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Visual Rhetoric and Architecture

Abstract

Architecture is a ubiquitous form of visual rhetoric, whose influence on one's feelings and subconsciousness may be analyzed in the context of both soft and hard power. Buildings were and still are often designed in a way that incites wellness. The Baroque architecture in general is one of the most vivid examples of that procedure, especially the forms proposed by the Society of Jesus, which played an important role during the Counter-Reformation. The more contemporary example is the architecture of Nazi Germany, which was supposed to invoke the feelings of superiority, power, terror and permanence. The monumentalism of structures and gigantomania are still visible in the 21st century in the shape of Burj Khalifa, which is now the tallest building in the world, constructed for the purpose of presenting the prestige of Dubai. Another example of architecture being a display of soft power is the general unification of a nation through art and culture, which can be found in the approach of the English towards the Gothic style and its perception of the British Isles. On the other hand, the instances of hard power in the context of architecture can be found in the countries which remained under the rule of Soviet Union. CCCP imposed their architecture in such areas using buildings and designs that were considered gifts from the superior nations to the subjugated ones, with the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw being an example. At the same time, the destruction of iconic buildings may be considered as showing dominance, the destruction of the World Trade Center being one of the most prominent cases.

Keywords: art, architecture, rhetoric, visual, propaganda, nationalism

The Oxford Dictionaries¹ describe rhetoric as the art of persuasion by means of rhetorical techniques, such as figures of speech. The term is typically used in the context of speeches and written texts and is a form of utterance conveyed through traditionally understood languages. However, even though rhetoric is usually associated with text and speech, in fact it may be visual as well, using specific imagery and iconography in order to convince the viewer of the idea presented by the author. Marcel Danesi (2017) explains that visual rhetoric “is the critical analysis of visual texts (paintings, movies, ads, posters, and so on) with the techniques of both semiotics and rhetorical analysis.”² Since visual representations

1 <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/rhetoric> [date of access: 09.09.2019].

2 <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-43#acrefore-9780190228613-e-43-div1-1> [date of access: 09.09.2019].

typically are processed through feelings first and conscious thought later, they might be more influential than text or speech. Nevertheless, while visual rhetoric focuses mostly on images, advertisement, posters and similar products, architecture might be one of the most successful rhetorical tools. It is possible to avoid television or many other types of media but it is impossible to escape architecture. In developed countries it is one of the most basic aspects of living space and a requirement for survival. This fact has been utilized – consciously or not – throughout centuries and it is still present in the twentieth century. Architecture and its use in the context of visual rhetoric is often a display of soft power which aims to incite and show the might and reaches through various developed aspects of culture (science, economy, art and architecture) in an attempt to become appealing and shape preferences. However, it might be perceived through the context of hard power as well – hard power understood as all violent acts inflicted upon other people, countries and nationalities.

The utilisation of architecture as a means to incite and preserve wellness is not a new phenomenon and the Baroque architecture serves as an elaborate example. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica³, this style developed during the late 16th century and is rooted in the counter-reformation movement, used as one of its tools. It was supposed to be very emotional and sensory, aesthetically appearing, rich and dynamic in composition. The definition also notes that “other characteristic qualities include grandeur, drama and contrast (especially in lighting), curvaceousness, and an often dizzying array of rich surface treatments, twisting elements, and gilded statuary”. The frescoes and paintings, as well as sculptures are the inseparable part of such a building and create one integral entirety. In order to appear appealing and inviting for the common crowd the founders and therefore the architects of that period were attempting to create temples of rich interiors which were supposed to show the vastness of wealth.

The most prominent propagators of the style were Jesuits, whom, basing on a multitude of different sources, Davide Arecco (2015: 55) established to be “the pearl of European culture”. Their perception of education and the Baroque architecture greatly affected the areas where they dwelled and conducted their activities. Joanna Jezierska (2015: 235) noted that the significance of affect and emotion in the Baroque art and architecture aids the rhetoric aspects as they are more persuasive in nature. The author argued that thanks to the nature of their education Jesuits had the biggest impact on rhetoric in the Baroque period – during these times Jesuit colleges were the most popular places to gain education but also the textbooks on rhetoric widely taught in such colleges were prepared by Jesuits themselves. The most important works were *De arte rhetorica* by Cypriano de Soarez and *De eloquentia sacra et humana* by Nicolas Caussin. Such teachings translated into fine arts as well, especially since the Jesuits were responsible for spreading the influence through not only scholarship but also art and architecture. Jezierska (2015: 240–241) mentioned clear analogies between rhetoric and art. The four main elements of speech were *elocutio*, *inventio*, *dispositio memoria* and action whereas three of them (*inventio*, *dispositio elocutio*) can be observed in art from the Baroque period as well. Art was supposed to be aesthetically pleasing, as well as acting as a vehicle for ideas – a specific meticulously crafted programme with iconographical message chosen by founders, carrying the Catholic thought through the means of art.

The Jesuit influences may also be traced in Wrocław. The city used to be occupied by a predominantly protestant society. According to Lec (1995: 21), it was impossible for Jesuits to settle in Wrocław for over forty years. Rudolph II was asked not to let them in and the Duke John Christian of Brieg signed a document in the name of protestant duchies according to which no Jesuit nor their adherents were

3 <https://www.britannica.com/art/Baroque-architecture> [date of access: 09.09.2019].

allowed to enter Silesia or otherwise they would be sentenced to death. In Wrocław itself, the municipal magistrate was responsible for limiting the possibilities of settlement for the monks. Moreover, only the Protestants were able to hold any official positions. Catholics living in the city had no access to a Catholic church or a Catholic school – each and every sacral building in the vicinity of the very centre of Wrocław was protestant and the only place in which Catholic ceremonies could take place was Ostrów Tumski. The situation started slowly changing since 1637 (the first plans of settling the Jesuits in Wrocław appeared in 1562 and kept reappearing throughout these 75 years but the protestant citizens were against this idea) when two representatives were unofficially invited and, in a way, smuggled into the city by Henryk Hartmann and baron von Schellendorf, the superior of the Knights of the Cross with the Red Star. Since that time, the Jesuits were slowly influencing the society, gaining favours from the city officials (not without effort or issues) which finally resulted not only in letting them operate but also creating their own college. Since the number of students kept increasing, in 1659 the Jesuits were allowed to move their lectures from the imperial mint to the imperial castle. Thanks to the vigorous development the school transformed into Leopoldina academy in year 1702 and became one of the most important research and study centres in Silesia.

The Jesuit college also required a church and therefore the Church of the Most Sacred Name of Jesus was built in place of previously demolished south-eastern part of the imperial palace. The church is a typical example of the Baroque architecture, based on Il Gesu in Rome and Saint Ignatius in Linz. Jezierska (2015: 242) noted that while the author of the ideological programme of the church is unknown, the Jesuit rules of rhetoric are still present within its decorations. The author argued that “successive components of the programme combine to make one consistent whole and, like in speech, the *exordium*, *narratio*, *confirmatio* (*argumentio* or *probatio*) and peroration stem from each other logically”. The programme and the implementation of the aforementioned rules focus on the two passages from the Bible – Psalm 113 (112) and Phil 2:30 – centred on the name of Jesus Christ. According to Jezierska (2015: 242), *exordium* (the introduction to the programme) may be found in the chancel in the depiction of the choirs of angels and figures from the Old Testament adoring the Name of God. *Narratio* is present in the depictions of selected events from the life of Jesus, and the main part – the *confirmatio* – is located above the nave and presents the adoration of the Name of the Saviour. The peroration (the concluding) part is located above the organ loft and shows another form of glorification of the Lord’s Name by angels who additionally are shown to be playing on musical instruments which is fitting for the location.

Apart from the decoration or the interior the location of the building itself appears to be non-accidental. The main entrance is supposed to be located in the western part of the façade which is adjacent to the main edifice of the university. Hence, the main entrance to the church is located on the southern side of the building. It is aligned with one of the streets leading to the marketplace and therefore even though the church is not located in the very centre of the city, it is still visible and invites the passers-by to come inside. Once they do so, they are surrounded by the rich, heavily ornamented and detailed interior with carefully crafted ideological programme supposed to help with persuasion in converting to Catholicism.

Another example of rhetoric in architecture in the context of soft power is the architecture of Nazi Germany, since it was a carefully crafted tool of Nazi propaganda. David Welch (1983: 2) wrote that the common concept suggesting that propaganda is just an art of persuasion is only partly true since in reality propaganda serves as a form of enforcement of the ideas and beliefs which are already present within the target group. According to the author, another misconception revolves around propaganda relying solely

on lies, as it uses half-truths or truths which may or may not be taken out of their contexts. Hitler was well aware of the impact this tool might have on the masses and skilfully applied its rules in his campaigns, taking inspiration from the British propaganda present during the First World War. The style of the Nazi buildings was classicistic since Hitler considered Roman architecture to be the embodiment of power and permanence. Even the ruins – similarly to the ancient ones – were supposed to remain imposing and testifying on the greatness of the Third Reich (Speer [1969] 1981: 55).

Hitler's plans regarding architecture in Germany were grand. Wolfgang Sonne (2006: 201- 202) noted that the Fuhrer wanted to reshape Berlin into the capital city worthy of the Third Reich. In order to achieve this goal, he worked with Albert Speer, one of the most important architects in Nazi Germany. The initial designs were monumental. The main axis of the plan was supposed to consist of free-standing buildings in the classicist style located on the sides of a 7 km long and 120 m wide boulevard with two structures at its both ends – an enormous triumph arch and Grosse Halle des deutschen Volkes (Great Hall of the German People) which was supposed to be 290 m high and house 180 000 people. Additionally, there was supposed to be the Führer-Palais which was envisioned to be more massive in comparison to Reichstag. Speer ([1969] 1981: 155) himself noted that “the idea was that [visitors] would be overwhelmed, or rather stunned, by the urban scene and thus the power of the Reich.” According to Speer himself, Hitler displayed signs of obsession with the Hall and expressed annoyance once he learnt that the Soviet Union was planning to erect a monumental building (the Palace of Soviets) as well. The architect noted that Hitler attempted to explain to himself that the massive dome was more important than the mere height of a building but once the war with the Union had started, the Führer presented deep satisfaction stating that “this will be the end of their building for good and all (Speer [1969] 1981: 155).” Both structures, however, are the indication of gigantomania typical for totalitarian societies.

In other words, the Nazi architecture was supposed to be monumental, expressing the power and might of Hitler and his followers, emphasising the general feeling that any resistance was futile and obedience was unquestionable. Yet Hitler himself during his inauguration explained that the choice of monumentality stems from his wish to let Germans regain their self-confidence and show the rest of the world that after the first world war Germany remains undefeated and equal to other nations (Wolfgang 2006: 203). In the end, most grand designs were not executed.

The aforementioned gigantomania is still present in the 21th century and countries still attempt to show their prestige through building monumental complexes. One of the examples is Burj Khalifa, which – according to Everington (2015) – today is the biggest building in the world, erected in Dubai – the city being one of the fastest growing cities in the world⁴. According to James Aldred (2010: 66), the 828 m high building previously known as Burj Dubai is “the latest and largest manifestation of the world's increasing appetite for super tall-buildings”. Yet, at the same time the author noted that in the moment of writing his article there were at least four plans for structures reaching 1000 m in preparation. The name itself holds a great significance in the context of political rhetoric since the building was named after the president of the United Arab Emirates, Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan. Yet, Burj Khalifa is not the only noteworthy building in Dubai – the city is full of architectural and engineering wonders including artificial islands (the World Islands and Palm Jumeirah) and the world's second tallest building Cayan Tower. Dubai seems to serve as a laboratory for newest architectural designs and engineering solutions while at the same time being the display of wealth and power. Yasser Elsheshtawy (2010: 3)

4 <https://www.thenational.ae/business/dubai-enters-top-five-ranked-fastest-growing-economies-1.116265> [date of access: 09.09.2019].

straightforwardly called the city “an Arab success story, an example of successful urbanization that has eluded other parts of the region.” According to the author, the Dubai phenomenon even resulted in coining the term ‘Dubai model’, which is possibly adjustable in different locations. He also observed that there is strong belief in the centre of power moving to the East, which means the visual rhetoric chosen to convey the ideas of power and wealth are successful.

The unification of a whole nation through art and culture might be perceived as soft power as well and architecture has proven to be successful as one of the tools used to reach such goal. The perception of the Gothic style in England – especially the development during the Victorian periods – serves as an extensive example. Edyta Supińska-Polit (2004: 23) noted that the Gothic tradition in English architecture has not changed since the 17th century. The style during the Victorian period was a tool used for shaping the national identity of the English and was also called the English style. The widespread belief in those times that Gothic architecture was created and perfected in England probably originates from William Gilpin’s (1786: 326) book *Observations, Relative Chiefly of Picturesque Beauty*. The work was a display of the author’s patriotism and conviction that the English architecture was superior to the continental counterparts and developed without any influence from the rest of Europe. At the same time Gilpin (1786: 326) made a claim that the purely British subtype of the Gothic architecture is the middle style and York Minster as well as the Canterbury Cathedral are the best examples that support his argument. According to Bradley (2002: 325–346), John Carter and John Milner shared similar approach and further enforced the idea of the Gothic architecture being of English origin and indicated the country’s divine mission to maintain medieval buildings. The link between the architecture and the divine will was also present in the next century and wrapped in religious ideology. Augustus Welby Pugin (1812–1852), the most prominent person related to the renewal of Gothic architecture in England, even claimed that the style was in fact an actual architectural principle (Watkin 1979: 154–178). The Gothic style was hence understood as a vehicle for Catholic ideals and architecture itself could be truthful and good or false and evil. Yet despite these connotations with Catholicism which Pugin indicated, the ideals more often found acceptance within the Anglican Church. Another prominent figure during this period was John Ruskin, who through his numerous works including *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853) supported the spread of the Gothic architecture during the Victorian Era and noted that he was able to observe passion, happiness and beliefs of both an architect and the whole society within textures, ornaments, colour and light of a building.

Additionally, Bradley (2002: 325–346) wrote that the general assumption of superiority over other countries in the form of the belief in the Englishness of the Gothic style was so deeply rooted in the Victorian period that it was impossible to discard it even with extensive research proving otherwise. This belief was also reflected in the English press during the Victorian era. The article “The New House of Lords”, which appeared in *Illustrated London News* 17 April 1845 serves as an example. According to the author, rebuilding the Palace of Westminster in that period was one of the most important architectural works comparable to rebuilding the St Paul’s Cathedral in both importance and the size of the edifice. The author also expressed the need for the new House of Lords to be erected in the Gothic style since it was considered superior in comparison with other options and therefore the Palace was described as the most beautiful example of this style in Europe numerous times, clearly emphasising the aforementioned ideas and spreading them further among the English society. There were cases in which other authors expressed their negative attitudes towards the style but such critique was often met with utter disdain. The article “The Times on ‘Gothic and Classic’”, which was published in *Leicester Chronicle* 2 March 1861

serves as an example in which the person criticising the style was straightforwardly called an idiot and a hypocrite without any knowledge of the Gothic architecture whatsoever. Thus, the article suggests that the appreciation for the style was so deeply ingrained in the English society of the Victorian period that its critique was treated dismissively.

The aforementioned examples, related to soft power, are attempts of their founders to incite and show wealth. Yet, architecture may also be used as a rhetorical tool in the context of hard power, showing dominance over subdued countries and enforce culture upon societies through implanting cultural works within them. One of the examples is the socialist realism imposed on the architectural thought and urban planning in the countries under influence of Soviet Union. Such process was called colonial Socialism by Greg Castillo (1992: 261–85). The most notable building designed in such style is Palace of Culture and Science located in Warsaw, the capital city of Poland. The tallest building in Poland was in fact intended to be the “Gift of Soviet Nations for the Polish Nation”⁵ and previously known as Joseph Stalin’s Palace of Culture and Science. Hence, the name itself may suggest that both culture and science was given to Poland by Stalin himself. The building still arises controversies till this day, especially when it comes to its inclusion on the list of monuments on 2 February 2007. Ślędziewska (2012) wrote that numerous persons of culture claimed that the building does not deserve such privilege⁶. The architects from the Polish Academy of Sciences remarked that in their concept the Palace is the contradiction of architectural rationale in all its aspects – economical, technological, aesthetic and urban⁷. According to Frątczak (2019), others claim that the building is the symbol of soviet domination and demand its demolition⁹. Regardless of the objections, the Palace was recognised a structure worthy of preservation and is considered one of the most important and popular landmarks of Warsaw.

Typically, architecture is a stative example of both soft and hard power – long-lasting, relatively unchangeable imagery of urban landscapes. However, it is possible to actively involve buildings in order to convey thought and meaning of certain individuals, groups or organisations. One of the most notable examples in this century is the destruction of World Trade Center, the consequences of which are still appreciable. During the time of the attack the twin towers were the tallest buildings in the world and therefore one of the most prominent landmarks in the city of New York. The motives behind the attack were stated in Osama bin Laden’s letter¹⁰. The choice of the buildings was not accidental and the photos and videos from the attack were spread in the media, impacting minds around the world. Damien Hirst, a British artist said that is that “it’s kind of like an artwork in its own right”¹¹ (he did apologise for this statement¹²) which was supposed to have a visual influence on the audience – at the same time he noted that the visual language had changed and the attack implanted the equivalence between an airplane and

5 <http://www.pkin.pl/eng/history-of-the-palace> [date of access 15.09.2019].

6 <https://warszawa.naszemiasto.pl/pkin-ma-60-lat-i-nadal-budzi-kontrowersje/ar/c1-1397367> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

7 <https://ksiazki.wp.pl/palac-kultury-i-nauki-jest-zabytkiem-6146235873719937a> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

8 <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/czy-palac-kultury-i-nauki-jest-zabytkiem-archiwalne-zdjecia-pkin/s52mkzw> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

9 <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,25015248,jedni-go-kochaja-inni-nienawidza-dzis-palac-kultury-i-nauki.html?disableRedirects=true> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

10 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

11 <https://web.archive.org/web/20041224191251/http://dh.ryoshuu.com/press/2002bbcnew.html> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/19/september11.usa> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

a weapon¹³¹⁴. It is also noteworthy that the most popular photos are showing the airplanes and smoke and never the bodies, presenting only the less drastic side of the event and “further shaping the discourse. The focus is shifted to the buildings remaining in the very centre and their symbolism. Katalin Orbán (2007: 59) remarked that the visual representations only indirectly capture the deaths and wrote that “it is questionable to what extent the destruction of architecture displaces rather than expresses the destruction of human life (Orbán 2007: 59).” Then the author paraphrased Brigitte Lebens Nacos (2002: 10–12) and noted that the event became spectacularised and therefore ensured that the message of the terrorists sent through the attack was conveyed and became a successful means of communication. Therefore, the fear-inducing rhetoric behind the destruction had affected people’s mentality

As it was presented in this article, architecture may be understood in the context of visual rhetoric since it might be used to successfully convey chosen concepts and programmes in several different ways, from inciting and presenting positive ideas, through serving as a mean of national unification, to serving as a tool of oppression and fear - be it the expression of power or wellness, the carefully crafted programme, the pride of the nation or a representation of the reigns in a conquered country. The destruction of architecture itself may also be given a world-changing meaning. Moreover, such representations are an integral part of living spaces within developed countries and therefore their impact is continuous.

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13 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11> [date of access: 15.09.2019].

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