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HERMENEUTICS OF CITY

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Abstract:

The article analyzes one of the possible methodologies for the perception of city space. The process is carried out on the basis of the downtown area of Bydgoszcz - an area devoid of these types of studies. In examining the problem, the hypothetical-deductive method was used primarily to justify the claim that hermeneutic thought is appropriate in the process of reading the semiotic message of the city.

Keywords: hermeneutics; language; Bydgoszcz

INTRODUCTION

Umberto Eco wrote that *“even the most elementary architectural configuration is a text”* [U. Eco 2009]. If semiotic thought encapsulates the above view, then how much content can be found in the structure of a fragment of a city as picturesque as downtown Bydgoszcz. But how to read the message contained in it, the hidden meanings and symbols? The hermeneutics of the title may be helpful. Paul Ricoeur claimed that hermeneutics is a reflection on the meaning of a work of art, a basic method of understanding the products of culture.

The world of urban space is sometimes referred to as a book that can be read in a variety of ways, taking into account the inner richness of the subject of cognition. A representative of the Tartus-Moscow school, Vladimir Toporov explored the spatial structures and areas of memory he found in the historical quarters of St Petersburg. The Russian semiotician saw that the symbols and meanings contained in the urban space perform an integrating function for the local community and at the same time crystallise the urban layout. The city is an accumulator of collective memory, in which the process of translation of the object into the natural language of subjective discourse takes place. The content of meanings and codes should be subject to



Fig. 1. Międzywodzie on the Młyńska Island;
source: photo by the author

a reading, the breadth of which can grow out of a hermeneutic tinged with holistic thought.

In the reflections of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, there is a suggestion to include aesthetics in the hermeneutic current. "All hermeneutics," Ricoeur wrote, "derives from this passage of the event into the sense, for the sense infinitely transcends the utterance conceived as an event." [P. Ricoeur 2010]. This position is linked to the mechanism of perception of a work of art, which emerges through the phenomenon of perceived beauty, from the path of the search for truth. Such an optic grows out of the Platonic triad that defines the phenomenon of art.

Do Polish cities contain elements of beauty, goodness and truth? Surely yes, but one needs to be able to perceive them and to read the message they contain. It is then necessary to be in tune, as Juliusz Żórawski wrote, with one's inner field. An area full of content that can be found and read in the message it contains is also the inner-city waterfront of Brda in Bydgoszcz. This is the 'linear living room' of this city, full of the harmonious coexistence of diverse, cubically materialised eras. Several of the buildings constructed here have grown to become symbols of Bydgoszcz. The Late Gothic cathedral stands opposite the modernist NOVA Opera House, which prepared the stylistically contemporary ground for the establishment of the BRE Bank.

The harmonious syntacture¹ of this part of the city encourages the analysis of existing spatial relations. However, it is worth remembering that scientific knowledge constitutes only a part of the information necessary for the full perception and understanding of the image of the city. It is impossible to consciously commune with the existing urban structure without being aware that we are dealing with the broadly understood concept of life in culture, which should also be interpreted through the prism of history. "Gadamer often refers to this knowledge as tradition, but it seems that the equally often used concept of transmission (*Überlieferung*) is more accurate, understood as a cultural transmission, as historically shaped cultural forms in which we live" [K. Ajdukiewicz 2006].

Looking through the broad framework of history, from the Middle Ages to the present, draws the image of the historical City Centre of Bydgoszcz. It would be advisable to consider the issue of the meanders of the context of objects accumulating over the years in the expression of the city. Its broad spectrum can be understood thanks to hermeneutics,

1. MEANDERS OF THOUGHT

Having come into contact with philosophical matter, one may ask to what extent this experience can influence the reading of the city's message? Martin Heidegger wrote that "Philosophy by its very nature is something esoteric to itself, it is neither made for nor digestible by the common man. It is philosophy only insofar as it opposes precisely reason, and especially sound human reason, by which is meant the local and temporal limitation of the human species; in relation to it [reason] the world of philosophy in and for itself is a world of defiance." [M. Heidegger 2009]. The broad spectrum of philosophical issues, dating back to Socrates and Plato, will only dilute the subject matter.

Accordingly, it is assumed that philosophical thought supporting the contemporary reading of the urbanised space message is limited to a sketchy application of the following strands: phenomenology, as well as philosophy of language and dialogue, all of which are intended to be tied together by a hermeneutic buckle, which is the ability to understand texts, including the text of the city.

According to the encyclopaedic definition, "hermeneutics [gr.] – is a discipline concerned with the criticism, study, explication, and internal interpretation of written sources in order to establish their correct text and proper meaning" [K. Rosner 1997]. "Hermeneutics would even have to be understood so broadly as to encompass the entire sphere of art and its problematics." [U. Eco 2009]. In the nineteenth century, hermeneutics acquired, through the dissemination of the thought of F.E.D. Schleiermacher, the title of a universal science, becoming a model of interpretative skill, applicable to all human sciences. The field of humanities is a constant component of the architectural world and also translates into the perception of urban space. Paul Ricoeur called hermeneutics a philosophical reflection on all forms of expression, e.g. myths, religious symbols, works of art, including the image of the city which takes variously materialised forms, full of ephemeral, verbal and emotional messages.

In order to understand the urban landscape one encounters, it is necessary to explore it in depth, reject any pre-understanding and undergo an eidetic reduction.

After delving into the thing itself, in our case getting to the heart of the architectural object and its spatial relationship with the surrounding matter, one must attempt to verbalise one's experience, to translate it into natural language.

¹ A term coined by Robert Łucka to denote the study of the mutual formal-spatial relationships of the elements that make up an architectural volume and urban space, with reference to linguistic syntactics.

Michael Graves used to say, *“Architecture for me is a matter of cultural symbols and how they are expressed in architectural form”* [T. Barucki 2005].

The perception of form is always individualised, dependent on the subject’s wealth of knowledge and emotionality based on the history and tradition of a given social group. If we are talking about the content of the text and the transmission of architectural forms, it is impossible to go further in the search for the synergy of cultural areas without referring to semiotics, to the reading of the meanings contained in spatial signs, because *“in this research we approach cognitive issues from the side of language, that is, when we practice semantic epistemology”* [P. Ricoeur 2010]. An important direction in following this course was indicated, among others, by Vyacheslav Ivanov’s take on the issue of the semiotics of urban space as the cultural universe of man. The layout of a city, its topography and its material substrate, become relevant as soon as they contain a load of values and meanings, which are consciously and unconsciously experienced by the city’s inhabitants and can lead to the crystallisation of its “soul”.

Hermeneutics is concerned with analysing cultural phenomena, including architecture.

St Petersburg’s genius loci has been addressed by Vladimir Toporov in many of his works. The former Russian capital, due to the clear chronological divisions of its spatial structure, is a convenient object for hermeneutical analyses. All the more so when there is a fascination with the city, or even more, a love of it. *“Love does not limit itself to spreading all this variety of affect around itself like a vast field of gravity, but creates between them [the subject and the architecture – R.Ł.] a certain ascending and descending spiral through which it runs in both directions”* [K. Ajdukiewicz 2006]. Visible areas of memory are a necessary condition for the existence of culture, which becomes a link between different eras and makes the disintegration into chronologically isolated layers impossible. Symbols contained in urban spaces, often with hidden meanings, fulfil an integrating and crystallising function in the structure of the urban layout. In this edition, culture appears pictorially, as a sign system whose roots of communication lie in the history necessary for a holistic, hermeneutic reading of the visual message. The city is an accumulator of collective memory, where a process of translation from the semiotics of the object to the semiotics of discourse takes place, where often, in a creative way, the past meets the present. The whole image of culture contained in the city can be considered from the point of view of a particular piece of information, from the point of view of a system of social codes *“...society is based precisely on human relations...”* [B. Skarga 2009].

2. DOWNTOWN BYDGOSZCZ

This bygone world can easily be seen at the junction of Mostowa and Focha streets, in the heart of Bydgoszcz. Within this image there exists, on the margins of our country’s urban knowledge, an element of space that is the Brda River flowing through the city.



Fig. 2. Villa in Sielanka; source: photo by the author

Few people have experienced the charms of the local *fin de siècle* or marvelled at the Idyll, a local travesty of Ebenezer Howard’s idea of a garden city, which was built a short distance from the medieval part of the castle founded by Casimir the Great.

Bydgoszcz experienced its economic and architectural upsurge at the turn of the 20th century. It was a time of colourful, bourgeois development of the city,

where the accumulating beauty allowed the then Bydgoszcz (Bromberg) to be called Little Berlin.

The Bydgoszcz castle hosted the following kings of the electoral order: Stefan Batory, Sigismund III Vasa, Władysław IV and Jan Kazimierz. The medieval stronghold survived for centuries, but its existence came to an end during the Swedish Deluge, or more precisely, when Charles Gustav's army was stationed here between 1655 and 1660.

From the 16th to 18th century, the Royal Mint operated in Bydgoszcz, where both cheap boratines and famous denars were minted. Years later, this much-deserved place, located in the very centre of the city, changed its name to the Młyńska (Mill) Island, where several old mills can now be found serving museum and exhibition functions.

The area discussed above: the confluence of Mostowa and Focha Streets, the Brda River, the Old Town, and Wyspa Młyńska (Mill Island) are all located within a square of approximately 800 meters. If, in this area, a passer-by tired of strolling through the stony Old Town Square wishes to take a moment's rest, it is enough to pass one block to find oneself in a green arcadia, on the island, linked by the Brda and Brda Młynówka,

for which today the more appropriate name would be "Museum Island". Inside the historic buildings, visitors can visit the Gallery of Contemporary Art, the Archaeological Collection, the European Money Centre and, above all, the rich collections on display in the Leon Wyczółkowski House. In 2012, the Island was awarded the Best Tourist Product certificate.

On the left bank of the Brda, north of the aforementioned Focha Street, the new Bydgoszcz was built, which includes the already mentioned Sielanka estate. In 1907, urban sketches of the estate were made by Joseph Herman Stübben, the same man who created plans for Dusseldorf, Madrid and Poznań, among others. In them, one can see the fascination with the idea of a garden city,

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly German architects were active in Bydgoszcz, among them: Heinrich Seeling Karl Bergner, Fritz Weidner, Otto Müller, Rudolf Kern. It was a colourful, reflective time, for which the characteristic terms – slogans – became: the crisis of culture, its decay – decadence. The ideas that were alive at the time were vividly portrayed by Stanisław Brzozowski, who introduced the term "cultural solstice" into Polish thought. It was a reflection of the social elite's consciousness at the time, who realised that a certain area of history was inevitably coming to an end, that the old values and ideals had faded, and that nothing could fill the void they left behind.

In the cafés and restaurants of Bydgoszcz, setting up their summer umbrellas in the park by the Old Canal, lively discussions took place about the stagnation of architecture and the derivative nature of neo-styles, among other things. Fritz Weidner, an architect from Bydgoszcz, took the floor and published his views in the "Technische Blätter für Deutschen Osten". This proponent and promoter of Art Nouveau, studied at the end of the 19th century in Berlin. The following were "...known to be his teachers: F. Bellermann - landscape class, W. Streckfuss - perspective, F.O. Kühn - ornament class, Dr. Döbber - art history and classical poetry" [I. Jastrzębska-Puzowska 2000]. On the historicism prevalent in his era, he spoke disapprovingly: "Nowhere is there a room in which we feel comfortable and familiar, in which we fit in, which is furnished in the spirit of our time, which speaks to us in the language of forms that we understand, because it is not our language" [I. Jastrzębska-Puzowska 2000].

How different, full of admiration, are his opinions on Art Nouveau, where one can find, according to F. Weidner, the engaging functionality of Art Nouveau furniture, the experimental beauty of new types of glass in Tiffany's works, or the architectural harmony of the artists' estate in Darmstadt.



Fig. 3. On the Brda Młynówka river; source: photo by the author



Fig. 4. On Młyńska Island, L. Wyczółkowski Museum;
source: photo by the author

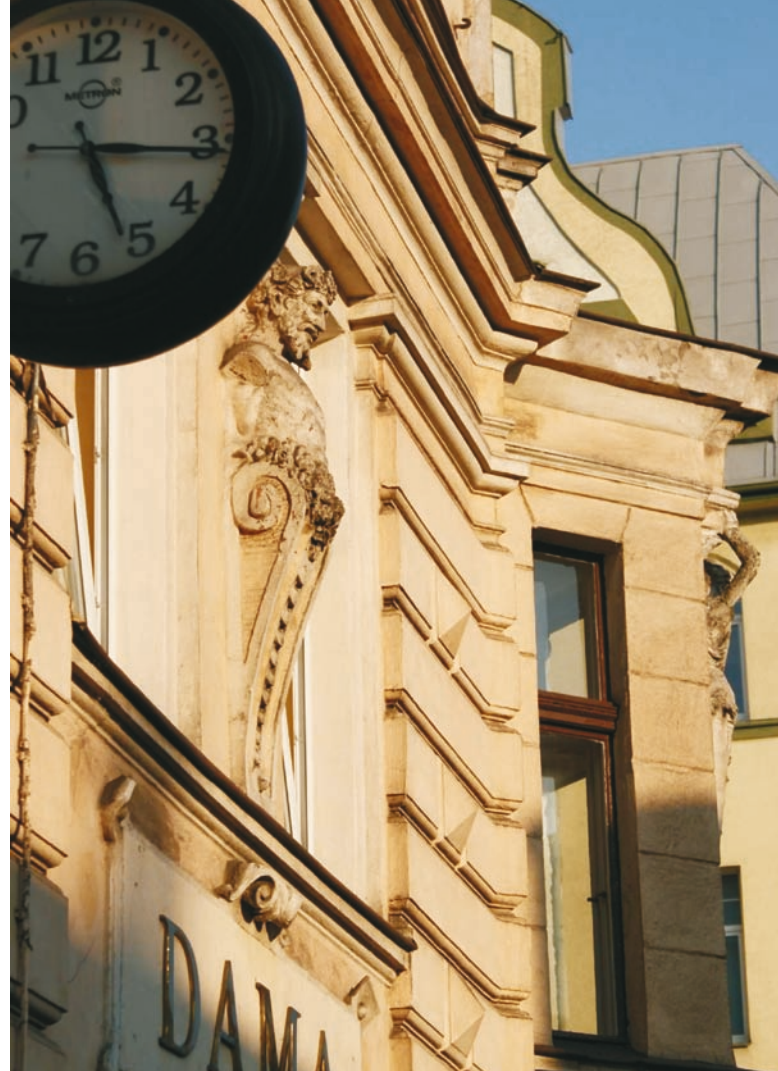


Fig. 5. Neostyles at Gdańska Street; source: photo by the author



Fig. 6. Interwar modernism in Sielanka; source: photo by the author



Fig. 7. Bydgoszcz Art Nouveau, Libelta Street;
source: photo by the author

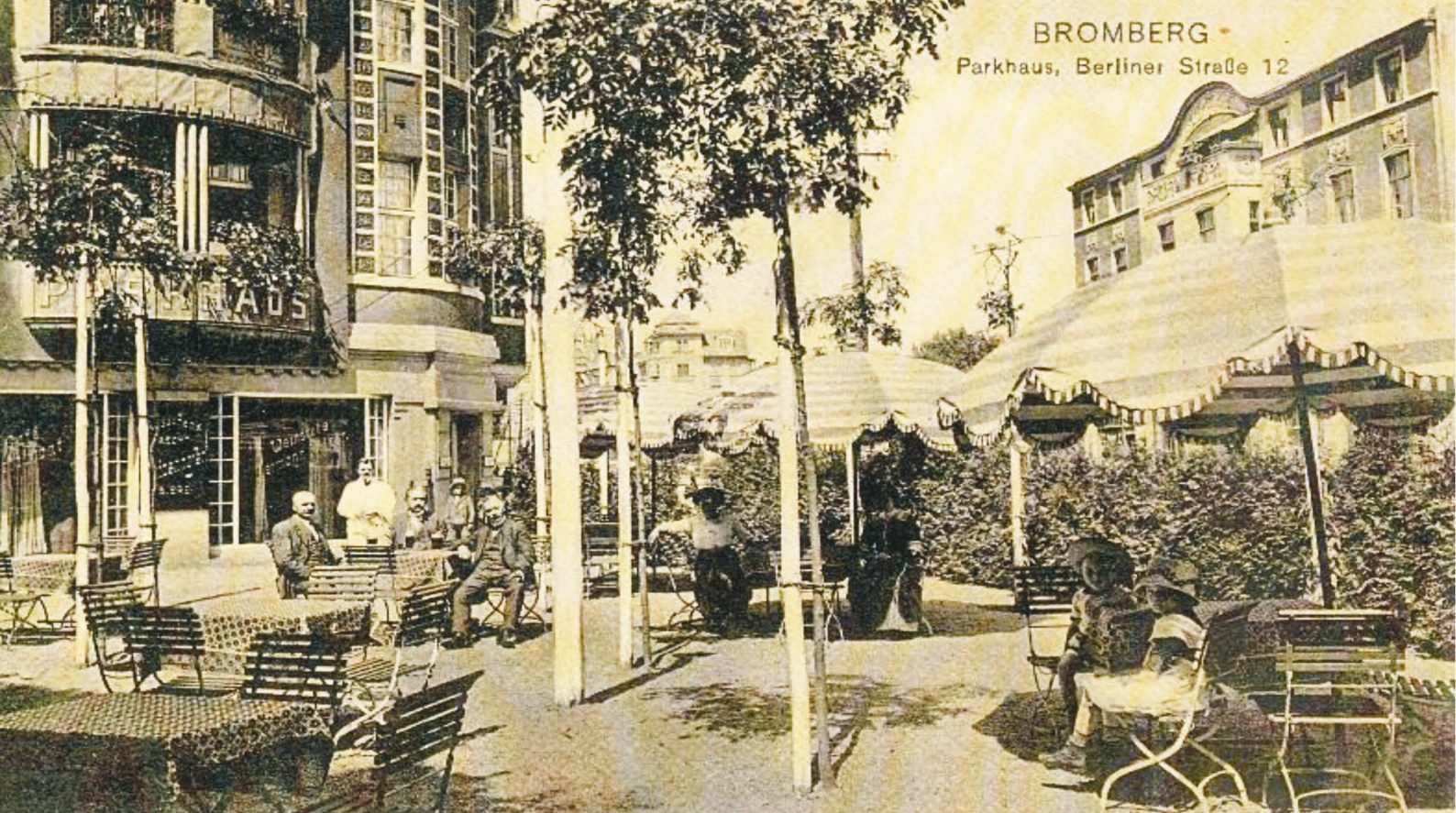


Fig. 8. Parkhaus – café garden, 1914; source: [Z. Hojka 2008]



Fig. 9. Hotel Pod Orłem; source: photo by the author

Evaluated from the perspective of the passing of time, fierce polemics lose their energy, arguments become blunted. One can say that eclectic architecture, often ridiculed, is a gift of history because it filled the urban void of past eras in Bydgoszcz and, for Polish conditions, created a vast space of the city in which it is easier to see examples of Art Nouveau and Modernism in a beautiful setting. Without the neo-styles and its gardens, the city would have been deprived of its architectural charm and palatable urban substance. The stylistic and national diversity has resulted in a colourful cultural mosaic of a city which, in its definition, *“brings people from different corners of the world together because they are so different from each other and therefore mutually useful, not because they are homogeneous and think alike”* [B. Skarga 2009].

From the beginning of the twentieth century, a creative trace was also left along the Brda River by a large group of Polish architects, whose works were embedded in both eclecticism and the organic forms of Art Nouveau. After the return of Bydgoszcz to the mother country in 1920, a creative “wind from the sea” could be felt in the city, which was modernism, imported mainly from the emerging city of Gdynia. The activities of the Poles did not lead to a spatial cacophony of forms born of a competitive spirit, but to a harmonious synergy of time and matter emerging from a love of the city’s diversity.

The memory and works of such artists as Józef Świącicki, Bogdan Raczkowski, Bronisław Jankowski and Jan Kossowski have remained alive in the city, and

after World War II, Juliusz Żórawski and Prof. Wiktor Zin, among others, materialised their design ideas here.

This mosaic of nations and styles has resulted in the existence of a charming city, full of historicisms, Art Nouveau, picturesque parks and a harmoniously changing architectural diversity. However, it is a city that still lacks a sense of identity. The Gdansk-based writer Pawel Huelle said of such cities that they have a discontinuous history, full of gaps and unexpected twists of historical action. Bydgoszcz was first part of Polish statehood, then, at the time of the Partitions of Poland, it was subjected to Germanisation, then repolonisation (after World War I), then during World War II it was subjected to Germanisation again, only to end with another repolonisation.

Despite this, there are places here where time has stood still, where you can imagine the life of the city between the wars and in the *fin de siècle*, when the factory owners, coffee and cigar sellers looked as Luis Buñuel depicted them in his excellent film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.

3. IN THE CIRCLE OF HERMENEUTICS

From the picture of Bydgoszcz sketched above, one can clearly deduce the reality that can be understood by the subject in its natural language. One can live with the conviction that *“in language there are preserved human experiences transmitted from generation to generation, containing something extremely valuable, and even that language itself, this condition of culture, and perhaps of thinking, points to what is essential, what flows from the very source”* [B. Skarga 2005]. According to U. Eco *“culture is signifying and communicating”* [U. Eco 2009]. Images are subject to naming, subject to analysis, which is a verbal message. In the specifics of the reading of the content of words contained in space discussed here, it should be said that we are dealing with an immanent process. After all, language is a monologue. The subject, wishing to discover the truth of a given reality/space, enters with it on the plane of play, the specifics of which L. Wittgenstein wrote about in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Aristotle stated that a game can



Fig. 10. Mostowa St.; source: [Z. Hojka 2008]



Fig. 11. The Cathedral; source: photo by the author

also be played for the sake of participating in it. The game is most often intended to lead to the discovery of truth, to an attempt to understand a particular work of art. This phenomenon can proceed on the basis of a dialogue between subject and object. Martin Buber wrote about such a mechanism, where I – the subject, riddles you. In our case, he riddles the architecture. *“Every concrete situation, every thought and every event appeals to me, riddles me, demands that I receive this riddling of my You and respond to it, that I enter into a relationship with it.”* Into a relationship with the object, which is architecture, and all this can take place with metaphysical participation – He. *“According to Buber, man can believe in values only when he*

has found them, not invented them, that is, they are revealed to him in his encounter with God, and never when he arbitrarily chooses them from among existing possibilities” [B. Skarga 2005]. Gadamer points out that if the purpose of the game is to try to find the way to the truth, it should then be taken very seriously. Otherwise this game is spoiled, it does not then get to the point. In the case of urbanist layouts, it is essential to evaluate the architecture in its existing context, with reference to the *genius loci*. A cardinal mistake is the lack of creative dialogue of the work with the spatial environment.

Gadamer wrote that through coexistence with art, one most easily arrives at a way of revealing truth that is impossible to grasp through scientific reasoning. If, in a given urban layout, one begins to play a game with the architectural substance desiring to know its historical basis and its prerogatives, which encouraged us to dialogue, this proves that the work of art has existed for the subject. At the root of the process of cognition is the conceptually and emotionally vague image of the creator. There is a two-way feedback relationship between both the viewer of the space and the creator of the architecture. Nothing is stable, in the sense of a message, in the found reality. The subject’s consciousness is changeable over time, so the world around him is subject to transformation. Movement, present everywhere, causes variability in the reading of objects, including architecture. However, there is no encouragement of relativism in these statements. The stabilizer is tradition and the awareness of history and the dialogue undertaken with it.

In addition to the historicisms existing at the intersection of Mostowa and Focha Streets in Bydgoszcz, two contemporary buildings are present in its riverside image, bringing a fresh breath of modern architecture to the established urban context.

Bydgoszcz is changeable. However, this is not a reproach, but an advantage, what, among other things, is its charm, and its diversity is what gives the city a sense of fullness and color. Hiding on the right side of the river is the late medieval cathedral, surprising in its colorful polychromes.

Located on the opposite bank is the modernist Nova Opera House by architects Jozef Chmiel and Andrzej Prusiewicz. Built for more than 30 years, the temple of Terpsychora brought majestically into the historical space of this part of Bydgoszcz a 20th century style. It became a distinctive breakthrough, thanks to which modernity arrived on the Brda waterfront. It appeared as a contribution to the meeting and dialogue as *“the sphere of interpersonal (existence), the sphere of mutual being opposite”* [B. Skarga 2009].



Fig. 12. The Nova Opera House; source: photo by the author



Fig. 13. Międzywodzie overlooking the Opera Nova; source:photo by the author



Fig. 14. BRE Bank, Loyd's Palace and granaries on the Brda River; source: photo by the author

A mark in the city's silhouette are the BRE Bank "granaries" by architects Andrzej Bulanda and Włodzimirz Mucha. They were built just down the street from the original merchant ones, where grain was stored before its onward journey to Gdansk. In this case, the architecture communicates its clear message through spatial forms. The technical detailing of the contemporary twin shapes is highlighted by the immediate vicinity of the fine neo-Renaissance Loyd Palace. One should not speak of stylistic contrast in this situation. Just as the towers of the Trinia dei Monti church are drawn against the blue of the southern sky, so here, the cool surface of the bank is the backdrop for the palazzo, sculpted and harmonious in its proportions.

As you can see, by contrasting and coexisting two worlds, the coolness of modernity and the warmth of a bygone era, one arrives at the sense of completeness, the unity of opposites, about which Nicolaus of Cusa wrote so much. On the façade of the building in question, the openness and smoothness of glass is juxtaposed with fire-painted ceramic. The Association of Architects of the Republic of Poland appreciated the BRE Bank, its form and the message contained in it, naming it an icon of contemporary Polish architecture. Bydgoszcz has gained yet another gateway, through which it is easier to introduce a new style into the space of the streets whose course was laid out during the reign of Casimir III the Great.



Fig. 15. Mural on the wall of the Brain Club on Gdanska Street; source: photo by the author

CONCLUSIONS

This is what is most beautiful about cities, when in their squares and streets it is possible to find a harmonious coexistence of overlapping eras; when in the urbanized space one can find objects worthy of being called *poetarchia*². It is necessary to go beyond logic, not to stop thinking or to give in to the reign of sentiment, but on the contrary, to think more, “*more source subordinating it to being*” [B. Skarga 2009]. “*Kant, in ‘Anthropology’ defined imagination as the ability to see eye-to-eye even without the presence of an object*” [R. Scruton 2010]. There is no, so typical of totalitarian systems, stylistic one-dimensionality and formal weariness. Sick ideas bear degenerate fruits, among which, with existential difficulty, people, despite everything, seek normality and the proper order of the world. It is difficult to conclude that templated modernism in architecture sends us back to understand its essence. If even so, it is a shallow content, serfing over the depth of the transmission of thought embedded in the culture of a given community, whose history is multifaceted and multicolored. Education needs to be spread, with “*the goal of storing the common stock of knowledge and continually paving the channels through which we can bring that knowledge*” [R. Scruton 2010].

In the area of Downtown Bydgoszcz, one can see the regularity that “*our daily life is a constant walking through the simultaneity of the present and the past*” [H.G. Gadamer 1993.]. The muse of memory – Mnemosyn – cannot be forgotten in moments of communing with architecture. Syncretic thinking and such a view of reality lead to the birth of added value, to the philosophical finding of what E. Husserl mentioned, that which is common, even in the midst of diametrically opposed things. Nicholas of Cusa wrote about the unity of opposites, about the elementary connections of forms, “*especially those which quite generally are constitutive of the deductive unity of theorems*” [E. Husserl 2006]. One should seek synthetic delight in the beauty of architecture existing in the city space. The Platonic definition of beauty may then be present, which, according to the philosopher, flashes and attracts, a result of a glimpse of the visibility of the ideal, and from there it is

close to the truth. Such truth, about the synergy of past and present times, about the communication of spaces and the complexity of their hermeneutic reading, can also be found in the area of the riverside center of Bydgoszcz.

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² A term authored by R. Łucka meaning the presence of a poetic element in the architectural form.