



IMAGES IN ARCHITECTURE – FROM MURALS TO ILLUMINATING PROJECTIONS

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Abstract. As in every other domain of art, in contemporary mural painting it is possible to indicate great projects and realizations as well as failures. However, many examples confirm the thesis of an especially significant role of depicting in architectural and urban space. After all, like in other kinds of painting, the main feature here is the talent of an artist. Artistic quality of depicting in architectural scale is so important because of its aesthetical, ethical and education role. It is hard to answer the question about the future of mural paintings and the role of the new media of transmitting color and illusion in architectural space. Nowadays, in the time of instant development of science and technology, increasing tempo of life and continuous need of changes, it may turn out that the digital and hologram pictures better fulfil the expectation of the present recipient. It is not unlikely that the practical values of these techniques – their energetic and light features – might cause the elimination of traditional wall paintings which have accompanied architecture for so many ages. On the other hand, we could observe in the present culture evident “retro” tendencies – the growth of interest in the past, the recognition of traditional forms of expression, and a desire for their continuation. Materiality, touchable texture, and some mysterious load of energy executed by artists in traditional techniques are the elements acting to the advantage of old-fashioned painted walls.

Keywords: architectural coloring, mural painting, digital and hologram depicting, composition, theory of contemporary architecture, visual communication, participation.

Covering with paintings one’s home – a cave, a tent or the walls of a building is one of the oldest and the most deeply rooted symptoms of human creativity.

Tied to architecture for centuries, wall paintings have fulfilled many functions: magic, symbolic, aesthetical. Murals indicated the prestige of a place, transmitted religious messages and commemorated the most important events. Created in many cases by prominent artists, murals offered the opportunity of going beyond the exclusively usable treatment of architecture. Wall paintings as well as spatial forms of buildings revealed a special meaning of architecture in social life, as a symbol of humanistic and universal values.

In spite of the great tradition and long history of mural painting, at the beginning of the 20th century, architectural painting – regarded as useless “decoration” – was abandoned by modern architects and followers of the “international style”. Adolf Loos recognized whiteness of walls as a natural sign of the civilization development. Notwithstanding the whole

ethos and commitment, the intransigency of such an ideology, manifested in a famous slogan “ornament is crime” [1], carried the signs of despotism. The principle of modernism formed by Louis Sullivan said “forms follow function”. Paradoxically however, the rigorous functionality often led to unification and – trying to “organize” people’s life – proceeded in fact according to the motto “life follows architecture” [2]. In reality, life escapes from the control of over-demanding programs. At the same time, when the “international style” led to the relinquishment of any “decoration” in architecture, monumental mural painting developed intensively in Mexico, and a huge New Deal’s mural project was realized in the United States. Nevertheless, the most dynamic development of contemporary mural painting’s form and technique came in the seventies and eighties, when the community-based *Mural Movement* produced hundreds of large-scale wall paintings in the United States, Canada and Western Europe [3].



Fig 1. *Homage to the Chicago School of Architecture*, Richard Haas, Chicago, North La Salle, 1980, source: V. Barthelmeh, *Murschilderingen*, Meulenhoff, Landshoff, Amsterdam, 1982

Since mural painting always exists within an architectural context and represents in fact a specific form of architectural color, it could never be perceived as absolutely autonomic art. Basic formal issues expose the interrelation between architecture and painting, like domination, subordination or harmonization, stressing deformation and interference in the tectonics of a setting, including change of scale, change of horizon, deformation of vertical direction, illusion of space, and illusion of architectural ornament [4] (Fig 1).

On the other hand, in addition to decorative and formal values, murals usually carry a message and introduce new values to architecture; so to say, they go beyond the architectural frame. Murals open before the audience “new worlds” and “spaces”; they act on their imagination, and “enliven” performances. There is continuity in the history of traditional mural forms from pastiches of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Renaissance murals, through pastoral scenes based on the eighteenth-century European gardens or oriental landscapes, to fantasy scenes and faux paint effects. From another point of view, a wide spectrum of mural works also proves that architectural painting mirrors contemporary art



Fig 2. *Dusk*, 1991, designed by Frank Stella, Los Angeles, 433 Olive St. / Pershing Square (photography by M. Bałkowska)

movements, such as op-art, surrealism, pop-art, different kinds of realism and abstract styles (Fig 2).

For its scale, common perception and availability, mural art is regarded as a social phenomenon, so the role and function of mural painting is more important and recognisable than in the case of other forms of painting. That problem was a starting point to isolate specific functions of mural painting, including some psychological and sociological aspects. The phenomenon of mural painting could also be presented in the perspective of pragmatic aesthetics with emphasis on the importance of the so-called “popular art”.

Many murals are used as a manifesto of frustration of poor or unsatisfied groups or communities; in extreme cases – as a tool of political or social fight. Murals could articulate political opinions, work as an information medium or popularize important social issues (Figs 3–5). In political or commercial campaigns that function is often extended to propaganda. Lots of commercial pictures take the form of huge advertisement, pushing an idea, an organisation or a product. Nowadays, it is hard to avoid commercial pictures in urban space, so an important issue is how to put advertisements into town landca-



Fig 3. *The People Park Mural*, 1976, by Osha Neuman, Daniel Galvez and others, Haste Street and Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley (photo by M. Bąkowska)



Fig 4. *Street of Eternity*, 1993, by Johanna Poething, Los Angeles (photo by M. Bąkowska)

pe and composition. Another problem is the choice of technique of presentation.

Accessibility of wall painting and its common reception makes that kind of creativity a social phenomenon, propagating the ideas of “popular art”, “popularization of art” and “escape from museum”. Mural art wants to be “common art” and – in contrast to “high art” (academy

art) which has been considered too hermetic and “over intellectual” – it searches for the contact with the audience. Giant pictures could be perceived as significant cultural messages. The key aspect is a psychological feature of the phenomenon – a deeply rooted in human subconscious need to “create pictures” and in this way communicate with others. Educational, social rehabilitation and therapeutic functions of murals are significant, too. Their significance was confirmed in many successful experiments led by architects, artists and sociologists’ teams in the United States and Western Europe [5].

Very often murals express the “speaking of nations”, the voice of ethnic minorities (e.g. the Mexican or the Filipino in the United States). These works usually insist on drawing our attention to the process of “imagining home” and reveal the community pride in their heritage. Besides, in murals one more important function can be fulfilled: the identification of place (searching for *genius loci*) and symbolic “labelling”. The architectural space is co-created by the user’s behavior. The territorial behavior usually expressed by appropriation could take the form of plunder as well as of a positive pro-social activity. People identify themselves with the murals because the paintings tell the story of the people. They see their lives reflected on a heroic scale. Accepted by the members of a local society, murals establish the visual unique marks of the territory, so the urban space is no longer “nobody’s” and becomes “ours”. The attention given to the murals by visitors and by the press certainly reinforces local pride in the walls. Eva Cockcroft in the book *Toward a People’s Art. The Contemporary Mural Movement* notices that community residents protect their murals from defacement, and there has been very little graffiti added to community murals in the United States. The reason is quite simple: there is no motive for adding graffiti to walls if the mural itself serves the same purpose of group assertion, expression, and identify – in a more effective way. Local youth, including gang members often participate in mural projects [6].

Nevertheless, if murals referred only to political or social matters, it would be easy to reproach them for propagandist didactics and monotony. However, the plurality of formal solutions and narrative motifs dismisses this type of accusations. Hidden symbolism, intellectual riddle, joke or just pure visual pleasure is very common in contemporary murals. Analyses of wall paintings show the characteristic *leitmotifs*: “space and time journeys” and humor. Murals are like gigantic history books, sometimes dramatically presenting key events or precisely reconstructing scenes of ordinary



Fig 5. Mural in Mexican district, San Francisco, 2006 (photo by M. Bąkowska)

people's life from the past. Such images might play a significant educational role. On the other hand, lots of giant pictures have quite a different mood, not always so serious. Building size jokes, optical illusions or just desire of mere decoration and “beautiful look” serve visual entertainment in urban and architectural space (Figs 6, 7). We can find the exemplification of such kind of creativity in almost all historical periods. The importance of its meaning is again appreciated and stressed. The characteristic trends of the second half of the 20th-century architecture turn towards tradition manifesting itself in historicism, homeliness and regionalism as well as humanization of spatial environment with popular tendencies as one of aspects. Charles Jencks mentions the idea of “the pursuit of humor” [7] as one of the main stylistic values of post-modern architecture, and according to this author, “enjoyment” constitutes the third defining criterion of postmodernism [8].

For their scale, color, symbolic meaning and – in some cases – high artistic values, murals work as expressive landmarks in urban space and help to better construct “cognitive maps”. Considering murals as clearly visual dominants, the function of identification could be regarded as a typical formal issue as well. Pragmatic values of mural painting do not exclude the artistic and aesthetical values. The most important aspects of themes represented in paint – regarded as a formal issue – submit the typology of architectural motives, figural scenes, decorative or “environmental” flora and fauna pictures, “quotations” from famous historical paintings. Figural depicting is one of the most frequent and oldest narrative motives. In ancient Egypt, Rome and Mesopotamia the figurative wall painting illusions were widespread, and especially enormous “superhuman scale” depicting



Fig 6. Jazz mural, 1987, by Bill Weber, Broadway-Columbus St., San Francisco (photo by M. Bąkowska)



Fig 7. Painted fence, Long Beach, 2005 (photo by M. Bąkowska)

was believed to have extraordinary or even magic power. Monumental portraits probably could activate an old myth of “enlivening by picture”, functioning since prehistoric man began to create his first drawings on the walls of caves. Anyway, the symbolic expressions of powerful paintings equal in scale with architecture, also impress spectators today. In countries behind “the Iron Curtain” that kind of depicting, especially huge portraits of Lenin in the former Soviet Union and of Ceaucescu in Romania, were made very often and were typical of the so-realistic style. In contemporary murals, gigantic-size portraits often turn the attention of viewers to ordinary people, members of society and not previously noticed by their neighbors.

Huge, photo-realistic pictures by Kent Twitchel on the external walls of buildings in Los Angeles evoke great impression (Fig 8). The painter, with equal care and attention as to the technique and psychological insight, treats all his protagonists: a pop-star, a soap-opera heroine, marathon runners, musicians of a symphony orchestra, a newly-married couple from the neighbor-

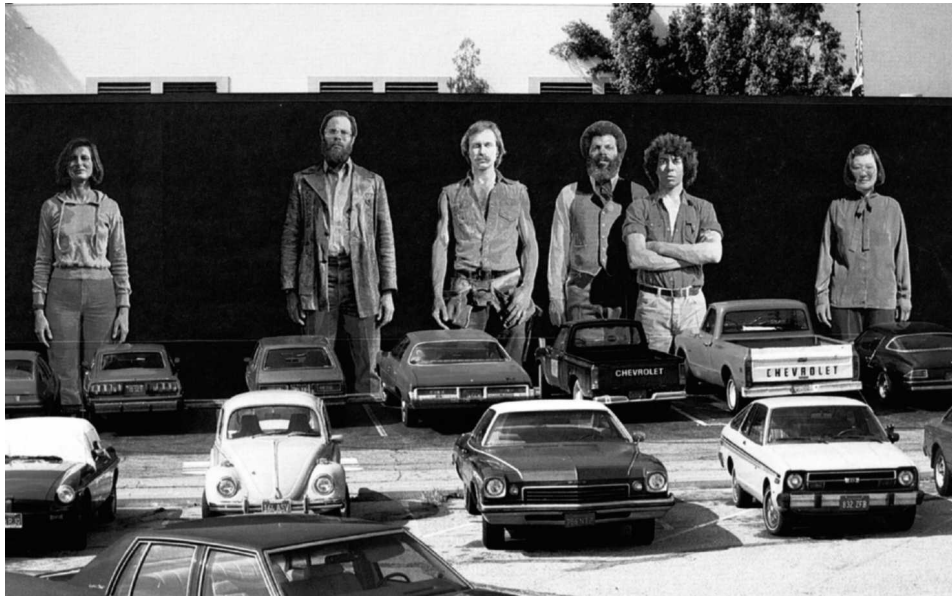


Fig 8. *Six L.A. Artists*, 1979, by Kent Twitchell, Torrance/ California, Engracia Ave., source: V. Barthelmeh, *Murschilderingen*, Meulenhoff, Landshoff, Amsterdam, 1982



Fig 9. *John, Elvis, Marilyn and Charlie*, Franklin Avenue, Hollywood, Los Angeles (photo by M. Bąkowska)

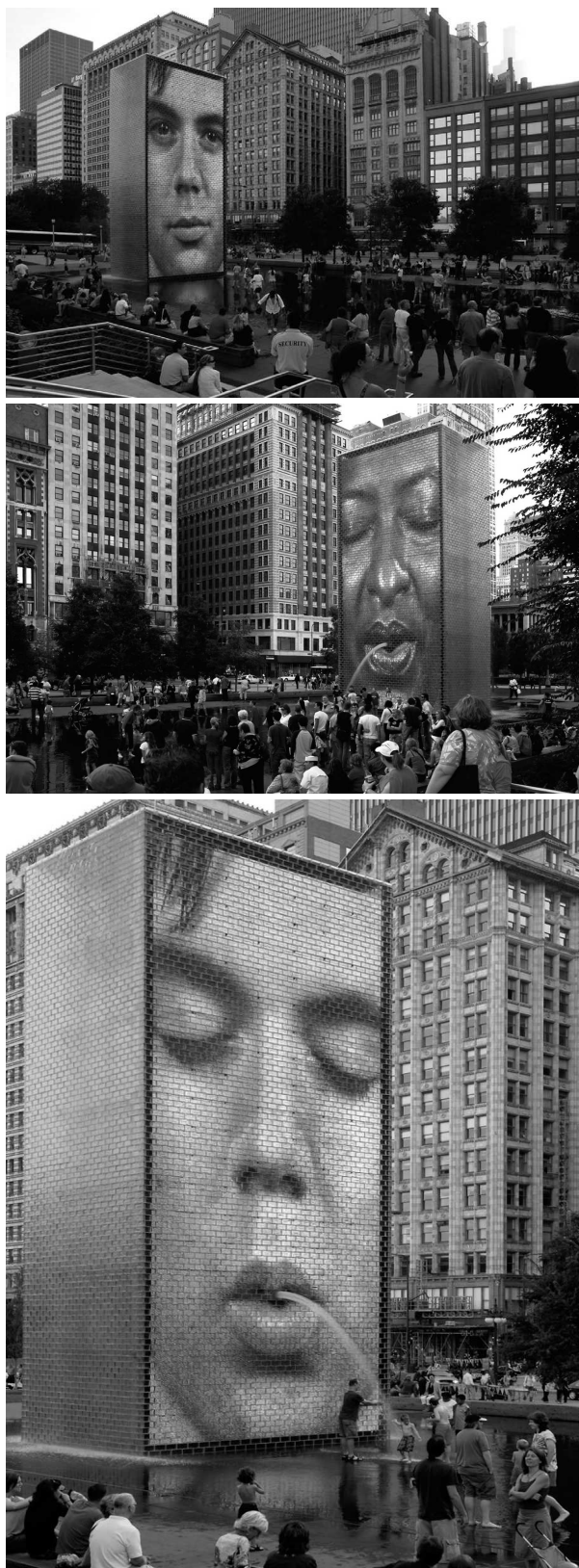
hood. Monumental portraits of well-known personalities and figures-symbols of pop-culture are also very popular (Fig 9). The heroes of comics *Superman*, *Batman* and *King Kong* compete with heroes from the action movies or cinema stars.

Besides traditional mural painting, pictures executed in new techniques, like digital, laser and hologram, have

recently appeared in architecture. It is a controversial matter whether it is possible to regard that kind of projection in categories of painting. Notwithstanding all formal doubts, the new techniques surely establish the continuation of the tradition of “illusion” and depicting in architecture [9]. The elusiveness, changeability in time, and the great functional potential are the charac-

teristic features of the new media. Laser performances use not only objects but the whole architectural space. The objective of such performances is to achieve a spectacular but momentary effect. Thus the surrounding architecture is not affected. Laser performances are held rather incidentally because of great concerts, spectacles or artistic events. Hologram depicting realized in architecture can also serve the effect of “spatial” illusion or even “hyper-illusion”, variable under the influence of a different angle of lighting and time. The most important difference between laser visions and hologram media inheres in the permanent character of a construction and a strong practical aspect. The facades using hologram techniques possess an effective ability to absorb the sun energy, the amount of which depends on the season of the year and the time of the day, so the building receives an additional portion of light, warmth and electric energy. Through the hologram techniques it is possible to gain homogeneous coloring as well as multicolored illusions in saturated, strong colors, and to preserve a high lighting ability at the same time [10]. An example of another method introducing pictures on external walls by applying digital screens is the work, exposing the ubiquity of media is the “machine, monument and architectural object” designed by Toyo Ito’s *Egg of Winds* in Yokohama (1991) [11]. In the project of the *Tower of Winds* (1986) Toyo Ito represents the visual complexity of Tokyo metaphorically in terms of a never-ceasing, ever-changing wind. In contrast to the west, where the city is perceived as a permanent museum of monuments and spaces, Ito sees Tokyo as ephemeral, articulated not through its buildings, but through electricity pylons, vending machines, illuminated advertisements and traffic signals [12]. Both *Tower of Winds* and *Egg of Winds* are interactive landmarks in the public domain as a result of creative confrontation with technical possibilities.

The aspects of entertainment and identification are combined with giant-size portraits in the Crown Fountain designed by a Spanish artist Jaume Plensa in magnificent Millennium Park in Chicago (Figs 10–12). The fountain consists of two 50-foot glass block towers at each end of a shallow reflecting pool, and exemplifies “architecture in action”. Each tower is made of glass blocks protecting a LED screen that randomly displays a person’s face, a nature scene, or a solid color. The towers project video images from a broad social spectrum of Chicago citizens (collection consists of 1000 faces), a reference to the traditional use of gargoyles in fountains, where faces of mythological beings were sculpted with open mouths to allow water, as a symbol of life to flow out [13].



Figs 10–12. Crown Fountain, 2004, designed by Jaume Plensa, Millennium Park, Chicago (left below and above; photos by W. Kulak)

In some cases illuminating pictures appear in urban landscape as an expression of art events lasting only for a short period of time of presentation. Through his famous “Public Projections”, a Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko disrupts our traditional understanding of the functions of public space, activating the silent monumentality of buildings in the exploration of notions of human rights, democracy, and truths about violence and alienation [14]. The main focus of an American artist Jenny Holzer has been on the investigation of means to disseminate her ideas within public space. Since late seventies, she has been working in urban environment, using the media that would enable her work to blend in the urban environment. LCD displays present texts which function as comments stimulating the awareness of our social conditioning [15].

Conclusions

1. As in every other domain of art, in contemporary mural painting it is possible to indicate great projects and realizations as well as failures. However, many examples confirm the thesis of an especially significant role of depicting in architectural and urban space.
2. After all, like in other kinds of painting, the main feature here is the talent of an artist. Artistic quality of depicting in architectural scale is so important because of its aesthetical, ethical and education role.
3. It is hard to answer the question about the future of mural paintings and the role of the new media of transmitting color and illusion in architectural space. Nowadays, in the time of instant development of science and technology, increasing tempo of life and continuous need of changes, it may turn out that the digital and hologram pictures better fulfil the expectation of the present recipient. It is not unlikely that the practical values of these techniques – their energetic and light features – might cause the elimination of traditional wall paintings which have accompanied architecture for so many ages.
4. On the other hand, we could observe in the present culture evident “retro” tendencies – the growth of interest in the past, the recognition of traditional forms of expression, and a desire for their continuation. Materiality, touchable texture, and some mysterious load of energy executed by artists in traditional techniques are the elements acting to the advantage of old-fashioned painted walls.

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PAVEIKSLAI ARCHITEKTŪROJE – NUO FRESKŲ IKI ŠVIEČIANČIŲ PROJEKCIJŲ

M. Bąkowska

Santrauka. Sienų tapyba, kaip architektūros elementas, per amžius turėjo įvairių paskirčių: magišką, simbolinę, estetinę. Freskos suteikė vietai prestižo, perdavė religinio turinio žinias ir įamžino svarbiausias įvykius. Kadangi sienų tapyba visuomet egzistuoja architektūriniame kontekste ir perima architektūrinės formos specifiką, jos negalime suvokti kaip visiškai autonomiš-

ko meno. Dėl savo masto, spalvos, simbolinės prasmės ir tam tikrais atvejais aukštos meninės vertės freskos yra išraiškingi orientyrai miesto erdvėje, padedantys geriau susivokti „kognityviuose žemėlapiuose“. Šalia tradicinės sienų tapybos neseniai architektūrinėje aplinkoje ėmė atsirasti naujomis technologijomis – skaitmenine, lazerine ar hologramomis – atlikti paveikslai. Jų meninė vertė yra ypač svarbi dėl jų estetiškos, etinės ir edukacinės reikšmės.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: architektūrinis koloritas, sienų tapyba, skaitmeniniai ir hologramų paveikslai, kompozicija, šiuolaikinės architektūros teorija, vizualinė komunikacija, dalyvavimas.

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