

PIOTR OPALKA*

A HOUSE
AS THE PRESENTATION
OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE

DOM JAKO
TEATR ŻYCIA CODZIENNEGO

Abstract

In his theory of “the presentation of self in everyday life”, Erving Goffman, an American sociologist, takes an insight into society and human behaviour, comparing them to predefined roles and a theatrical scenario. In light of this concept, the image of a house that reflects the ambitions, expressions and self-creation of its users might be one of the media serving this description. The metaphor of theatre contributes to the description of these mechanisms through which house dwellers, and, within a broader framework, the residents of districts and cities, put on their respective masks.

Keywords: house, theatre, Erving Goffman, dramaturgical perspective

Streszczenie

Amerykański socjolog Erving Goffman w swojej teorii „człowieka w teatrze życia codziennego” analizuje społeczeństwo i zachowania ludzkie, porównując je do wcześniej przygotowanych ról i scenariuszy teatralnych. Zgodnie z tą koncepcją obraz domu, będącego odbiciem ambicji, ekspresji i autokreacji jego użytkowników, może stanowić jedno z mediów służące tym opisom. Metafora teatru jest przyczynkiem do opisu mechanizmów, w których mieszkańcy domów, a w szerszym kontekście również dzielnic i miast, podobnie jak na scenie, przywdziewają odpowiednie maski.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, teatr, Erving Goffman, perspektywa dramaturgiczna

* Ph.D., Eng. Arch. Piotr Opalka, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Opole University of Technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Erving Goffman, an American sociologist, recognized as one of the representatives of symbolic interactionism, compares the choices and reactions of individuals to predefined roles and theatrical scenarios in his best known book, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”¹. The researcher investigates episodes from the dramaturgical perspective, perceiving the individual as an actor who plays his/her role on the stage of life. These theories have their analogies in different behaviours and social actions, including the space surrounding humans. Goffman refers to theatre terminology, using the notions of performance, role, back room, front, audience, “trust in a role”, “dramatization of action”, “idealisation”, “controlled expression”, “false presentation”, “mystification” and “reality and play”. Their meanings are reflected in architecture, including but not limited to, a house and its related space. The interpretation might be different and varying over time, i.a. due to the evolution of space design. These descriptions might be reflected in social mechanisms through which house dwellers, and, within a broader framework, the residents of districts and cities, put on their respective masks as on the stage. The house, as the space that is the closest to a man, is the form which presents specific approaches, wealth status and owners’ interests, which do not necessarily coincide with the “content” of its interior.

2. A HOUSE FROM THE DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The dramaturgical perspective in architecture has its source in the experience and feeling of space, cultural and aesthetic patterns, as well as the inspirations, ambitions, expressions and self-creation of its users and professionals – architects and urban planners. The house, being the final and tangible effect of actions, is a mixture of different expectations and influences.

The metaphor of **performance** in the theatre is the material, physical form of a building. The house might be considered as a type of performance. It is an image of residential space exposed in the public space of urban fabric, being a kind of stage. The façade of a house conveys the most clear message that provides information about the owner of the house, being (or not) under the pressure of cultural matrix, pursuit for individualisation or merging with the surroundings. However, the external form of the object, apparently clear, might sometimes mislead the viewer (spectator). This lack of a coherent message along the line of sender-recipient might be not fully intended. Detached houses built on the basis of “ready designs”, whose form and spatial context are substantially distorted, might be one such misrepresentation (ill. 1). If we take into selective consideration palaces, manor houses or even castles, they are a blend of random, eclectic forms which do not have anything in common with architecture. The houses which used to be built on large plots, within a spatial context, today are pressed into small plots and disfigured by a dissonant functional programme which does not match their form. These forms might be chosen as a result of vanity and an inadequate way to boost self-esteem, a lack of awareness and

¹ E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, PIW, Warsaw 1981.

taste or, more prosaically, the desire to fit into a development model which, unfortunately, dominates in the Polish space².

The equivalent of a **theatre role** is the vision of the house which materialises the project in the form of a physical building. It is a record defined by the investor's needs and architect's talent before the final "presentation". The scenario – a house project materialises on the theatre stage or at specific location in space. In both cases, the final vision might be modified. Building a role has its analogies in creating a project that develops in a top-down manner. A specific object, which is a house of a predetermined form, function and design, is a derivative of the foregoing experiences and projections and attributing specific meanings to it. Its physical form is the result of observations of conduct of other individuals in the cultural environment and assimilating to them by using similar items³. In this regard, the mechanism of assuming particular aesthetic images of George Herbert Mead, defined as *role-taking*, is close to Goffman's research⁴. According to Mead, the personality of an individual or social group evolves while assuming approaches of other people, as their approach "is influenced by a whole social community, which does not always affect him/her directly, as an individual does not need to be its member; he/she might only have stereotypes in the group in which he/she functions and compare to them, irrespective of the role he/she assumes"⁵.

Goffman's **façade** is a fixed part of the performance of a particular individual, which functions invariably for the whole period of its duration. Its distinct parts – scenery and the external form might be also referred to architecture. A building is a form of message for the audience which provides information about its owners. Scenery is the external layer, which, depending on a form, might be: contemporary – historic, dynamic – static, rich – moderate, bad – good, etc. The external form, which is also connected to decorativeness, does not need to be consistent with its interior. The screen, modern structure of a building might include classical design and furnishing. The work of architecture might be based on symbolic elements which are visible on its elevation or in the functional composition. A cuboid covered with a gable roof is equipped with a relevant set of symbols which might be perceived differently, depending on the context. By accentuating, e.g. sacral elements, it may be deciphered as a vicarage, church, a house of prayer, a building of congregation, or a synagogue.

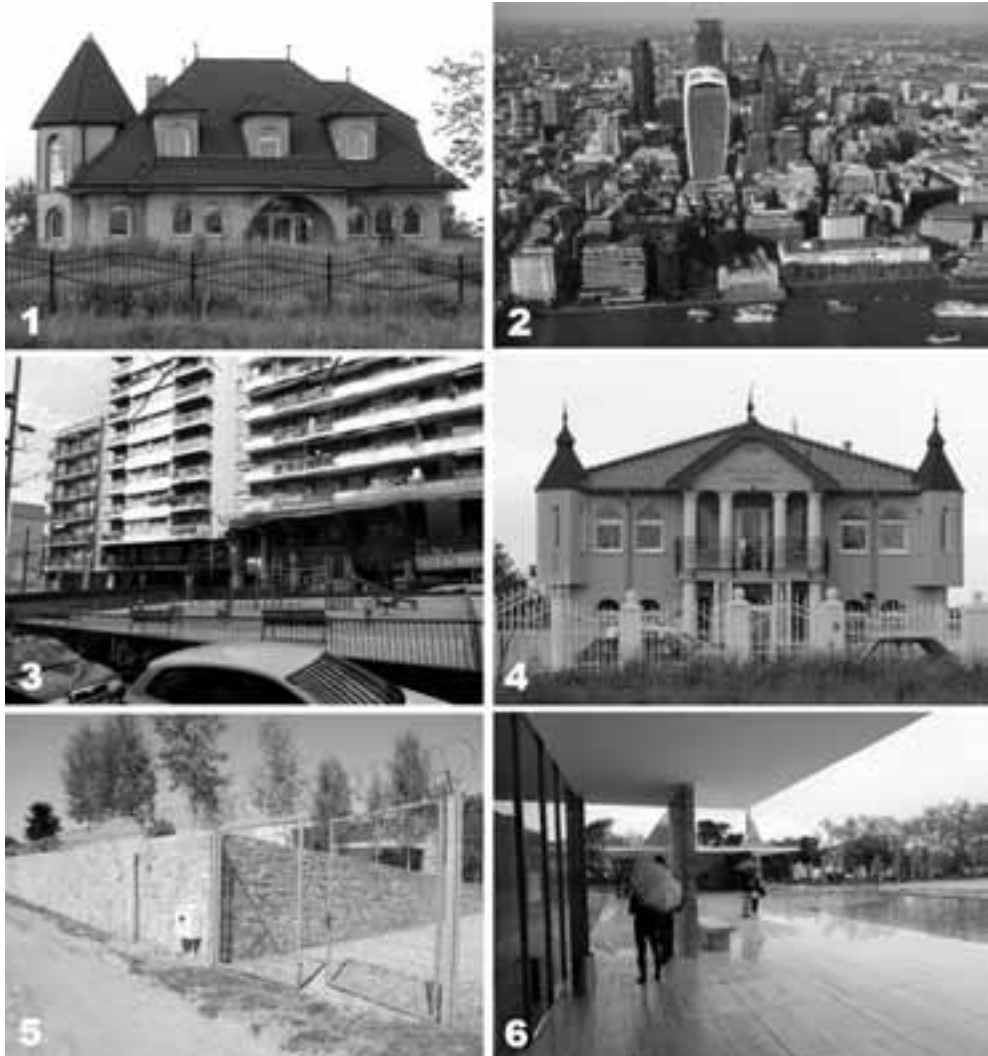
The proper selection of the means of expression may put a spotlight on (or lower) social position of the owners, emphasizing their ownership status and interests. The façade in architecture might be analysed in the scale of a single building as well as a wider complex of buildings. The scale, intensity and availability of a development have a major impact on how architecture is perceived. A disturbed perception of residential buildings manifests itself particularly in the centres of big cities, where such buildings are often crowded by the multitude of commercial and service buildings (ill. 2). This densely built-up area between residential buildings may lead to reduction or elimination of other necessary, ancillary

² J. Dobesz, *The Polish House*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 2008.

³ M. Furman, *The intersubjective experiences. Phenomenological considerations*. [in:] *Philosophical Journal*, No. 4/5 – October 2009, p. 103.

⁴ G. H. Mead *Mind, Self and Society* (translation: Z. Wolińska). PWN, Warsaw 1975.

⁵ D. Ćwiklińska-Surdyk, A. Surdyk, *Man as an actor on the stage of life. G. H. Mead's and E. Goffman's theories and narrative role-playing games*. *Homo Ludens* 1/(4) 2012, p. 12.



- III. 1. A house which invokes to historic forms in a very incapable way, Opole, photo by author, 2016
- III. 2. Oversized commercial and service buildings encircling residential housing and historic buildings in the City Centre of London, photo by author, 2015
- III. 3. Reduction or elimination of the basic functions typical for multifamily residential developments in Barcelona (Travessera de Dalt), which results in, i.a., location of playgrounds between the main vehicle traffic corridors, photo by author, 2016
- III. 4. The houses in the forms more than eclectic adapted for service functions, Opole, Pużaka Street, photo by author., 2016
- III. 5. Fencing of the atrial house in Bierkowice, near Opole (arch. R. Konieczny), photo by author, 2014
- III. 6. The German Pavilion built by Mies van der Rohe for the International Exhibition in Barcelona in 1928 (reconstruction), photo by author, 2016

functions (ill. 3). Despite the requirements set out in the spatial development plans, the form of modern buildings does not always create harmony in the area of a street, urban block, or district. This picture may deviate substantially from the forms of frontage of streets in the cities, which were built until the beginning of the 20th century and which developed over the centuries.

Back room means tangible and intangible objects – props in the theatre which are used during a performance; they conceal or accentuate specific elements or space of an object. According to Goffman, “*a back room or wardrobe are these places where one knowingly belies the impressions created by a performance. They naturally perform numerous functions significant for such places. Here one can laboriously fabricate these parts of a performance which allow him/her to express something apart from oneself and create delusion and appearances. Here one arranges the props and fragments of personal façade so as to turn stage behaviour and roles into a harmonious whole.*”⁶ In his book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean McCannell directly refers to the Goffman’s “back room” as the place in space: “*Since important secrets of a performance are revealed at the backstage and since the performers leave their roles there, it is obvious that this place is not open to the audience and the existence of such places is even kept in secret*”⁷. In the house such back rooms are spaces not open to the audience: a bedroom, bathroom, sauna, technical rooms.

The audience obviously includes the house’s observers. On the stage, i.e. the space of a building, an individual (spectator) might establish relations with other individuals. The house dwellers are both actors and spectators. The way the audience is arranged depends on the architect, who plays the role of director and screenwriter and who imposes a narrative of moving within a specific space of a building. He also decides on visual connection and communication with the outside world. The audience of public buildings, which are the seats of social or religious institutions that through their functions refer to the notion of a house – “the house of God”, “the house of a book” or back then “the house of a party”, are the users who use services offered there. The way of moving in such buildings results from specific rules, customs and rites as well. Nonetheless, the areas of insight and assessment of such a building may differ, which may have an impact on the feeling of intimacy of its residents. In the case of excessive interest from the observers (audience), the access to its interior may be limited in time and space.

When describing “**trust in a role**”, Goffman divides observers into those who distance themselves from it and those who are attached to it. He claims that when playing a specific role, an individual expects a reaction from them which will conform with his intent. In the architecture, such an intended or unintended reaction might be an interest, or a feeling of admiration, awe or indifference. Transformations in the area of architectural fabric might cause extreme reactions of opposition and protest, e.g. in the area of reconstruction of cultural monuments. “Trust in a role” (function) might be undermined during reconstruction of the ruins of historic buildings or construction of new houses in historicized forms (ill. 4) The selectivity of particular patterns might thus lead to “building or feigning traditions which actually do not exist, so attributing past genealogy to rather contemporary buildings, ideas or patterns”⁸.

⁶ M. Furman, *The intersubjective experiences...*, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

⁷ D. McCannell, *The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Wyd. Muza, Warsaw 2002, p. 207.

⁸ P. Sztompka, *Sociology: Analysis of Society*. Wydawnictwo Zak, Cracow 2012, p. 309.

Goffman's "**dramatization of activities**" is often related to a message that aims to demonstrate facts in favour of an individual. In the architecture, it may be compared to the selection of a palette of particular means of expression that provide a form with the desired character and content. For example, the way of sculpting or the use of the vertical or horizontal elements of a geometric body will influence the dynamics of the form. The form of a message might be dependent upon the context of the surroundings (a stand-alone building, along a frontage of specific height, greenery, etc.). The perception of an existing building might be significantly affected by the change of the surroundings. Drawing attention to aristocratism, Goffman indicates the possibilities to show the character of an individual/building in this sphere, indeed. In the architecture, particular forms of buildings evoke specific connotations which may be ascribed to specific users and functions in every era. For example, the Palladian forms were used in buildings of higher rank, as opposed to e.g. Dutch architecture whose "*houses are simple, they are all exactly the same, however, their proportions are so elaborately defined, artfully grouped and beautifully finished (...), so they are enchanting, fabulously harmonised, idyllic (...)*"⁹.

The metaphor of "**idealisation**", i.e. the modelling and modification of individual's performance so that it meets society's expectations is the architecture which fits into an established, dominating, aesthetic trend. In the era of globalisation idealisation might be based on the selection of modern forms of buildings reinforced by stereotypes, including those promoted by the media. Their existence in confrontation with local, regional or national ethnic forms might cause two phenomena: their utterance in opposition to unified forms or following new trends. The clash of cultural changes is a natural and inevitable process which accompanies the change of social life conditions or access to new materials and technologies¹⁰.

When describing "**maintenance of expressive control**", Goffman attends to the possibility of disturbances appearing in the communication of meanings in the event of misunderstanding of a sender's signal or message. For a house owner who has lived in a flat before, the perception of a house, its form and function might be distorted. The patterns of functional programmes it has absorbed might convey messages that deviate involuntarily from those intended. It is not only the individual who manipulates communicated impressions, but also the communicated impressions might manipulate the individual. The form of a building might convey unintended content that might have not had a deeper meaning for a sender. The classical geometric body of a building which refers to historic forms, but conceals modern interior décor might signify a lack of awareness and "expression control" of a future owner at the stage of the building construction.

Goffman defines situations in which individuals' simulations mislead the audience as "**false presentation**". Such conduct might cause discrepancies between reality and the appearances that are thus kept up. The way in which a building and its surroundings are presented might be an element of the play of delusions and appearances. Such contradictions in the architecture are visible, e.g. in the presentations of our Polish television drama series. A house is usually presented as a space devoid of everyday household items, sterilely clean, without any memorabilia that show the continuity of generations or the

⁹ Sz. Rutkowski, *The human settlements*, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze w Warszawie, Warsaw – Cracow 1932, p. 86.

¹⁰ P. Sztompka, *Sociology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 295.

elements that define identity of its dwellers – be it their preferences, nationality, gender or religion. The dwellings of nice people are usually full of bric-a-brac that is easy on the eye and with dominating pastel colours. The dwellings of evil characters as well as the young and the new rich have a cold, ascetic, monochromatic décor. On the other hand, parochial tawdriness or luxury is too overdrawn as compared to reality. The serial apartments are disproportionately larger, better and tastefully decorated than the average dwelling of the statistical Pole¹¹. The image of an architect as a movie character is distorted too. The attribute of the architect, the main character in the series “Rodzinka PL” is only the poster of the Diocletian’s Palace in Split, which hangs in his home studio. In the Polish realities it symbolises the fall of the profession.

“**Mystification**” is presented by Goffman as a way to keep the audience in this state by limiting contact and keeping social distance which causes anxiety among the audience. In the architecture such situation may apply to buildings with forbidden access or with limited view for bystanders. This may cause curiosity and mystery among the observers. A house as a private, inaccessible space, which, as the English saying goes “*my home is my castle*”) might protect its owners from undesirable glances. Some houses, although known to the wider public from presentations in the media, are actually inaccessible. Paradoxically, some of them, designed to be fully open to the surroundings, might be fenced with a high barbed wire wall (ill. 5).

For Goffman, “**reality and play**” are visible in two models of conduct: real and false performance. In architecture, it involves transformations undergoing in the space of a building and at the adjacent point with its surroundings. The elements of illusion, a form of a play with the audience, date back to antiquity. The blurring of borders between “reality and play” was clearly visible in Baroque art, in which opera embodied the synthesis of arts, combining music, literature and theatre in addition to the visual arts. Later, in Richard Wagner’s operas, since, i.a., artificial clouds and light were used in different ways, the borders between the stage, orchestra and spectators and audience were blurred. Currently, the most visible are plays in the external layer of buildings, which often blur the borders between materiality of a building and its surroundings. The changes of presently dynamic elevations made with the use of different curtain walls, whose compartments of different level of transparency, cleverly slideable, foldable or retractable, are those which change the perception of whole elevations. Contemporarily, this play grows in popularity with the use of new building façade materials, including advanced multimedia. Undoubtedly, water has been always used to achieve specific effects of play in space. The interiors of contemporary, modern residential buildings which are fully open to the surroundings may give the impression of staying in an aquarium (il. 6). At the beginning of the 20th century, the first interiors that combined space, planes and structure appeared. With the planes of the walls oriented towards space, these buildings have blended to the surrounding landscape¹².

¹¹ B. Łaciak, *The portrayal of a Polish house in television drama series*, [in:] Woroniecka G. (ed.), *What does living mean? The anthropological sketches (series: Customs, law and politics. Everyday life)*. Wydawnictwo Trio, Cracow 2007, p. 173–196.

¹² S. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*. PWN, Warsaw 1968, p. 583–584.

These solutions allow the observer to be introduced to different levels of reality, blurring the materiality of architecture. After 1950, such solutions spawned, i.a., the idea of environmental art¹³.

3. SUMMARY

A cultural tradition constitutes a model for developing the broadly understood space of a house built on the basis of continuous experiences of human activity passed on from generation to generation. The form, function, design and technology for constructing buildings, as well as, inextricably connected with them, decoration and furnishing of such buildings, are subject to modifications in future generations, based on past experiences. A house with its adjacent surroundings, as the space which is the closest to a man, is a kind of a litmus paper that informs the observer of its owners. In a wider context, it portrays whole communities. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective reflects the proverb "fine feathers make fine birds" under which the impressions resulting from our observations may become fixed. In the era of rapid globalisation, the primacy of mind marginalising the cultural continuity, the aesthetic unification poses a real threat to maintaining the individualism of societies, which is expressed, i.a, by the way of shaping the closest surroundings, including the house.

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