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FORM, MATERIAL, DECISION. A CRITERION OF AUTHENTICITY IN ARCHITECTURE

FORMA, MATERIAŁ, DECYZJA. KRYTERIUM AUTENTYCZNOŚCI W ARCHITEKTURZE

Abstract

This paper proposes a working criterion separating authentic reinterpretation from decoration, as ecology becomes architecture's newest decorative alibi. It examines the work of Venturi, Siza, Heringer and de Graaf around form, material and decision. Form is authentic when it carries a real reason, while material is authentic when it is itself rather than imitating an older one. The greatest threat is therefore not tradition versus modernity but indifference, ecology being often just its latest costume.

Keywords: *architectural authenticity, greenwashing, material honesty, sustainable architecture, tradition and reinterpretation*

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest określenie kryterium odróżniające autentyczną reinterpretację tradycji od dekoracji, gdy ekologia staje się najnowszym alibi dekoracyjności. Wykorzystano w badaniu metodę analizy krytycznej zestawiającą Venturiego, Sizę, Heringer i de Graafa wokół formy, materiału i decyzji. Udało się określić, że forma jest autentyczna, gdy niesie realny powód, materiał, gdy jest sobą, nie udaje starszego. Największym zagrożeniem nie jest spór tradycji z nowoczesnością, lecz nijakość, dla której ekologia bywa dziś tylko kostiumem.

Słowa kluczowe: *architektura zrównoważona, autentyczność architektoniczna, greenwashing, tradycja i reinterpretacja, uczciwość materiału*

1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Venturi split architecture into two categories: the duck, a building whose form openly declares its function, and the decorated shed, an ordinary structure carrying a sign that tells you what it is not[1]. The split still holds. Only the slogan has changed.

The sign once advertised a product. Today it more often advertises a conviction. A house built from concrete block can wear a steep roof copied from an Alpine cottage, even though it no longer needs to shed snow the way the original did. A sealed glass tower can be clad

[1] R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (rev. ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1977, p. 87.

in stone that once meant load-bearing walls a meter thick. Nobody checks whether the roof still does its job, or whether the stone still holds anything up. The shed has learned a new language, and today that language is ecology. This claim deserves closer scrutiny than a claim to sell hot dogs, because it asks to be believed, not merely bought.

The same problem can be named more simply. Sometimes a building produces the Bilbao effect. Sometimes it produces a hot dog stand. Both are forms. Only one of them means something. This essay looks for the line between them, not through a gallery of admired buildings but through a working criterion, one able to tell a reinterpretation from decoration added after the real problem was already solved elsewhere, usually inside a mechanical room.

Authenticity here means honesty in three things at once, not fidelity to tradition or to a single style. Form must carry a real principle, not quote someone else's shape without reason. Material must be what it claims to be; whether raw or engineered makes no difference, since decoration begins the moment one material pretends to be another, usually older and nobler. A building must finally decide to be something, because the greatest danger is rarely a wrong choice or a foreign style, only one that means nothing at all. Ecology invalidates none of this. It is today the field where this difference plays out most sharply, not a separate subject.

2. THE LINE BETWEEN REINTERPRETATION AND DECORATION

Let's start with form. The criterion can be stated simply. Reinterpretation keeps the operating principle of a form while changing the form itself. Decoration copies the form and abandons the principle that once justified it. A roof ridge can run parallel to the building's edge, or it can twist along a diagonal. The shape is entirely different. The principle by which the roof sheds water and snow stays the same.

That same principle takes on very specific regional variants, which is proof it survives despite radically different shapes. In the Alps the roof has a shallow pitch, suited to heavy roofing materials and to treating snow as insulation. In the Tatras it is often multi-pitched and broken, because the local snow demands a different distribution of load than Alpine snow does, and winters tend to bring more rain, which ruins wood shingle. In Scandinavia, a gabled, twin pitched roof dominates, often covered in birch bark and living turf, forming a sod roof that kept the house warm all year, whether or not snow happened to fall that season. Three entirely different silhouettes, one physical principle translated into three different climates. Anyone who transplanted the proportions of an Alpine roof straight into Finland would not be reinterpreting anything, only moving decoration to a place where it has no justification. Scale has a voice here too. A three-hundred-room hotel covered in a steep, multi pitched roof stops working as a form, no matter how faithfully that roof quotes tradition, because a principle worked out for a single-family house does not scale without penalty to multi-family housing, collective dwelling, or a public building.

Yet there is a second track of reinterpretation, independent of form altogether. Tadao Ando, in designing his buildings, does not quote Japanese carpentry literally. He does not repeat the shape of a traditional roof or the layout of a timber structure. What he draws from that tradition is something else: a discipline of precision and attention to detail, the same one Japanese carpenters have used for centuries to join wood without nails, and he carries that

discipline into an entirely different material. Ando's concrete, exposed both outside and in, without plaster, without cladding, is brought to the same precision of formwork that a craftsman once brought to a wood joint. There is no shared vocabulary of form here between source and result. There is a shared discipline. This shows that reinterpretation need not preserve either the physical principle or the shape, so long as it carries over something rarer and harder to fake: a standard held against oneself.

3. THE SENSORY DIMENSION OF AUTHENTICITY

The test from the previous chapter can be carried out with the eye. You can look at a roof, trace the ridge, judge the scale, and decide whether the form carries a principle or only quotes one. There is a second test, though, that the eye alone cannot perform. An authentic building has a smell, has an echo, has an aura. None of these traits decides anything on its own. Together they produce something even a layperson recognizes, though rarely able to name it. It is still the same question as with form, only asked of other senses: s the building what it claims to be?

The easiest way to show this is with a small detail. Take a room where the division between materials runs smoothly from wall into floor and lines up with the fittings. Almost nobody stops to admire the grout line, or a perfectly matched veneer pattern. And yet anyone who walks in senses whether the room was designed with care or something in it grates. This value operates below the threshold of naming. You do not need to understand it to receive it. These are the fundamental design decisions that later operate at the scale of nuance in how a space is perceived.

Building material works on exactly this principle. Wood smells. It smells different in Japan, different in Poland, different in Scandinavia, but it always smells, regardless of what certificate has been attached to it. It has its own echo, its own way of reflecting and absorbing sound. And this is not only about wood. A clay wall, a stone wall, a fired brick wall, each acts on the senses in a way proper to itself and slightly different every time, because no firing and no batch of clay comes out identical. Ando's concrete, exposed both outside and in, is the extreme case here, since it cannot be faked by either plaster or laminate, and despite its rawness carries an echo and a brutalist warmth. The same divide, as it happens, tracks the environmental balance too. Wood can store more carbon than its production emits, and for the whole of its service life acts as a lasting reserve of it[2]. A panel pretending to be stone passes through a production chain that leaves behind a carbon footprint absent from the original.

This dimension stays in memory longer than shape does. A smell can preserve an entire interior long since forgotten, the way the cold and the odor of a childhood cellar stay with us. Artificial material does not do this. A panel pretending to be stone has nothing to leave in memory, because it has no smell of its own and no sound of its own, only a surface.

Out of seemingly the same products and techniques, then, an entirely different, authored dish emerges. A plastic manor house, however much it cost, remains a dense, undercooked loaf.

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[2] Historic England, *The Embodied Carbon Emissions of Construction and Retrofit Materials for Traditional Buildings*, "Heritage Counts", 9.12.2024, https://historicengland.org.uk/research/heritage-counts/heritage-and-environment/avoiding-embodied-carbon-production/construction-materials-embodied-carbon/ (access: 18.08.2026).

4. TIME AND PATINA

We never perceive a building standing still, since even from the window of a moving car the angles and proportions keep shifting, and a photograph remains a single frame, good for explaining an idea and helpless in the face of atmosphere.

Time, however, does something more than change the viewing angle. It is a slower test of the same material honesty that smell examined a moment ago. Smell tells you what a material is now; patina tells you the same thing twenty years from now. A building changes with the time of day, with the season, over the years, and here too material stops being neutral. Wood grows noble with time. Concrete gathers patina. Copper on a church roof turns green. Stone darkens where water runs down it, and after years carries the record of its own history. Render and pressed metal roofing gain nothing with the years; they simply wear out. Good material ages toward maturity, cheap material ages toward decay, and that is a difference invisible in a rendering, visible after twenty years. Asked what makes a building come to be loved, a thirteen-year old-boy from Maine answered with one word: age. Real patina, meanwhile, tends to be rarer than its imitation[3].

Real patina cannot be designed in advance, nor can it be sped up. It is the one value a building cannot gain at the drawing stage, since it is only produced by time, rain, and daily use. A material either has something to build it from, or it does not, and no rendering will settle the question either way.

From this it might follow that every building should aim for greatness and bankrupt its investors. That would be a false conclusion. If every house on the street screamed that it was a masterpiece, life in such a city would become unbearable. Icons can be unlivable. They tire you out, demand attention, refuse to be forgotten, and yet most architecture is simply meant to stay in the background and not get in the way.

There remains a third path, one the simple division from the essay's opening easily overlooks. Beside the building that produces the Bilbao effect, and beside the one that becomes a hot dog stand, there is also the background building. Modest, unassuming, deliberately quiet, and yet built from good materials and with care for detail. It does not need to be an icon. It may even be better if it is not. It is enough that it be authentic in its modesty, since then it gets better with every year instead of falling apart. Most of a city is exactly this kind of background, not monuments but ordinary street frontages, passed every day and no longer noticed. What decides a city's quality is not the number of its icons but whether its ordinary buildings are made of something that ages well. A building's silence, though, can differ. You can stay silent and be good, or stay silent and hold nothing inside, and that is an entirely different silence.

Such a building announces nothing, and yet stays in memory more firmly than many a loud neighbor. It has a smell, has an echo, has its own climate; none of which can be faked with materials pretending to be something they are not.

5. BEAUTY: SIZA AND THE CRITIQUE OF AUTOMATISM

Álvaro Siza puts the matter forcefully. Beauty, in his view, is not an ornament glued onto a building after the fact, but a condition without which sustainability remains an empty

[3] S. Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*, Viking Press, New York 1994, p. 31.

slogan. He frames it in one sentence: "Beauty is fundamental for the idea of sustainability"[4]. He says this, moreover, with unease, because he sees that the word sustainable has started to function like a label. Stick it on, and the discussion ends, and the building passes for good before anyone checks whether it actually is.

That warning deserves to be taken literally, all the way, not just as a sentence good for a book cover. A sustainable building can be beautiful. It is not beautiful automatically, though, by definition, simply because it met a standard or received a certificate. A label is not beauty. You can calculate the energy demand, check every coefficient, and still end up with something that holds up neither as form nor as a place to live, even if its own designer announces it as the most environmentally advanced work of their career[5]. This is exactly the automatism Siza has in mind, the one that attributes beauty to anyone who passed the audit, when he warns against sustainability as an empty slogan. "Being less bad is not the same as being good", as another, equally influential architectural manifesto from two decades ago reminds us[6].

The real problem usually lies elsewhere, and it is more mundane. Too often a building is neither traditional, because it creates no climate of its own and pays no attention to the physics of construction, nor genuinely sustainable, because no hard logic stands behind the declaration. It is something in between. And it is precisely on that "in-between" that the label likes to land, because there nobody questions it.

There is more than one path here, and it shows best at two opposite poles. For Siza, beauty is born from resolving conflicting constraints; light, structure, climate, and program woven into a single whole, so it is something worked out. At the opposite end stands Anna Heringer, for whom "sustainability is a synonym of beauty"[7]. She builds with earth and bamboo, without a separate stage of packaging, because in her architecture there is no gap between technique and form that would later need covering up. This is not an aesthetic of poverty. Earth and bamboo carry embodied energy close to zero, so its beauty and its environmental balance are literally the same number. It is hard to imagine two more different answers. Both are true. What unites them, however, is what matters most for this essay. In neither case is beauty a layer added after the technical problem is solved. In Siza it follows from that solution, whereas in Heringer it is identical with it[8]. Neither here nor there is there a moment when the finished building still has to be dressed in something, to look like what it was meant to be.

This is pluralism, but without diluting the criterion. Siza's worked-out beauty and Heringer's beauty, identical with material, share no common vocabulary of form. What they share is the same uncompromising attitude toward material and detail. It is not, then, about forcing one style on people, one tradition or one sustainable modernity, wood or concrete. It is about

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[4] Á. Siza, Beauty, Poetics, and the Limits of Technical Sustainability, [in:] *The Wisdom of Tradition. A Dynamic Cultural Approach to Sustainable Architecture*, E. Bchir, C. Zeballos (eds.), UIA – International Union of Architects, Barcelona 2026, p. 13.

[5] F. Bowen, J.A. Aragón-Correa, *Greenwashing in Corporate Environmentalism Research and Practice: The Importance of What We Say and Do*, "Organization & Environment" 2014, no. 27(2), pp. 107–112.

[6] W. McDonough, M. Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, New York 2002, p. 92.

[7] M. Maganga, *"Sustainability Is a Synonym of Beauty": In Conversation with Anna Heringer*, "ArchDaily", 2021, https://www.archdaily.com/959398/sustainability-is-a-synonym-of-beauty-in-conversation-with-anna-heringer (access: 20.08.2026).

[8] Á. Siza, *op. cit.,* p. 14.

a building being something at all. The dispute between the two poles could go on forever and would still be a dispute about living things. Far more dangerous is whatever stands at neither pole, because it never decided to be anything in particular.

6. RESISTANCE OR SUBMISSION: DE GRAAF

Siza goes further than beauty alone. He also calls on architects to resist, to refuse letting the profession be reduced to a technical service subordinated to economics. Reinier de Graaf, a partner at OMA and a critic from within the profession itself, looks at this more soberly, not to say more coldly. In his book *Four Walls and a Roof* he shows that an architect holds far less power than they like to think, because to build anything at all they must serve forces they would happily criticize[9]. The ideal usually dissolves into the market and into politics before it has a chance to settle into a building.

In practice the choice is a matter of degree, far from binary. A young office most often designs exactly what the client wants, even if that means faux manor houses clad in nature-looking product, because it has to live off something. Resistance, the kind Siza calls for, becomes real only once some status and position have been secured, once refusal is possible without risking that the practice will not survive the year. This is therefore not a question of pure ethics but of stage. The same architect at two different stages of their career will answer differently, and both answers will be honest.

It would also be too easy to blame everything on the weakness of character among designers. Some of them do knowingly choose profit over aesthetics, especially where nobody is looking, in warehouses or industrial halls. But the system ties their hands too. A local zoning plan can force the shape of windows, dormers, or facade materials; an official can block a better solution than the one that finally gets built. The strongest force, though, is often the investor, for whom the building is above all an investment, and every zloty spent on quality that does not show up in the sale price counts as a loss. I prefer, for this reason, to treat it as context, not as an accusation against fellow professionals. Architecture is a mirror of society, full of gray areas and compromises, not only black and white.

That grayness does not mean, however, that anything goes and that nothing can be judged. Sit a few experienced chefs down at one table. They will argue about which dish is best and never reach agreement. But without hesitation they will point to the one that is one hundred percent inedible. It is much the same with a building's aesthetics. About the best, the argument can run forever. About the inedible, there is no argument. The trouble is that architecture produces far too many completely inedible dishes.

Where do they come from? Rarely because the designer cannot recognize them. Far more often because the decision for a building to be something gets surrendered along the way, giving way to cost, to the zoning plan, or to the investor's taste. Metal roofing pressed to imitate wood shingle defends none of what once justified real shingle. It does not need a steep pitch, since water will run off any sheet metal regardless. It does not gray with age the way wood does; it just rusts under the paint once the paint finally fails. What is left is the shape alone, a quotation with no reason behind it. That is precisely the inedible dish, and it is almost always the fruit of a concession, not of conviction.

[9] R. de Graaf, *Four Walls and a Roof: The Complex Nature of a Simple Profession*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2017.

7. CONCLUSION

This essay set out from the start to find a criterion that works, not a gallery of admired buildings. A few simple statements have come out of it. Reinterpretation keeps the real reason for a form and changes its shape; decoration keeps the shape alone and abandons the reason. Material counts as authentic when it is itself, and then it has a smell, an echo, and a patina that imitation cannot fake. Beauty rarely arrives with a certificate; more often it is worked out or identical with the material. The decision for a building to be something is always made under pressure, so resistance to the market remains possible, though it depends on the stage. None of these statements closes the matter once and for all, and that was never the point of writing them.

The real stakes lie elsewhere than in the dispute between tradition and modernity. That dispute, however sharp, plays out between buildings that are something. The traditionalist's mistake and the modernist's mistake are still the mistakes of someone who decided on something. They can be named, argued with, corrected someday.

Worse is the building that decided on nothing. It is neither ugly nor beautiful, could stand anywhere and belongs nowhere, provokes nothing, and is therefore, in effect, dead. There is no arguing with such a building, since it holds no thesis one could reject, and that is exactly why it multiplies without resistance. The sign on the shed changes from decade to decade; today it reads ecology, but the question underneath stays the same. Architecture, if it is to be more than a service, requires its author to look critically at their own premise and to ask not whether a building looks sustainable or traditional, but whether it means anything at all.

Ecology, meanwhile, is more than a sign. Climate change now makes designing with a carbon footprint in mind a real necessity, not a passing fashion. The trouble starts only once nothing is left of it but the badge. When ecology is grounded instead in one of the real principles – tradition, the honesty of material, knowledge, or a readiness to decide – it offers a chance at a building that is something, not just anything.

That is why the greatest danger is neither the mountain chalet nor the glass tower. It is indifference.

References

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