

---

Functions of Architecture

Author(s): ALEKSANDER WALLIS

Source: *The Polish Sociological Bulletin*, 1986, No. 73/74 (1986), pp. 65-71

Published by: Polskie Towarzystwo Socjologiczne (Polish Sociological Association)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44816241>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Polish Sociological Bulletin*

JSTOR

ALEKSANDER WALLIS

## Functions of Architecture

### 1. Working Definition

By an architectural object I understand a designed, built-up setting of a distinguished physical space intended for a definite use by individuals, social groups or communities. Thanks to the architectural setting, a distinguished space becomes capable of satisfying various social needs, and is transformed from a physical into a cultural space.

The peculiar quality of architectural objects is that they are capable of satisfying both biological and cultural social needs at once. Buildings which fail to satisfy cultural needs are not architecture.

By "architecture", I shall mean individual objects and their complexes, including urban complexes.

### 2. Functions

Every architectural object has its basic utility function expressed in its colloquial name, such as a cottage, a house, a residential building, a sky-scraper, a temple, a factory, a shipyard, a theatre, a stadium, a railway station, etc. At the same time, every object additionally performs a number of public functions whose meaning goes beyond its strictly utilitarian role. The ability to satisfy all of these needs, I call the functions of architecture.

The complete set of functions in question developed at an early stage in the evolution of architecture and was fully shaped in antiquity. On the other hand, the development of societies in different periods and places accounts for the changes in the ways architecture has performed its functions, and for the ensuing transformations of architectural forms and styles.

It must be stressed that all the functions of architecture have a social character. Besides, they should not be confused with problems inherent in the creation of architecture, i.e. the sphere of technics, technology and economics.

### 3. Classification of the Functions of Architecture

Universal classifications may be troublesome. Likewise in this particular case a specialist classification may turn out to be more useful. Interest in architecture springs from a great many viewpoints: its problems are perceived in different ways by historians, geographers, sociologists and architects. Because of this, I am not going to fight for the ideal classification. On the contrary, the classification I propose will be useful

primarily for analyses of the social role of architecture. The names proposed for the individual functions are treated as working suggestions, and better proposals will be taken into account.

The functions of architecture

- 
1. Protective
  2. Distributive-organizational
  3. Worldview associated :
    - a. identification
    - b. prestige
    - c. political
    - d. ideological
    - e. philosophical
    - f. cumulative-structuralizing
  4. Catalytic
  5. Artistic
  6. Economic
- 

The above classification may be simplified or elaborated. The worldview, catalytic and artistic functions may be termed cultural ones. At the same time, each of the distinguished functions may be split into more detailed ones.

#### 4. General Remarks

For cognitive purposes, we distinguish, name and analyse the individual functions of architecture. In fact, all of them blend within an individual work; they interpenetrate and at times express one another (for instance, the prestige of a building is expressed through the beauty of its shapes). This applies in particular to the worldview functions which make up an indivisible whole.

It is easier to distinguish a given function and assess its meaning than to learn the mechanisms and rules it obeys. The development of knowledge about the individual functions has been uneven, and in some cases it is still unsatisfactory. The catalytic function, for instance, has been studied in a systematic way for no more than ten years.

Every society has a definite axiology which it applies, among other things, to the closed and open spaces it employs. Axiology has a decisive effect on the spatial behaviour of society. Axiology as such depends both on the historic past of a given society and on its affiliation with broader cultural spheres (European or Asiatic, Catholic or Orthodox, Mediterranean or Scandinavian, etc.). Architecture is the field which enables every society to materialize its own systems of spatial values. This happens on different levels of social structure, a family, a rural commune or an urban district, a religious group, a metropolitan community, etc. At the same time, the development of architecture leads to the enrichment of architectural culture and a given society's axiology linked with space.

#### 5. Particulars

The protective function, from too high or too low temperatures, rainfall, snowfall, etc., from the fauna and flora from the immediate and

distant surroundings, finally, from unwelcome individuals and hostile communities, is performed by all architectural objects (there are exceptions to the rule, e.g. the traduation towers at Ciechocinek). The biological, mental and social existence of the individual and society as a whole depends on these functions. Moreover, they enable the individual and society as a whole to develop successfully in all three spheres.

The distributive-organizational function likewise belongs to the universal qualities of architecture. Every object of architecture distributes human behaviour and activity within its own space. In this sense, architecture is a great organizer of various aspects of life: family life, production, religious life, political life, cultural life, sporting life, etc. Architects compose the space of the individual buildings on the basis of various branches of knowledge ranging from value systems established in the social consciousness, through building regulations and personal specialized knowledge to their personal experience. Because the role of architects consists of the introduction of their own ideas into designs, this often leads to clashes with the existing systems of social values.

Distributive-organizational problems connect architecture and town-planning to a greater degree than any other functions. No wonder that plans for the ideal cities worked out during the Renaissance, and 20th-century designs for the cities of the future are linked primarily with this particular function.

Together with the other branches of culture: language, science, humanities and art, architecture participates in the formation of intellectual, emotional and moral values which add up to man's image of society, the world and the position he occupies in it. This is the essence of the worldview functions of architecture. They concern several sectors of social consciousness, of which below.

The identification function corresponds to the intense urge of individuals, social groups and entire communities to identify with selected objects and values. Depending on the social group, the need for identification embraces values of a family, ancestral, local, institutional, municipal, religious, professional, regional, ethnic, racial or national range. The repertory of important identification values includes architectural works, urban landscapes and whole cities, as well as selected styles and periods of national architecture. In every society, objects of architecture are both objects of identification and symbols of the social ranges listed above. An architectural work may become an identification object both because of its remarkable artistic values and because of the representative function it performs for a given cultural sphere. To quote a native example: the manor house has made a career as a symbol of Polishness. An object devoid of marked artistic values may have an identification value for individuals or small groups (for example, a family home). The values in question are so universal and have been so spontaneously and unconsciously accepted that we only become fully aware of the phenomenon when we face unfamiliar architecture.

Identification with works of architecture may result from generation affiliations. Generations particularly aware of their lack of a link with the architecture of the past are anxious to substitute contemporary architectural forms for out dated ones. This happened both when Art Nouveau architects fought against historical styles and 19th-century eclecticism, and when, a quarter of a century later, the new architectural

avant-garde contested both Art Nouveau and the whole 19th century.

The need for identification values gives rise to definite patterns and formal canons in architecture. They are particularly important in buildings with considerable ideological significance. This primarily applies to sacred buildings. Confronting a temple, we have no doubt about its affiliation with Roman Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, Judaism, Islam or other religions.

The prestige function is linked with the sense of position that an individual, a group, a community or an institution occupies in the local or general social structure. The prestige, hence also the meaning and respect that the given individual (group, institution) publicly enjoys in comparison with that enjoyed by other individuals (groups, institutions) is strictly linked (though not identical) with his political position. Because of this, the prestige of architectural works has been used since time immemorial to represent the political status of various subjects of power. The dependence, however, is not reciprocal. The prestige of a theatre building, a railway station or a hotel, not to mention a tenement building or a cottage, is not necessarily linked with political symbolism.

The prestige and political functions of architecture are materialized by a limited repertory of strikingly obvious methods. They include: relatively large-scale buildings (this solution was known prior to the pyramids); conspicuous localization in the landscape; use of forms with historically established symbolism (e.g. colonnades); artistic decoration of façades; elaborate driveways, stairs and gates; facing with valuable materials. The relatively limited set is used in countless variations. The prestige and political differentiation of architecture corresponds to the prestige and political differentiation of society. That is why these functions are so important, and that is why they are so effective in outshining other meanings of architecture.

In its most outstanding achievements and mediocre works alike, architecture expresses ideas which occupy an important position in our understanding of the world. Architecture shapes our image of such concepts as power, duration, mass, form, continuity, peace, tensions, dynamism, sublimity, harmony, grandeur, contrasts, rationality, irrationality, and many others. It forms our concepts of beauty and ugliness, novelty and originality. The role of architecture is not confined to evoking the basic, elementary concepts in us. In contact with buildings of rich, complex forms, our mind combines the individual concepts and emotions into more complex intellectual and emotional sets. We naturally associate these sets with the purpose of the individual buildings. The association between definite ideas and complex wholes, on the one hand, and the purposes or contents of the buildings, on the other, accounts for our perception of architectural forms in terms of definite symbols and values. The vastness, complex shapes, rhythm, dynamism, slenderness and loftiness of a gothic cathedral conjure up images and emotions of supernatural sacred contents. An accomplished Renaissance building gives an impression of peace, balance, harmony, nature simplicity, power and accessibility. These values may be understood both in aesthetic and social terms. A smooth, whitewashed convent wall, devoid of any openings and marks, secluded and mute, is a symbol of a closed world accessible only to the clergy. For the sake of simplicity, I have not taken into account the semantic elements of architecture (sculptures, bas-reliefs, stained-

glass windows, coats of arms, allegories et al.) whose presence enriches and enhances the expression of buildings.

The conceptual, emotional and symbolic expression of architecture presented above very briefly, has two aspects: its worldview-and-philosophic role, and its ideological role. However, close their interrelation, they are by no means identical. The ideological expression of architecture is easier to grasp. In the most obvious cases, a fortress, a prison, a parliament building, a temple, a bank, a hotel, or a department store, are public buildings of evident purpose and character, whose forms are full of ideological expression. Most probably, the perception of these contents is often emotional and non-verbal, yet their ideological impact is unquestionable.

The ideological expression of architecture refers exclusively to relations occurring in the social world; it manifests a nation's multifarious differentiation, its hierarchies and prevailing powers; it gives an image of accessible and elitist institutions, of values revealed in the past and present, of national, regional, class and professional symbols.

The impact of architecture upon the philosophic views of individuals is more complex. Here our understanding of nature and the universe, man's position in the former and the latter, elementary concepts of our existence come into play. I am not familiar with research on the subject. It would be difficult to accept, however, that architecture does not affect our image of the division of the world into sacred and secular values, our understanding of the concepts of continuity and duration, our apprehension of time and space, our discrimination between nature and culture, our discovery of the language of symbols and our perception of history. As I have said, architecture alone does not form the human mind and imagination, yet its role does seem to be quite considerable in this sphere. I believe that it was much greater in the past, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, than it is today.

Architectural works last for centuries not because they have been made of stone, wood, bricks or concrete, but because of their high artistic and cultural value. They cause outstanding works to acquire the status of inviolable buildings first in the public opinion, then often on the strength of law. This means that they are conserved and undergo repairs, and that they have immunity from being pulled down, or being drastically reconstructed, and having their immediate surroundings being transformed in a way likely to endanger their cultural functions. Has it not been for the status of infrangibility, most of the outstanding works of the past would have long been demolished for building materials. The durability of buildings also has an economic aspect. A nation's material wealth is not the result of the efforts of a single or even a few generations. This applies especially to architectural objects. When we think about the affluence of France, we also mean her architecture of the last ten centuries. When we think of Italy, we look back to the Renaissance, even to Antiquity. One may argue, however, that the above is true of the foremost specimens, of which there are thousands, but which do not encompass the whole of the architectural heritage. Indeed, but if we consider architecture of a lower rank, we realize that for the last few centuries it has contributed to the material foundations of most historic cities. Hence the durability of architecture may be viewed both from a cultural and economic angle.

The cumulation of architectural values plays a significant role in the formation of the image of every historic centre. It is the basis of its cultural continuity, the source of its historical and artistic accretions. A group of intangible architectural objects becomes the warp for the town-planning compositions of its city. In this way, the constancy of the individual objects stabilizes town-planning complexes, as a result of which the town-planning structure of central areas is preserved. The whole of the qualities described may be termed the cumulative-structuralising function of architecture.

Interiors, façades, as well as entire architectural complexes largely affect social interactions, such as contacts, encounters, conversations, conferences, professional tasks, intimate and public behaviour, daily and holiday procedures, religious and secular observances. Depending on the character and quality of architecture, its influence may be good or bad. Outstanding works permit the individual, group or community successfully to orient their undertakings and experiences. Not only is there a link between the development of religious life and the existence of sacred buildings, but we are able to distinguish buildings that particularly facilitate the concentration, intensity and profundity of religious experience. In this case, just as with its other functions, although architecture is only one of many elements (in addition to painting, sculpture, music, lighting, inscriptions, etc.), its contribution is, nevertheless, important. Good architecture has an analogous effect in all the other spheres of our activity. This is a matter of something more than merely organizational functionality. It contributes an artistic setting for human behaviour, as well as a set of significant cultural values: a sense of mental security, privacy or autonomy of behaviour, ideological and worldview contents corresponding to a given situation, a sense of identification of the action with the place in which it is carried out. The occurrence of the above-described reactions is confirmed by the expressions that we use colloquially with regard to interiors that we find "pleasant", "cosy", "romantic" or "intimate". Architecture may equally well play the opposite role, which is observed both in the case of poor architectural works or buildings with such intentions as prisons. One may feel ill at ease, alienated or lonely in the midst of an architectural landscape, not necessarily in interiors. Hence, in many cases, architecture plays a catalytic role with a negative sign; it acts as an obstacle to human contacts.

Artistic functions may be performed both by buildings whose shapes act as a source of aesthetic experience and by complexes of buildings, at times quite mediocre, which contribute to landscapes with high aesthetic values. Our interest in a building may be completely exhausted by its beauty, sublimity or elegance. The same is true of the beauty of a landscape. The artistic forms of architecture also play an important role in the materialization of its other functions: prestige, worldview and catalytic ones. These aspects of the artistic values of architecture are by no means indifferent to us, as can be seen in many literary descriptions of architecture. Thanks to the efforts of some dozen generations of art historians, and the writings of theorists of architecture (beginning with Vitruvius), its artistic functions are among the best documented and recognized ones.

The economic function of architecture closes our list. We may assume that in most cases this function was intended neither by those who com-

missioned the architecture nor by those who created it. Italian Renaissance artists wanted to erect beautiful, attractive buildings. One can hardly expect them to think about them in economic terms as a source of profit for their cities. The beauty of Italian cities and their monuments have attracted millions of people in our century. Italian architecture of the past has its share in the huge sums derived today from tourism. On the other hand, contemporary hotels are built with the intention of making a profit. American hotels erected by Portman are spectacular examples of this attitude. Their architecture and programme are the factor that attracts crowds of users and tourists. If we accept that the localization of an architectural object is one of its important attributes, the function in question acquires additional meaning. The price of land in countries where it obeys the laws of the market is not uniform over the area of a city. It is particularly high in the central zones where it may reach quite stunning values, which springs from a simple regularity: better localization in urban space contributes to the successful operation of every institution, which may be expressed in economic terms.

### 6. Closing Remarks

This approach to the functions of architecture may be instrumental in the analysis of its historic and contemporary works. Which functions were preferred and which had little influence in the individual periods, and when the functions were balanced, is not without meaning. In this respect, the programme and the practice of socialist realism is interesting. In this case, some worldview functions were treated as superior to others, notably, distributive-organizational, catalytic and artistic ones. It may be judged from the writings and programmes of architects themselves which functions they saw as the motivation responsible for the development of architecture. In turn, an analysis of the architecture of the individual periods indicates when its development depended on the development of protective and distributive functions, and when on the transformations of worldview and artistic functions. An analysis of building on a mass scale seems particularly relevant from our viewpoint. The crisis of contemporary architecture and town-plannings is evidently a crisis of their cultural, worldview and catalytic functions.