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(DE)STABILISATION OF ARCHITECTURE

Abstract: In the second half of the 20th century, dynamic social, cultural, economic and political transformations sparked criticism of theories that viewed cities and their architecture as static, normative and materially fixed forms. At the same time, there emerged a need to acknowledge the importance of continuously evolving relationships and processes, along with diverse meanings and interpretative possibilities.
By viewing buildings as processes in constant interaction with contemporary society and its needs, we also challenge the notion that they are materially fixed and inviolable. Emphasis on architectural interactivity leads to a redefinition of traditional practices and attitudes, opening up new possibilities, diverse pathways and modes of action. Shifting the focus from permanence and immutability toward dynamism and transformation undermines stability and clarity, while fostering creative thinking and greater flexibility. Openness to changing contexts and needs results in the creation of more sustainable and userfriendly places that also respect the environment. Questioning architecture as a static structure paves the way for a multiplicity of approaches, interpretations, and the multidimensional complexity of dynamic interactions.
In this article, we will undertake a closer examination of the potential unleashed by embracing change and abandoning values such as permanence and immutability in favour of the dynamization of architecture, viewed as a compelling example of de-coincidence.

Keywords: architecture and interaction, sustainable architecture, dynamism in architecture, architectural theory, contemporary architecture, responsive architecture, sustainable development, adaptable buildings, heritage and contemporaneity

The second half of the 20th century witnessed an unprecedented dynamization of changes impacting nearly every aspect of human life. These changes undermined, and in many cases completely rejected, the previously accepted frameworks and reference points. This dynamism is also evident in the discourse and practices surrounding architecture, a field traditionally viewed as stable and resistant to change[1].

There is a clear trend towards moving beyond the mere description of formal features of an architectural object and its historical contexts, considered objective and immutable, to incorporation of diverse, dynamically changing contexts and interactions[2]. From this perspective, the built environment becomes part of the perpetual <<(re)design of the world>>[3]. Viewing architecture through the lens of dynamic interactions – stemming from cultural, social, political, functional and technological changes – importantly, leads to the questioning of definitive interpretations, making the emergence of new connections and meanings an open process. Resilience over time, viewed as a fundamental value, transforms into synergy, where the passage of time opens up new possibilities and reinterpretations.

The departure from the established order also involves the physical dynamization of architectural objects. Openness to changing contexts and needs leads to transformations in design approaches, where an important goal is to create adaptable buildings ready for interaction and modification, thereby supporting the creation of a sustainable built environment. This may entail introducing an element of impermanence, where a flexible response to ongoing changes and evolving needs encourages the creation of temporary solutions[4]. Such an approach emphasizes sensitivity and openness to community needs,

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1 *Firmitas* was one of the pillars of the triad established by Vitruvius. Permanence encompasses not only robustness and stability but also resilience over time.

2 The importance of an approach that emphasizes a relational aspect is advocated by, among others, P. Healey, *Urban complexity and spatial strategies: Towards a relational planning for our times*, Routledge, London 2006; S. Graham, P. Healey, *Relational concepts of space and place: issues for planning theory and practice*, "European Planning Studies"1999, vol. 7, no. 5, pp. 623-646; B. Latour, A. Yaneva, *Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move*, [in:] *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, ed. R. Geiser, Birkhäuser, Basel 2008, pp. 80-89. Meanwhile, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), by Latour and Yanevy, assumes a radical approach where interactions lead to the complete transformation and erasure of the original form: 'Everybody knows – and especially architects, of course – that a building is not a static object but a moving project, and that even once it is has been built, it ages, it is transformed by its users, modified by all of what happens inside and outside, and that it will pass or be renovated, adulterated and transformed beyond recognition'.

3 J. M. Jacobs, P. Merriman, *Practising architectures*, "Social & cultural geography" 2011, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 217.

4 These issues are examined in an interesting way by, among others: P. Bishop, L. Williams, *The Temporary City*, Routledge, London, New York 2012.

acknowledges the significance and role of bottom-up initiatives, and incorporates them into shaping the urban environment that residents inhabit. Practical experience demonstrates that – even though the initial stages of collaboration between diverse social groups and stakeholders, which break away from familiar frameworks and traditional design methods, demand patience and considerable empathy to find common solutions amidst the chaos of differing needs and visions – the final outcome represents a valuable response to actual needs[5]. By acknowledging voices that are typically overlooked, it becomes richer and offers new perspectives.

This approach – which shifts away from viewing architecture as one of the most stable types of artifacts – is also evident in ultramodern and experimental projects. However, as objects based on complex technological solutions, they inherently create forms that are more resistant to subsequent changes and user interventions. The rapid advancement of technologies used both in the design process and during the construction phase enables the creation of responsive architecture, subject to continuous physical change, as it adjusts its parameters to evolving and transforming needs and conditions. Movement and change contradict the static nature of buildings; yet, they introduce an element of interaction with the surroundings.

In the face of climate challenges, one of the key tasks has become the development of dynamic façades that, by responding to atmospheric changes throughout the day, can ensure user comfort. One of the earliest projects proposing this approach – combining solutions with sensitivity to the poetic aesthetics of architecture – is the Institut du Monde Arabe, designed by Ateliers Jean Nouvel and built in Paris between 1981 and 1987. The responsive metal blinds covering the southern façade evoke the traditional element of the mashrabiyya, while also drawing inspiration from the mechanism of a camera shutter. In this way, a form characteristic of Arab culture (and to some extent its function – namely, protection from the sun) was merged with contemporary technology. The light-sensitive shutters alter their geometric pattern to control and regulate the amount of light entering the building's interior. This movement significantly influences both the aesthetics of the façade and the interior spaces, where the variability of light influx plays an important role. The project clearly demonstrates the significance of process and temporal variability, as well as the interaction between the external environment, architecture and the user.

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5 See, among others, *Bottom-up social change: materials, building, community*, eds. E. Golden, J. Vermillion,ACSA/AIA, New York 2020; J. Partanen, *Indicators for self-organization potential in urban context*, "Environment and Planning B Planning and Design" 2015, vol. 42 (5), pp. 951-971.

According to architect Ernst Giselbrecht, the design of the building envelope has become a key aspect of contemporary architecture[6]. Viewing architecture <<as spatially perceptible nodes of a larger network in which many forces are active>>[7] assigns it the role of a mediator between changing external conditions and the internal environment. When shaped by both shifting environmental factors and evolving user needs, architecture assumes a dynamic character and becomes part of an interactive process. Variation in the façade of the Kiefer Technic showroom (Graz, Austria; 2006–2007)[8], designed by Ernst Giselbrecht + Partner, is defined by white sun-shading panels, whose movement and changing configurations enhance interior conditions, while fundamentally influencing the façade's evolving aesthetic and a sculptural character of the object. Meanwhile, the distinction and connection between the façade, shading and windows take on an ambiguous and hard-to-define nature. The building may appear as a closed, opaque white volume or as a fully transparent structure dominated by extensive glazing. Between these extremes lies a wide spectrum of diverse variants and configurations. They affect not only the rhythm of divisions, the more or less spatial articulation of the façade – its symmetry or asymmetry – but also the size, shape, and placement of window openings. As a result, they significantly shape both the perception and character of the building. Consequently, it becomes impossible to conduct a single, definitive formal analysis of the architectural object or to unambiguously define its characteristic features. Variability, dynamism and interaction emerge as the defining and unique characteristics. As Martin Grabner observes, <<the dynamic shell puts the emphasis not on its separating but on its mediating qualities and becomes a method of communication between the building, the environment and the people>>[9].

Variability, impermanence, movement and the capacity for continuous reconfiguration, regarded in the 1960s primarily as architectural science fiction dreams – evident at that time in the futuristic and extreme urban ideas (such as the Plug-In City, the Walking City, and the Capsule Homes project proposed by the Archigram Group) – have since evolved into central elements

6 Ernst Giselbrecht + Partner, *VernetzteArchitektur / Connected Architecture: Projekte 2007--2017 / Works 2007-2017*, eds. Ch. Kühn, M. Grabner, Scan Client Publishing, Graz 2017, p. 11. Ernst Giselbrecht participated in the accompanying event of the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale titled 'Time Space Existence'.

7 Ibid., p. 9.

8 The solutions tested in this project will also be applied in the project implemented in Mallorca. Ernst Giselbrecht + Partner, News, 2024, https://www.giselbrecht.at/news/(accessed: 10.06.2025), Ernst Giselbrecht + Partner, *Vernetzte Architektur*..., p. 33.

9 Ibid.

of contemporary approaches to formulating and implementing responses to specific social and climatic challenges.

The development of advanced technology, including CAD software, has enabled the architectural visions and intuitions of Peter Cook, co-founder of the Archigram Group and creator of the Plug-In City, who for over half a century conveyed his concepts through countless sketches and drawings, to be partially realised in the 21st century. Among the several completed projects, the most recognizable one is the Kunsthaus Graz, designed by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier[10]. The building's form radically contrasts with its surroundings; however, the architects emphasize interaction over confrontation. Describing potential paths through the gallery, Sir Peter Cook points out that it is arranged in such a way that, in a sense, the city itself becomes the main exhibit visible from within the museum[11]. He emphasizes that the foundation of a good design is the proper organization of space, and once this is achieved, <<you have to create the magic>>. He compares architecture to theatre, full of surprises and unexpected twists – <<an unexpected object, a surface that goes from opaque to translucent to glass – a rebellion against (...) 'the tyranny of windows'. Things reveal or hide themselves, as we get closer and get to know them>>[12]. Called the <<Friendly Alien>>[13] by its creators, Kunsthaus Graz generates a responsive architectural environment, with its skin enfolding the interior as though it were flesh. The BIX media façade[14], functioning as a screen, not only allows for shifts in colour and illumination, but also operates as an external medium for changing messages and meanings crafted by curators and artists – thus enabling interaction with the surroundings and users alike. In one interview, Colin Fournier described Kunsthaus Graz as a turning point in the pursuit of architectural solutions that reference the natural environment not only through external form but also through preservation of <<an architecture that, with the aid of robotics and artificial intelligence, might one day become truly alive and responsive to environmental forces and human needs as well as desires>>[15].

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10 Colin Fournier was also one of the co-founders of Archigram.

11 S. Casciani, *The plug-in citizen. Interview with Peter Cook*, "Domus" 2010, https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2010/12/11/the-plug-in-citizen-interview-with-peter-cook.html (accessed: 08.06.2025).

12 Ibid.

13 Among others, P. Cook, *The City, Seen as a Garden of Ideas*, Monicelli Press, New York 2003.

14 BIX is a neologism derived from the words 'big' and 'pixel'. Kunsthaus Graz, *BIX media facade*, https://www.museum-joanneum.at/en/kunsthaus-graz/discover/bix-medienfassade- (accessed: 04.06.2025).

15 *Colin Fournier, project author, Spacelab Cook/Fournier, London, in conversation with Barbara Steiner, 08.04.2017* [in:] *Up into the unknown. Peter Cook, Colin Fournier and the Kunsthaus* [the exhibition guide], eds. B. Steiner, K. Huemer, Kunsthaus Graz, Universal museum Joanneum, Graz 2018, p. 18.

By attempting to mimic the perpetual dynamism, interactivity and adaptive capacity of natural environments, designers transcend the typical static nature of architectural design.

Interaction occurring at a specific moment is important, but equally crucial is openness to a long-term process and the evolution of architectural objects – their maturation, ageing and transformation. Reflecting on these long-term transformations, Stewart Brand concluded that structures made with cheaper, less sophisticated materials, using more human-centred, wellknown and easily recognisable solutions are easier for users to adapt and more open to functional modification. By creating space for new activities and being open to transformations, such buildings simultaneously stimulate creativity. This approach shifts focus from analysing an object in space to studying it over time, revealing the value of not only the original design but also subsequent modifications, which reflects the shared contribution of professionals and users or owners in shaping the structure. Moreover, every building evolves with time – <<but only some adapt gracefully>>[16]. Brand contrasted the greater flexibility of 'low' architecture with the permanence pursued in "high" architecture, which is often artistic and appealing but resistant to modification. He also noted the incompatibility of low-durability components with the concept of "permanence". Referring to these findings, Mark Meagher argues that it is not obvious in the case of high-tech buildings, whose purpose is to ensure responsiveness. Although modern technologies are typical of "high" architecture, awareness of their relatively rapid ageing opens the door to "low" architecture thinking about future change[17]. Mark Meagher presents Kunsthaus Graz as an example of hybrid architecture, in which responsive elements contribute to the building's cultural significance, innovation and aesthetic appeal, while durability – understood as persistence over time – is maintained through the regular replacement of worn components[18].

The innovative character of numerous ultra-modern star projects can pave the way for new architectural possibilities and solutions, and their potentially positive impact on urban revitalisation may help initiate broader economic, cultural and social change[19]. However, there are significant challenges regarding

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16 S. Brandt, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*, Phoenix Illustrated, London, 1997.

17 M. Meagher, *Responsive architecture and the problem of obsolescence*, "International Journal of Architectural Research" 2014, vol. 8 (3), pp. 98, 100. Besides drawing on Stewart Brand, Mark Meagher also refers to Jeremy Till's book *Architecture Depends*.

18 Ibid, pp. 100, 102, 103.

19 In the case of the Kunsthaus Graz, the construction significantly contributed to an increase in civic pride and a strengthening of local identity. An insightful overview of the impact of star architecture on urban transformations can be found in, among others, *About star archi-*

long-term adaptability of advanced technological systems and the involvement of communities in their subsequent modification.

Regardless of the technological solutions employed and the project's complexity, there is increasing emphasis on the value of dynamic and multifaceted interaction. When considered, this approach enables responses to the evolving needs of communities and individuals. Shifting the focus from purely technological concerns to a human-centred perspective introduces greater dynamism and the inherent characteristic of change present in the natural environment.

The early 1960s witnessed significant impulses for the development of this process, as social and cultural changes, along with the devaluation of the myth of modernity, led to a stronger critique of modernism. In her famous book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs critically assessed the dogmas of modern urban planning and redevelopment, emphasizing the lack of consideration of interaction with urban and social dynamics. Creating seemingly complete projects and preventing significant changes after their completion excluded both creativity and the freedom to shape the diversity of urban life[20]. Challenging the imposed order and embracing the city's daily experience – including the interactions among various elements of the built environment and its users – led to a shift from rigid, closed concepts towards the notion of "organized complexity"[21]. Urban diversity also encompassed the need to preserve culturally and socially important buildings, sites and spaces that would have been removed for their failure to fit a neat orderly image. As Aldo Rossi observed, architecture is not just the visible image of the city – it is also a structure created over time[22]. Therefore, urban development is rooted in dialogue, taking into account not only material layer, but also history and the collective memory of places and events.

Since the 1960s, growing awareness of the social value of architectural heritage has expanded beyond its historical, aesthetic and educational importance (knowledge of the past) and preservation for future generations, to encompass its relevance for contemporary communities. Transformations in Western culture – driven by globalization and developments in technology, transport

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tecture reflecting on cities in Europe, eds. N. Alaily-Mattar, D. Ponzini, A. Thierstein, Springer, Cham 2020; and a special issue: "European Planning Studies" 2022 , vol. 30, no 1: 'Star Architecture and Urban Transformation'. Expectations regarding the role of star architecture in urban, social and economic transformation were particularly strengthened and disseminated in the 1990s, owing to the spectacular 'Bilbao Effect'.

20 J. Jacobs, *Śmierć i życie wielkich miast Ameryki*, transl. Ł. Mojsak, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2014, pp. 21, 37.

21 Ibid., p. 445.

22 A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 1982, p. 128.

and communication – have significantly accelerated the pace of life and processes of change, while at the same time eroding traditional reference points and anchors. In this world of liquid modernity[23] – where reality and identity are no longer stable and unambiguous – the importance of architectural heritage as a point of reference has gained increasing recognition[24]. Paradoxically, however, this perspective signified openness to change, stemming from integrating heritage into contemporary urban life and adapting it to current needs. These efforts did not question the value of historical architecture but rather opened up to new possibilities resulting from a dialogue between historical forms and meanings and the contemporary context, initiating a multidimensional and complex process[25]. It involves a significant interaction between the historical architectural structure and contemporary interventions, introducing new layers of meaning while preserving the legibility of the historical substance, as well as intangible values. It is essential to consider the relational aspect, which encompasses cultural, economic and social changes – above all how architecture is experienced by local communities. The shift from protecting only objects, ensembles or sites of outstanding universal value from a historical, artistic, or scientific perspective[26] to understanding heritage as a collection of past resources recognised by the group as reflections of their core values, traditions, knowledge and beliefs[27], has opened the field to interactivity, variability and a diversity of approaches. The departure from established order and awareness of multiple interpretations led to destabilisation of previously applied principles and solutions. The paradigm shift and evolution from 19th-century conservation as 'preventing change' to a contemporary approach that accepts change as inevitable and pursues optimal strategies for managing it[28],

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23 Z. Bauman, *Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności*, Agora, Warszawa 2011.

24 This aspect has been identified, among others, in: European Charter of the Architectural Heritage, Council of Europe, October 1975, item 1–4, and was particularly emphasized in: Nizhny Tagil Charter for the Industrial Heritage, International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH), Nizhny Tagil, 17 July 2003, item 5.V, p. 5.

25 Cf.: J. Sowińska-Heim, *Transformacje i redefinicje. Adaptacja dziedzictwa architektonicznego do nowej funkcji a zachowanie ciągłości historycznej miejsca*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2018.

26 Such approach is also present in: Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted in Paris on 16 November 1972, Journal of Laws 1976, No. 32, item 190.

27 Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention), Faro, 27 October 2005, Article 2.

28 See G. Araoz, *Protecting heritage places under the new heritage paradigm and defining its tolerance for change. A leadership challenge for ICOMOS*, in: *Conservation turn – return to conservation. Tolerance for change. Limits of change*, eds. W. Lipp et al., Edizioni Polistampa, Firenze 2012, pp. 47-52.

represented a challenging break from an established and stable order. However, adopting a more dynamic and relational approach – although timeconsuming – enabled the discovery of new values and opportunities. In the 21st century, adaptation of historical buildings and their integration into the active urban life has become a "natural" process and a crucial element in preserving architecture that is meaningful to local communities, fostering urban and social identity, and contributing to environmental protection.

(De)stabilisation of architecture takes on various forms. What they all share is the conviction that architecture should be seen as a dynamic process rather than a static, one-time defined artefact – implying openness to change in response to dynamic contexts and evolving needs[29]. This approach enables a more holistic view of designing the built environment and recognising its internal interactions and interdependencies. The relational aspect, which goes far beyond values tied to the physical characteristics of the building, presents a challenge, as it requires more flexible and forward-thinking approaches, as well as transdisciplinary collaboration. At the same time, moving beyond a static definition of architecture brings new opportunities and stimulates creativity. In light of the dynamic changes occurring today, it leads to the creation of a better, more sustainable urban environment.

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29 Nowadays, a very important aspect is the ability to adapt and respond flexibly not only to social and cultural transformations but also to climate change.

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(DE)STABILIZACJA ARCHITEKTURY (streszczenie)

Zachodzące w drugiej połowie XX w. dynamiczne zmiany, zarówno społeczne, kulturowe, gospodarcze, jak i polityczne, doprowadziły do krytyki teorii, w których miasto i jego architektura postrzegane są jako zbiór statycznych normatywnych form materialnych. Jednocześnie sformułowana została potrzeba uwzględnienia znaczenia nieustannie powstających relacji oraz procesów, zróżnicowanych znaczeń i możliwości interpretacyjnych.
Otwarcie się na postrzeganie istnienia budynków jako procesu oraz nieustannej interakcji ze współczesnym społeczeństwem i jego potrzebami, kwestionuje również ich materialną stałość i nienaruszalność. Nacisk na interakcyność architektury prowadzi do redefinicji tradycyjnych praktyk i postaw, otwierając na nowe możliwości, zróżnicowane ścieżki i formy działania. Przesunięcie akcentu z trwałości i niezmienności, w kierunku dynamiki i zmiany, prowadzi do utraty stabilności i jednoznaczności, pobudzając jednocześnie do kreatywnego myślenia i większej elastyczności. Otwarcie na zmieniający się kontekst i potrzeby, oznacza również powstawanie miejsc bardziej zrównoważonych i przyjaznych dla użytkowników oraz środowiska. Zakwestionowanie architektury jako statycznej struktury, otwiera drogę do wielości podejść i interpretacji, wielowymiarowości i złożoności dynamicznych interakcji.
W artykule nastąpi bliższe przyjrzenie się nowym możliwościom, które przyniosło otwarcie na zmianę i odchodzenie od wartości takich jak stałość i niezmienność w kierunku dynamizacji architektury, procesu na który spojrzeć można jako na interesujący przykład de-koincydencji.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura i interakcja, architektura zrównoważona, dynamizm w architekturze, teoria architektury, architektura współczesna, architektura responsywna, zrównoważony rozwój, budynki adaptacyjne, dziedzictwo i współczesność

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