

# Cultural and Ideological Clashes in the Context of Built Environment

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The paper presented is a theoretical work discussing architecture as a standing testimony of human conflicts stemming from cultural and ideological clashes. The author describes several types of these clashes, starting with the discrepancies between history and modernity. The clash between the old and the new is portrayed as potentially triggering conflicts, in case there is no dialogue between history and contemporary architecture. Another type of conflicts is composed of those stemming from inadequate transposition of cultural norms, which may have a detrimental influence on human identity. Globalisation is shown as one of the factors that affect this loss of identity, and is reflected in architecture. In addition to that, the paper touches upon the issue of chaos vs. order, two notions used and understood differently by the practitioners of particular architectural styles. The antagonism between chaos and order is also described as generating potential conflicts. Finally, the paper discusses the ideology-based conflicts, reflected in architecture. They are described as closely related to the loss of human values, and the symbols of these values. Throughout the work, the author comments on positive and negative practices in culturally- and ideologically-sensitive architectural design, giving examples of projects and buildings, in different time periods.

**Key words:** architecture, cultural conflicts, ideological conflicts, social clash, religious conflicts, identity, globalisation

## Introduction

Architecture is an integral part of culture. It reflects social structures, values and the way in which people perceive the reality, thus, it constitutes a mixture of inseparable identities. As a phenomenon evolving in time, architecture is in many ways related to social identity, ideology and politics – culture is a result of all these constructs, as well as an element which actively creates them.

Cultural differences, clashes with subcultures and cultural trends may result in conflicts. These clashes reflect conflicts between separate identities or their incompatible elements. Some elements are incompatible only at first glance. In fact, the clash between them may bring cultures together and lead to the creation of a new common culture. Culture encompasses various elements: people's perception and understanding of themselves and the world, individual and group behaviours, relationships, the aesthetic order of daily activities in the social space.

Ideological views are deeply rooted within the human psyche, and, thus, exert an important influence on social behaviour. Therefore, an ideology-related conflict is always accompanied by the transformation and reconsideration of architecture, representing certain views on the world and the systems of values.

## Conflicts between the old and the new

Processes such as territorialisation and globalisation constitute a hazard to traditional culture – both to people and

architecture created by them. Such processes may modify the identity of any built environment. That is why the conflict between the old and the new, between modernity and history is one of the universal cultural conflicts present since the beginning of humanity. The conflict between the traditional and the modern does not only stem from mere antagonism between the old and the new – in modern times it is also based on ideological bias related to modernism. According to Tzonis[1], architecture of the 1970s underwent the process of purification, detachment from the past. It applied to architecture, which was disposed of its “false grandiosity”, “addictive effects” and the “ideological mask” as the representation of “the ruling authority”. Such constructs were replaced in postmodernism with new buildings, new “grandiosity” and the new “addictive effect”. The present architectural realm is filled with structures representing these “ruling authorities” and “ideological masks”. They perhaps have even greater potential to influence its users, having been created based on studies in political and commercial marketing.

One of the controversial examples of the denial of the past is the extension of the largest museum in Canada – the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The extension was built in 2002, following an international contest won by Daniel Libeskind. The museum, formally established in 1912, underwent enormous changes together with the implementation of Libeskind's project – both spatially and compositionally.



Fig. 1. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, arch. D. Libeskind, 2007, photo by Peter Morgan, 2007

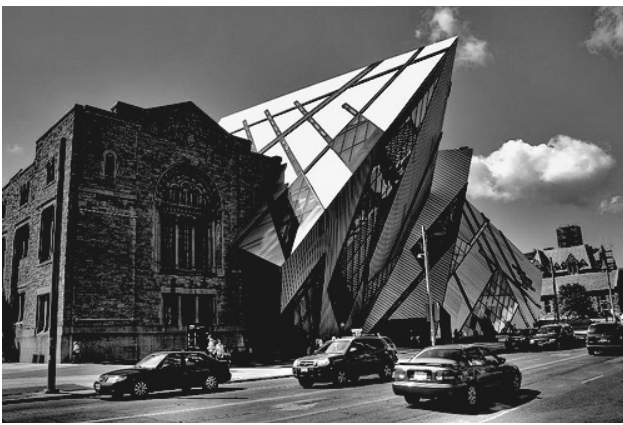


Fig. 2. A view on the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, arch. D. Libeskind, 2007, photo by Saku Takakusaki, 2008

The architect's design completely changed the perception of the surrounding architecture. Libeskind comments on his project by saying it is "a wonderful opportunity for dramatic new architecture and the creation of a great public attraction. The centrality of the site intensifies the profound relationship between history and the new, between tradition and innovation"[2]. It makes one reflect on the fact that tradition is not always treated with due respect; some critics state that Libeskind's project exemplifies this problem. This corresponds to a popular (but not necessarily positive) trend in art: the aim of which is to shock the audience, in order to help a given artist gain popularity and rise to fame.

Libeskind created the project, in which he broke architectural conventions and deliberately created a new space, diverse both emotionally and physically. While the project does not follow traditional architectural rules, the design refers to the context in which the building was erected. The architectural form has been a result of a profound design process – placed on several crucial city intersections, the museum's extension has a form of intersecting crystals. Similarly, these crystal forms were inspired by the crystals located in the Royal Ontario Museum mineralogy galleries.



Fig. 3. A view on the extension of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, arch. D. Libeskind, 2007, photo by Ross G. Strachan, 2008

Finally, the solid shapes are supposed to reflect the fortress-like appearance of the old building, even if the new forms correspond with the old ones mainly by contrast [2].

The opening of the first part of the museum – "Michael Lee-Chin Crystal", on 1 June 2007, attracted sharp criticism. Opinions of critics were divided, ranging from positive to very negative ones. To give an example, Lisa Rochon, an architecture critic, wrote in the "Globe and Mail" journal that the opening of "Michael Lee-Chin Crystal" "rages at the world"[3] and that it is oppressive, angry and hellish. In fact, it might seem that the form is aggressive and takes advantage of the historical form to its own benefit, like a parasite[4]. Nevertheless, despite this critique, the museum received a substantial financial support from the Swarovski company, which contributed to its success.

### Order vs. chaos

Another universal conflict, visible in architecture, is the dichotomy of order and chaos, the conflicting acts of following the rules and breaking them. In the 20th century, as a result of the conflict between order and chaos, the concepts of art and architecture were reconsidered. The postmodern style emerged as a reaction to logic and mathematical-based modernism, emphasising the need to get separated from the past. In postmodernism architecture and art did not aim to convey any specific meaning, and according to some authors, like Alberto Perez-Gomez, even lost the capacity to symbolise. Moreover, postmodernist artists did not aim to set any standards and foundations – they did not want to be repetitive. The postmodernists, represented by e.g. by Philip Johnson, Terry Farrel and Robert Venturi would rather make use of historical sources, in a playful manner citing and placing them in a new context. However for deconstructivist artists, such as Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman or Bernard Tschumi, as well as Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind mentioned

above, this a way of using historical elements was too orderly – they postulated a complete separation from the signs, allegories and historical references, and suggested the freedom of experimenting, where the artist turned a blind eye to the historical sources of meaning. The functional and formalised modernist aesthetics, which was contested in postmodernism, became obsolete. It was juxtaposed with abstract formalism, which did not respect basic architectural norms and assumed that every element of a building may constitute an autonomous system [5]. Nevertheless, these deconstructivist rules, pointing to the discontinuity of meaning, were aimed at creating a better world, which means they can also be perceived positively.

### Transfer of cultural norms

Cultural globalisation, which is a phenomenon that has accompanied humans in their geographical explorations and trade journeys for centuries, has nowadays an increasingly greater impact on modern society, as well as on globalisation in general. It results in several conflicts. Those which are the most detrimental to the architectural identity and urban planning can be referred to as the dissolution of local identity. Globalisation has led to the process of fragmentation of local experience, magnified by the confluence of cultures. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists started to claim that there exists no direct relationship between culture and ethnicity [6]. The society in the classical understanding of Emile Durkheim was replaced by the concept of a dynamic, diverse society. National and cultural borders are nowadays getting blurred and give way to trans-nationalism and cultural hybridisation. Architecture and urban space are not untouched by these trends.

One of the examples of architectural designs, which respected the country's original identity and culture is the government building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, designed by Louis Khan and erected in 1983. The fact that the architect "drew upon and assimilated both the vernacular and monumental archetypes of the region, and abstracted and transformed, to a degree of utter purity, lasting architectural ideas from many eras and civilisations" [7] may account for the fact that the design won the Aga Khan prize in 1989. The architect explains the meaning of the building's design by saying: "it was not belief, not design, not pattern, but the essence from which an institution could emerge" [8]. Such a design can only be created when an architect studies the culture and the history of the place in which the building is going to be erected – it calls for the architect's reflection and a high level of understanding which translates into extra effort and time devoted to carrying out the project.

Similarly, the 2008 Zaha Hadid's Stone Towers in Cairo, Egypt, were an attempt to refer to the native culture, or rather: an attempt to combine two, theoretically mutually exclusive, ideas. First, the project was inspired by Egyptian stone works, which gives the design a clear reference to Antiquity. The buildings make great use of sunlight

and shadow, which makes one think about the two phenomena once crucial for the functioning of Egyptian society. On the other hand, the outer skin of the Stone Towers reflects the surrounding ring of roads – a product of contemporary changes. Hadid merged these two concepts in one design, transposing certain norms into a modern project [19].

The importance of addressing cultural differences existing between the Western culture and the culture of Australian indigenous Aborigines has been recognised by architect Greg Burgess whose Uluru Cultural Centre is a result of a profound design process. Starting this process by spending a month amongst the Anangu tribe, the designer continued to address the specific relationship of the Aborigines with the material world, characterised by their unique perception of time and the surrounding world. Diagrams reflecting the spiritual life of the tribe were used as a basis for the architectural concept of the Center. The project ended up as a result of a participative mediation process, in which the local community was involved in a respectful manner. [20]

On the other hand, the process of transposing cultural norms may entail new conflicts. The design of the National Grand Theatre in Beijing, sent to China from France, is a good illustration of this phenomenon. The building is located next to the Tiananmen Square, an important cultural site. Its form outshines the narrow local streets and historical urban tissue. Those, who criticise the building point to the clash between its form and city's other symbolic sites, such as the Monument to the People's Heroes, the building of the People's National Congress, and the Gate of Heavenly Peace, located to the north of the Tiananmen Square. Erecting the theatre building in such a location was a challenging task to perform; the design had to take into account the theatre's several functions, and the volume of future rooms. The architect of the National Grand Theatre in Beijing – Paul Andreu was trying to minimise the conflict provoked when the "exogenous" architectural form was placed in the urban space, by giving consideration to the elements of local identity. Xing Ruan notices that the building makes the observer think about "heaven", reflected in its cylindrical form, contrasting with the "earth" of the theatre – therefore, the composition may be perceived as a representation of the Chinese concept of cosmos [9].

Such attempts to save the architectural local identity are not able to stop the unification of architecture, where new designs are created based on modern global technologies. What one can do is to stress the importance of local heritage and identity, as well as of deeply rooted traditions, as opposed to external manifestations and symbols [10]. Such attempts may also reinforce traditional values which an individual or the whole society may derive from their surrounding. But, as a trend, the process of globalisation leads to the impoverishment of traditional values, which are replaced by new values and identities. Globalisation entails

gradual subjectification and commercialisation of basic values, as well as customs and social roles related to them. This stands in sharp contrast to the past, when people lived “in traditional cultures with clear identities. They were programmed by the society in which they lived”. In such communities, the culture defined “what was good and bad, what was beautiful and ugly, genuine and false, it provided definitions of *sacrum* and *profanum*” [11]. This referred not only to certain patterns of behaviour but also to architectural styles, designs, patterns and interrelations.

Current processes in architecture have led to the deconstruction of “solid theoretical, philosophical, cultural structures (...), as well as cultural, educational, political and economic systems. Futurists, Surrealists, and Dadaists, used provocative experimental forms to represent current events” [12]. Some trends rooted in the post-war trauma, and present in the art created after World War II, can be referred to as “deconstruction, dislocation, decentralisation, disintegration and discontinuity” [12]. These processes are related to the relativist way of perceiving reality, in which culture is fluid and chimeric, while the traditional concept of material culture is abstract [13].

The process of questioning the existing rules and guidelines in architecture is visible, for instance, in the design of a multi-function centre located at Federation Square in Melbourne, Australia. The designer took the traditional Melbourne arcades and streets as an inspiration but deconstructed them to serve his own purpose. Another building which questions universal architectural assumptions is the one designed by Juan Carlos Osinaga and Sol Madrdejos Fernandez – a chapel erected in 2000 in Valleacerón, Spain. According to those who are used to traditional temple interiors, this deconstructivist concrete building may seem not to serve proper religious functions.

### Conflicts based on secularisation

Religious conflicts are an integral part of secularisation. Together with the diminishing role of religion in the western societies, one can observe the process of secularisation of space, manifested in the growing number of churches, which cease to serve their religious functions. In this way, the society is deprived of elements, which have developed people’s trust in authority, i.e. *sacrum*. The word “*sacrum*”, stemming from Latin, is ambiguous and may mean both sacred as well as profane objects and actions. The term “*sacrum*” was first used by the French sociological school represented by Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss and Émile Durkheim. Later, it was commonly referred to by phenomenologists of religion, such as Rudolf Otto, Gerard van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade [14]. The term is now often used to define the sacred zone, separated from the ordinary, secular life. The sacred encompasses the beliefs and religious practices; *sacrum* is a central notion in religious studies and cultural anthropology. The sacralisation of secular space has a long tradition, and can be currently observed too. The



Fig. 4. A view on the “Casa da Música”, Porto, arch. OMA, 2005, photo by Benutzer: Janekpfeifer, 2005

Reichstag building is a good example of this phenomenon: after the fire in 1933, the building was renovated, and in 1999 the dome was added to its original form. The dome, an important element of sacral architecture, became a symbol of the parliament, i.e. the secular power. By means of ultra-modern technologies adopted in the process of its construction, the dome became a new “*sacrum*” of modern reality.

Traditionally, social integration centres around rituals, symbols and monuments – a source of support and authority [15]. In many cities, new buildings are constructed to foster this integration and to shape group identity around the symbols of a “new *sacrum*” – art and technology. Examples of this phenomenon can be observed in many cultures, e.g. Casa da Música in Porto (“art as *sacrum*”), or the design of “Cybertecture Egg” in Mumbai (“technology as *sacrum*”).

As the traditional symbols and rituals disappear, they are replaced by new ones, the role of which is to act as motivational forces. They are often the result of propaganda and, in order to be effective, they must “have an emotional character that leads to the allegiance of the entire being, without thought (...). Propaganda appeals to belief: it rebuilds the drive toward the lost paradise and uses man’s fundamental fear” [16]. Magala notices, that not only symbols are threatened in the modern civilisation of the West. What is also lacking is the “cultural and axionormative point of reference which would integrate people; there is no elite which would act as a role model and instil values in the society” [11]. The deprivation of a foundation, or a point of reference, leads to the loss of support for any reflexiveness. On the other hand, when the traditional foundation is lost, there is room for introducing new, external rules. Juxtaposed with such rules, a human being creates their own “safety cocoon”, a safety zone. An individual becomes easily threatened by changes, in the presence of which people choose to stick to old habits [16], rather than experiment with the new. Opinions on the causes and effects of such tendencies, both in architecture and in other fields of human activity, are highly divided. Some agree with Rousseau

that “disorder is an integral part of order”[17] and claim that structural disorder should be an integral part of developed orderly structures[18]. They promote the openness of the system. Others criticise such elements of disorder, and claim, that they can make one think of “unsafety, instability, conflict and fear” [5], when looking at the buildings. In the postmodern architectural composition, the notions of contrast, disorder and contradiction are of great importance, perceived as “a positive assertiveness and a driving force of growth”[18]. Both tendencies are valid – in fact “no population will survive without sufficient members sufficiently aggressive. However, no population could survive where chaotic and conflicting competitions normally get to deadly dimensions”[18].

## Conclusions

Architecture reflects human culture, identity, ideology and the system of values. It becomes a marker of human beliefs, rules, and traditions. That is why any cultural and ideological interplay, including conflicts and cultural merges, is mirrored in the built environment. It also highly depends on the existing system of power, which frequently leads to the erection of symbolic architectural objects.

Building proportions and the location in an urban context, materials and forms used in its construction, as well as the building’s functions, frequently contain hidden information on the dialogue between two or several communities, groups and the architect. Architecture can reflect the course, quality and outcome of that dialogue, resulting in a culturally-conscious design. On the contrary, a building can violate a local identity. This violation may lead to further conflicts, in which architecture can become the agent, a source of problems, or a reflection of conflicting identities. As a result, a building can be either accepted or rejected by a community – it can also be supportive, neutral or destructive for the culture- and ideology-based social identity. When used inadequately, architecture may lead to the loss of values, and identity, shaping architectural styles and trends.

Put under different philosophical influences, architecture has been constantly transforming. Last century provides for examples of these transformations: there have been several value transitions, from reason to meaning, and to economy. In other words, architecture has travelled from logic-based modernism, influenced by the multitude of industrial solutions and the standardisation of procedures, through meaning-based liberalisation of profession, where an independent architect, the value of aesthetics, regionalism and genius loci were the key notions, back to the profitability-based rapid and efficient changes of the modern times, where spectacle and image-oriented messages related to the world’s development play the pivotal roles.

All in all, irrespective of whether it reflects or generates problems, architecture is, more than frequently, a marker of culture and its ideology, which gives it a particular role

in the contemporary times: namely, it has become a cultural industry.

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