The role of architectural design in industrial heritage interpretation
– the case of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź

Introduction

The article presents possible design strategies that can be used concerning the revalorization of industrial heritage. They are exemplified by the case of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź. In particular, the possibilities of using the narrative role of architecture in the context of shaping social awareness of the values of tangible and intangible cultural heritage were outlined. The principal question is whether, despite the lost heritage, it is possible to preserve the memory of it, and if so, what actions should be taken to make this memory permanently inscribed in the existing space.

When trying to find a solution to the research problem formulated in this way, it is first necessary to refer to the most important concepts for the described case: “palimpsest” and “narrative in architecture”.

The term “palimpsest” as a metaphor for stratification was used for the first time in the mid-19th century [1]. Since then, its meaning has not merely referred to […] a manuscript on parchment from which the original text has been wiped away [2], but to a process of re-editing where existing layers of objects or traces have been partially or completely covered up or removed. With the built environment, the term palimpsest initially began to be used to describe the historical areas of cities, and then to cover the whole spectrum of architectural heritage. In this perspective, a palimpsest can be understood not only as an accumulation of layers but also as a method of interpreting an object. In Poland, this issue has been repeatedly discussed by scientists. Among the initiatives undertaken in recent years, it is worth mentioning the seminar “Authenticity and the palimpsest of preserved monuments”, organized in 2015 by the Commission for the History and Conservation of Sacred Architecture of ICOMOS Poland.

At the same time, interpreting an object with numerous layers is nothing but a story about its history. And this requires a good narrative, because, as Anna Wierzbicka notes, […] architectural narrative allows us to consolidate inconsistent experiences [3, p. 33]. This is not an easy task, because the narrative in architecture escapes strict rules, and therefore it should be perceived rather as a metaphor based on an analogy to the tradition of storytelling [4], which is connected with the current of oral history strongly marked in contemporary culture [5], [6].

In this context, it is therefore possible to say that through the appropriate shaping of architectural forms, a story can be conveyed to the recipient, in this case about the complex, multi-layered history of the place. The purpose of the described didactic task was to familiarize students with this method of reading and interpreting architecture. However, the aim of this article is also to assess the results obtained.

Wójtowski Młyn
– history, research, and current state

The most famous place in Łódź with milling origins is, of course, Księży Młyn, which belonged to the local vicar and over time became the nucleus of the most famous industrial enclave in the city [7]. The place described in the article – Wójtowski Młyn – is located in Łódź on the eastern outskirts of the city centre. It is located on a small river called Jasięń (in its upper reaches), along which mills have been located since the Middle Ages. This was since the current of the river was swift, and the topography of the land made it possible to dam up the waters and place the mill ponds at a relatively short distance from each other [8].

* ORCID: 0000-0002-9429-9626. Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering, Poland, e-mail: bartosz.walczak@p.lodz.pl
Already in the early 1820s, the area was purchased by Christian Friedrich Wendisch – one of the Saxon entrepreneurs brought to Łódź to develop industrial production. As a result, in 1826, a cotton spinning mill was added to the wooden mill that existed at that time. The building was erected in a frame (half-timber) structure, on the brick walls of the basement [10] (Fig. 1a). In terms of size, the spinning mill was inferior to other production facilities erected in the valley of the Jasień River, but it is difficult to overestimate its importance for the history of industrial development of Łódź, as it was the first factory building built for this purpose in the city.

The unexpected death of Wendisch caused the collapse of the company in 1830, and the building itself stood abandoned for several years. The factory was reactivated and expanded by a new owner – Fryderyk Moes. Production continued until 1863 when the manufactory was severely damaged by fire. Eventually, the site became the property of Karol Scheibler, who transformed it into a farming estate, which was the subsidiary of the largest textile factory in Łódź and one of the largest in Europe. The so-called Scheibler’s farm not only supplied the shop in the factory workers’ housing estate with groceries but above all it supplied some organic ingredients (including animal urine) necessary for the dyeing and finishing processes. The foundation walls of the pre-existing buildings of the Wendisch/Moes factory were used to build a house for the farm manager (Fig. 1b). The building has survived to modern times. However, its purpose changed several times, and the facility was adapted to subsequent needs, e.g. a car repair shop operating here in the post-war years. Finally, in 2002, the building was handed over to one of the Łódź scouting teams for the purpose of a workshop and warehouse for sailboats.

In 2008, the property caught the attention of local archaeologist Zbigniew Rybacki. With the support of the Provincial Conservator of Historical Monuments in Łódź, archaeological research was started, which lasted until 2011. The excavations turned out to be a valuable source of information about the history of this place and its palimpsestic nature.

First, the exact location of the first mill was determined, of which only a ground beam and a few boards survived. This was enough to establish that the building was erected in a post-and-plank construction at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, which was confirmed by tests carried out in the laboratory of the AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków: The samples were tested using two methods […]. Type C14 studies date the mill to 1480, and the dendrochronological method to 1576. This means that there is no older structure in Łódź (after: [11]). However, these elements were too few to determine the dimensions of the mill and its architectural form (Fig. 2). No relics of earlier buildings were found. Nevertheless, it is difficult to overestimate their importance for documenting the material history of pre-industrial Łódź.

---

1 The so-called boathouse of the Group of the 58th Łódź Water Scout Troops “Zdrowa Woda” [Healthy Water] named after the Heroes of September 1939.
The role of architectural design in industrial heritage interpretation – the case of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź

Then, archaeologists confirmed the location of Wen-disch’s spinning mill from the 1820s. In the course of further examination of the walls of the existing building, it was possible to identify the construction phase related to Moes’ industrial activity. Summing up, as a result of interdisciplinary research, it was possible to reconstruct the history of the site and determine the location of individual buildings successively erected in the place of Wójtowski Młyn and using its hydro-technical infrastructure.

The rich history of the building outlined above and its unquestionable value are not reflected in its present condition (Fig. 3). The condition of the building, which is a municipal property, deteriorates year by year. Scouts do not have the means to take proper care of the building. As a result, the half-ruined building is gradually absorbed by lush vegetation, and only a small plaque on the front façade informs about the history of the place to a limited extent. For a non-specialist, it is just a dilapidated building, like many in a city still recovering from the decline caused by the liquidation of the textile industry in the 1990s. At the same time, it is a place with great potential. This is determined not only by cultural values but also by the picturesque location on the former mill pond and the proximity of a large housing estate from the 1960s and 1970s, whose inhabitants willingly use the urban green areas around the water reservoir. At the same time, a new residential complex is being built nearby, and the area of the former Scheibler’s farm is also to be the subject of a similar investment, which may be both an opportunity and a threat to the facility in question.

The starting point for the activities described in the further part of the article is therefore the lost memory of the (almost) lost heritage.

Architecture as a story about the past of Wójtowski Młyn

Goals, objectives, and course of the project

In 2019, at the Department of History of Architecture, Revitalization and Conservation of Monuments, which is part of the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Łódź University of Technology, a design exercise was carried out as part of classes on the protection and conservation of monuments in the Master studies in...
architecture\(^2\). The classes aimed to test the possibility of activating the former Wójtowski Młyn in academic conditions. In particular, it was about searching for such architectural solutions (functional, spatial, and material) that would make it possible to expose the multi-layered and multi-faceted history of the property. The designed architectural solutions were to take into account the results of the research and constitute their physical interpretation through a clear separation of what is a material relic, reconstruction, hypothesis, and contemporary creation. A very important assumption was also to maintain the unique atmosphere of the place, which makes being almost in the city centre feel like being in the countryside. This feature was considered particularly endangered due to the investment pressure on the surroundings of Wójtowski Młyn. The last of the assumptions was to propose a new use that would be attractive to contemporary society.

The project task lasted half a semester (7 weeks, i.e. 35 teaching hours according to the curriculum of the time). First, the participants could familiarize themselves with the current state of research, the results of which were presented during a guest lecture by Zbigniew Rybacki – an archaeologist responsible for excavations at the mill. Then, as part of the site visit, the students could also listen to the representative of the scouts, Joanna Filipiak-Mar -
kiewicz, who pointed out serious problems and limitations resulting from the current condition of the building. In addition, the students were informed about the plans of the city authorities regarding the future of the place. According to the vision of the municipal office, the area of Wójtowski Młyn is considered as the location of one of the pilot projects related to EXPO Horticultural, which is to be organized in Łódź in 2029. After the renovation works, the building would be used for one of the thematic paths, combining the involvement of scouts and the topic of water as a renewable energy source (RES) [12].

Over the subsequent six weeks, the students worked in teams of two. First, they had to attempt to analyse the existing state, identify cultural values, and formulate design and conservation guidelines. Based on these assumptions, they prepared architectural concepts. The subject of the evaluation was the logical coherence of individual elements of the task, as well as the quality of architectural solutions. An aspect particularly assessed was whether it was possible to create an architectural object that would

The role of architectural design in industrial heritage interpretation – the case of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź

not only be socially useful, respect the principles of protection and conservation of monuments, but would also have a narrative function. Attention was also paid to whether it was possible to combine architectural and natural elements, and whether the whole refers to the perception of the place and its micro-identity.

Project outcomes

Over 30 projects were created during the implementation of the design task. It was sufficient material to make observations in the field of heritage interpretation with the use of architectural solutions.

When starting a project concerning a historic building, one always has to face the issue of its cultural values. In the realities of professional practice, architects rely on recommendations developed by specialists. As mentioned before, in this case, the students had to think for themselves about what determines the value of this place, what elements are its carriers, what to keep from the house of the manager of Scheibler’s farm, standing on the walls of the Wendisch spinning mill, located in the place of Wójtowski Młyn, and what to display from the earlier stages.

A large group of students focused on the reinterpretation of the oldest stage of the site development, i.e. the former water mill. Łódź has medieval roots – it was granted city rights at the beginning of the 15th century, but its actual development took place only during the industrial revolution, whose legacy dominates the cultural landscape of the city. Therefore, the existence of a structure older than 200 years was apparently inspiring for people who have daily contact with 19th-century factories as the main component of the local heritage. It also shows how important it is to place the heritage in a broader context, because only in this way can the criteria and attributes that represent them determine its value and uniqueness, even if only of local importance.

Antiquity in the opinion of experts is considered in conjunction with other criteria for assessing the historic value of the object. In this case, it grew to the symbolic value of “the oldest building in Łódź”. However, since there was not enough information about the appearance of the mill, many students decided to manifest the existence and original use of the building in the most obvious way – using a water wheel as an attribute. Translating it into the language of architecture resulted in a series of static spatial forms, more or less literally, in whole or in part, referring to the drive of the water mill as a strongly embedded cultural code (Fig. 4).

In this context, it is important to explain that any reconstruction, as a rule, reduces the authenticity of the object.
and its historical value. However, in some cases, creativity is necessary to make the remains of the building’s original form legible. Sometimes it is enough to carry out anastylosis on a fragment of ancient ruins, sometimes a modern intervention must have a much broader scope – but it is always important to distinguish between new elements and old ones, and to emphasize what is a reconstruction confirmed by research and what is only a hypothesis, a guess.

To illustrate this issue concerning Wójtowski Młyn, it is worth using the example of one of the student projects involving the “reconstruction” of the 16th-century mill, for which – as mentioned above – the research results were limited to a few basic data. As it turned out, the authors of the project in question decided to use a virtual reconstruction commissioned by archaeologists to promote their excavations (Fig. 5). This case undoubtedly proves the deceptive nature of virtual models and their potential irregularity in the interpretation of heritage. In the case of Wójtowski Młyn, the result was in stark contrast to the requirements of the *London Charter* [13], an important document based on a long-standing (and ongoing) debate on the principles of presenting information on cultural heritage in a digital environment, so as not to mislead wide audience recipients [14]. The same principle should guide designers of architectural representations of hypothetical appearance of objects that no longer exist, which should rather suggest and stimulate the imagination of visitors, as Robert Venturi once did with Benjamin Franklin’s house in Philadelphia, and today, for example, Edoardo Tresoldi in the ruins of the church in Siponto in the south of Italy.

This type of strategy was reflected in the idea of another team of students who proposed simple, white-painted steel frames. Their geometry and arrangement suggest the existence of a mill, and also the location of other objects, including the Wendisch factory, which was so important for the early industrialization of Łódź. The concept was enriched with a kinetic installation (a rotating water wheel connected to the gears through a transmission belt), referring to both stages of site development: flour milling and cotton yarn production (Fig. 6). In this way, it was possible not only to present a logically and visually coherent architectural narrative regarding the development phases of the buildings but also to emphasize that industrial heritage is not only buildings but above all their technological equipment.

This was not the only project that explored the palimpsest history through the overlapping volumes of buildings
existing now and in the past. This design strategy in some cases took into account not only the volumes of the buildings, but also more insightful interpretations. One of the most comprehensive proposals included a minimalist platform on the site of a medieval mill and a pavilion with a skeletal structure, analogous to the former Wendisch spinning mill, but with glass curtain walls and a textile membrane cover. Decisions regarding the adopted solutions were aimed at creating a structure that would be considered contemporary even by laymen.

The special atmosphere of the place was the last theme running through the student projects. In this regard, self-containment has proven to be the most fruitful design strategy. Several proposals used very modest means to present the history of the place to preserve the peaceful, intimate character of the area with agricultural origins. In this group of projects, the repertoire of functional and spatial solutions included simple terraces, pergolas, as well as properly shaped land development with skilfully selected vegetation (Fig. 7).

Summary and conclusions

The building in question and its complex construction history are excellent examples of problems related to the protection and conservation of industrial heritage and in particular its valorisation and revalorization. Waldemar Affelt tried to capture this issue in his method of evaluation, which can be applied to any object recognized as a heritage of technology, because in addition to “rigid” and defined names of values, both their “flexible” attributes and indicators can and should be selected individually depending on the type and state of preservation of technofacts. Cultural values were “deposited” and “grown” like the cultural layers of an archaeological site – hence the term “industrial archaeology”. In the case of Wójtowski Młyn, we are dealing with real industrial archaeology, and its

---

3 According to the terminology adopted in Affelt’s methodology, a technofact is any movable or immovable object included in the resource of the heritage of technology [15, p. 12].
results, when confronted with the actual condition of the object, force us to look for solutions that would tell the history of a property in the best possible way to the contemporary society.

At the same time, due to its specific history, the building, despite being part of the industrial heritage, is free from negative associations caused by deindustrialization and economic decline. The intimate scale of the building also means that it is not affected by many threats typical of degraded post-industrial properties.

Due to the irretrievable loss of function, the protection of post-industrial buildings requires their adaptive reuse to an incomparably greater extent than in the case of other types of monuments. Activities of this kind can significantly contribute to the renewal (revitalization) of crisis areas, a phenomenon characteristic of former industrial districts.

The problem task presented in this article made it possible to test the effectiveness of selected design strategies that would allow us not only to preserve the memory of the buildings that once existed in Wójtowski Młyn, important for the history of the city both in pre-industrial times and in the period of industrialization. Design should therefore be treated as a research process leading to a new interpretation of the site. In this approach, architectural creation must be subordinated to the extraction and exposure of identified cultural values. Since only “scraps” have survived from the particular stages of the construction history, architectural solutions were needed that would bind them together and, at the same time, be an effective tool for telling stories from the palimpsestic past.

Based on the analysis of the identified approaches and interpretations, the following observations can be made:

– choosing a leitmotif symbolizing the original function draws the recipient’s attention to the fact that the building was something else than its architectural form suggests, but it does not fully refer to the complex history of the place (it is more an anecdote than a story),

– creating an architecture that takes into account all phases of transformation is a difficult task, but possible to carry out provided that the narrative is well structured (just like any complex, multi-threaded story),

– narration in architecture requires the appropriate selection of forms and materials (e.g. reflecting the state of knowledge about the various stages of construction history), and in addition, it should be understandable (and attractive) for the contemporary recipient,

– it is especially difficult for young architects to be restrained and to understand that it is the subject of the story, not the narrator, that should be at the centre of attention,

– the role of interpretation is of fundamental importance for the understanding of the object and the recognition of its value by the contemporary recipient,

– the narrative must be adapted to the rank of the historic object and the available means, and consequently take various forms.

In addition to issues strictly related to the narrative, the discussed projects also revealed several problems essential for the effective interpretation of monuments, especially those belonging to industrial heritage.

First of all, it is significant that, apart from the water wheel technology, the engineering aspect of heritage has been omitted, which is, however, problematic not only in Poland but almost everywhere in the world [16], [17].

Secondly, preserving the genius loci turns out to be a particularly difficult design challenge. The atmosphere of the place is ephemeral and difficult to capture and translate into architectural language. Moreover, changes can easily destroy it. Architects must show the appropriate sensitivity to successfully design solutions that respect the atmosphere of a place with a high concentration of cultural values.

Another important issue is adaptive reuse. It is of crucial importance for monuments to be socially useful because emotional bonds are built through everyday contact. It is equally important to present a technical monument in such a way that its original function is understandable for those who interact with the heritage. While most people can easily imagine how a baroque palace or even a medieval castle functioned in the past, members of post-industrial societies are usually helpless when it comes to industrial facilities. It is difficult to appreciate a monument that is not understood. Therefore, in the case of sites related to production or technology, interpretation explaining the process determining the appearance of a historic object is of particular importance. It is also worth explaining other issues that allow for a better understanding of the monument and its embedded system of meanings.

To sum up, the architectural narrative concerning cultural heritage can take various forms, which was perfectly demonstrated by the discussed projects, whose authors after graduation will hopefully be better prepared to perpetuate the memory of (not only) industrial heritage.

Translated by Anetta Kępczyńska-Walczyk

References


The role of architectural design in industrial heritage interpretation – the case of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź

The article presents possible design strategies that can be used concerning industrial heritage on the example of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź. In particular, the possibilities of using the narrative role of architecture in the context of tangible and intangible cultural heritage have been outlined.

The considerations are based on the results of a semester project carried out at the Department of History of Architecture, Revitalization and Conservation of Monuments of the Łódź University of Technology, the subject of which was the proposal of an architectural intervention aimed at telling the complex history of construction, as well as maintaining the unique atmosphere of the place. The biggest challenge was the discrepancy between the building’s rich past and its current state and architectural expression.

The design proposals allowed for several interesting observations regarding design strategies, i.e. history and heritage as a source of inspiration; the atmosphere of the place as a subject of protection; the role and appropriateness of building materials in the interpretation of industrial heritage as well as the process of educating future architects and preparing them for the creative use of post-industrial heritage with respect for its cultural values.

**Key words:** industrial heritage, palimpsest, heritage interpretation, architectural narrative

---

**Abstract**

**The role of architectural design in industrial heritage interpretation – the case of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź**

The article presents possible design strategies that can be used concerning industrial heritage on the example of Wójtowski Młyn in Łódź. In particular, the possibilities of using the narrative role of architecture in the context of tangible and intangible cultural heritage have been outlined.

The considerations are based on the results of a semester project carried out at the Department of History of Architecture, Revitalization and Conservation of Monuments of the Łódź University of Technology, the subject of which was the proposal of an architectural intervention aimed at telling the complex history of construction, as well as maintaining the unique atmosphere of the place. The biggest challenge was the discrepancy between the building’s rich past and its current state and architectural expression.

The design proposals allowed for several interesting observations regarding design strategies, i.e. history and heritage as a source of inspiration; the atmosphere of the place as a subject of protection; the role and appropriateness of building materials in the interpretation of industrial heritage as well as the process of educating future architects and preparing them for the creative use of post-industrial heritage with respect for its cultural values.

**Key words:** industrial heritage, palimpsest, heritage interpretation, architectural narrative

---

**Streszczenie**

**Rola projektowania architektonicznego w interpretacji dziedzictwa poprzemysłowego na przykładzie Wójtowskiego Młyna w Łodzi**

W artykule, na przykładzie Wójtowskiego Młyna w Łodzi, przedstawiono możliwe strategie projektowe, jakie można stosować w odniesieniu do dziedzictwa przemysłowego. W szczególności nakreślone zostały możliwości wykorzystania narracyjnej roli architektury w kontekście materialnego i niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego.

Podstawę rozważań stanowiły wyniki projektu semestrowego zrealizowanego w Zakładzie Historii Architektury, Rewitalizacji i Konserwacji Zabytków Politechniki Łódzkiej. Jego tematem była propozycja interwencji architektonicznej mającej na celu opowiedzenie złożonej historii budowli, a także utrzymanie wyjątkowej atmosfery miejsca. Największym wyzwaniem była rozbieżność między bogatą przeszłością obiektu a jego obecnym stanem oraz wyrazem architektonicznym.

Propozycje projektowe pozwoliły poczynić wiele ciekawych obserwacji dotyczących strategii projektowych (tj. historii i dziedzictwa jako źródło inspiracji; atmosfery miejsca jako przedmiotu ochrony; roli i odpowiednictwa materiałów budowlanych w interpretacji dziedzictwa przemysłowego), jak również procesu kształcenia przyszłych architektów i ich przygotowania do twórczego wykorzystania spuścizny poprzemysłowej z poszanowaniem jej wartości kulturowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziedzictwo przemysłowe, palimpsest, interpretacja zabytku, narracja architektoniczna