
THE CITY AS AN EXPERIENCESCAPE: ARCHITECTURE'S ROLE IN TRANSFORMING THE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OF THE URBAN SPACE

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THE 'PLACE' OF ARCHITECTURE: ARCHITECTURE AND ITS URBAN CONTEXT

Any attempt to articulate the problems of contemporary architecture in terms of its cultural experience, and thus not solely in terms of its formal and artistic qualifications (which as well are, it is proper to add, always culturally relativised), demands to locate it within some kind of a broader framework. Only the choice and operationalisation of it make it possible to answer the question about beyond aesthetic, and therefore, social, political, or cultural functions that it can fulfil. Therefore, also the concentration on the urban problematic aspects, while undertaking analytical approach towards specific architectural projects, is to be connected with a basic theoretical assumption that architecture cannot be deprived—even in the field of philosophy—not only from its social and cultural, but also spatial context: the city itself. The matter of concern is, however, not the lack of independence of architecture resulting from its definitional functionality, as criticized by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* (Kant, 1914), analyzed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1989) and warming the heart of Gianni Vattimo in *Transparent Society* (Vattimo, 1992). (And that, for a while now, has been problematised and challenged by the deconstructivist architecture), but rather the irreducible, reflexive, and mutual relationship between urban and architectural, between the ways in which city and architecture are being culturally constructed, understood and experienced as an effect.

This specific interrelation, however, which was realized already in architectural modernism, and, in a completely different way, has become the main object of interest of postmodern architecture (justifying the utopias of complete transformation of the urban space related to it), has not been explicitly characterised in theoretical studies

of urban space. Here, the place of architecture is proving to be extremely mobile: its position at the centre or on the margins of urban reflections varies with the changing perspective of thinking about what determines and creates the character of the city and urban texture. Paradoxically, however, it is not the object-oriented reflection, concentrated on the functional and socio-economic characteristics of the built environment, which highlights the reciprocal and reflexive relationship between the city and architecture that interests me here. It rather plays an important role in the subject-oriented reflection on urban space, main focus of which is not so much the mechanisms governing the development of the city, or its structural characteristics, but its cultural experience. For in this perspective, important, but not central to the urban reflection, the question, *inter alia*, of architecture's role in the process of constructing diverse experiences of the urban space, becomes problematic. Therefore, it remains closely related to the initial belief that the city must be treated primarily as a cultural space: the space ordered and constructed by the cultural—and thus culturally defined—experiences of its users. Therefore, I am referring to the experiences that are co-created and co-determined by urban architecture: the nature of its intellectual and sensory impact, its meaning and the influence on the urban landscape it is located in.

It is worth noting that this assumption accompanies not only the concept of humanist principle, according to which and in accordance with Florian Znaniecki's anti-naturalist theses, one should study urban space precisely as experience space, expressed in terms of cultural values and constructed by architectural, symbolic points of reference (Znaniecki, 1934), or the revolutionary articulation, proposed by Henri Lefebvre, and constantly referred to by Edward Soja, of categories of the urban, social space in lived space terms, and therefore the space of its cultural, mentally and emotionally coloured experience, in which both characteristics of the built environment and theoretical, artistic images of the urban space are subject to mediation (Lefebvre, 2003: 43; 2005; Soja, 1996: 76). It also plays an important role in the pioneer "urban" considerations of critical school representatives, such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin or Siegfried Kracauer, where the notion "urban"—what will become one of the fundamental points of reference for my considerations—is to be interpreted simply as the space of experience, space "architecturally framed and founded", to put it in Benjamin's words (Benjamin, 1979: 364).

In this perspective, the architecture is therefore not, as Kant would have it, imperfect, because subordinate art, or a necessary, though aesthetically just a side,

effect of the urban development. As a tool for framing and founding of the city, it is rather a catalyst and a symptom of transformation of the urban space experience. Its changes and reinterpretation of the role played by it, reflect, therefore, the transformation of the understanding of the city itself and metaphors used to describe it—and hence, its cultural experience as well.

CHANGING FUNCTIONS: FROM GROWTH TO THE ENTERTAINMENT MACHINE

Therefore, it is not surprising that this, discovered at the end of the nineteenth century by the early urban critics, experience- and city-creating role of architecture has been forgotten for many years, when the basic metaphor for describing the city and the nature of its transformation was the metaphor of a city as a growth machine (Logan, Moloth, 1987). This perspective, prevailing in American urban studies (urban sociology, urban political economy), even if it was very critical, claimed to understand the city as a machine functionally subordinated to processes of economic growth and wealth creation, where the manipulation of space is focused only on its exchangeable and not on its symbolic or at least utilitarian value. This way of thinking about the city, also reflected in the architectural works—just to mention the achievements of modernist, utopian functionalism—dominating until, more or less, 60s of the twentieth century, together with the dominant role of the industrial city, challenged not so much the assumption that the city is a socially produced space (Castells, 1977; Gottdiener, 1997), but rather with reductionist spirit—implying radical, unilateral determination of social space by socio-economic formations generating it—marginalized, on the one hand, the question of the role of experience as a “tool” of cultural production of space, its recipient and the starting point of theoretical analysis. On the other hand, it deprived architecture—understood primarily as “building”, which fulfils social and economic needs—of the culture-creating function of its generating, transforming and problematising (something the modernist architects would surely not agree with). The city, being a growth machine, therefore, a profit-oriented body, was thus symbolically absorbing both its inhabitants and its architecture.

It is also not surprising that the focus on the importance of architecture for what the city is and how we should understand it is back in fashion in the urban studies, with the cultural turn occurring within them. For it involves the opening of the sociological, geographical or economic reflection on the city to issues that go beyond the so far

reductionist paradigms, while condemning them to interdisciplinarity, which is definitional for contemporary urban studies. For the appreciation of the role of culture and the issues related to it, is, on the one hand, an effect of changes in metaphors used to describe the city, which are forced by the actual and real transformation of the industrial city to the post-industrial city. The growth machine category loses its heuristic capacity. The end of heavy and centralized industry and return to the decentralized industry, based on symbolic production, demands a revision of the models used to describe and explain both the problems of urban development, as well as ways to “use” the city. This is primarily because the new determinants of urban development that arise with the creation of a post-industrial city give new value to its so far absent or marginalized aspects such as style or quality of life, or its experience, defined by Charles Landry in *The Art of City Making* in ‘soft’ urban infrastructure terms (Landry, 2006: 281). In this perspective, the city appears to be an entertainment machine (Lloyd, Clark, 2001), not only space for investors, but also for consumers, tourists and symbolic consumption-oriented inhabitants. This in turn is reflected in the often criticised for this reason post-modern architecture (Girardo, 1996). As Richard Lloyd and Terry Clark note, “The features of the entertainment machine are not altogether new, as cities have long been sites for consumption and aesthetic innovation. What is new is the degree to which these ‘cultural’ activities have become crucial urban features” (Lloyd, Clark, 2001: 356).

On the other hand, the emphasis on cultural factors in the theoretical and more practical reflection on the city is a result of the necessary review of the questions about how in the post-industrial era the city can be guaranteed to successfully compete in the economic market. This success is, as many researchers agree, primarily a cultural one. It is, therefore, the increase of the role of culture in defining the economic position of the city, analysed by Richard Florida (Florida, 2005) within the concept of creative cities, or by Sharon Zukin, who refers to the categories of urban, cultural economy (Zukin, 2002), that demands that it is treated as a primary interest of the cities, their economic base. “Cultural strategies that initially represented the result of economic development turned into strategies aimed at stimulating economic growth”, as Zukin notes in *The Cultures of Cities* (Zukin, 2002: 280). They aim not only to attract investment and trade—a city with a good museum of contemporary art is often automatically seen as a city flourishing economically—but also to attract interest of professions defined by Florida as the creative class: artists or intellectuals whose

presence in urban space, according to the author of *Who's your City*, is a guarantor of their successful development (Florida, 2008).

And what determines both the investment, and the significant for the quality of life, attractiveness of the city, is precisely its openness, cultural innovation, and, or that perhaps above all, its recognition. The latter can be guaranteed by cultural uniqueness that is distinct and largely based on, and represented by a specific and well “matched” iconography. “Increasingly significant in understanding the new competitive environment is the play of *urban iconics*, through which the intention of physical structures or events can be grasped all at once. (...) What this does is help and reinforce the resonance of the city. And resonance generates drawing power, which in turn can override underlying real economic potential”, states Charles Landry (Landry, 2008: 286).

In this context, one of the key elements of the city's attractiveness is thus its architecture. Therefore, it is not only understood as building that fulfils needs. On the contrary, moving beyond its purely functional approach, involves rather the tendency typical for contemporary reflection on the city to define architecture in terms of city's cultural capital or the stake in a game of city's symbolic economy, as Zukin or Florida would put it. From this perspective, architecture's utility is underestimated or even entirely neglected, whereas architecture is to be understood as a leading actor in the process of creating city's cultural identity and its cultural representations, and, importantly, its brand. The changing contextual, socio-economic reflection on architecture is, therefore, not describing it in the spirit cited above any longer – as a phenomenon reflecting capitalist relations of production. It turns out to be an extremely important, strategic tool, which allows the city to appear on the global cultural market and, consequently, to succeed in the competitive marketplace.

Hence, way too often, as a consequence, architecture seems to be treated exclusively as a catalyst of culture driven urban renewal (Zukin, 2002), of redefinition of the image of the city (Landry, 2009), or simply city's promotion tool. “Bilbao effect” can function here as the best, but at the same time rather alarming, example: Gehry's Guggenheim Museum is to be understood, by the representatives of the urban and cultural studies, in the first place as Bilbao's logo, a marketing tool, not as museum (function) or interesting architectural project (form). This fact affects, obviously, humanistic approach towards the problem of architecture's role in “framing and founding” of the urban space. Architecture, “stylistic hallmark of late capitalism”,

(Klingmann, 2007: 5), as Anna Klingmann would put it, is aimed at increasing consumption, transforming the city into a theme park or simply a brandscape.

Yet the place branding or urban branding perspective, as characterized by scholars such as Klingmann, Robert Govers and Frank Go (Govers, Go, 2009), allows posing anew the question concerning relation between architecture and the city conceived as the space of experience. Since, according to above mentioned scholars, the process of urban marketing has to be strictly connected with so called “experience economy”, brands do not anymore relate just to products, but to aura of meaning—added or symbolic value attached to them, and, as a consequence, to the realm of their experience. “Consumption is more about co-creating experiences than the exchange of goods and services” (Govers, Go, 2009: 44), note the authors of *Place Branding*, illustrating the indicated change. Therefore, the value of architecture – treated as a branding tool—“is no longer appraised merely as a formal object but by its ability to elicit relevant transformation in people and places” (Klingmann, 2007:318)—states Klingmann in *Brandscapes. Architecture in the Experience Economy*. Hence, not only its point-wise, architecturally transformed fragments (icons), but the city as a whole, the brandscape, is to be understood in terms of an experience environment (Govers, Go, 2009: 136). The category that reflects the character and effect of thus understood urban environment in the most adequate manner is the experiencescape category: the utopic—not in modern, but in post-modern manner—space of hedonistic, consumption-oriented experience of aesthetic pleasure.

ATOPIC EXPERIENCESCAPE: ARCHITECTURAL WARPING OF THE URBAN SPACE

Although the answer to the question concerning architecture’s role in “framing and founding” the space of experience, with which place branding perspective provides us, does not seem to be satisfying, it can be treated as a valuable lesson. For it demonstrates, that the perspective of experience, often marginalized in the reflection on the city and architecture, can now not only play a decisive role in the reflection on the city, but it also requires widening of conceptual framework used in characterising its phenomenon and changes. Therefore, it primarily calls for asking which experience is to be included in the urban experiencescape and which is actually the most dominant in the urban landscape, and what is the role of contemporary architecture in its creation. Since, as it was argued, contemporary architecture is above all to be aimed

at generating various experiences, transforming the experience of the city itself, it is worthy to focus on those of them (even though they continue to play marginal role) that not only repeat and preserve the image of a modern city a space of consumption, entertainment or leisure. The actual transformation assumes after all, a critical or at least problematising picture of what city is or could be, viewed from the perspective of its experience, mediated and shaped by architecture.

Thus, this assumption allows one to concentrate on the experience of contemporary architecture that falls outside the reductive logic distinctive for American urban studies, where the city is defined either as the growth or as the entertainment machine. It also helps to draw one's attention to architectural projects, which, in a new way, put the question about urban utopia and the real possibility of its development. Thus, they function as an alternative to modernist and postmodernist reflection on the city. I am, therefore, referring to such ideas as Peter Eisenman's projects, which, as their author claims, are to be freed from the rule of the criteria of functionality and, at the same time, are not supposed to provide any comfortable experience of visual pleasure. It is enough to mention the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Holocaust Monument in Berlin) or unbuilt *Max Reinhardt Haus*: buildings, whose transformational impact on the experience of urban space cannot—in case of Max Reinhardt Haus, potentially, of course, due to the fact that the project was not implemented—be overestimated. In this case, it is rather philosophy of culture and its categories, e.g. atopia that can play an important role in describing the experience of the urban space transformed by them.

It is so, because the notion 'atopia', or 'atopic experience' may be treated as a more adequate tool for characterising the cultural experience of contemporary 'stressogenic' rather than comforting urban architecture. The category 'atopic'—according to scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes (Dziuban, 2009)—relates to the characteristics of experience of that, what is not-classified, alien, uncanny, and unintelligible or anxietygenerating. However, as the name suggests, atopia, *a-topos* relates to spatial metaphors such as utopia or heterotopia – the ancient Greek *topos* means, after all, "place" or "discourse" among other things. Consequently, as a privative, a negation of *topos* (*a-topos*), atopia ought to be understood as non-place, something outside the place or out-of-place. This broad semantic field of the category of atopia, which links the possibility, or rather impossibility, of understanding and classification with the reflection on space, allows one to pose the question on spatial

experience that could be described in such terms. Therefore, it can be productively applied in the context of the contemporary thought on architecture, which seems to be, as it is argued, of primary importance for the experience of urban experiencescape.

Therefore, the reflection on the architecture, and the fact that it can play an entirely new role in the process of “framing and founding” of the experience of the urban space, can rely on the idea of ‘spatial warping’, as introduced by Anthony Vidler in *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Vidler, 2001). It allows one to not only revisit Richard Sennett’s category of “resistance” – according to the author of *Flesh and Stone*, the main notion describing man’s relation to the urban space, lost in the modern era (Sennet, 1996). But also enables one to concentrate on the variety of *malaria urbana*, as described by Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel or Siegfried Kracauer: problematic and unpleasant experiences of the urban space. Hence, the warped space of metropolis is to be treated not as hedonistic experiencescape, but as a source of fears, phobias and neurosis of its inhabitants: *horror vacui*, agoraphobia, claustrophobia or *das Behrührungsangst*, haptophobia – the fear of being touched. *Malaria* caused and generated nowadays not as much by the emergence and the difficulties of the urban life, as argued by the representatives of critical school—we had enough time to get used to it already—as by contemporary stressogenic, uncomfortable architecture.

Thus, architectural warping can be reflected precisely in architecture’s moving forward of dysfunctionalization and problematisation of its formality, mirrored for instance in the fact, that the boundary between architecture and sculpture is frequently being erased. The following may serve as an example: Kapoor’s disturbing metro stations in Naples, which once and for all re-contextualise and transform the experience of users of public transport or Rachel Whiteread’s uncanny *House* in London or *Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna, which with ruthless brutality enters memory experiences into the urban space, destabilising its unproblematic perception. Therefore, stressogenic architecture seems to engage not so much optical, as tactile dimension of the experience. But this haptic model of architectural experience challenges not only the distance characteristic of visual perception of the architecture, assumed by the place branding perspective. Since it is constructed not for seeing, but above all for moving subject, and, therefore, its often very enigmatic form enables understanding from one, privileged point of view. Haptic-oriented architecture (such as for instance Daniel Libeskind’s *Jewish Museum* in Berlin) batters also or

above all on the tactile anxiety of the moving subject generated by destabilisation of surfaces, claustrophobic spaces and dead end streets causing anxiety, fear, incertitude, or instability of its “user”. From this point of view architecture—to quote Vidler’s *Warped space*—is to be conceived primarily as a “vertigo machine”, or, while posing the question about its relationship with the city’s space: a spatial sabotage.

After all, architectural warping can be approached here not merely as an experience-problematising or anxietygenerating mechanism, but also as a tactic—and therefore not a top-down, overall urban strategy—in the sense that Michel de Certeau has attributed to this term (Certeau de, 1984). That means that it chooses the actions aimed at local, small-scale subversions: transformations and problematisations of the character of the urban texture, by destabilising its elements or fragments. Yet, since both, modern and post-modern urban and architectural utopias failed partly because they were supposed to lead to total and complete transformation of the urban space, contemporary stressogenic architecture is well aware of its unfeasibility. This is why, current architectural projects, according to Vidler, “are honed into tools, weapons and instruments of insertion, opening rifts and faults in the apparently seamless fabric of the city” (Vidler, 2001). Therefore, its deviations, ruptures and discontinuities generated by the architecture are to be treated not only as integral elements of its texture, but also a point of reference for the atopic experience of the warped urban experiencescape.

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Chapter V

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