FUNCTION OF TIME IN NARRATION OF CONTEMPORARY CITIES

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Abstract

Contemporary perception of time differs significantly from historical one. The contemporary time is speeding, divergent, meticulously quantified with abstract units, disconnected from perception of space. Differences between day and night, physical and digital, far and near are constantly, gradually vanishing.

With this new time perception, contemporary urban space has evolved. Cities extend, their centres melt; deallocation, speed and light images explode interior-exterior oppositions. The space aspires to the speed of light. Shizophrenic, kinetic reality, where *signifiant* leaves *signifié* is characterized by discrepancies: economic barriers, fences, and incessant opening into virtual reality.

Time is a factor joining events in narration and in architecture. Chronology of events is shattered in contemporary literature, introducing strategies of retrospection, anticipation and anachrony. The situation in contemporary architecture is similar. These strategies appear also in contemporary cities: retrospection in historic monuments, anticipation in avant-garde, "science-fiction" buildings and anachrony in non-places on the verge of physical and virtual reality. Lines of events in a plot of a city's narration has changed. Certain duality of a contemporary city space appears: perception of sheer time in ruins, monuments, and a temporal flow of events-spaces.

Along with the speeding urban organism, an idea of slow city spaces has appeared. The idea of a city "tasted" with senses, replacing the terms of acceleration, progress and change with: slowness, reflection, variety, essence; effects of reflective attitude towards reality, traces of resistance against the inevitable loss of beauty in contemporaneity. A phenomenological approach as a response for the speeding city reality.

Thisarticle analyses affiliations between the contemporary perception of time, narrative strategies and city space.

Introduction

Time is connected with a city not only at its functional level – as a measure – but also as a philosophical concept. The concept of time is inextricably linked with a narrative fabula, defined as "a series of events" spread out on a timeline. Simultaneously, although fine arts have been

divided into the ones developing over time such as literature, poetry and music, and the ones seemingly immobile (sculpture, painting and other graphic arts) into which belongs architecture, the apparent immobility of some arts is based on illusion of monumental nature of their reception. Although architecture belongs to the visual arts (commonly characterized as "immutable, still artifacts") its perception isn't timeless, but according to Mieke Bal related to monumental time –"temporality that denies (…) historical time and aspires to eternity" (Bal, 2009, p.77). In a city – understood as a work of art – time appears monumental, but also unfolds before its flâneurs sequences of events.

In history, perception of time presumed its relative nature. Time was represented as of some particular, perceptible length, measured at the base of natural phenomena. Traditionally, time was linked to space. Cities, on the other hand, were created as events of a particular story. Castra Romana told the tale of Roman legions and the ritual of founding cities. Baroque public spaces reflected the discourse of power, processional spaces – religious beliefs. All these narratives were linear (there existed also a direct link between the city space and the time; Joseph Rykwert in The Seduction of Place. The History and Future of the City presents example of towns created and functioning as solar clocks).

Juhani Pallasmaa sees a city as an instrument of metaphysical functions, too complex to be thoroughly imagined and described –„a maze of clarity and opacity" (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 142). The beginning of the twentieth century introduced "the beauty of speed", recognizing acceleration as an advantage (primary), and thereby destroying the unity of time and space.

Contemporary perception of time

Contemporary perception of time differs significantly from historical one. The contemporary time is speeding, divergent, meticulously quantified with abstract units. Our reality has disconnected it from perceiving space, using conjunctions of the two elements solely for measuring (obligatory for commercial purposes) which is illustrated by the terms of "spatializing time" and "temporalizing space" (Pallasmaa, 2007). Gradually vanishing have been differences between day and night, physical and digital spheres, far and near. Practically all new digital media have introduced a new genre of time –virtual one, passing in digital reality.

Trade in time is a characteristic feature of contemporaneity (the measure treated as exchangeable goods), as well as shortening and lengthening of the time used for various activities. The issue of density of time has been impaired in modern times, leading to the phenomenon of temporary schizophrenia. The acceleration causes the act of "killing time" and killing time means killing space. According to Zygmunt Bauman, postmodernism is time of disappearing space and using temporality as a tool of conquering spatiality – caused by new technologies. To all these above mentioned elements may be added the issue of duration – time and space understood as products of experience according to Bergson and Bernard Tschumi (for whom every representation of time in space requires duration). Time is essentially trigeminal, combining three realms connected by continuous movement: past, present and future.

Time in narrative

In narration, time is a factor joining elements, ordering each narrative work on two levels – continuity of a text (i.e. a chain of signs) and linearity of a plot (i.e. a chain of events). Contemporary literature has shattered the chronology of events, manipulating with elements of a direction, a distance and a target of time. Strategies of retrospection, anticipation, and anachrony – aimed at generating tension, emphasizing certain issues and interpretations, causing particular aesthetical or psychological effects – are used by authors so often, that chronological chains of events evolved into literary tools used for a specific purposes. Whereas retrospection is a quite common literary strategy, anticipation appears in narrative less frequently. It alludes to a further course of a story. Its aim is to create tension or to express a fatalistic vision of future. Anachrony (anticipation within retrospection or retrospection within anticipation) is a construction of time so disordered, that it cannot be deeply analysed.

Mieke Bal defines in narrative different kinds of time of different thickness, present in human life and conflicted with each other (Bal, 2009, pp.77,78). "Day-to-day time", "monumental time", "historical time", "time of daily events" and "micro time" – all appear in literature, whereas works of architecture strive for eternity, operating with "monumental time". Therefore, the works seem to be continuous and immobile, but like in literature, an architecture user also faces events, at least defined since the Tshumi's thesis from Red is not a colour. Thus, a city and its architecture have two different measures – time of creating and time of perception. Buildings are perceived variously on different paths of moving around spaces. Architecture is full of quotes from the past and references to the future – i.e. anticipations based on aesthetics taken from science fiction.

The way to the space of the contemporary city

Along with separating various methods of use, Modernism introduced fragmentation of space, disregarding the material resistance of cities to segregations of their functions. According to Juhani Pallasmaa, Modern buildings signified acceleration of time, deconstructive structures – even greater acceleration, and the newest, contemporary architecture is – by its nature – sped up and neurotic (Pallasmaa, 2007). Traditionally time was "fastened" in buildings and in projects. Buildings were designed in particular time and "caught" this particular time, telling stories their origins. Simultaneously, buildings operated rather as environments of events than single events. Contemporary architecture lost the memorizing function.

Paul Virilio in *The Overexposed City* construed airports as a new genre of space – architecture of surveillance and artificial freedom, in fact fully controlled with electronic devices. Similarly, the electronic surveillance and electronic gates have replaced architectural city gates, depriving the cities of space borders, the *here-there* opposition and thus – paradoxically – time continuity. "Deprived of objective boundaries, the architectonic element begins to drift and float in an electronic ether, devoid of spatial dimensions, but inscribed in the singular temporality of an instantaneous diffusion." (Virilio, 2005, p.383) Chronological time was replaced by computerized time; unity and continuity of space without borders is not founded on unity of experienced time.

Lefevbre presents one more change in cities connected with time measures – acceleration, caused by automobile traffic as a ground of transforming experiential, phenomenological space

into abstract space – its simulacrum. For a common driver, for whom possessing space requires minimal emotional input, the flattening reality of cities is seen as a set of fast moving, 2-dimensional pictures. Moving through urban narratives, he perceives only these purely functional elements of the city-text, that inform him about his road; in order to do that, the elements must be turned in the driver's direction (Lefevbre, 2012, p. 313).

Marc Augé claims that each city is a summary of the world, condensation of people from diverse backgrounds, countries of origin and with different status. Metropolises adopt and group people. Simultaneously, omnipresent urbanization is an effect of two processes: globalization (global market and communication necessary to operate the network) and common consciousness (environmental and social) of new solidarities and addictions created by the globalization. These two phenomena, together titled mundialization, resulted in alienation, irrelevant experience of homogeneity and unifying standards – on one hand, the lack of a coherent "costume" for urban tissue amassed over years, and on the other – network shops, banks, restaurants making individual cities indistinguishable from each other; creating schizophrenic experiences.

By the end of the 20th century, narcissism of society was already reflected in architectural urban forms – smooth glass facades. Boundaries have disappeared – the "mystery" between the interior and the exterior. Artificial lighting has blurred differences between day and night. Dematerialization has occurred, along with disintegration, relocation, dozens of ephemeral identities, and dynamic, kinetic urban space. (Rewers, 2005) The narrative of contemporary cities consists of torn spaces and individual times. There is no one single, unified time in the contemporary world. Various kinds of time constitute different time sequences. The place of kinaesthetic urban experience gets the TV screen or the illusive world inside it. The screen does not show reality, does not connect spaces (like doors), or isolate them (like windows) forming boundaries between day and night, external and internal, spectators and their environment (urban space) – but schizophrenically splits reality into the virtual and physical. At the same time it narrows down the field of human experiencing to the sense of vision. Contemporary cities are cities of eyes. There are no real experiences inside them; pacification of a body reshapes reality. It resembles "dulled consciousness, induced by TV" (Pallasmaa, 2007, p.142).

Manhattan (formerly) and Dubai (now) in architectural and urban-planning writings are synonyms of places representative for present-day cities, but there is no need to fly to New York to see negative features of contemporary urban space. The changes can be seen in the old continent, not only in modernist housing estates but also in historic cities. Deprived of its limits, the Augé's city-world is so monstrous that travelling around it by the subway (whether it is Paris, London or Berlin) creates the effect from Virilio's dromology. Furthermore, objects of star-architects – often ignoring their context – can be distinguished only by assigning them to certain images, previously seen on the internet. Colours and shiny planes between them meet demands of reigning ocularcentrism, filled with signs of global corporations – identical in all cities. Indistinguishable, unified commercial interiors do not allow for differentiation (even an answer to the question, on which continent the space is located).

Contemporary city - anticipation

Even further goes "electropolis", and a "new simplicity"[1] of urban architecture, culture created by computers – i.e. electronic devices as machines used for designing and as machines – metaphors; ajar space, offering a variety of sensory experiences and deep meanings, contrasting with the Post-modern "decorated shed". Ewa Rewers used the both terms ("electropolis" and "new simplicity"), characterizing in "Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta." ("Post-polis. Introduction to Philosophy of the Postmodern City") their nature and origin (Rewers, 2005, pp.101-143).

The road to this trend led through the metaphor of the screen – already mentioned, replacing the reality of glass panes of the 1970s. As the first example of this movement Ewa Rewers presents Parisian *Intitut du Monde Arabe*, designed by Jean Nouvel. Glass façades in the cities of the late 20th century were gradually replaced with or transformed into screens and billboards. Such elements simultaneously concealed forms of buildings and presented virtual reality (i.e. visual information, inscriptions, images). Images on screens no longer reflected urban reality. *Signifié* broke the relationship with *signifiant* – like in Baudrillard – making it impossible to build consistent messages, connecting human experiences. Along with film screens now often present in cities (and happenings or installations using film medium more and more frequently today), fiction of images at a distance is created, causing the rupture of time and space. The time and the space are fictional, easy to traverse and to change completely, like during traveling through portals from sci-fi novels. The established culture of the present time gives only momentary pleasure. Along with the generated fiction, arose resistance against dictatorship of screens and of pictures from a distance.

After the epoch of the screen came time of "electropolis". The time of urban architecture, created by the culture of computers, i.e. computer-formed and using the machine imagery. The mobile machine is still a valid metaphor (like in Futurism and Modernism) but now it moves with increasing speed. The current speed is the velocity of a jet plane and from the height of the plane all details blur and disappear. A new utopia is striving for the speed of light is. The speed of light has become the new measure of perfection, thus replacing metaphysics of light (previously influencing architecture) with the physics of light. Various spotlights affecting the art of building in history (i.e. the sun, God, electrical reflectors) have been replaced with fibre optic cables and LED strips, conducting light waves in space and transferring data. The space striving for the speed of light is not completely closed, and it offers various sensory experiences and deep meanings. However, as Frank R. Werner grants the objects of the "new simplicity" deeper, sensual multiplicity of meaning, Ewa Rewers seems to focus on the Werner's negative example of an "autistic individual building", incapable of entering into dialogue with its context (Werner, 2005). Rewers cites John Beckmann, for whom the adjective "deep" refers to proliferation of virtual spaces. The multidimensional space ceases to be what city's inhabitants traverse. The space "traverses them" (Rewers, 2005, p. 139) instead.

The challenge of time means disregarding stability, being in constant motion, speed, dislocation. Signs become more important than architecture, and the architecture is "anti-spatial" and torn between providing a shelter and multiplying virtual spaces – the real world and the digital one.

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[1] The term used by Frank R. Werner may be found i.a. in his article *The 'New Simplicity' – A Problem of Representation in Architecture and Town-Planning? Some Remarks on 'Simplicity' in Architectural Theory.*

The dislocation, speed and light images explode the urban opposition of inside and outside. City façades are screens – rather virtual than actual boundaries. Instead of spatial limits – financial borders inside cities are present in contemporary urban spaces and spatial barriers for some groups of users, preventing equal use.

In the urban organism without borders and perceptive spatial dimensions, drifting in the digital ether, the language of time has overshadowed the language of space. The domination of sings determines the process of creating architecture and eliminates „materiality depth, shadow, opacity" (Pallasmaa, 2012, p.143). This, furthermore, destroys the mystery of discovering unknown, urban elements. This equals disrupted time of city novels, lack of plot, and absence of literary suspense in city narrative. The aesthetics of the city of anticipation is the aesthetics of distance, architecture succumbing to illusion of modern technology, aesthetics of transparency, break and distance; non-existent, cosmic reality.

The work of art, the issue of memory – retrospection

Mark Wigley in the essay „The Architectural Cult of Synchronization" (Wigley, 1999) reports certain memory loss in contemporary architecture; the loss which is reflected in buildings lasting no longer that a human life, and therefore being fragile creatures, no longer holding (storing) memories. The memorializing function of building structures, perceptible in monuments and urban tissue thorough history, has been eliminated and replaced with digital archives. Contemporary societies tend to care more about information than built environments; electronic data are presently better preserved than buildings (objects can be rebuilt, which is evidenced by many various replicas of architecture).

According to artist Sandra Illiescu, time slows down in the presence of works of art. Illiescu introduced „aesthetic time", different from historical time, blending present with past. Karsten Harries in his memorable and controversial essay titled "The terror of Time", describing architectural objects as man-made shelters aimed to supress feelings of vulnerability and fear of death, posed a similar thesis: "The language of beauty is essentially the language of the timeless reality". (Harries, 1982) On the other hand, Pallasmaa indicates the need for settling objects in their temporality. He treats time as a haptic sense. Matter reflects time, and perception of skin is consciousness of materialized time.

In narrative, memory is the link between time and space. Yet, the memory is a special kind of narrative focalization – "vision" of the past. It is often an act of narrative, binding events or elements previously unrelated in the story. Moreover, the memory is not only an objective narration. Sometimes discrepancies between reality and memory occur, like e.g. in the case of traumatic events.

The building is a symbol shaping the reception of time, it becomes a kind of museum, collecting time. For Mark Wigley (Wigley, 1999) monuments are hardly buildings, but rather spaces protected from the passage of time, preserving some features of the past –urban incarnations of retrospection. This "time machines" institutionalize time; the fixed elements carry ephemeral qualities. For Juhani Pallasmaa the principal task of architecture is to mediate between the two polarities of time. „Time of architecture is detained time" (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 312).

The purest incarnations of retrospection in architecture are ruins and – according to Marc Augé – the contemporary attitude to time reminds the attitude of ruins to time. The ruins express pure time, and sheer perception of time is perception of emptiness. Too many stories accumulate in ruins to tell them (Augé, 2008).

Also in narrative, according to Mieke Bal, the retroactive comeback to the time, when a place was a different space is resistance against mapping, looking from above, disrespecting time and various elements, like population in literature (Bal, p. 151). Thus spatializing memory, presenting history to landspace opposes overall control – planning against time. Again, the urban space follows the rules of the narrative text.

Augmented space – anachrony

Whereas narrative anticipation in literature is a strategy used significantly less frequently than retrospection, and it is usually limited to a single clue about the future aimed at producing tension or showing a fatalistic vision of fate, one can propound such thesis that in the urban narrative, futuristic architecture as a utopian prophecy appears comparatively as often as exact quotes or loose references to buildings of the past. Furthermore, in contemporary cities, retrospections occur next to anticipations or tend to be entirely compounded (retrospection-within-anticipation or anticipation-within-retrospection), evoking disruption of structure of time which cannot be further analysed – termed *anachrony* in literature. Eventually, continuous change is a characteristic feature of contemporaneity.

The space of contemporary cities is characterized by simultaneous closure to the real space and opening to the world through virtual media. These elements are visible in the most of modern intelligent buildings, (again) causing schizophrenic split. "I would like to suggest that we have lost our capacity to dwell in time, or inhabit time. We have been pushed outside of time, the experiential space of time. Time has turned into a vacuum in opposition to the >tactile sense of [time]< in Proust's writings, for instance", according to Juhani Pallasmaa (Pallasmaa, 2007). For Pallasmaa contemporary environment, mainly technological, does not care about rootedness and sense of belonging. Alienation and lack of empathy in contemporary architecture are apparent. Urban landscapes equal flat time; lack of time instead of its calming presence.

Contemporary metacity means disappearance of a city: its disseminated, ubiquitous centre and non-existing opposition of the city and a village. There are no borders and the boundaries are necessary to tell a story. They do not have to be tight, but their presence is essential in the narrative. There are also no formal limits in architecture. Architectural works are individual visions of architects designing them – today designing (the most often) without inscribing in a local style. Every building struggles to be distinguishable, but all are similar in their own justification of their context and history. Prestige of the architect stems from global recognition. What's more, tyranny of youth engulfed the built environment. As young, well-groomed bodies tend to be fashionable and valuable, contemporary architecture should not remind of decay. The urban anachrony involves timelessness, not aging buildings.

Conclusion – the slow city

Along with the speeding urban organism, an idea of slow city spaces has appeared. Returning to "tasting" spaces, both in the sphere of consumer culture and aesthetic, "valorising designed spaces as works of art" (Rewers, 2009) Slow spaces mean freedom – the freedom from spatial limitations, care for individualistic values, an effect of adopting a reflective attitude towards reality. Along with the city as the homogeneous magma indistinguishable in speed, a romantic rebellion for sentimentality has replaced the terms of acceleration, progress and change with slowness, reflection, variety and essence. The change has been replaced by choice, and functional programmes – by freedom. The time of sensuous space has come, as an effect of reflective attitude towards reality, traces of resistance against inevitable loss of beauty in contemporaneity.

Green architecture (Ewa Rewers connects this movement with the following architects: Ambasz, Perrault, Hundertwasser) and phenomenological approach are responses for the speeding urban reality. Aesthetics in place of abstraction along with human scale, natural movement of a human body and its tempo reflected in urban space. The slowdown in reading space created by eliminating (or reducing the importance of) vehicular traffic in a city's text – although utopian – can have positive effects. Analysing relationships between the human body and landscape is the next step.

The sense of touch is responsible for the consciousness of continuation and narrative, the sequence of events; gaze is associated with the sense of touch, feeling of depth, continuity and also navigating through spaces, as well as other senses – smell and hearing. Reflected echo marks boundaries of space (which is the most important for blind people, whom Oliver Sacks in the *Eye of the mind* describes as "seeing" the space in the rain, hearing falling drops). Smell and sounds enable orientation (in seaside towns, proximity of the sea is smelled and ports also heard in noises of yachts). Eyesight breaks the space of a contemporary city.

Small, historic cities follow these rules by their nature. Tyrolean Brixen is phenomenological space – a historical city with the human scale of buildings, narrow streets, winding spaces, transitioning between interior and exterior, similarly to Venice. The city becomes the space of a house, and the house – the city. Passages through buildings form inner streets, convent cloisters are linked with spaces of squares, interiors of apartments overlook the city space through bay windows. Gaze moves here over textures of walls and floors of urban interiors; noises bind spaces, determine their size, "embed" passers-by in a particular point in the city; smells help in orientation. New constructions in the city, despite their modern forms, enrich this historic town. Climbing Hall (designed by Wolfgang Meraner and Martin Mutschlechner), Heating Plant (with a skate park on the roof, designed by Modus Architects), Pupp Hotel (designed by Bergmeister Wolf Architekten) with their neutral forms, large glass and transparent elements on facades (metal mesh, perforated metal sheets) relate to the historic environment rather than isolate themselves from it (e.g. with ornamental brick walls). They continue the dialogue of the interior with the exterior, keeping the succinctness of architecture, not trying to compete with traditional forms.

Even if it's impossible to transpose all the features of small, historic cities into European capitals and other metropolises, focusing on the linearity of plot, eliminating some levels of anticipation and introducing more retrospection lets for anchoring in their present time. Sensory spaces,

concise forms, human scale and physical reality instead of virtual multidimensionality (and the velocity of light) result in flowing time, buildings aging with dignity and places marked by the passage of time. The chronological chain of events is most appropriate in the urban narrative. Allowing for the passage of time paradoxically counteracts the human anxiety about it. The city serves as a shelter again, playing its primary role.

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