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INTERMEDIATE FORMS. A SPACE FOR REFLECTION, HERE AND NOW

Art research paper

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Contents

Introduction 163

An Intermediate Thought 164

The house in Bordeaux. On a *venustat* element from the Vitruvian triad 166

On a function that has lost what it held most dear 169

References 171

Sources of photographs 171

Abstract

This article focuses on the issue of functionality in architecture and gradually analyses it, from the nearest to ourselves, most minor, to the most capacious scale. Our living space, our home, our local public spaces, our cities, but have they always been ours? Did they not belong to past generations, hold other contexts, and occupy another time? What saved these spaces from becoming forgotten, lost and ultimately destroyed? Intermediate Forms are architectural reflections on times in between the past and the future, the moments that occupy the present. They are a specific links between what was and what is yet to come. In their provenance, they were created as a precise response to the needs of the past. Needs that have changed or even vanished as time progressed. They are the relics of the past; their affordance reaffirms their quality.

This is not only functional architecture.

These interiors are not just static.

These are evolving forms.

It is all that has grown beyond need.

Keywords

architecture beyond function, intermediate forms, affordances of function, ethics, dialogue, evolution, adaptation

Introduction

We live in a radical present, in which few ponder the future. The future of our planet, the future of the next generation, the future of our city, backyard or inhabited building. It engulfs us here and now. I often think about such ideas through the lens of my field of specialization, architecture, and find similarities. More specifically, we are losing our roots, our identity and our originality. We are building functionally and ad hoc. We are erecting ever-greater monuments of function. What will happen to these monuments in the face of accelerated change? The change we have recently witnessed – Covid-19 - has entered our daily lives unannounced, and also without our approval, has begun to induce spatial revolutions.

The years of Covid-19 are times of enormous spatial disparity. We left office buildings, schools, galleries, theatres and gyms empty. Places with extraordinary capacity were left vacant, while our dwellings were forced to quickly absorb the function of those places. Living space has been limited for economic reasons. For many, what mattered was not dwelling size, but instead proximity to city centre was favoured. We worked in offices, exercised in numerous sports complexes, we met with friends in restaurants and bars. We used the city as an extension of our modest, private spaces.

Our dwelling was an intimate space, that virtually only served us. It was a place of relaxation and preparation for our next outing. It was the sole witness to our physical imperfections and mental weaknesses. However, what happens when this space becomes the background to our professional lives? How should we frame our webcam? Is the backdrop we choose for our professional encounters an orchestrated scenography or an invasive slice of our privacy? What does this display divulge about us? Can we liken the experience to losing a layer of clothing on our body; a kind of outer cloak where the colour, texture and thickness define our tastes and individualities?

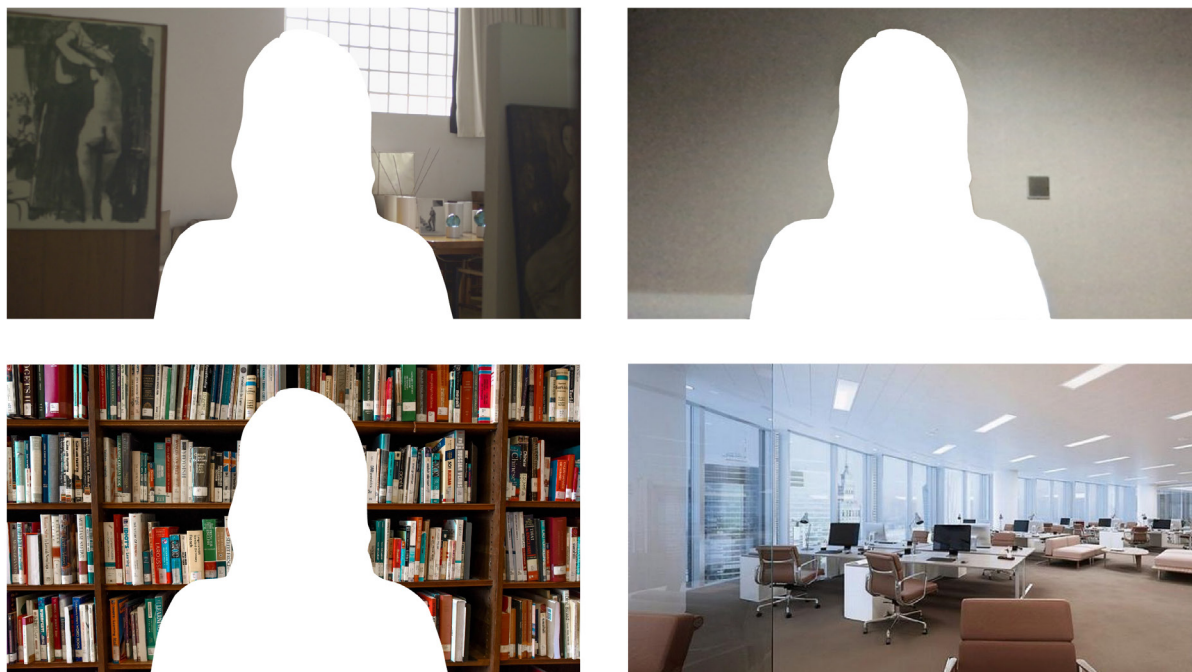


Fig.1. Snippets of privacy: exposed privacy (top left, illus. by the author); hidden privacy (top right, illus. by the author); privacy filled with attributes of knowledge (bottom left, illus. by the author); empty office space (bottom right, illus. by the author), <https://www.rp.pl/Ekonomia/309159909-Plany-na-razie-krotkoterminowe.html> [accessed: 10/07/2021].

Our present must redefine the relationship between private and public space, between indoor and outdoor space, become safe but not isolated.

Changes are happening, that require architecture to be highly flexible in its focus. Flexibility is needed to look beyond the main function of a space. This article focuses on non-functional aspects of architecture that provide complement to architecture with ethics towards the place and the Other¹, ecology, aesthetic values and finally the ability to change. Change of ownership, surroundings, climate and function.

An Intermediate Thought

Intermediate Forms is an exhibition presented by Martyna Rajewska in cooperation with Jolanta Kwarciak². *Intermediate Forms* are negatives that were discarded in the process of laser cutting

1 „The Other is also sometimes the building. Behind its appearance is the realisation of someone's plans and dreams. What also stands is the ethical ability to coexist with what is built next door” (J. Dominiczak, *Miasto dialogiczne i inne teksty rozproszone*, Gdańsk 2016, p. 143).

2 *Formy pośrednie*, wystawa, J. Kwarciak, M. Rajewska, curator: S. Gałuszka, Kolonia Artystów, Gdańsk, 05/11/2020 - 04/12/2020.

model-making elements. *Intermediate Forms* became a record of the void between being and non-being. The exhibition was created to give a new form to what has been rejected. Its final form was centred around a framework designed to support, organise and distribute these negatives.

Intermediate Forms obtain their context not only from their initially lost form but also from the perspective of being a link between a closed institution (lockdown) and the passers-by looking in its windows.

An impulsive response to the Covid situation forced the closing of all galleries immediately after the vernissage of *Intermediate Forms*. The result was a loss of an exhibition for conscious viewers, and a new form was born; an exhibition for accidental observers and curious eyes. It is a relationship full of potential affordances.

Several features of the gallery were initially thought to be problematic to the design of the exhibition: the non-standard, unenclosed, daylight-filled, ground-floor gallery. These features later became pillars of how the project was presented. The Gallery building is the corner of the development quarter at Grunwaldzka Avenue, in the central part of Gdańsk Wrzeszcz. It has large windows facing the Avenue on one side and the square at Waryńskiego Street on the other. This unique location allowed spectacle of light filtered by the installation became a property of a public space. Unlike the private and often obscured windows of dwellings, the gallery windows encouraged passers-by to look in. The exhibition itself became the property of the exterior (street, square) rather than the interior of the building itself. It was turned towards passers-by rather than patrons. The exhibition emphasised the value of the city, the city as a space for actual contact with culture – however shaken during the pandemic.



Fig. 2. *Intermediate Forms*, through the window, photo by the author.

The city's culture is contained not just within academies, galleries, opera houses or theatres, but also within buildings that grow out from their local tissues. Buildings shape an architecture that cannot be found anywhere else. An architecture coupled to the surrounding landscape, climate, specific human needs, based on local materials. Authentic architecture builds its originality based on its origin.

The house in Bordeaux. On a *venustat* element from the Vitruvian triad

This is the story of a space designed on the basis of a particular need. The client, Jean Francois Lemoine, lost his mobility in a car accident, and ever since needed a space that would improve his everyday life. In a conversation with the architect (Rem Koolhaas, OMA), he spoke of his requirement: to create a space that is more than functional and not only sprung from the need to improve his mobility: „Contrary to what you would expect, I don't want a simple house. I want a complex house, because the house will define my world”³. The architect undertook this task.

Furthermore, the frames he designed became a metaphor for the picture frame, which limits and aesthetically complements the work itself. He framed the views, filtered and gave rhythm to the light,

and created an everyday life without routine, though full of rituals. Despite the rational solution of a single-storey house, three houses are built, one on top of the other.

The lowest level is a series of caves carved into the hill, designed to bring the family together. The ground floor, at garden level, is an almost transparent space, a little inside a bit of outside; and the upper floor is a space dedicated half to parents and children with an essential separation of their separate parts⁴.

In the centre of the dwelling is its mechanical heart, a 3x3.5m platform designed as an office for the owner, Jean Francois Lemoine. An office which, thanks to its hydraulic structure, moves between all building floors, and the Owner is the only one who has full access to the library organised over the entire height of this establishment.



Fig. 3. The House in Bordeaux, <https://www.oma.com/projects/maison-a-bordeaux> [accessed: 16/06/2021].



Fig. 4. The House in Bordeaux, <https://www.oma.com/projects/maison-a-bordeaux> [accessed:16/06/2021].

This project did not make a problem out of the owner's disablement, but instead challenged the architecture to create a situation in which the owner is most privileged. It is only he who fully benefits from the performative possibilities of this architecture. Only for him, the platform is moving up and down. He is the director of the daily spectacle - a spectacle not of fiction, but complex realities.

However, what happens when that director goes missing? Jean passed away after 2 years of finalising the design of this intriguing house. A house that owes its appearance to its owner's mobility „handicap”; one might be tempted to say that the house learned to move for him or that they moved because the owner's will that transferred into the building's mobility. Since 2000, the house which had such functional purpose, has become non-functional due to the loss of its owner. Non-functional, but not untrue. It is a spatial record of an individual's history. A beautiful case realising the thought formulated by Tadao Ando:

After having secured the functional basis of a building, I search how far it can be detached from function. Architecture lies in the distance between it and function⁵.

The House in Bordeaux has detached itself significantly enough to be called art. Art that fulfils various functions, but which do not constitute its essence. For me, art is the possibility of affordance, often an affordance of function, a well-designed space enables rather than restricts. It's extraordinarily capacious, and when left to itself, forms the air in an incredibly poetic way.

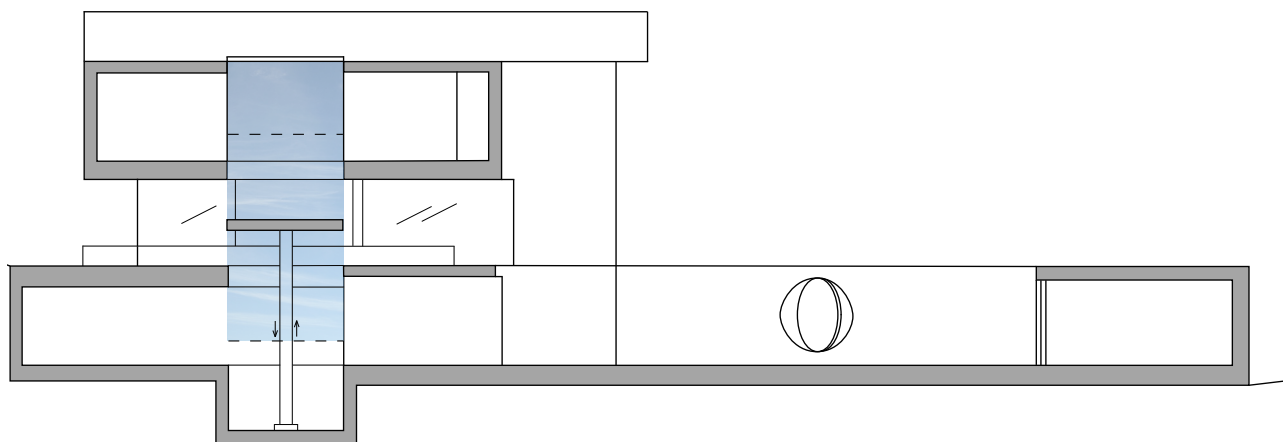


Fig. 5. Cross-section through the house in Bordeaux, illus. by the author. The blue area defined by the platform moving on the hydraulic lift is the „beyond function” space. The dashed boundary lines define the extremes of the horizon line variation for a seated platform user. This is the space of an expanded horizon.

On a function that has lost what it held most dear

Loss of function is the case for many factories, post-military buildings and, more recently, sacred architecture. In response to the trend towards secularisation, Dutch and German churches have for some time been transformed into cultural institutions. The abandoned buildings of the Gdańsk shipyards, former German factories, and bunkers have become the stage for many festivals and artistic events. What makes us give them a proverbial second chance and not let them go? In the words of the Finnish architect and writer Juhani Pallasmaa, buildings that show us their imperfections, corrosion, decay and general aging arouse our empathy and a sense of compassion. At the same time, perfect structures appear self-sufficient, not in need of our affection.

In the inherent tendency towards rationality, perfection and timelessness, buildings tend to remain outside our emotional and empathic reactions. The layering of traces of use, wear and time usually enriches the architectural image and invites our empathetic participation. Architectural ruins offer particularly potent images of nostalgic association and imagination, as if time and erosion would have undressed the structure of its disguise in utility and reason⁶.

Writing from the perspective of the Imperial Shipyard of Gdańsk, it was precisely the empathy cited above that saved its buildings from devastation and in some cases complete demolition. Thanks to local activists, photographers, architects, people who got to know the shipyard, spent time with it, built a relationship⁷, and fostered the discussion about its protection, subsequent revitalisation began. In the album *Stocznia Szlaga*, published in 2013⁸, the photographer and neighbour of the Gdańsk

6 J. Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image, Imagination and Imagery in Architecture*, New York 2011, p. 77..

7 „[...] fall in love with what I see. Because what we love we will not harm. We are as good as we can for what we love” (P. Zumthor, *Myślenie architekturą*, Kraków 2010, p. 98).

8 M. Szlaga, *Stocznia Szlaga*, Gdańsk 2013.

Shipyard, Michał Szlaga, documents the slow collapse of the giant shipping structures in a graphically sublime way. Overturned cranes, falling gantries, the torn metal structure of the trusses, punctured walls, thousands of square metres of cut up metal pieces. All these factories, offices and warehouses were witnesses to monumental changes and freedoms that sprung from this place. They were also magnificent structures with sublime geometry, often exposing their structural framework. The shipyard is so deeply rooted in Gdańsk's history that the people of Gdańsk fought hard to keep it alive. The aforementioned album by Michał Szlaga, was originally intended as a photo-journalistic farewell to this place, but instead it became the motive for saving these colossal structures and their history. We can look at the album as a manifesto which refuses to accept another collapse of the giants. Today, these giants are zoned as historical and as such, protected. It's no doubt that had the changes been made earlier, more of them would have been preserved. Nevertheless, I feel an incredible satisfaction that the melancholic and very human-like decline of these architectural organisms, presented in Szlaga's album, has spurred us on to fight for their protection.



Fig. 6. Photo from the book *Stocznia Szlaga*, photo by Michał Szlaga, <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/michal-szlaga-z-ksiazki-stocznia-szlaga>, [accessed: 03/07/2021].

One cannot question the need to protect architecture that possesses historical, cultural and aesthetic importance. It seems difficult to extend this need to architecture that is purely functional. Revisiting an earlier idea discussed within this text, the pandemic times are times of change, both worldview and spatiality.

We have learnt to work, do our shopping and participate in events online. Though I do not worry that we won't return to cultural centres, I question whether the same will be true in the case of mono-functional office blocks and shopping malls. What will happen to them? What is next? Will they manage

to adapt to the new needs? It is this ability to adapt that for me, is the true measure of the buildings quality and the space contained within them. It's akin to evolution in nature, existence depends on ability to continuously adapt.

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