

BEATA JUCHNIEWICZ*

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY.
TWO NATURES OF ARCHITECTURE BASED
ON THE MVRDV STUDIO REALISATIONS
OF THE GLASS FARM PROJECT IN SCHIJNDEL

ROZWAŻNA I ROMANTYCZNA.
DWIE NATURY ARCHITEKTURY
NA PODSTAWIE REALIZACJI PRACOWNI
MVRDV PROJEKTU SZKLANEJ FARMY W SCHIJNDEL

Abstract

The article discusses the problem of searching for definitions of modern architecture. An analysis of compositional, artistic and meaning values of the Glass Farm building was carried out in the context of the Vitruvian triad. Then the conclusions were referred to the wider field, to selected aspects, and to the entire body of modern architectural practices. As a result, an attempt to answer the question about the meaning of these fundamental definitions today was made in connection with the expansion of new technologies. An important element of this analysis also comprises taking into account emotional issues, the current needs and expectations of architects and recipients. Certain important theses about the leading meaning of modern architecture imagery were included in these conclusions.

Keywords: image, facade, architecture, aesthetics

Streszczenie

W tekście podjęto problematykę poszukiwania definicji współczesnej architektury. Przeprowadzono analizę wartości kompozycyjnych, plastycznych i znaczeniowych budynku Szklanej Farmy w kontekście założeń witruwiańskiej triady. Następnie odniesiono wnioski na szersze pole, do wybranych aspektów, całokształtu współczesnych praktyk architektonicznych. W efekcie podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o znaczenie tych fundamentalnych definicji dzisiaj, w związku z ekspansją nowych technologii. Ważnym elementem tej analizy jest również uwzględnienie kwestii emocjonalnych, aktualnych potrzeb oraz oczekiwań twórców i odbiorców. Wśród wniosków znalazły się ważne tezy o wiodącym znaczeniu obrazowości współczesnej architektury.

Słowa kluczowe: obraz, elewacja, architektura, estetyka

* Ph.D. Arch. Beata Juchniewicz, Department of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Science and Technology, beata.juchniewicz@pwr.edu.pl.

(...) *To see yourself in this complicated space is like an answer to the question: who am I and where am I? This is the most important truth and at the same time a trap of architecture...*

B. Juchniewicz

The eternal dualism in art is a reflection of the dualism of human nature. The coexistence of reason/prudence and emotions/intuition has always caused tension, but at the same time it is creative. Every epoch, balancing between these qualities, searches for its own definition of architecture¹. It emerges in the process of reinterpreting the Vitruvian triad: *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* – that is, architecture must be solid, useful, beautiful, i.e. durability, purpose and beauty. Although a deep sense of these concepts remains unchanged, it acquires new meanings and shades. Architecture, in fact, combining *the talent of the art of shaping space* and being a play on *solids in the light*, still remains a *stay in things* for a human being. The goal of the *way to architecture* remains the same.

The Glass Farm in Schijndel is an interesting example of modern architecture. The reflection on how its authors, in the context of dualism between rationalism and intuition, interpreted the Vitruvian triad (through artistic means, based on new technologies, by historical context and the play on meanings), can become a voice in the discussion about a modern face of architecture. A thoughtful and romantic face at the same time. Combining sense and sensibility.

1. Glass Farm – the image of architecture

The author of the Glass Farm project in a small Dutch town of Schijndel is the MVRDV Urban Design Practice². The object was built in 2013 in the central square between the town hall and the church. The place was empty as a result of bombing during World War II. The building houses offices, shops, a medical centre and restaurants. The architects' assumption was to design architecture which would blend in with the historical centre. The authors, who are famous for unconventional ideas, designed a glass building covered with a large-format photo depicting a typical Dutch farmhouse. The combination of modern materials and technologies with a historical image was to become a kind of mediation between history and

¹ According to P. Trzeciak, the turning point in the history of architecture was the industrial revolution, which divided the society into supporters and opponents of changes. From that moment he distinguished in architecture two, sometimes intermingling trends, i.e. rationalism and emotionalism. The first one is based on technical progress, whereas the other is inspired by opposition to the reality shaped by the factory and the city. The prospect of studying architecture that Trzeciak set is based on history and psychology. This view makes it possible to prove the thesis about the continuous penetration of emotional and rational elements in architecture as a result of reactions to changes related to the industrial revolution earlier and now to the revolution of the computer era.

P. Trzeciak, *Historia, psychika, architektura*, PIW, Warsaw 1988, p. 19 and subsequent pages.

² See Fig. 1, which is a set of pictures taken by the author of the text. The object described in the article was presented in different shots. Detailed information is available on the website of the design office: www.mvrdv.nl/en/projects/glass-farm.

modernity. An important feature of the applied print is its enlarged scale. As a result, an adult recipient remains a proportionally small child in relation to the size determined by the image on the building. In this way, the building also seems to be something like a house mock-up in the scale of approximately 1:1.6. The simple shape of the building's body with a gable roof is compact, thanks to which large surfaces of photographs can exhibit many details and consequently create the illusive reception of the whole object. The window and door openings in the photograph are independent of the real ones that are distinguished by 'cut-outs' in the photograph. Thanks to this, there are spaces which make it possible to illuminate rooms. Also, in the interior a recipient remains in the illusion of staying, for example, under a thatched roof because the photograph viewed from the inside and against the light create the same kind of illusion as in the reception from the outside.

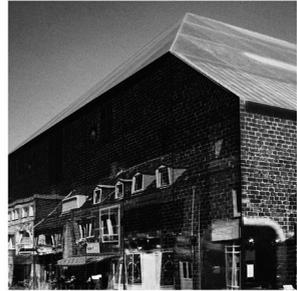
Now, let us look at this object in the context of the Vitruvian triad, i.e. *durability, purpose and beauty*.

1.1. Durability. The archetypal shape and the meaning of shelter

The concept of durability has many meanings. For Vitruvius, the most important of them was the aspect of material endurance and immutability of the architectural object in the perspective of time. If we refer to history, we will find justification for such reasoning. Questions about the beginnings of architecture and at the same time its linguistic meanings made Quatremère de Quincy distinguish three types of original architecture, namely a cave, tent and hut³. All of them are firmly rooted in the language and associated with thinking about architecture as a *shelter*, although undoubtedly each of them gives a slightly different shape to the concept of durability.

The farm in Schijndel, which is visually probably closest to the type of a hut, 'talks' about durability in an interesting way. Its archetypal shape and images which were applied on the facade are a continuation of the historically established forms of architecture of the place where it was constructed. The ambiguity of this image is quickly exposed by the observer who discovers that to a large extent it is just an illusion of the form of the past time. The means of the artistic expression force the observers to find themselves in the reality and to answer fundamental questions about spatial relations and their meanings. Architecture, which feeds the observer with illusions, poses fundamental questions to him about what durability means nowadays. Durability of forms and their meanings. It also makes you think about the passage of time. The Farm facades reflect the surroundings, images are multiplied and distorted. This mirror of the image of both past and present architecture is a voice in the discussion about what durability is in modern architecture. The shelter in a purely physical and material aspect is exposed to the test in confrontation with the illusory permanence of the image. The sense of security arises also on the mental level when the user recognizes and accepts forms bearing familiar contents. However, here too, dualism appears because it is necessary to take into account the man's psychological need for new things and changes which naturally form a carrier of development. Also, in terms

³ G. Świtek, *Gry sztuki z architektury*, Publishing House: Wyd. Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013, p. 152.



III. 1. Building of Glass Farm, from the outside and inside. Photos by author

of image, the necessity to transform and adapt forms to contemporary needs is inevitable. The image of the Farm has a very distinct aspect of romantic nostalgia. It is emphasised by the scaled volume and photographs on its surface. It even more strongly reverts the observer to past times when s/he was a child and saw reality in different proportions. For her/him, space is enlarged in an almost literary way.

This overall ambiguous and time-varying image of the object contributes to the reception of this architecture more as a kind of event and a visual game with the viewer. All sensory experiences and associations are firmly embedded in a broad context of time. The images of the past time which overlap with the movable present contexts stimulate imagination and depending on the time of day and lighting create the next entr'actes of this performance, full of nostalgia, but also with modern references to the concept of shelter, which is the Glass Farm on the square in Schijndel.

1.2. Purpose/serviceableness – a functional costume

The Vitruvian purposefulness and serviceableness are complemented by other synonymous words, i.e. usefulness and helpfulness. They are all connected with the functionality of the facilities, that is, how well they respond to human needs. Here we usually think in the category of physical and material parameters. The history of architecture takes place between two extremes. One is to follow functionality as a rationally fundamental guideline for constructing a form. This priority can contribute to the emergence of architecture ... that is reluctantly *inhabited*. This happens, for example, when the monotony of optimally functional but repetitive elements creates a composition which is devoid of differentiation. And on the contrary, when an architect, who is absorbed in the artistic game with a form, devotes himself/herself to the visual side so much that s/he forgets about utility values and creates a work more to watch than to *live* in it, in a broad sense of this word.

The Farm in Schijndel is mainly a service facility. The uncomplicated body, which was rationally divided and organised inside, was easily filled with particular functions. What distinguishes the Farm is the mere envelope which is visible from the outside and in the interior. It creates a special atmosphere of the object and gives it a theatrical feature. It is difficult to free yourself from the feeling of uncommonness and the game also inside, where the wall and the roof are more a picture than a real partition. The observer has a feeling that s/he is in a theatrical scenography. But, perhaps this is what s/he expects – the Glass Farm is eagerly visited by both residents and tourists. It has become an important, recognizable and interest-generating object in a visible way. This means that its authors achieved a good balance between playing with the form and the utility of this form in an interesting way. The picture which was applied on the facade of the Farm, by filling the entire surface of the walls and the roof, loses its frames which would make it possible to assign it to any part of the building. It is a whole new layer which became a stage costume for this building.

1.3. Beauty – order through a quotation

Historically established rules in creating forms – *orders* – were supposed to be one of the elements which contributed to the formation of a harmonious composition, and therefore simply beauty in architecture. It can be said that *orders* also created a spatial order.

Nowadays, designing in increasingly tighter and denser architecture results in the fact that each new object has a smaller chance to appear individually. It is often seen as a new element of an already existing composition. In this way, the context influences its shape. Designing becomes more and more the art of relationships, not only within the boundaries of the designed object, but also with the surroundings. Thus, it is possible to create in opposition to, in contrast or with continuation of the existing forms, textures and materials. And every time creating new, surrounding-related rules.

The authors of the Farm paradoxically combined extremely different compositions and meanings in one object. Referring to images taken from tradition, they built a building which fits its historical surroundings with its scale and shape. At the same time, being an example of modern architecture made of steel and glass, the Farm remained in some way faithful to the old orders despite the fact that the way of creating images, even for technological reasons, belongs to different aesthetics than these images. Therefore, this is a rare example of action,

in which the architect transposes a ready image of past architecture without dividing the composition into its components. Usually these elements are subject to various aesthetic transformations to finally create a composition of a new work and the observer perceives them as links to the forms characteristic of architecture of a given place, time or function. Here, the 'copy and paste' action for the whole image of the object was applied. The Glass Farm has become an architectural quotation of old orders in the modern space of the square whose walls are after all historical objects. They determine the scale of this space. The famous, accepted and historically familiarised form of the hut has fulfilled the role of visual mediation as well as communication between the old and the new. The main aesthetic treatment which was realised with the use of images became a play with contexts.

2. Imagery of the modern façade – a redefinition of traditional architectural concepts

Detailed considerations and analyses regarding the image of the Glass Farm showed the leading importance of images in shaping the forms of architecture. In the further part of the discussion, we will try to consider how the analysed example blends in with wider practices of modern architecture.

2.1. Playing with durability – different meanings of the concept of shelter

'By falling into nostalgia, we reconstruct the past in the future.'⁴ The Glass Farm is an example of how, without breaking with historical patterns, we can create purely modern architecture.

Referring to traditional forms as a continuation of the historical image of a shelter is a fairly common procedure which is used in projects. It can be interpreted as an expression of nostalgia for the past, but the application of new materials and technologies as well as often dynamic foundation of the body, detaching it from the foundation, show the need to open up to changes. The walls and the roof do not have traditional divisions and here new orders are dictated by technology and geometry. One of the first, more well-known examples of this kind of thinking about architecture was the house of Casa Rudin by Herzog & de Meuron, which was realized in the years 1996–97. The idea contained in a simple and compact, monolithic body, which is raised and placed on the plate above the surface of the ground, outlined the directions of searching for the next designers. This reinterpretation of historical forms found many followers.

Another trend, which differently interprets the concept of shelter, is expressed in architectural realizations looking for mobile architecture in which living becomes a concept only temporarily connected with a place⁵. Since architecture by assumption is supposed to be temporary, often even portable, it becomes variable in shapes and reacts to the dynamics of the surrounding conditions (mobile walls of buildings). The Glass Farm hence becomes part of the discourse of modern

⁴ In this way E. Rewers describes the phenomenon of nostalgia for the past of cities, when we try to reconstruct already non-existent spatial patterns on the modern territory., E. Rewers *Po-wolna przestrzeń*, [in:] *Czas przestrzeni*, K. Wilkoszewska red., Universitas, Kraków 2008, p. 97.

⁵ B. Juchniewicz, *Architektura i czas. Poetyka mobilności*, Czasopismo Techniczne z. 15-A, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2010, p. 140–44.

architecture about shelter, and therefore it also redefines the concept of durability. The concept which acquires new meanings and contexts, also through the relationships with the changeable definition of inhabiting. The inhabiting, which no longer excludes the simultaneous satisfaction of the need for wandering, both real and imaginary, which is going to be dealt with in the next section.

2.2. Playing with the form – functionalism based on the mobility of forms, images and processes

Mobility (as a value) introduces new meanings for the key architectural concepts, i.e. habitation and place. Consequently, we can observe a variety of plays with the form as a result of a new understanding of the meaning of functionalism. Since that which is subject to variation over time is to be functional by changing the shape literally or even visually and thanks to it adapts well to the changing needs of residents, architects reach for materials that will allow them to create aesthetics corresponding to such demands. What is meant here is the whole range of realizations, which are characterized by the variability of the external facade image; starting from motionless planes on which images change (reflected or displayed) to moving facades that change the texture, colour and divisions of compositions within their boundaries. In this way, the need to create movement and changes in architecture manifests itself.

Glass, due to its constantly discovered new possibilities of shaping, also in terms of the artistic expression, is a material which is used very often today. Large surfaces of ‘glass houses’, on the scale of single-family and multi-family housing, but first of all public utility buildings, realise the eternal romantic need for spaciousness and light, opening distant views and building the impression of illusion. Glazing of roofs over passageways or large surfaces of walls, which become a link rather than a barrier between the interior and exterior, open long-range perspectives.

Glass makes it possible to open views, but also in the form of a mirror or a printed image it opens the space in a metaphorical sense. This façade property was discussed in detail when analysing the Glass Farm. Real images are mixed with those created by mirrors or artificial representations. These new topographies occupy territories of real places and it is difficult to separate them unambiguously. That which for the architect in the project “rationally” is called a glass wall, in the reality of the cityscape becomes a plane that accepts external images. A plane that fills up with a narrative about the city. This is the substrate on which multiplied images are created that make up new worlds for the city and its residents. The recipient is drawn into a kind of an architectural trap, which makes her/him constantly revise the known relationships, i.e. close – far, front – back, low – high. The need for illusion in space is also satisfied by electronic screens which are used on the facades, variable lighting as well as treating the wall as a mobile veil. This mobile veil, which is covered with images similar to tattoos, becomes the skin of the building, which reacts with changes to the time of the day or weather conditions. And this interpretation of utility creates new orders in architecture.

2.3. New orders – playing with contexts

The Glass Farm turned out to be a hut, a shop, a cafe, and a yoga room. All these and other functions were placed under the thatched glass...

The possibility of printing and covering glass not only with colour stains, but also with any images is often used by architects. The visual and meaning effects of such treatments strongly influence the shaping of the modern image of architecture. Placing images on the walls creates a new type of spaciousness⁶.

In this way, architecture inevitably enters the territory of the visual arts. The boundaries between the concept of the wall and the image, and consequently between the building and the sculpture, are becoming more and more blurred. The moment in which modernism excluded an ornament for the good of functional architecture, for a certain time set architecture on the side of searching for beauty in pure geometry. Geometry, which in the society of 'factory and city' often led to the monotonous unification and repeatability of forms. Modern monotony is the monotony of multiplied images surrounding us from everywhere. From the surface of the fabric, clothes, furniture, indoor and outdoor walls up to screens with moving images. These images do not have frames, they become a kind of tattoo or costume and fill surfaces, introducing into the space a kind of game with the observer. In this way, architecture becomes a kind of scenography. The former guidelines in the form of certain patterns and orders were supposed to build harmony in space, ensure compositional order and readability in the relations of the surroundings. Nowadays, architecture responds rather to the need to evoke exciting experiences and have fun. It creates spaces of surprising relationships and funny contexts. It is the architecture of playing and sometimes even playing with architecture.

3. Summary. The art of looking/thinking and building. In search of the definition of modern architecture

Analysing the above considerations, it can be said that the image of architecture is closely related to the way of thinking (its author) and looking (recipient). Both of these processes interpenetrate each other. Architecture, being both the aesthetic and functional space, interprets current aspirations and needs of societies. The Vitruvian triad comprises three fundamental concepts which define this space. A proper understanding, also through the works of architecture, of modern approaches to these concepts provides knowledge of architecture and of the society. The meeting with the Glass Farm became the starting point for reflection on the search for the definition of modern architecture.

At this point, it would be worth mentioning significant changes that have led to the present image of architecture. In the first half of the 20th century, many philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger or Bergson, were fascinated by the concept of time. However, at the turn of the 21st century, there was a clear shift in interests of the entire community of philosophers, scientists and artists towards space.

We even talk about a *spatial turn* which is manifested by a great interest of the humanities and social sciences in the category of space (works by Lefebvre, Foucault, Soja and others). Space has become a broad concept which is discussed in many fields of scientific

⁶ B. Juchniewicz, *Ornament i obraz w przestrzeni architektury. Kontynuacje i innowacje*, Czasopismo Techniczne z. 5-A, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2012, pp. 246–49.

and artistic reflection⁷. This phrase introduced new ideas to the territories of discussions about architecture and, importantly for the present considerations, it is a testimony to the approximation of visual arts and architecture. A series of artistic practices become architecture because their authors often move on a border between arts, which is often difficult to specify.

Hence we can just certainly conclude that architecture has become art which interprets the most important metaphors of modernity, although with the cooperation of related arts, in particular visual arts.

Similar conclusions were formulated by Porębski who concluded that architecture 'constitutes an appropriate metaphorical and metaphorizing façade of modern man and his world'⁸. Since this statement was made (the 1980s), the process has speeded up and architecture has entered areas that are difficult to define, and it also went beyond reality. In this way architects, being inspired by different actions not only from the visual arts but also by technology and scientific discoveries, make an art of architecture in which the most important aesthetic problems of our times are concentrated and combined.

Thanks to this fact, architecture, apart from the art of construction, is the image which conveys a significant message, i.e. it seems that even more explicitly than in the past⁹. Images which are placed on the facades go out of their frames and become new quality surfaces of entire buildings. They enter the material and meaningful reality of the present by applying elements existing earlier – quotations which acquire new meanings and build new contexts. In this way, *détournement* (takeover) of original contents for a new visual reality is manifested¹⁰. The reality which enlarges the space of architecture in the meaning which is described by Manovich¹¹.

As a result of this process, the imagery of modern architecture becomes a leading motif in the reception of the whole city space and the way it is experienced. Perhaps the fact that architecture creates space through images is more important than the way it builds and physically organises this space.

This situation is coherent with other aspects of man's spatial functioning. Each day we are getting more and more involved in the virtual reality of computers, smartphones and GPS. The space which is produced by these devices dominates over the real one in many aspects. In this space we look for help to be oriented in the real space, including architecture. Perhaps, the city being the place of playing with images is not understandable enough anymore just because it responds to the need for experiencing a real wander and an imaginary one which

⁷ This fact has been mentioned by many authors, for example G. Świtek, *Gry sztuki z architekturą, op.cit.*, p. 684 and K. Wilkoszewska, [in:] *Czas Przestrzeni*, K. Wilkoszewska (red.), Universitas, Kraków 2008, p. 9.

⁸ M. Porębski, *Ikonosfera*, Warsaw 1972, p. 168, [quoted from:] P. Trzeciak, *Historia, psychika, architektura*, PIW, Warszawa 1988, p. 18.

⁹ Architecture as an art of image was extensively discussed by G. Świtek G., *Gry sztuki z architekturą, op.cit.*, pp. 160–171.

¹⁰ See: definition by Adamczak M., *Słownik* [in:] *Miasto w sztuce – sztuka miasta*, Rewers E. (red.), Universitas, Kraków 2010, p. 664.

¹¹ Lev Manovich, *Poetyka powiększonej przestrzeni*, [in:] *Miasto w sztuce – sztuka miasta, op.cit.*, pp. 596–627.

takes place in the world of images. And this situation is the result and at the same time the reason for redefining the concepts of living and shelter.

This mental image of the city intermingles with the real one which is becoming more and more complex, still extended by new contexts and meanings. Its changeable images undergo continuous transfiguration until they become a kind of heterotopy¹².

All these considerations show that there are no permanent or unambiguous definitions of architecture. One of the key reasons for its changeability are also emotional factors of the very creative process. The dualism of human nature causes constant balancing between rationalism and intuition. This eternal dualism gives rise to creative tension. The struggles which are connected with it make us ask the same questions in order to define ourselves and the surrounding space from scratch.

Vitruvius listed fundamental notions which should be treated as questions. The architect ought to keep asking himself these questions over and over again to achieve new and sometimes surprising answers. Architecture is the art of spatial relations, visual effects and man who emerges from its image. In this sense, architecture is still the art of shelter as well as the art of searching for safe and adequate spaces for ideas of a given time.

At the same time, architecture is the art of constructing and demolishing. We build frames and designate borders in order to cross them in a moment – according to the principle of life, which consists in movement and development through changes. Rational and sensible architecture sets safe barriers-borders to protect the process of life and peaceful functioning within its frames. However, just a moment later it is already emotional, risky, intuitively looking for changes and possibilities of going beyond the safe areas it designated itself to new and unknown territories. If it had not been for this dualism, this creative contradiction, the image of architecture would be detached from the unchanging human nature after all – thoughtful and romantic at the same time as it combines sense and sensibility.

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¹² See the definition of heterotopy – *it is an effectively rendered and played utopia, a mirror image of all the places known to us, found in the new image*, M. Foucault, *Inne przestrzenie*, translated by A. Rejniak-Majewska, “Teksty Drugie” 2005, No 6, p. 124.

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