Buildings as embodiments and symbols of security and power

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Summary

In this paper I argue that based on the analysis of the relationship between security and representation, three different approaches can be distinguished in architecture: visible security; represented security; and functional security. In my analysis, I use a history-based approach, which I try to supplement at each point. These approaches are not able to cover all architectural functions because of the heteronomy, multifunctionality and regional-cultural dependence of architecture. I first give a general introduction to the close connection between architecture and security from the beginning. I then, following Nikolaus Pevsner, focus on the analysis of government buildings as a primary architectural task.

Keywords: architecture, representation, security, building

Az épület mint a biztonság és a hatalom megtestesítője és szimbóluma

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Összefoglalás

Tanulmányomban amellett érvelek, hogy a biztonság és a reprezentáció kapcsolatának elemzése alapján az építészetben három megközelítés különíthető el. Az első a látható biztonság, a második a reprezentált biztonság, a harmadik pedig a funkcionális biztonság. A három kategória azonban az építészet heteronómiája, multifunkcionalitása és regionális-kulturális függősége miatt nem képes lefedni a biztonsággal kapcsolatos összes építészeti funkciót. Bevezetésként bemutatom, hogy városlakóként hogyan találkozunk a biztonság kérdésével az épített környezetben. Ennek illusztrálására Jane Jacobs és Jan Gehl munkáira támaszkodom. A biztonság a kezdettől fogva alapvető emberi szükségletnek számított, pusztán az épített környezet változott, újabb és újabb lehetőségek nyílnak meg. A látható biztonság kérdése Vitruviusig nyúlik vissza, kinek a tanai az építészet alapvető kérdései szempontjából ma is aktuálisak. A reprezentált biztonság témáját a 19. századi kormányzati építkezések elemzéséhez kapcsolódóan magyar példákkal vizsgálom (Parlament, Nemzeti Bank). A példák elemzéséhez Nelson Goodman tipológiáját használom. Tanulmányom utolsó része a funkcionális biztonság kérdésével foglalkozik, amely a kortárs építészet egyik legnagyobb kihívása. A vastag falak helyett ma már különféle biztonsági berendezések állnak rendelkezésre a védelmi funkció ellátására. Amellett érvelek, hogy a hagyományos értelemben vett biztonság kérdésköre ma már az akadálymentesítés építészeti kérdésére is kiterjed.

Kulcsszavak: építészet, reprezentáció, biztonság, épület

In examining the relationship between security and architecture, it is commonplace to mention Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (all-seeing). Bentham designed the perfect prison, which was able to create a structure of power solely through the use of architectural tools *(Bentham 2017: 193)*. At this point, the study of prison architecture, which Nikolaus Pevsner also noted as a separate category, may seem evident. The explicit relationship between the two areas is clearly prison architecture. Nevertheless, the issue of security permeates different areas of architecture, though not always as explicitly as in the case of Bentham's Panopticon. Adding the question of

representation to Bentham's utilitarian and functional conception gives a deeper picture of the role of security in architecture. The link between representation and security (as an essential function of any building) goes back to the dialectical relationship between form and function that is of perennial relevance in the history of architecture.

How urban citizens face the issue of security

In his influential work *Cities for people*, Jan Gehl begins with a quote from Jane Jacobs' iconic work *The death and life of great American cities*, published in 1961. Jacobs emphasises that a person must feel personally safe and secure while walking on the streets among strangers *(Jacobs 1961: 30)*. She identifies insecurity as a general problem in major US cities. Adapting statements from Jacobs' book, Gehl also applies the criterion of safety to his own system of categories for urban space. Gehl formulates the following four criteria as a new goal for urban planning: lively, safe, sustainable, and healthy cities *(Gehl 2010: 6)*. Jacobs and Gehl seem to have a similar conception of what constitutes a safe and secure city. As Gehl describes it:

> The potential for a safe city is strengthened generally when more people move about and stay in city space. A city that invites people to walk must by definition have a reasonably cohesive structure that offers short walking distances, attractive public spaces and a variation of urban functions. These elements increase activity and the feeling of security in and around city spaces. There are more eyes along the street and a greater incentive to follow the events going on in the city from surrounding housing and buildings. *(Gehl 2010: 6)*

Gehl creates 12 quality criteria concerning the pedestrian landscape spanning three categories: protection, comfort, and delight. For the category of protection, Gehl sets out three criteria:

1. protection against traffic and accident, which means feeling safe
2. protection against crime and violence, which means feeling secure
3. protection against unpleasant sensory experiences *(Gehl 2010: 239)*.

The first criterion is a later need that developed in light of urban-metropolitan lifestyles. The second and third criteria (feeling safe and secure) are among the basic human needs that remain as important with the modernisation of the environment as they were at the beginning of civilisation. Gehl devotes an entire chapter to safety and security.

Security and the ability to read a situation are reinforced when social structures are supported by clear, physical demarcations. A sign at the city limit tells us we are now entering the city. Quarters can also be marked by signs or gates, as they are known in the Chinatowns in many American cities. Neighborhoods and individual streets can be marked with signs, gates or symbolic portals, and our arrival at a housing complex can be marked with gates and welcome signs. *(Gehl 2010: 102)*

To interpret the analysis, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by urban space. Perhaps the most accurate definition of urban place is that of physical and sociocultural public space. Within this definition, we can distinguish three groups if we examine it according to the category of publicity. The so-called *external public area*, for instance, contains: squares, streets, roads, parks, car parks, etc. *Internal public areas* are sites of public institutions such as libraries, museums, and public transport (trains, bus stations, airports, etc.). The third group includes external and internal quasi-public spaces: legally privately owned but public spaces (such as restaurants, cinemas, sports fields, shopping malls), and privatised public areas.

What do these three categories have in common? Although their respective forms, customers/users, and purposes are distinct, representation is an important aspect of all three categories. This representation can communicate many different messages from stakeholders to users, but they also share a common moral and security issue. Architecture, as a moral issue and as a public matter with its style and form of language, has always been a significant platform for the transmission of values. These values may differ over time, but in governmental buildings, the symbolisation of political status, power, and security was also an important consideration from XXS scale (like interiors) to XXL scale (like neighbourhood units or complete cities). Architecture always expresses people's desire for or real belonging (or distancing); it can do so with visible elements, materials used at the forefront, form language, and symbols. In architecture, the national – or international – form language is important in preserving the community's identity.

The category of the built environment, neighbourhood unit, or building determines who is responsible for security and to what extent and in what way it is present in that space. In many cases, in internal public areas, such as a shopping mall or an airport, the city-to-city concept prevails. They have streets and squares like real urban space. Artificial lighting and air conditioning make the quality of time spent there uniform and predictable. We are always protected from environmental influences due to the controlled temperature and consistent climate. Thanks to the carefully planned and calculated environment, as well as the presence of the security services – and the fact that all city functions are available in one

place – we feel comfortable in the space. The same feeling is harder to achieve in the public spaces of the city. There are far more unpredictable elements at play here: changeable weather and traffic conditions, much freer and therefore unpredictable human activity, and a less intensive presence of security staff. In the public space, architects have several options, which I will discuss later. Before doing so, we need to examine where the human need to feel safe in a building comes from, and to understand that this sense of security also needs to be represented.

The origins of the security question in architecture

The concept of security has been bound up with architecture since the first stone was laid for a dwelling. The fact that man is a homo faber who adorns his environment implies that there is a built environment around him. The house was basically created to protect people from the vicissitudes of the outside world, forces of nature, and attacks from animals and other tribes. This topic was already addressed in the first century BC by Vitruvius, who also discussed the beginnings of architecture in his masterpiece *The ten books on architecture*. The latter is the only surviving text from antiquity on architecture and, according to Vitruvius, it is the first Latin work to attempt a comprehensive discussion of architecture.

> Some made them of green boughs, others dug caves on mountain sides, and some, in imitation of the nests of swallows and the way they built, made places of refuge out of mud and twigs. Next, by observing the shelters of others and adding new details to their own inceptions, they constructed better and better kinds of huts as time went on. *(Vitruvius 1914: 55)*

One could argue that the original archetype of all architectural works was the place of refuge. If this is the case, then the most important aspect of architecture is that of *security*. Vitruvius claims that the people had to defend themselves primarily from the forces of nature, especially from the weather:

> And since they were of an imitative and teachable nature, they would daily point out to each other the results of their building, boasting of the novelties in it; and thus, with their natural gifts sharpened by emulation, their standards improved daily. At first they set up forked stakes connected by twigs and covered these walls with mud. Others made walls of lumps of dried mud, covering them with reeds and leaves to keep out the rain and the heat. Finding that such roofs could not stand the rain during the storms of winter, they built them with peaks daubed with mud, the roofs sloping and projecting so as to carry off the rain water. *(Vitruvius 1914: 55)*

Among the architectural works, the sacral buildings and the buildings of power also hold a special place in Vitruvius' category system. From the point of view of the communicational aspect of architecture, representation is important for sacral buildings, while security is crucial for buildings of power. These characteristics, together with other properties to be noted in due course, are what define a building. I claim that the relationship between representation and security forms the focus in the public architecture of different historical eras. In architectural theory, representation and functionalism, rather than representation and security, are usually contrasted. However, in order for a building to function well, the primary criterion is that of safety.

Another factor associated with civilisation, also mentioned by Vitruvius, is fire *(Vitruvius 1914: 54)*. Although the author does not explicitly address it as such, there is a security factor that arises in connection with the use of fire: namely, guarding the fire. And in the event of a fire, there is no representation factor, only functionality and protection with safety: "To supply heat, the mighty sun is ready, and the invention of fire makes life more secure" *(Vitruvius 1914: 264)*. What Vitruvius describes relates to the category of visible safety, for both the house and the fire. During this period, human resources are no substitute for construction or protection.

Man, as a homo faber, had a need to decorate the shelter that provided protection. In the history of architecture, in addition to functionality (which primarily includes security), there have been several demands that have led to the emergence of new architectural features. In sacral architecture, for example, in the case of churches, another security factor also appears albeit on a metaphorical level. The church as the connection between the earthly and heavenly spheres is, of course, the built embodiment of protection by God, too. Represented security culminated in the great wave of public building construction in Europe in the 19th century.

Represented security – in a historical form language

The retrieval and renewal of past architectural features is an important point of reference. Neo-styles convey values from previous eras that hold a representative force for the community. Architectural functions are fulfilled through public buildings, especially government buildings, which are significant in that they must convey power and security. This applies to all people, regardless of gender, age, education, etc. The sense of power and security must be comprehensible to everyone who encounters the building.

Nikolaus Pevsner was a German-born British architectural historian, who was a major researcher in the history of European architecture. In his famous work, *The history of building types* (1997), he began by considering governmental architecture prior to any other building

with a cultural or practical function, because the architecture of public administration has always been a priority. Government buildings occupy a central role in Pevsner's work; indeed, he discusses government buildings in four separate chapters *(Pevsner 1997: 27–62):* Government buildings from the late twelfth to the late seventeenth centuries; Government buildings from the eighteenth century: Houses of parliament; Government buildings from the eighteenth century: Ministries and public offices; Government buildings from the eighteenth century: Town halls and law courts.

Fischer (2014: 39) also argues for the epoch-making change in the history of architecture. He emphasises that the focus shifted from the sacral and (public) buildings of the dominant and representative purposes from the 19th century (as the author puts it, from the period of the breakthrough) to the buildings of public institutions and mass housing construction. The change in the tasks of architecture, of course, also implies the presence of representation and security. The buildings of representative public institutions were also important in national endeavours in the 19th century. When Pevsner specifically highlights the role of parliament buildings from the 18th century, he also emphasises the symbolic-representative role of these buildings. This role is similar to that of other public institution buildings (such as ministries and public offices, town halls and law courts), because in these cases, the buildings' conveying power and security is paramount. We can call this represented security.

One of the first questions of Lawrence Vale's *Architecture, power, and national identity,* published in 2008, is the following: "How do government buildings mean?" *(Vale 2008: 4).* Vale says the following about the meaning and visual communication of governmental buildings: "The heavy walls of hard-baked clay or solid stone would give to the ephemeral offices of state the assurance of stability and security, of unrelenting power and unshakeable authority" *(Vale 2008: 42).* Stability, security, power, and authority are the four qualities that buildings must convey to all people consistently and without any doubt through visual and architectural communication. The materials and formal language of the mediated content are significantly culturally determined. Nevertheless, in addition to cultural specificity, there are universal, archetypal, architectural features that can be used to easily decode the message.

Vale's work recalls *Goodman's (1988)* typology, which also examined the issue of architectural meaning. Let me rehearse here Goodman's analysis of the Hungarian Parliament Building and the National Bank.

Goodman's (1988) typology of architectural meaning types

Denotation: Representing or depicting something. Whale shaped, sailing boat shaped, etc.

Exemplification: Exemplifying or expressing properties – "the building is designed to refer effectively to certain characteristics of its structure" *(Goodman 1988: 38).* Formalist architecture.

Expression: Exemplification of metaphorically possessed properties.

Mediated reference: Allusion, for instance, finding something "contradictory" about a building, even if a building cannot convey a contradiction.

Goodman's analysis – applied to the Hungarian Parliament

Denotation: The Hungarian Parliament does not denote (vs. Whale and National Theatre).

Exemplification: This building does not exemplify beyond the properties of its building material. (This also has a meaning because it is made from domestic materials from the territory of the country.)

Expression: Perceiving monumentality, impressiveness, beauty, grandeur, etc.

Mediated reference: Its neo-gothic style refers to the golden age of the Hungarian Kingdom. The 96m high cupola refers to the purpose of the building: in celebration of the millennium of the founding of the Hungarian state in 896. A bicameral parliament, which is extremely important from a socio-political point of view in this age, and which also plays a role in shaping the building, can also be felt from the outside. Overall, the building mediates and conveys social and historical security for all Hungarian citizens.

I would add a historical note to the mediated reference section. Due to its governmental role, central location, and symbolic meaning, the Parliament Building has always been significant for architectural communication. That is why, in Hungary's previous socialist state, the red star was placed on the dome of Parliament to precisely eliminate this former sense of security. If we analyse the placement of the red star on the Parliament from the view of Bentham's Panopticon, a similar feeling could be evoked: I never know when they are watching, as the red star is always there at the highest point in downtown Pest. Of course, the red star was also in place to symbolise the new power.

Let me share another example and analysis in the Goodmanian vein, but one that does not carry a directly political aspect, namely, the Hungarian National Bank. The building and the function itself are, of course, governmental, but the institution was not based on a political cycle, but rather on a long-term one – accordingly, it must also symbolise stability architecturally. Let us see how it achieves this.

Goodman's analysis – applied to the Hungarian National Bank

Denotation: The Hungarian National Bank does not denote (vs. Whale and National Theatre).

Exemplification: This building does not exemplify beyond the properties of its building material. (This also has a meaning because the materials must be and appear strong.)

Expression: Perceiving monumentality, impressiveness, beauty, grandeur, etc.

Mediated reference: The building of the Hungarian National Bank exudes power with its massive structure, strict architectural details, reinforced plinth zone, and used materials. Visually, all of this means that my money is safe, I can trust the institution as well as the Hungarian state that maintains it. The use of historical architectural elements increases prestige because it shows that my money has been handled by a long-established institution, which also signals an enduring sense of security.

As ordinary citizens, we do not need to know who designed the building and when, in what style; we do not need to have a professional analytical toolbox to decode the messages conveyed by the building. The building's physical appearance indicates its intended meaning. It can therefore be concluded that, regardless of the more specific function, one of the primary purposes of government buildings is to exhibit security.

Functional security – Sense of security indicated by proxies

Expectations about security have changed dramatically in recent architecture. Safety is no longer necessarily signalled to us by thick stone walls or representative, massive buildings. (It is important to specify that this applies to the everyday life of peacetime. In a state of war, of course, security is different in the built environment.) We have cameras instead of heavy walls. Our sense of security is ensured, if not reflected, by the objects (cameras, alarms), but we are aware that human help will arrive promptly in the case of any trouble.

As I emphasised at the beginning of the paper, it is important to distinguish public spaces from the point of view of the public. Yet, this distinction is not always an easy one to draw. The line between private and public spaces is often blurred, which is also a key issue for security. Furthermore, nowadays security does not just mean that I am safe. Accessibility also poses new challenges to architecture; it is important that people with reduced mobility, a parent with a stroller, or a deaf person, for example, can reach and access the entrance to a building without encountering physical obstructions. As Vale notes:

A security-driven urban aesthetic of "stand-off" setbacks changes the boundary between public and private space, alters the relationships among streets, sidewalks, and facades. It changes the way buildings are seen and the way they are entered. It can change the sequence with which they are experienced. The setback may affect the sense of welcome that the institution conveys, and result in subtle changes of attitude on the part of the

visitor. A building with multiple entrances conveys a different hierarchy than a complex that must be accessed through a single secure portal, let alone one that is first entered below ground. On the positive side, buildings designed to have a single securable entrance will need also to make such an entrance accessible to visitors with disabilities, thereby eliminating the two-class system of access that currently remains prevalent. *(Vale 2008: 544–545)*

Likewise, in his foreword to Jan Gehl's book, Richard Rogers writes: "Everyone should have the right to easily accessible open spaces, just as they have a right to clean water" *(Gehl 2010: ix)*. Even though Gehl includes accessibility in the category of comfort, I argue that the possibility of free access today forms part of security. In my view, security issues that affect the average person have two layers: the protection functions in the traditional sense; and an equal opportunities and accessibility function. For people who do not have physical disabilities, this latter aspect is a comfort feature. But for individuals who have physical disabilities or special characteristics and are in any way hindered, the issue of security is not a mere matter of convenience.

The three conceptions of architectural security outlined here – the physical, the represented, and the functional – do not follow one another in time. Physical security will be a prerequisite for representational and functional security. In addition, because we live in an architecturally heterogeneous environment with a variety of styles and ages in our everyday lives, our old buildings also need to be rethought in terms of security. Just as buildings can be renovated and technically upgraded, so too there is a need to update its security aspects. This is a difficult task because the highest level of modern technology must be implemented in old buildings that are culturally protected and part of the architectural heritage, such as the Hungarian Parliament building.

Conclusion

Our approach to security needs to be applied to the diverse built environment in which we live. Of course, since the beginnings of architecture, the notion, expression, and representation of security have changed. The first point of my analysis was Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which is identified in the literature as a symbol of security in architecture. In the paper, I categorised the architectural tasks and eras: the first was visible security; the second was represented security; and the third was functional security.

In the first section, I introduced how we confront the issue of security today as urban citizens. To illustrate this phenomenon, I based my argument on the works of Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl. Being safe and secure has been a basic human need from the very beginning of human evolution, only the built environment has changed and new opportunities have become available. The issue of

visible security goes back to Vitruvius, whose statements remain relevant to this day with regard to the fundamental issues of architecture. To analyse the represented security, I considered some governmental constructions of the 19th century, using two examples from Hungary: the Hungarian Parliament Building and the National Bank. To study these examples, I drew on Nelson Goodman's typology, which Lawrence Vale applied to government buildings in his book *Architecture, power, and national identity*. The final section of the paper dealt with the issue of functional security, which is a major challenge for today's architecture. Instead of thick walls, various safety devices are now available to fulfil the protection function. I argued that the issue of security in the traditional sense needs to be expanded today, to incorporate the issue of accessibility into architectural solutions.

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