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THE SCENOGRAPHIC CHARACTER
OF AN ARCHITECTURAL BUILDING OR PLACE
AS THE SUBJECT OF A SPATIAL NARRATIVE GAME

SCENICZNOŚĆ OBIEKTU ARCHITEKTONICZNEGO
LUB MIEJSCA JAKO PRZEDMIOT GRY
NARRACJĄ PRZESTRZENNĄ

Abstract

In this paper we describe the connection between theatrical scenography and urban design of the public space. Reference is made to the contemporary transformation in culture – especially post-modern trends which promote a narrative attitude to the creation of a place's identity and also changeability, flexibility, temporariness, and ephemerality in contemporary architecture.

Keywords: architectural context, spatial narrative, genius loci, scenography

Streszczenie

W artykule poruszono kwestię związku scenografii teatralnej z projektowaniem przestrzeni miejskiej. Odwołano się do współczesnych przemian kulturowych nurtu ponowoczesnego, które promują narracyjne podejście do kreowania tożsamości miejsca, a także zmienność, elastyczność, tymczasowość, efemeryczność architektury współczesnej.

Słowa kluczowe: kontekst architektoniczny, narracja przestrzeni, genius loci, scenografia

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1. An introduction

Comparing theatrical scenography to contemporary public space and taking the cultural transformations of both into account (organization of space, artistic and architectural expression, new media etc.) similarities and connections can be observed which stimulate further research in this area. Initially theatrical stage design benefited from architectural knowledge and heritage, but the development of modern avant-garde theatre (sometimes named ‘experimental theatre’) made scenographic art more autonomous towards architecture and more often in relation to a literary work – becoming the art itself. Consequently some plots and elements of scenographic art became an inspiration and motivation for conscious and unconscious architectural creation and specific urban site shaping as a stage decoration – an arrangement for a real urban drama – city life going on in urban interiors and places.

In the paper general contemporary trends in the shaping of a theatrical scenography and an architecture of public space are identified and selected projects with elements of a stage decoration, creation, and other theatrical practice are presented.

The main thesis of the paper is “form follows narration”.

2. An anonymity of place

Marc Augé described no-places as a space with an unidentified identity, without meaning, no creating context, no initialising social activities, no making relationships between people and relations with surroundings [1, p. 53] – that is, to some extent deprived of basic ethical attributes: truth, beauty and goodness. No-places are in opposition to places, which have two additional features – place has a centre and limits. They can be formally limited or conventionally, giving the *genius loci* [7, p. 16]. It is a concrete expression interacting on the perception of the viewer.

3. A searching for meanings – between literature and architecture

The ability to create many narrations in architectural space means we can recognize cities and their objects as open works. Umberto Eco developed the idea of *open work* in opposition to: shapelessness, disorder, randomness, uncertainty of intentions, and, above all, ambiguity in art and literature. This thought induces the next – that there is the perspective for interpretation and dialectical perspective between the form of a work and its openness guarantees meanings and relations [2, p. 8]. Juliusz Żórawski noticed this aspect writing about the cohesion of form [9, p. 19].

Therefore we can put the question – who is the narrator and who is the interpreter of a work in architectural space? In the essays *The Legends of Modernity* written by Czesław Miłosz we read that a man wandering the city has many associations, reflections, images of people and situations – so he is both narrator and interpreter [6, p. 46]. The same role is played by the architect, but s/he has the special position of narrator-author, not reader of art.

In the search for meaning, context plays the main role. Creating a relationship between an object and its surroundings can take place in both directions – by making the building

compatible with its surroundings and vice versa. The third possibility is when a complex architectural creation covers a broad territorial and semantic range. Arranging a space with the aim of creating a narration resembles work on a theatrical stage – not just as a profession, but also at present there are many similarities in applied operation.

4. The theatrical stage as laboratory

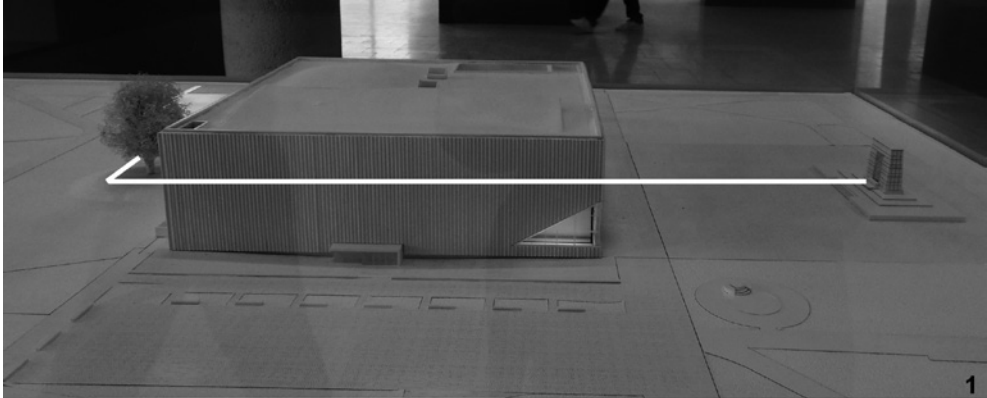
Theatre combines almost all elements of artistic activity, and in addition is a kind of space-laboratory where we can safely experiment and recognize the reality – through the drama, but also through the context of the stage. The recall of the theatricality of the city was connected with the launch of daily life, street arts [8, p. 193–206], while the impact of architecture on the development of theatrical space was repeatedly perceived – there almost from the beginning of the dramatic arts. It created such concepts as, for example, the *Total Theatre* of Erwin Piscator and Walter Gropius, or the *Simultaneous Theatre* of Andrzej Pronaszko and Szymon Syrkus. Jan Kosinski writes ‘we must say that any scenography in a theatrical place has always been architecture – not an image or subject, but clean architecture understood directly, closing and describing the space around the man, which shows limits, capabilities of moving, and behaviour’ [4, p. 115,116].

Changes in the theatrical stage and space rely mostly on the gradual abandonment of realistic scenery to be replaced with collusive, minimalist or illusionistic scenery. The shaping which includes the central perspective aimed at the stage is replaced by a fragmented recognition of the scenery. Increasingly the performances also take place outside the stage, so there is no longer a formal division between the stage and the audience. To this arrangement, modern multimedia techniques are added that multiply the message, reinforcing the performance. There is also experimentation in lighting and movement. In each case the aim is to create a performative space, a certain spaciousness for the show, the spectacle, the performance [3, p. 176].

These trends are concurrent with the social and cultural transformations described as postmodernism. The disappearing limits between emptiness and materiality, reality and fiction, can be found in the dramatic arts and in architecture.

5. Scenography in shaping the architectural space

A stage design development of architectural space implies first of all emphasizing its narrative character – is it permanent or temporary, and increasingly often implies a potential change and adaptation to current needs. This all primarily violates one of the strongest architectural features formulated by Vitruvius – durability. Today, there are many buildings that by premise are created as temporary, by definition different from others, characterized by originality and uniqueness of solutions. Although the theatre no longer has such a strong principle of separation between stage and auditorium, in the shaping of space it refers to the slot design (scene boxed), which often emphasizes the attractive views, which in turn become marketing tools help to identify the space. What is important is the superficiality of architecture, which defines the interior or blurs the line between inside and outside. Developments in technology and the ease of adaptation to various applications has meant that elements of



- III.1. Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw – model, Warsaw, photo: R. Józwick, 2015
- III.2. Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London, photo: R. Józwick, 2014
- III.3. Renewal of King's Cross Station, London, photo: R. Józwick, 2014

architecture are increasingly mobile, electronically controlled. There are multimedia screens that directly produce specific content or narrative information. The expression of these means of expression is becoming stronger. All these elements contribute to the paradigm of scenography design of architectural space, the essence of which is: form follows narration – space is created as abstract, narrative or poetic in a pragmatic context, which is the structure of the city. Kevin Lynch wrote: “A vivid and integrated physical setting, capable of producing a sharp image, plays a social role as well. It can furnish the raw material for the symbols and collective memories of group communication. A striking landscape is the skeleton upon which many primitive races erect their socially important myths” [5, p. 5].

6. Examples

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews (arch. Reiner Mahlamaki) was opened in 2015. Apart from the narrative of museum exhibition, the building itself and the process of its formation have features that create its meaning. In front of the museum, in the park, a temporary object was built – a pavilion-tent (herb. Ohel), which foreshadowed further architectural events, being a kind of prologue (Arch. Group CENTRALA, 2009). Its form alluded to the project selected in the competition – in conception has narration – entrance through a spatial installation.

In viewing the museum as a whole, it is most readable from the Ghetto Heroes monument, which became the inspiration for the design of the building. Based on the linear narrative form of the transition it can be read as follows: the monument is a symbol of heroism, but also recalls the extermination of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto; the building introduces the issues of the history of Polish Jews; at the end of the museum the spectator-visitor encounters a large panoramic window, behind which grows a big tree, which can be interpreted as a symbol of life (as in the funerary symbolism of Judaism) [III.1]. The tree and the monument determine the context – the museum located on the axis is the element which makes the narrative complete. The scenographic additional element of nature is the entrance resembling the entrance behind the scenes, a mysterious and enigmatic place.

The annual projects of the Serpentine Gallery Pavilions show how there can be various interpretations in the same place – and thus different architectural narratives. Since 2000, the challenge has been faced by famous architects. During this time, the results have been projects with different relationships between space and surroundings: inward, isolated, open etc.

In 2014 the commission chose a pavilion designed by Smiljan Radić, resembling a Neolithic stone or cocoon and as a result of modelling took the form of a torus [III.2]. The formed shell, made of glass fibre “closed” the user inside. Contact and communication with the outside are enabled by an opening: entrance/exit directed to the main building of the Serpentine Gallery, a terrace open to the north part of the park, tree cropping window and opening the “epicenter” of the space. The building was also the setting for sponsored Friday night meetings with poetry, music, film, and literature. Thanks to the translucent shell, the pavilion was lit from interiors.

The earlier pavilion designed by Sou Fujimoto had a completely different character. The white spatial structure was dissipated in the landscape, resembling a white cloud. It was possible to go inside, but this form was more open than the Radić pavilion.

A place designed with a traditional stage design approach, taking into account specific views and curtains as “interior walls”, is the area of the ex Renault car factory in the town of Boulogne-Billancourt near Paris. In the area of the park special places were marked out which are directed to the best views of the landscape. For this purpose a special set of tall chairs has been arranged. The park’s plant and architectural framework, which is the heart of a new district, resembles a unified stage cohesive in nature.

Some elements supporting the architecture (e.g. artificial light – illuminations, but also the location in relation to the cardinal directions) also affect the scenography of a site. A very good example is the new philharmonic building in Szczecin (Estudio Barozzi Veiga, 2014). Originally the form of building was completely white block. During the building of the project it was supplemented by colourful illumination which could be controlled depending on needs and circumstances. It includes the possibility of change, comprising a different expression

within the building. A similar effect was used in a commercial building – M&M World at Leicester Square in London (Pompei AD, 2011). The whole glass facade is adorned with elongated light sources that change colour. Another example is the highlight of the covering of the newly redeveloped London's King's Cross station (John McAslan + Partners, 2014) [Ill.3].

7. Conclusion

Contemporary architectural transformations of space are inspired by scenography art – implementing: variability, mobility of elements, various and strong means of expression, and spatial narratives creating genius loci.

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