent disclosures into the structure of the building (Ill. 7 and Ill. 8).

3.4. BORDERLESS – TEAMLAB

The first edition of teamLab Borderless opened in Tokyo in 2018. It is an example of an immersive environment in which the digital image, light and interaction with space play the leading role. The layout of the interiors creates conditions for projections that respond to the movement of the user. Images migrate as the boundaries between individual installations gradually dissolve. The teamLab collective describes this idea as *borderlessness* – the blurring of boundaries between the work, the space and the viewer.[15] The recipient becomes a participant. Research devoted to teamLab's installations shows that their idea is not based on sight alone. Movement, orientation in space, relations between visitors and the multisensory character of

[12] S. Casciani, *Jean Nouvel: The Allure of Modernity*, Pritzker Architecture Prize Essay, 2008, pp. 1–6.
[13] Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Rockwell Group, *The Shed*, "ARQ" 2017, no. 97, pp. 28–41.
[14] E. Dimendberg, *Diller Scofidio + Renfro: Architecture after Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, pp. 4–6.
[15] W. Haslem, *teamLab Borderless: Bridging Borders in Simulated Ecologies*, "MAST: The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory" 2020, no. 1(2), pp. 242–263.

the experience itself are equally important.[16] Immersion does not, therefore, result from the use of technology. It is created from the combination of image, space and the user's activity. In this case, material architecture does not disappear entirely but is subordinated to the media layer. It creates conditions for projections, movement and the user's interaction with space. The final experience arises in real time, depending on the presence and behaviour of the visitors. The juxtaposition of these four works shows that the cinematic quality of architecture may derive from the building's form, as well as from changes in the functional programme, the operation of media, and the user's activity (Ill. 9 and Ill. 10).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Looking at contemporary architecture through the lens of film and scenography proves to be more than an interpretative experiment. Categories such as framing, spatial montage, sequentiality, narrative and immersion are not mere metaphors borrowed from the language of film and new media. They refer to specific design decisions that affect the way the user moves, perceives space and becomes engaged in its experience. The analysis of the four works shows that the cinematic quality of architecture can manifest itself in different ways. In the Fondation Louis Vuitton, it derives primarily from the variability of perspective and the gradual disclosure of subsequent spatial frames. At the Philharmonie de Paris, it is bound up with the contrast of spaces and the rhythm of movement. In The Shed, time and change are inscribed in the structure of the building, while in teamLab Borderless, digital imagery, interaction, and immersion take the lead. The question posed in the introduction, whether architecture is still form or already a script, finds no simple answer. Contemporary works do not force such a choice. They show that as the role of event and interaction grows, material form ceases to be the sole source of the experience of space. Contemporary architecture, therefore, remains a form, although it is increasingly designed as a script. What brings it close to film is not aesthetics, but the way its reception is shaped in time. Movement, sequences of perspective views, changing events, and user activity make it possible to perceive space as a cinematic experience. The proposed perspective forms part of the author's research into the relations between architecture and film art.

[16] *Ibidem*.



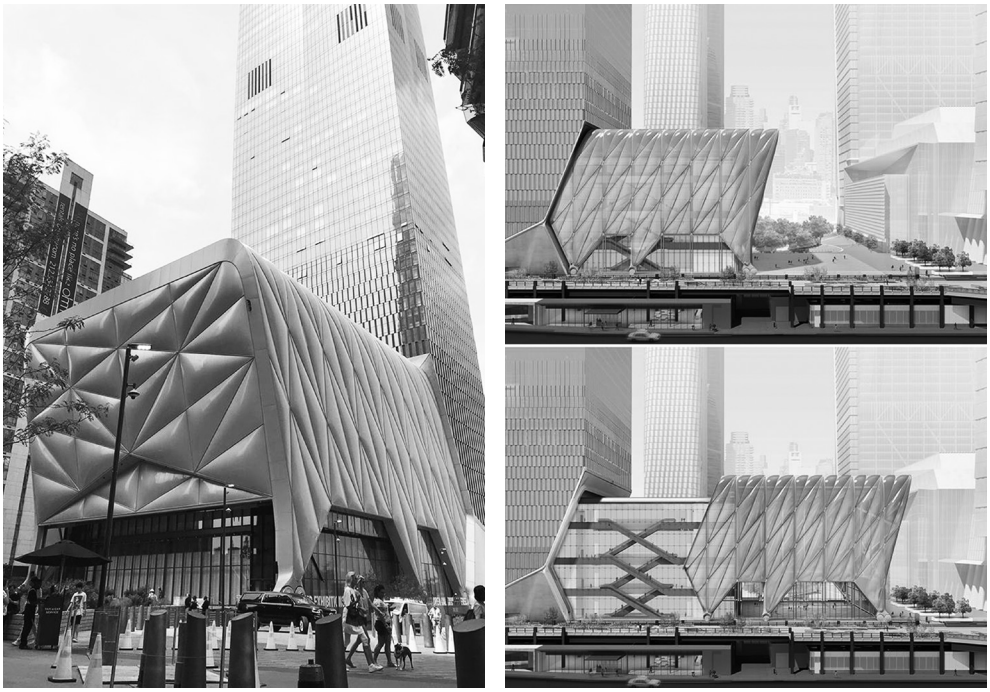

Ill. 1–2. Villa Savoye. Photos by Maja Piechowiak




Ill. 3–4. Fondation Louis Vuitton. Photos by Maja Piechowiak




Ill. 5–6. Philharmonie de Paris. Photos by Maja Piechowiak



Ill. 7. The Shed. Source: https://www.basenprof.pl/artykuly/4/basen_z_innej_beczki.html (access: 27.06.2026)

Ill. 8. The Shed – Building Structure Movement Pattern. Source: https://www.basenprof.pl/artykuly/4/basen_z_innej_beczki.html (access: 27.06.2026)



Ill. 9. Borderless. Source: https://www.teamlab.art/nl/e/tokyo/?ref=vanschneider.com (access: 27.06.2026)

Ill. 10. Borderless. Source: https://tokyocheapo.com/place/mori-building-digital-art-museum-team-lab-borderless/ (access: 27.06.2026)

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[15] Vidler A., *The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary*, "Assemblage" 1993, no. 21, pp. 44–59.

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