

Visual Narratives of the City: On Architectural Drawing and Sketching

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Abstract

This article examines the image of the city as captured in architectural drawings and sketches, treated as tools for interpreting urban space. The author outlines the role of drawing in the history of art and architecture, highlighting its significance as the fundamental language for recording design ideas and as a method for understanding spatial reality. Particular attention is devoted to an analysis of the drawings of three Polish architects: Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, Krzysztof Ludwin, and Sławomir Gzell. Their sketches reveal various ways of perceiving and interpreting the city – from reflective contemplation of architectural structure, through a narrative and emotional depiction of urban space, to a synthetic analysis of urban composition. The analysis indicates that the architectural sketch serves cognitive, analytical, and interpretive functions, enabling the capture of both the material characteristics of urban space and its atmosphere and *genius loci*.

Keywords: drawing, sketch, cityscape, the art of observation, urban sketching

1. Introduction

Drawing: the fundamental language of art. And of the art of observing. It is the most universal language in the world – independent of nationality and culture. It is the fastest and most personal way to capture ideas, emotions, impressions, inspirations, or sudden moments of enchantment. It is direct and irreplaceable in giving form to thoughts across all areas of the visual arts. It is an indispensable element in the conceptual phase: as an idea takes shape, from large-scale urban structures down to the concept of a building, a sculpture, or an installation. Most importantly, drawing is also a vital tool for developing sensitivity, and the act of drawing is a process that develops over many years and cannot be replaced by any technology or device. For, as Edgar Degas observes, drawing is not merely a representation of form, but above all a way of perceiving it [Valery, 1974: 116].

As a means of human expression, it originated in the secret caves of pre-historic times. The most outstanding examples of this unique art form can be seen in the Lascaux caves in the Montignac region of France and in the Altamira caves near Santander in northern Spain.

The story of the drawing is one of the main themes of the recently concluded major exhibition “Fascination Paper: Rembrandt to Kiefer” at the Albertina in Vienna¹. Here, drawing is not presented merely as a distinct genre, but as the core of all art on paper. From Rembrandt’s swift strokes, through graphic interpretations of Titian’s drawings in woodcuts, to Anselm Kiefer’s contemporary paper installations, where the essence of drawing is revealed through the combination of techniques and experiments with texture. The exhibition demonstrates how the concept of drawing extends from the gesture of the hand to large-scale spatial forms. The curators juxtapose works from various eras – from the fifteenth century to the present – to illustrate the continuity of drawing as a mode of thought. Spectators can observe how contemporary experiments are rooted in historical technical practices.

2. Drawing architecture

A special form of this artistic expression is architectural drawing, which attained the status of an autonomous work of art only in the late 20th century. Andrzej Białkiewicz provides a detailed account of the history of architectural drawing, encompassing both the architect’s drawings and drawings depicting architecture [Białkiewicz, 2006]. He mentions Vitruvius, who, having expanded upon the knowledge of the Greek philosophers, was the first to address the topic of freehand drawing as applied in the designer’s work. Already in the first book of *De architectura libri decem*, we read that the architect “must know how to draw so that, with the aid of sketches, he may easily create an image of the intended work” [Vitruvius, 1956].

In the Middle Ages, the era of great cathedrals, drawing underwent intensive development, while the architect’s status rose in the social hierarchy thanks to technical knowledge inaccessible to the general public. The famous sketchbook of the Picardian master and builder Villard de Honnecourt, which contained precise instructions for constructing specific structures along with explanatory drawings, remains to this day a source of knowledge in architecture, engineering, and the natural sciences [Jarzewicz, 2001].

The Renaissance brought about a further increase in the role and significance of *disegno* – drawing based on studies from nature. This term was coined in the early fifteenth century by Cennino Cennini – an Italian painter and art theorist – who referred to drawing as the foundation of art [Cennini, 1955]. The study of drawing, which was considered the source and essence of all the arts, henceforth

¹ <https://www.albertina.at/en/press/en-exhibitions/fascination-paper/> [accessed: 29.04.2026].

became the cornerstone of artistic education. Although Giotto's innovative frescoes began to break with the existing conventions of Italian painting and perspective, it was not until Masaccio's fresco "The Holy Trinity" (1425) in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella that the first painting with a geometrically drawn convergent perspective was created. In the sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari coined the term "drawing arts," uniting the great triad of painting, sculpture, and architecture, distinguishing them from craftsmanship and science as artistic professions [Vasari, 1980]. It is also difficult not to mention the significant place drawing occupies in the art treatises of Leone Battista Alberti, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Leonardo da Vinci, as well as in the writings of Giorgio Vasari [Ważbiński, 2000]. From the sixteenth century onward, the Renaissance approach to drawing as a means of recording thought became the foundation of artistic activity. Drawing played an important role in analyzing and identifying both theoretical and practical aspects of a given problem, while also serving as the basis for formulating design ideas. Drawing also began to be perceived as an independent creative act – an active and creative element present in every field of art, including architecture.

Research topics related to architectural drawing have been the subject of analysis by many authors, including Marian Fikus [Fikus, 1999], Jan Bruzda [Bruzda, 1993], and Piotr Patoczka – a draftsman and champion of, among other things, "vanishing" regional culture and architecture [Patoczka, 1996]. The subject of architectural drawing is also addressed by Maria Misiągiewicz [Misiągiewicz, 2003] in her comprehensive monograph *O prezentacji idei architektonicznej*. There she mentions "drawn architecture," which results from two types of creative work: "reproductive" drawings subordinate to real buildings, and design drawings created independently of the real world but intended to "entering that world". Leszek Maluga also presents a broad analysis of this issue in his book *Autonomiczne rysunki architektoniczne*. There, he explains, among other things, the scope of the term "architectural drawing," defining it as three concentric sets of increasing breadth: architectural design drawings, an architect's drawings, and drawings on architectural themes [Maluga 2006: 22]. It is also difficult not to mention the comprehensive publication *Rysunek architektoniczny w praktyce czyli jak patrzeć ze zrozumieniem* by distinguished draftsmen and painters associated with the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology. The issues presented there are based, among other things, on the psychology and physiology of vision, as well as, above all, on the authors' experience and their drawing and teaching practice [Balcerzak et al., 2019]. In turn, *O rysowaniu architektury* by Janusz Sepioł is a publication devoted to the role of drawing in the process of architectural creation and in the architect's design thinking. The author argues that drawing is a fundamental method of understanding the subject and that its primary function is to visualize our understanding of the reality surrounding us [Sepioł, 2025]. A somewhat separate issue is the study of freehand drawing itself [Orzechowski, 2015] or the pedagogy of drawing in architecture departments, as discussed by the previously mentioned Piotr Patoczka [Patoczka, 2016] and Andrzej Białkiewicz [Białkiewicz, 2019], as well as Maria J. Żychowska [Żychowska, 2019], Grzegorz Schnotale [Schnotale, 2022], and others.

Today, drawing is one of the most popular means of communication. It is used in various fields of contemporary visual arts, ranging from architecture, painting, sculpture, design, and set design to graffiti, musical works [Nadolny, Stuchocka, Buczkowska, 2023], multimedia, and film (as storyboards). Now, drawings by prominent architects are exhibited at renowned institutions such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Albertina and Mumok in Vienna, and the MAXXI in Rome. The expressive conceptual sketches of artists such as Aldo Rossi, Zaha Hadid, Renzo Piano, and Frank Gehry often function today as autonomous works of art, independent of the architectural designs to which they originally referred [Kronowski, 2010]. The interplay between drawing and painting in the architect's creative process has been described repeatedly, for example

in the case of Le Corbusier [Gil-Mastalerczyk, 2009], while the phenomenon of the work of so-called “paper architects” [Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, 2015] fits into a broader trend of autonomous architectural drawing, whose origins can be traced back to the imaginative visions of Giovanni Battista Piranesi or later Futurists [Żychowska, 2013]. Today, this trend finds expression in the work of, among others, Massimo Scolari, John Hejduk, and Lebbeus Woods [Bigaj, 2015].

3. The sketch, the drawing, urban sketching

The city, as a complex spatial structure, remains a frequent subject of drawings and sketches. In depictions of the city, alongside the architecture itself, urban life – movement, the presence of people, and their relationships – plays an increasingly significant role. This is not, however, a new phenomenon, as depictions of urban space have long been present in the tradition of European painting – from the works of Giotto, through those of Piero della Francesca, to the works of representatives of Venetian veduta painting such as Canaletto and Francesco Guardi, or the Austrian Rudolf von Alt.

In the 1960s, the drawings of Gordon Cullen, a British architect, illustrator, and urban theorist, and author of *The Concise Townscape*, on urban space became an important example of this approach. Cullen – like Kazimierz Wejchert – describes the city through sequences of images depicting various fragments of space: landscape interiors, public spaces, architectural complexes, streets, and squares. Linked by numerous functional and spatial relationships, these drawings create a complex picture of the city, its character, and its beauty. Cullen presented them as a narrative built from successive drawings, making his sketches an extremely valuable tool for studying urban space [Cullen, 2015].

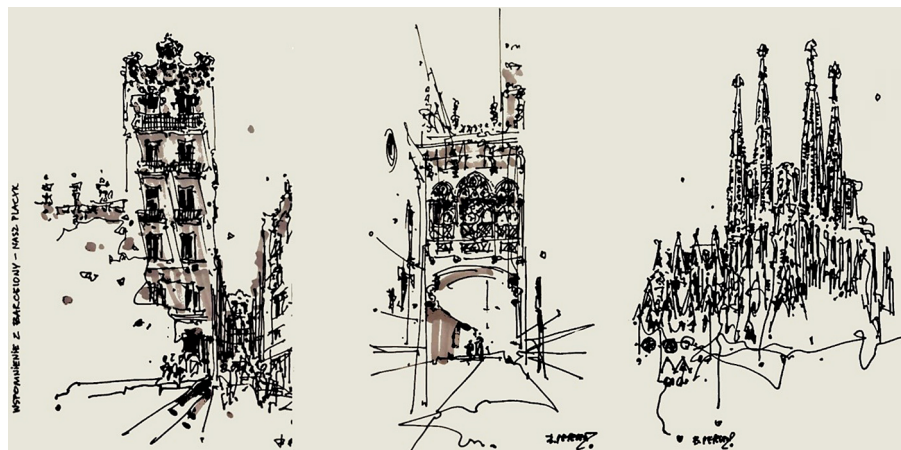


Fig. 1. Barcelona (author's own sketches)

Quick sketches and spontaneous drawings have become one of the primary and increasingly popular ways of capturing urban themes. Social media has fueled the growth of this form: Facebook and, especially, image-focused Instagram, where the hashtag #drawing now has nearly 200 million posts.

In recent years, the informal artistic and social movement of Urban Sketching [Campanero, 2012] has grown rapidly; its members create concise, expressive records of urban spaces in sketchbooks. Thanks to Instagram's popularity, it is easy to follow the work of architect-illustrators from around the world, such as Maurice Brennan, Klaus Meier-Pauken, and Simone Ridyard, as well as artists working in drawing and watercolor – including Marek Badzyński and Krzysztof Ludwin. Their works – much like Gordon Cullen's narrative visions – help us better interpret and understand the city as a beautiful and complex space of shared life.

Both drawing and sketching, though often underappreciated, form the foundation and starting point for many fields of art – they are both the beginning and, at times, the culmination of creative expression. There is no clear boundary between a sketch, a study drawing, and a finished work. This distinction is subjective, entirely dependent on the observer’s perspective. This is because a sketch possesses immense potential that can develop, but it may also remain in its embryonic, original phase. This medium can take the form of a simple outline for a painting composition, a drawing study, a preliminary concept for a larger work, a first record of an idea, or a design for an installation, sculpture, or building; but it can just as easily function on its own as an independent, finished work of art.

4. The image of the city in architectural sketches: An analysis of the work of selected architects

Sketching works wonderfully outdoors. It is the best way to learn to observe and familiarize oneself with a space, as well as to train one’s memory. Drawing on-site serves as an irreplaceable “database” of knowledge about phenomena occurring in real space. This memorized image constitutes a wealth of experience from which one can draw almost endless inspiration. The biographies of many outstanding artists include travels and stays in significant art centers, which often became turning points in their creative careers. Alberti traveled to the Eternal City to study ancient buildings, while Vasari, while preparing his *Lives*, had to traverse nearly all of Italy to see the works of the artists he was writing about. The passion for travel, known as the grand tour, which was one of the defining elements of Enlightenment culture, made people realize the immense cognitive value of direct observation. English gentlemen, German princes, as well as Russian and Polish aristocrats, set out on long, often months-long educational journeys. During these trips, they explored the most important sites and works of art within the established canon of European culture. We are familiar with the sketchbooks of Wojciech Weiss, Kulisiewicz, and Zbigniew Herbert [Juchniewicz, 2018], filled with unreal, synthesized afterimages composed of distinctive images of the city’s skyline, contrasts, careful observations of people, the colors of the atmosphere and fishing nets, and the play of light and shadow.

The author decided to analyze the drawing works of three Polish architects – traveling artists whose works are characterized by significant formal and stylistic diversity. Their drawings engage the viewer in a unique way, introducing them to an individual and rich world of representations. These works are characterized by a high degree of expression and intensity: the intensity of experience, interaction, and dialogue with the external world, as well as the intensity of the aesthetic experience, even in the form of a working sketch.

4.1. Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński: Drawing as a tool of contemplation

Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński’s deeply reflective and sensual drawings exemplify a consistent quest to capture the essence of the objects he depicts [Kucza-Kuczyński, 2020]. In them, we see monumental, expression-laden forms combined with subtle detail. Kucza-Kuczyński carefully analyzes structures, planes, and contours, clearly linking visual impressions to analytical thinking. The line is lively and expressive – it thickens and layers. He uses lines of varying thickness and intensity – from thin, delicate marks to strong, decisive strokes, even sharp impacts: of a marker, brush, or pencil. He also uses the hardness (or softness) of the tool he employs. Here and there, he introduces color. As a result, the drawings take on a dynamic quality and do not give the impression of a mechanical reproduction of reality.

With remarkable precision and a synthetic approach, Kucza-Kuczyński captures the character of an object, a place, and a space by employing strong

contrasts and dense hatching. These elements are the hallmark and essence of Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński's drawings. He boldly pairs black and white, light and shadow, smoothness and roughness, line and shape. He frames and places individual accents with particular attentiveness. There is no room here for haste or chance. He employs both closed and open, static and dynamic compositions with equal ease. Even in his most free-flowing sketches of views of San Gimignano, Bethlehem, Venice, or Polish landscapes, one can see a perfect sense of proportion as well as a rigorous and consistent adherence to the principles of composition and perspective.



Fig. 2. Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński's sketches;
source: K. Kucza-Kuczyński Domy Świata,
wyd. Blue Bird

Kucza-Kuczyński captures broad urban and landscape panoramas with equal success to architectural fragments: streets, slivers of rooftops, details, or sequences of rhythmic elements. Piercing deep into the material's structure, tectonics, and texture, he gradually approaches abstraction. These drawings not only transform the image of reality but also – thanks to the artist's special connection to the depicted places – deeply convey their origins and character, while simultaneously becoming autonomous works of art.

Distinctive features:

- ▶ expressiveness and variety in the use of the line – the primary tool for constructing form, space, and the atmosphere of the place depicted;
- ▶ a strong emphasis on texture, structure, tectonics, and the weight of the material;
- ▶ distinct contrasts of light and shadow, contouring, and a high degree of formal synthesis;
- ▶ a clearly perceptible interplay of tensions between the weight of individual elements;
- ▶ layered superimposition of planes;
- ▶ densely applied hatching.

In Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński's drawings, the city is depicted as a living urban structure, composed of the rhythm of roofs, facades, and streets. One of the most important features of these works is the sense of the weight of architectural matter. The sketches often resemble notes from observations of space, capturing the atmosphere of a place rather than its precise geometry. Monumental architectural and landscape forms become symbols of a place's culture and memory, and the drawing serves as a medium for philosophical reflection. Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński's drawings serve as a tool for deep contemplation and as a successful attempt to capture the *genius loci*.

4.2. Krzysztof Ludwin: Narrativeness and an emotional image of the city

Krzysztof Ludwin's works present a more painterly approach to architecture; here, the sketch becomes a quick story about the city – vibrant and bathed in light. The leitmotif most frequently captured in his sketches and watercolors is, of course, Kraków. But not only that – as a traveling architect, Ludwin portrays cities and places all over the world. In his work – besides Lanckorona, Paris, or sunny Sicily – exotic places like Rio de Janeiro, Manaus, or São Paulo in Brazil play an important role.

Ludwin's cities are dynamic, swirling organisms. He absorbs them, engaging all his senses in a multifaceted way: we feel the tastes, smells, sounds, and shifting light. The image is constructed with a sense of urgency – the artist himself defines his work as “nervous expressionism.” The sketches are quick, dense, restless, impatient, full of verve, without subsequent corrections or changes.



Fig. 3. Krzysztof Ludwin's sketches (private collection, shared by the author)

This makes the city feel fleeting, like a lingering afterimage. The artist masterfully uses the paper's white or gray (as well as the transparency of watercolors), lending the city's streets a luminous quality and a sense of lightness. Notably, as an architect, Ludwin maintains spatial discipline. Even in his most free-flowing, almost "dancing" sketches, a solid structure and an understanding of perspective are evident. Figures (silhouettes of people, café umbrellas, bicycles, even animals) appear in the sketches; they are usually simplified, and their blurred, dynamic contours heighten the impression of constant movement and haste. This type of sketch often serves as a basis for Ludwin's later watercolor or oil paintings created in the studio. He most frequently employs the line-and-wash technique. The line does not create a contour but rather defines directions and planes; it is light, nervous, fresh, hurried, and always confident. It is precisely the interplay of these two means of expression – the spot and the line – that creates the ideal formal harmony and is the hallmark of Ludwin's work.

Distinctive features:

- ▶ a relaxed, fluid, dynamic, quick, and confident line;
- ▶ the combination of line, texture, and color;
- ▶ the presence of elements of urban life (people, public spaces);
- ▶ the snapshot-like quality of the composition;
- ▶ a blend of architectural sketch and illustrative drawing, with decorative quality;
- ▶ a fairy-tale quality, a sense of haste, joy, and at times an atmosphere of dreams and memories.

In Krzysztof Ludwin's sketches, the city becomes a stage for social life, and architecture provides the backdrop for the residents' activities. As a result, the image of the city takes on a narrative, lively, and poetic character. The drawings clearly capture the dense, layered urban fabric, its rhythm, bustle, and dynamism. This is a subjective, deeply transformed interpretation of the place – the extraordinary worlds of the author's wanderings, his imagination, passions, and emotions.

4.3. Sławomir Gzell: Drawing as a tool for thinking about the city

In Sławomir Gzell's drawings, the image of the city takes the form of an intellectual game and an interpretation of space [Gzell, 2014]. His sketches of Kraków, Siena, or Strasbourg are like graphic mental shorthand, serving both cognitive and aesthetic functions. They are characterized by dynamic, rough lines and do not attempt to be "pretty". Gzell does not copy views; rather, he focuses on capturing the character of urban space and the spatial relationships among its individual elements. He often uses dense horizontal and vertical lines to create chiaroscuro and the texture of old brick walls. This lends the buildings weight and materiality.

Sławomir Gzell's drawing – dynamic and confident – is a record of the movement of the hand and the concurrent thought process. It is also a dialogue between the word and the line. His characteristic verbal comments perfectly complement the graphic composition. This fascinating tangle of lines, combined with the frequently used, characteristic, "trembling," expressive – even predatory – and instantly recognizable line, infuses static buildings with life and movement. The space comes alive; it is bustling and dynamic. Undoubtedly, these drawings fit into the aesthetic of the architectural sketch, where incompleteness and spontaneity are elements of artistic value, while the visible process of drawing – quick lines, corrections, overlapping strokes, and verbal notes – ensures that the sketches retain a lively, authentic, and spirited form. Although created as commentary or a tool for urban analysis – visually reminiscent of the currently fashionable sketchbooks – they possess high aesthetic value and can be perceived as autonomous graphic works, revealing an individual vision of the city and architecture.

Distinctive features:

- ▶ linearity and minimalism;
- ▶ sketch-like quality and spontaneity; free perspective;
- ▶ a synthetic representation of spatial composition, absence of superfluous details; the drawing often resembles a sketch;
- ▶ expressive line, quick and spontaneous;
- ▶ an observer's perspective – most often natural;
- ▶ a rather limited color palette in favor of linear drawing.

In Sławomir Gzell's drawings, the city appears as a spatial structure and a system of urban connections, in which the relationships between streets, squares, and buildings are more important than architectural detail. The author "thinks architecturally", treating drawing as a tool for analyzing and interpreting the city, as well as a kind of commentary on a text or a diary of events. In his written and drawn sketches, the image of the city is synthetic, condensed, abbreviated, and focused on the most important elements organizing the space. The author deliberately applies partial deformation to objects in a light,



Fig. 4. Sławomir Gzell's sketches; source: S. Gzell O architekturze. Szkice pisane i rysowane. Blue Bird

skillful manner. Sometimes the subject of the drawing is merely outlined; at other times, there is an extremely precise rendering of detail and expressive form. Occasionally, figures also appear, depicted in a concise, often humorous manner. Undoubtedly, these sketches reveal the author's attitude toward the places he visited.

5. Summary and conclusions

Intentional observation triggers reflection that leads to selection and, in the case of sketching, to making quick decisions [Kowalczyk, 2021]. It also signifies a shift away from copying an existing arrangement of elements toward intentional modifications. It is also a means of concentration and deep intellectual work – thinking on paper [Makowska, 2018] – as well as one of the fundamental methods for stimulating creativity in the design process [Kowaltowski, Bianchi, de Paiva, 2010]. The very process of drawing – like any artistic endeavor – requires constant effort, grappling with both the material and one's own creative explorations. It is demanding work, often difficult and frustrating, which does not always bring satisfaction, though it sometimes provides a sense of fulfillment. Interestingly, the ability to sketch with ease usually emerges only after the artist has mastered the fundamentals of drawing. A good sketch only appears unfinished on the surface – it can evocatively capture a fragment of reality without striving for literal realism. Despite a certain simplification, it remains a subtle and refined truth about how the artist perceives the surrounding world. In this sense, a sketch can be considered the very essence of drawing [Malinowska-Petelenz, 2024].

This analysis indicates that architectural sketches can be regarded as an excellent research tool for studies of urban perception and urban composition. It serves as a vital tool for interpreting the image of the city at every scale: from the city panorama down to the smallest detail, while sketching allows for the identification of fundamental elements of spatial composition, such as proportions, axes, dominant and subdominant features, accents, building rhythms, nodes, and skylines. Drawing is an exploration of reality and a visualization of thought – an irreplaceable, distinctly subjective and emotional creative process that serves as a record of the author's individual preferences. It is important to remember, however, that the recreation of reality on any scale goes beyond the scope of mechanical modeling. The space of memory undergoes profound filtration and transformation here. It is distorted by specific creative “filters:” the human eye and physical painting and drawing tools. Drawing, as a visualization of thought, can, however, be:

- ▶ A method of recording information – a drawing can be constructed according to the rules of perspective theory or intuitively, based on natural sensitivity and direct observation of reality.
- ▶ An element of the cognitive process – drawing in situ deepens one's understanding of the surrounding reality. This process engages visual perception, as well as mechanisms for identifying and interpreting phenomena. Drawing outdoors intensifies visual perception and fosters a deeper understanding of the place.
- ▶ An element of creative reasoning in the design process – drawing enables the development of design ideas, the analysis of various spatial variants, and the gradual crystallization of an architectural concept.
- ▶ A means of expressing the characteristics of three-dimensional space – drawing allows one to represent properties such as proportions, scale, or the structure of form, as well as to capture more elusive and intangible aspects of a place, such as its atmosphere or *genius loci*.

Based on the work of Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, Krzysztof Ludwin, and Sławomir Gzell, it can be argued that architectural drawing is not merely a technique for representing reality, but above all a tool for thinking about

space and a means of interpreting it. An analysis of their sketches reveals that drawing serves several parallel functions: cognitive, analytical, interpretive, and expressive.

Above all, drawing is a form of observing and exploring space. In Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński's sketches, one can see a careful analysis of the relationships and interplay of tensions between mass and weight, the tectonics and layering of forms – strongly contrasted with the line and plane of the sky. Here, drawing becomes a tool for exploring scale, the rhythm of the built environment, and the character of a place. Through the selective representation of spatial elements, the sketch captures the city's urban structure, the architectural articulation of the built environment, and the relationships between its parts, often in the context of its placement within the landscape.

In Krzysztof Ludwin's work, on the other hand, drawing serves primarily an interpretive and expressive function. His sketches often have a more impressionistic character. Working intuitively, impressionistically, and emotionally, the artist focuses on the atmosphere of a place, the dynamics of space, and the individual experience of the city, conveying to us the joy and value of the search for form – ultimately achieving a pure creative drawing that is simultaneously the artist's synthesis of perspective and subject.

In Sławomir Gzell's work, drawing primarily reveals an analytical and synthetic character. His written and drawn sketches focus on issues of composition, spatial organization, and the city's logical structure. The drawings created in this way take the form of careful, urban notations, close to the idea of urban sketching on both the macro and micro scales. In this context, drawing becomes a tool for interpreting space, enabling the artist's commentary, the synthetic organization of observed phenomena, and the identification of the most important components of the city's structure.

A comparison of the work of these three architects leads to the conclusion that architectural drawing is a complex cognitive and creative tool that allows one to simultaneously observe, analyze, and interpret space. It is not merely an illustration of reality, but a form of understanding it. In this sense, drawing becomes a record of the process of thinking about the city and architecture, as well as a medium that captures both the material structure of space and its more elusive, perceptual, and emotional aspects.

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