

TECHNICAL TRANSACTIONS | CZASOPISMO TECHNICZNE  
ARCHITECTURE | ARCHITEKTURA

9-A/2015

MACIEJ SKAZA\*

## GAMES OF MEANINGS IN CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

### GRA ZNACZEŃ W ARCHITEKTURZE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ

#### Abstract

Meanings recorded at different levels of possible connotations become a pretext for the game between the designer and the user of the building. The studies relate to possible levels of connotations of these signs and a game, also the search for them by recipient, which – deriving pleasure from the perception of the art of architecture – can also be described as fun.

*Keywords: architectural theory, the perception of architecture, building's levels of connotations, meaning in contemporary architecture*

#### Streszczenie

Znaczenia zapisane na różnych poziomach możliwej konotacji stają się pretekstem do gry pomiędzy projektantem a użytkownikiem budynku. Rozważania dotyczą możliwych poziomów konotacji tych znaków i gry, oraz ich poszukiwania przez odbiorcę, która – przynosząc przyjemność z postrzegania sztuki jaką jest architektura – może być także określona mianem zabawy.

*Słowa kluczowe: teoria architektury, postrzeganie architektury, poziomy konotacji budynku, znaczenia w architekturze współczesnej*

\* Ph.D. Arch. Maciej Skaza, Department of Housing Architecture and Architectural Composition, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

The purpose of this discussion is to focus attention on the articulation of meanings carried by the structure; the visible or hidden in the “play of masses brought together in light”, incorporated as a result of an idea of the project – a composition created by its architect. The art of building contains information – signs and their systems – stored in architectural form. This perception directs attention toward semiotics, which – although it is derived from linguistics – embraces with its scope more than the field of language can show; it can expand research field also to those human activities that suggest communication without manipulating words. In this approach we can also perceive the signs stored in the building as a dialogue between the architect and the building, between the building and its recipient. Reducing the above-mentioned relations – they can be understood as a dialogue between the architect and the recipient of art.

It should be noted that both relationships: the architect-artwork and the recipient-artwork are bi-directional transmissions. One and the same building can be perceived variously (depending on the conditions of perception). In this perspective, the meanings “stored” in the building can be “read” in a radically different way by recipients / users of architecture. As R. Ingarden wrote: “for each of us – perceivers – coexisting with an artwork builds up another concretization of the artwork closely entangled with our way of feeling, with our sensitivity and the vicissitudes of our life; concretization, for which the artwork itself is only a starting point – if somebody prefers – the point of destination never fully attainable; concretization, which only in part is determined by the artwork itself, because not only the multiplicity of perceptions of a given work associated with the conditions of life exerts a decisive influence on its constitution, but also our whole personality, its way of perceiving, feeling and response” [6, p. 166].

An important element of the game in reading meanings is the complexity of the architecture itself, understood as art.<sup>1</sup> Each artwork is a message, carrying the information, content, written in a certain language. In this case, the language of architecture which uses components such as a column, wall, slab, or window. T. Ando recalls, “The erection of a single post has the effect of interrupting a scene. Similarly, a single wall, severs, interrupts, opposes and violently alters the site on which it is placed; it begins to show signs of evolution into architecture. At the same time, the shadow cast on the wall by the leaves of nearby trees can cause the wall to blend with its landscape. Generally, various elements coexist in a series of mutual rhetorical relationships...” [1, p. 445]. The code of this communication, written in the structure of walls and columns, slabs and roofs, windows and doors, is a set of signs with a complex structure of meanings. The architect, using this kit of elements specific to his profession, communicates with the receiver, conveying the content (sometimes visible, sometimes hidden – requiring discovery). This resource is individual and can be read as a rudimentary characteristic of the artist.

Depending on the structure of the building itself, the capabilities of the recipient in terms of encoding and decoding determine the act of transmission and reception. The mere perception is therefore different for each recipient. Therefore various readings of meanings can be written in the building (or perhaps – drawn – more often in the case of architecture). Each of us, subjectively, perceiving architecture, creates its individual image. The perception of meaning depends on cultural factors, education (understood in relation to art), as well as

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that not all architecture can be considered as an artwork. It’s been assumed that a necessary condition of perceiving the building in aesthetic category is discovering the structure of over-rational meanings.

previous experiences that allow us to accept a wider spectrum of possible spatial variants of architectural language. Today the wall does not have to be a vertical, flat shape, the window can reach the height of the building, and the usage of complex mechanical systems (taken from the photograph) determining the character of the façade is not necessarily surprising any longer.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, due to the characteristics of the building, we can talk about the ease or difficulty of reception of architecture, and thus – simplicity or problems in reading meanings – the game with architecture becomes complicated, and in some cases even impossible. This complex connection depends on possible interpretations. There is a single architectural work (regardless of the possible ways to write), but it also provides a multitude of its interpretations, or – after R. Ingarden – concretizations of the same artwork. It does not result only from purely physical conditions, such as a point of observation or perception based on photos or drawings – in contrast to direct reception. Roman Ingarden notes that “there are many concretizations of architectural works; it seems understandable. There are in fact many viewers of the same artwork and a lot of different, variously proceeding perceptions. Each of the pluralities associated with each of the perceptions, if not every perception, entails the inevitable consequence of the determination of its intentional counterpart of some intentional object” [6, p. 162]. Even one recipient can see the same object in different ways. Various receptions are possible when observing the building from the outside and from the inside. Other information, and thus different perceptions of data, is provided by the analysis of drawings, photographs, and authorship descriptions. Architecture presents itself in different ways during the days or at nights; it will spur one sensation in its permanent user, and another in an incidental recipient.

The game of reading meanings of architectural work happens at different levels of our perception. Each building is a place of refuge (space); architecture is an art marked by utility. Umberto Eco writes about this basic communication of architecture, pointing to the role of the functionality of individual elements of the building – the roof covers; the wall separates; and the stairs enable communication between levels determining us to automatically lift our feet [3, p. 199–200]. At the same time the building can become a manner of “higher” order communication at different levels of semantic connotations of the architectural composition’s language – a message, containing meanings associated with it that go beyond rationality of function.

In the case of historical architecture, the connotation of a meaning seems obvious in most cases – the castle was the place of refuge separated with surrounding walls, while the palace or mansion are more open to the outside (remaining in our mind a place to live), and the church has always been perceived as the temple, a sacred place. Contemporary architecture entails the need to revise the aesthetic dimension of this art. This applies to the typology of recognizing architecture well-established in society. Manipulating elements that have permanently been etched in the language of architecture, their meaning is changing – the church can today look like a bunker, the house like a greenhouse, and the residential building like an office building. This also applies to the elements of architectural composition – the column does not have to be vertical, the wall – straight, and the window can turn into a wall of a building. This change forces on the recipient the necessity of adjusting his perception of architecture. Since the border of the building (wall) can be transparent (because made of glass), the historical conditions relating to the border or lack of them must change the fact, that what is translucent (allowing eye contact), can also be a physical boundary between inside and outside (limiting the possibility of going outside).

Independent, higher record levels of meaning in architecture are those hidden in a building by its creator. Some of them can be read directly, others require explanation. Examples of this type of creative process might be the project of a residential building in Makuhari (Chiba), Japan (proj. S. Holl and K. Sone and T. Enomoto, 1992–1996), the Jewish Museum in Berlin (proj. D. Libeskind, 1999–2001), and also the Seminary of the Congregation of the Resurrection in Krakow (proj. D. Kozłowski, W. Stefański, 1984–1993). To discover the path that reflects the poetry of Matsuo Basho’s travel record “Oku no hosomichi” shown in the composition of “silent buildings” and “active structures” [8, p. 44–77], and the path “between the lines” of the decomposed religious symbol,<sup>2</sup> or described in the idea of the “four gates” (the road between initiation, hope, knowledge and faith) [7, p. 62–63] – it is necessary to introduce the recipient (by an additional explanation) to be able to fully participate in the game of searching for meaning in these buildings. The above-mentioned architecture needs further clarification. When it is perceived by an incidental recipient, the discovery of hidden meanings in front of the receiver on the other (hidden) level of connotations is impossible. In these specific cases in which the over-rational meanings unequivocally attest to the attachment of these buildings to art – the contemporary architecture requires a guide.

In psychological terms, due to the acquired and preserved emotional–intellectual attitude (yet undergoing subsequent transformations along with obtained experience), the distinction between art easy and difficult in the reception is reflected in acceptance of architecture, or its negation. Particularly in the case of this art, it is difficult due to the ubiquity of buildings encountered every day. Because of the utilitarian character, the recipient experiences architecture regardless of his aesthetic preferences. Therefore, the formation of discrepancy between authentic and artificial sensations – resulting from socially accepted norms – is possible. Conditions and cultural stereotypes affect our ability to read signs. However, each of these (and subsequent) experiences enables us to start the next game with architecture, another play with the building. Steven Holl writes: “The everyday act of pressing a door handle and opening into a light-washed room can become profound when experienced through sensitized consciousness. To see, to feel these physicalities is to become the subject of the senses” [5, p. 179]. Looking at this aspect from another point of view – a prerequisite for such perception of the building saves in the architectural work the values that will influence our senses, as it is in contact with the work of art – in terms of these considerations – it enables us to start the game (and to continue it, regardless of the selected gambit) in reading meanings: ideas, pretexts, relations between elements which enable the recipient to find the beauty of the composition saved in the relations between columns, walls, ceilings, doors, windows, etc.

Discovering meanings in architecture can become for its recipient a kind of game; sometimes simple, sometimes so complex that understanding its rules is only possible with additional description beyond the basic level of perception of “changes in three-dimensional reality, serving some function, associated with the life of the collective” [3, p. 199]. Savouring the reading of successive meanings, stored permanently in a building (those visible and those hidden). In this perspective, architecture can be seen not only as a game, but also – bringing pleasure in this exploration – it can be play – between a spectator and a structure. And no doubt – it should be seen as art.

---

<sup>2</sup> comp. <http://www.jmberlin.de/main/EN/04-About-The-Museum/01-Architecture/01-libeskind-Building.php> [online: 2015.06.12].

## References

- [1] Ando T., *The Wall as Territorial Delineation*, [in:] Dal Co F., *Tadao Ando. Complete Works*, Phaidon, Milano 1995.
- [2] Arnheim R., *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa. Psychologia twórczego oka*, (trans.) J. Mach, Oficyna, Warszawa 1978.
- [3] Eco U., *Nieobecna struktura*, (trans.) A. Weinsberg, p. Bravo, Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 1996.
- [4] Hall E.T., *Ukryty wymiar*, (trans.) T. Hołówka, Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA SA, 2003.
- [5] Holl S., *Question of Perception. Phenomenology of Architecture*, [in:] Holl S., Pallasmaa J., Pérez-Gomez A., *Question of Perception. Phenomenology of Architecture*, William Stout Publishers, San Francisco 2006, p. 41, [in:] M. Borowska, *Estetyka i poszukiwanie znaczeń w przestrzeniach architektonicznych*, Semper, Warszawa 2013.
- [6] Ingarden R., *Studia z estetyki*, t. II, PWN, Warszawa 1966.
- [7] Kozłowski D., *Projekty i budynki 1982–1992. Figuratywność i rozpad formy w architekturze doby postfunkcjonalnej*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 1992.
- [8] *Makuhari Housing. Interview with S. Holl by Y. Futagawa*, GA Document Extra. Steven Holl, Tokyo 1996 nr 06, p. 44–77.
- [9] *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, (ed.) Ch. Jencks, K. Kropf, (trans.) D. Szymczak, Grupa Sztuka Architektury, Warszawa 2013.