Miroslaw Nizio*

From imagination to space. Architecture and museum exhibition as a dialogue and interaction

Introduction

It is not that I do something haphazardly, rather I think about who will view our projects and try to understand how they might perceive them. The form, shape, material are so sensual that it seems they will be understood by everyone [1]. These words are kind of a key to understanding the design philosophy reflected in the major completed projects as well as competition and conceptual proposals created by the team of the studio I run. I began to build the foundations of the Nizio Design International studio, established in 2002 in Warsaw’s Praga-Północ district, more than a decade earlier – during my studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology majoring in the interior design. It was in New York that I founded my first design firm at the turn of 1989 and 1990.

In my view, architecture has a complex character, real and abstract at the same time, which not only expresses itself through form, light, colour, body, structure, and material texture, but also conveys impressions and awakens emotions, reaches to the depths of the soul and experience – both of the creator and the viewer. Architecture is a medium through which the architect creates their environment and expresses their professional credo, knowledge and inspiration, while presenting their personal attitude to the world. Through architectural material, a more abstract form of dialogue is also carried out – with the present, past and future, with ancient and modern works, as well as with nature and with matter-building material [2, p. 18]. The quintessence of my view of architecture was aptly presented by Monika Komorowska, who wrote: Architecture of Nizio Design International can be viewed as a search for integrity. It originates from the sculptural attitude towards reality, openness in the process of architectural creation and dialogue with the place as well as, what is of great importance, with its viewers. […] Discussion is a starting point for the multi-directional process of design thinking to which artists, philosophers, publicists and curators are invited. Here, architecture constitutes the manner of expression which creates a many-layered meaning, the way of communication with the modern world [3, p. 14]. I also particularly emphasize the craft and artisanal connotations of my own design and implementation process, as pointed out by the author of the article Architecture between dimensions: Interior and building designs highlight the understanding of the construction process, the designers’ interest in it, as the final step of arriving at the final form of the design. Design understood not only as a path of thought, but also as a meticulous, artisanal process, beginning in the sketch, in the mock-up, in the solution of the detail, leading through the selection of materials to the execution [3, p. 20].

This article is an attempt to introduce readers to the ideas behind the museum designs that were created at the Nizio Design International studio. The most important of these is the idea of a dialogue understood as a conversation through architecture with its audience, with the landscape, and with one’s own feelings and experiences. In each museum concept, I try to make the form of the building, its message, as well as the scenographies of the exhibitions themselves a means of expression.

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Philosophy

In the interview with the “Architektura i Biznes” [Architecture and Business] website, quoted in the article’s introduction, I formulated some key principles for me regarding the process of creating museum facilities dedicated to important historical events and the responsibility involved. The designs (by Nizio Design International – editor’s note) are difficult because they involve different history and stories, sometimes tragic, traumatic ones. The responsibility of our studio and mine personally is that we have to convey the facts, team up to ensure the historical accuracy of a given narrative. Building anything in the dimension of identity, history must be preceded by a thorough analysis of factual materials, preparation at the curatorial level, verification and confirmation of individual threads in close cooperation with historians. Of course, in the case of core exhibitions, curators and exhibition experts have a special role. As a designer, I would not be able to endorse the factual and historical threads without having the background, the relevant knowledge to do so. This is a difficult and responsible task – just as an architect is responsible for facilities that have a function and must meet certain criteria and feature certain qualities [1]. I am close to the philosophy of Peter Zumthor who believed that The roots of our understanding of architecture lie in our childhood, in our youth; they lie in our biography [2, p. 57]. The basis of creativity for me is knowledge, sensitivity and personal experience. The effects of my work, on the other hand, are the result of specific sensations, growing up in a specific time and place. In turn, the signpost on the creative path is the pursuit of the universal message of the work which is expressed in using forms, associations, quotations, symbols and emotions that are understandable to the general public, marking social, cultural or national identity. On the other hand, individualism that gives a work of architecture a unique character is important in creative work, causing the object to convey revealing, inspiring things in new, unexpected and non-obvious ways.

When creating museum designs and related narratives, both architectural and exhibition ones, I use an elaborate authorial language that [...] has its own syntax, that at all times is closely related to the structure of a place [3, p. 21]. Close contact with the space and its in-depth analysis, attentiveness in view is the starting point for the development of the form. As a former student of sculpture, I look at space both from the perspective of an architect and from that of a visual artist. Particularly close to me is the sculpture of Eduardo Chillida and Richard Serra, who built their large-scale, symbolic works in close union with nature and in relation to it and the audience [4], [5]. I have repeatedly pointed out that the path to the development of the form is a thorough, multi-stage process of studying vectors, relationships and connections of history, the fate of the people associated with it, the structure of the landscape, the materials that make up the local cultural landscape. As Komorowska noted, [...] designs of the atelier embrace several ones which strongly show the genius loci. Those are the designs in which the designer’s assumption is expressed in the entire development development of the interior and exterior of the building in a coherent message which gets through to the user on different levels: from the exterior, and relations with the landscape, to the details of exhibition solutions. [...] The performed objects, analysed on drawings and mock-ups, allow us to hear people, and feel their experiences [3, p. 21]. The buildings I have developed are sculptural-architectural structures that belong to the landscape and fate of a particular place, becoming its symbol and interpretation.

Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów, project completed: 2021

Analysis, gradual formation of the body, study of the context sometimes bring surprising solutions. Such was the case with the design of the Mausoleum of Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów [Mauzoleum Martyrologii Wsi Polskich w Michniowie], which won numerous awards, including: the Internet Users’ Award in the jubilee 10th edition of the POLITYKA Architectural Award competition, Property Design Award 2022 in the public facility category, or Grand Prize in the Chinese YUANYE Awards competition.

In the case of the sculptural, segmented body of the Mausoleum, not all of its structure immediately appears to the eyes of the viewer. At the point where visitors enter the Mausoleum, an interaction begins that takes place on many meaningful and sensual levels, between the people (the author, the viewers, the protagonists or heroes of the commemorated events), the site and its history, and nature. Visitors initially fail to notice the rifts in the structure of the building, the decay of the body and the degradation of the architecture (Fig. 1). Yet the decomposition of the building dovetails with the degradation of the world, as discussed in the narrative of the core exhibition. The viewers, with the help of their own sensitivity and imagination, come to understand this idea. The building of the Mausoleum of Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów is a sculptural architecture, an expression of thinking about the object as a symbolic form existing in a specific time, natural conditions, with the wealth of a specific story. It is a memorial the body and matter of which reflect the process of destruction, referring to the pacification of the village of Michniów by the Nazis in 1943. The body resembles a row of village cottages lined up one behind the other, but their form is unsettling. It is subject to disintegration, as after a major fire or earthquake. In the successive shattered bodies of the building, gaps and rips are formed through which light enters the interior (Fig. 2). The body consists of 11 segments. The first ones have a solid structure, the next six give the impression of being consumed with fire, falling apart. The cool and ascetic structure of the concrete, which bears the imprint of the wood, is broken and chiselled in a disturbing way – this procedure captures the drama of the tragic war events. Throughout the composition, the handling of light and the development of detail are important, including the use of cubic, irregular shapes in the design of the displays – this
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Fig. 1. Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów:
a) bird’s eye view of the building and sketch of the side elevation with cross-section through the ground (photo by M. Czechowicz),
b) sketch of the mausoleum (drawing by M. Nizio)

Il. 1. Mauzoleum Martyrologii Wsi Polskich w Michniowie:
a) widok budynku z lotu ptaka i szkic elewacji bocznej z przekrojem przez teren (fot. M. Czechowicz),
b) szkic założenia (rys. M. Nizio)

Fig. 2. Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów:
a) sketch of the interior (drawing by M. Nizio), b) part of the exhibition (photo by M. Czechowicz)

Il. 2. Mauzoleum Martyrologii Wsi Polskich w Michniowie:
a) szkic wnętrza (rys. M. Nizio), b) fragment ekspozycji (fot. M. Czechowicz)

form is a reference to the destroyed village and the chimneys of burned-out houses. The choice of materials in the exhibition was also important: the smell of black steel and burnt, blackened wood and the sight of its texture imprinted in concrete interact with the senses. All of these elements – both contained in the architecture and the museum narrative – are components of the dialogue that emerges between the designer, the viewer and the environment.
The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv, 
design: 2018

The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv [Narodowe Muzeum Hołodomoru-Ludobójstwa w Kijowie] is a special project that we have been working on since 2018. The works on the construction of the building and the conceptual design of the core exhibition were halted by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The arrangement of the exhibition was developed by the Nizio Design International studio team with the co-authorship of Haley Sharpe Design Ltd. The architectural design of the building of the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide was prepared by the Ukrainian studio Project Systems LTD with the co-authorship of Nizio Design International. Total usable area of the Museum is almost 14,000 m², while the exhibition area will occupy over 3,500 m².

The architecture and the core exhibition commemorate the victims of the Holodomor, the man-made famine caused by the Soviet authorities in Ukraine in 1932–1933 that killed several million lives. Blended into the tectonics of the Dnieper River slope, the building refers in its form and in the texture of the materials used to the symbolism of the Ukrainian land – the source of food and life on the one hand, and the eternal resting place of millions of Ukrainians on the other. The dual symbolism of Ukrainian land and soil – fertile, but also hiding the graves of Holodomor victims – is a leitmotif that appears throughout the artistic conception of the building and the exhibition [6]. An important procedure in shaping the body of the museum was the creation of a clear break and fracture in the roof of the building which expresses the light shed on the truth about Soviet crimes (Fig. 3a). An important element of the design is a monumental corridor bringing visitors inside the building, deep into the earth, where it will be possible to observe and feel the structure of Ukrainian black soil reflected in the Museum’s façade (Fig. 3b). The building […] should blend into the ground, it should be hidden in a sense. Hidden as the subject of the Holodomor – the Great Famine – was hidden for decades, as it was forbidden to talk about [7].

References to nature and the use of vegetation motifs in the design served to emphasize the museum’s message – […] the blocks of the museum will be covered with faded grass. The truth about the Great Famine was supposed to overgrow, it was supposed to disappear. It has not disappeared. Our goal is for it to be shared and disseminated in a dignified manner [7]. From the very beginning of the building’s design process, the visual and scenography concept for the exhibition space was born along with the architectural solutions in mind. In the end, it was cut by walls with an aggressive wedge-shaped form, which represented the mechanism of the Soviet regime. My idea is to build this narrative on contrasts: light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and the clash of different architectural and scenography forms [6].

The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa, 
project completed: 2016

The Museum in Markowa [Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów podczas II wojny światowej im. Rodziny Ulmów w Markowej] commemorates Poles who risked their own lives to save the Jews during World War II. The most significant motif in this design seems to be the diagonal shape of the building’s body (Fig. 4). Its ascetic dynamism by its very form introduces a mood of anxiety, and is a symbol of the destruction of a peaceful life, the happy home of a rural family – the Ulma couple, who were killed for making a heroic effort to help their Jewish neighbours. An important role in formulating the final shape and meaning of the design is played by the use of corroded steel on the walls of the building which evokes the horror of the war years (Fig. 5a). Playing with light is also important: the interior of the museum is in semi-darkness, diffused by the glow emanating from the heart of the building – the symbolic “home of the Ulma family”, the embodiment of
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Fig. 5. The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa: a) front view, b) part of the exhibition (photo by L. Kwartowicz)

Il. 5. Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów podczas II wojny światowej im. Rodziny Ulmów w Markowej: a) widok od strony frontowej, b) fragment ekspozycji (fot. L. Kwartowicz)

goodness, hope and peaceful life (Fig. 5b). In Markowa, Nizio Design International’s architects themselves presented their own design concept to its residents. They explained the genesis of the form, a house with an archetypal façade giving the feeling of safety that tappers off like a stiletto provoking the anxiety and emotions felt by the Poles hiding Jews. The architects showed in what way the building was placed in context, in the so called “remembrance wood”, on a square which will be lightened with rainbow-hued bricks bearing the names of the Poles saving Jew. The architects explained the assumptions of the exhibition and its poetic nature with the use of black and white photographs that gradually fade telling the story of those who died [3, p. 16].
Gross-Rosen “Stone Hell” in Rogoźnica
project: 2012

The commemorative monument “Stone Hell” was designed as a monumental architectural and spatial installation that will use the universal language of art and the context of the site to tell the story of a tragic chapter in the history of 20th-century Europe. In the “Stone Hell” design, a commemoration of prisoners who perished in the Nazi Gross-Rosen camp, the dominant means of expression is the disturbing, sculptural juxtaposition of the stone inner walls of the former quarry with the creator’s dramatic gesture of partitioning the historic space with a giant steel wall (Fig. 6a, b).

The “Stone Hell” uses the symbols of the granite extracted from the stone pit which, appearing in the crypt, in the form of ash, brings memories of those who were “destroyed” there just like those granite blocks [3, p. 20].

The Blessed Father Jerzy Popiełuszko Museum in Okopy,
project: 2019

Of course, architecture is one thing, it is extremely important and constitutive of the Museum, but the place for such a literal exploration of Father Jerzy’s story will be the core exhibition. Exploring his life, going through the exhibition, we can return to the building body and architecture, and perhaps understand more maturely why it is the way it is. And that, I feel, is beautiful [1]. The design of the museum was created in 2019, and our goal was to find a simple and expressive form of commemorating the priest-martyr of the communist system. The key to working out the idea of the architecture and core exhibition at the Blessed Father Jerzy Popiełuszko Museum [Muzeum Bł. Ks. Jerzego Popiełuszki w Okopach] are the many references to the rural landscape of Podlasie, full of old churches and wayside shrines. It is to these that the central element of the museum, a gable roof rising out of the ground that is the culmination of a memorial site hidden underground, makes intuitive and symbolic reference (Fig. 7a, b). The façade, constructed of concrete blocks, features clearances that can be associated with the symbol of the cross, but also with the openings between the logs of the wood of a country cottage. With the aforementioned openings, the building will give the impression of a lantern, illuminating the neighbourhood with bright light coming from within it. Around the centrally designed Place of Recollection an exhibition was placed, the composition of which refers to the imagery of the lives of saints, showing the fate of Father Jerzy in the context of the three decisive moments of his life: baptism, priesthood and martyrdom. From the riverside escarpment, the premise will be fenced off with an openwork wall made of concrete blocks. Water will flow down its walls, referring to the universal symbolism of life and washing the sins away, but also evoking a specific association with the place of Father Jerzy’s death, the dam in Włocławek (Fig. 8).

The project was inspired by wooden and stone wayside shrines, still common around Podlasie and Mazowsze Wschodnie (Eastern Mazovia). Associations with churches – Gothic, with attics, with concaves, stimulating and facilitating interaction with visitors – were also important for the composition of the block. In addition, […] the facility will be made of aggregate of local stones, not with materials brought from other regions, but the ones sourced just from this place. These aggregates will be used to create 80 × 40 centimetre blocks, the main building and construction material for the entire premise. Thanks to them, the block in the external part will be slightly moved, some flaws, cuts, clearances will be noticeable, intended to symbolically reflect the tragic history of Father Jerzy. Thus, the building itself will already begin to
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“speak”, tell a little about the story [1]. The concept of the museum was three years in the making, and the design process itself was preceded by discussions, thoughts and sketching. The design evolved, so that it matured not only in the imagination of Father Popiełuszko’s family and those involved in the construction of the monument, but also in mine.

The Warsaw Rising Museum
– concept for the expansion and modernisation, project: 2018

The concept for the expansion and modernization of the Warsaw Rising Museum [Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego] was selected through a competition organized by
the investor and the Warsaw branch of the Association of Polish Architects. According to the jury of the competition, the concept prepared by our studio […] is characterized by compositional coherence and scale adapted to the surroundings, as well as architectural expression subordinated to the currently existing spatial and symbolic hierarchy of the existing museum complex. It is also a form that is open to the city through the location of a glazed long lobby along Towarowa Street [8]. The concept for expansion of the most important museums in Poland is particularly important to me. First, because of my personal involvement in its creation, and second, because of its role as a symbolic buckle that ties together the studio’s and my achievements over the past 15 years. I did not notice this regularity at first, but that’s exactly how many years separated the creation of a new project for the Warsaw Rising Museum from the moment that was a kind of turning point on my professional path – in 2003, together with Jarosław Kłaput and Dariusz Kunowski, we co-created the concept and began works on the core exhibition at the Museum under construction at the time. Together with the Nizio Design International team, I designed and then completed the exhibition. At the time, it was felt that a museum revolution was taking place inside the capital’s former tramway power plant on Przyokopowa Street, which had become the Museum’s seat. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we pioneered multimedia and interactive, narrative exhibitions and displays. As it soon turned out, the project was innovative on many levels. The exhibition provided the impetus for a change in thinking about the design and implementation of museum exhibitions in Poland. For many years, it set the highest quality standards in the field and raised the bar for technological and multimedia solutions. It so happened that years later I returned to designing for the Warsaw Rising Museum. I knew the Museum very well. I was familiar with the exhibition spaces and the environment of the museum facilities. Probably also for this reason, it was with some ease that my team and I were able to work out in detail the architectural and urban design concept, which, as the jury ruled, “fulfilled to the greatest extent the design goals established in the competition” [8].

Having observed the Museum’s successful activities over the years, having visited it both on business and privately on the occasion of various events, I was aware of the challenges it may face. The insufficient functionality of certain urban and architectural solutions seemed key to me. Over the years of operation, the needs of the institution, the habits of visitors, and the environment of the museum buildings themselves have changed. Close proximity, a new city has basically sprung up – modern housing developments, office buildings and a subway station. Therefore, from our perspective, two issues were important: in the ideological sphere – to strongly emphasize the relationship between the past and the present, and in the purely practical sphere, that of architecture and urban planning – to improve the functionality of the entrance area of the Museum from Towarowa Street. We had worked on the concept, which was selected by the jury from among the 11 other ones submitted for the competition, for several months. The design involves the creation of a new spacious and comfortable entrance area to the Museum. This zone, which we felt the Museum lacked, is to become its calling card, it is to open the space towards the city and this new environment that has evolved around the Museum. The design envisages new development of the premises (Fig. 9), related to changes in the organization of visitor traffic, as well as the creation of an additional

![Fig. 9. The Warsaw Rising Museum – concept for the expansion and modernisation, visualisation of the project](source: Nizio Design International)

Il. 9. Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego – projekt rozbudowy i modernizacji, wizualizacja koncepcji
(źródlo: Nizio Design International)
storage area, necessary for the continued efficient and smooth operation of the facility.

In designing the expansion of the edifice, we distinguished, so to speak, two zones, the “historical” one, connected with the core exhibition and the existing building, and the new one, which is to become a symbol of modernity (Fig. 10). By locating the main entrance on the side of the main thoroughfare, we were able to create an expansive space conducive to education, recreation, as well as reflection on the content related to the Warsaw Rising. The main element of the new entrance area will be a pavilion, light in form, located on the side of Towarowa Street, in which we have emphasized three functional cores such as a “welcome centre”, educational premises and a restaurant. In addition to the entrance area, the new pavilion is to include a hall that can accommodate up to 300 people, as well as an exit down to the underground floor which serves as a link to the existing building [9]. The space is welcoming, light, with bright colours, glazing and lush vegetation reigning supreme. I am pleased that the entrance area of the Museum is to undergo a major metamorphosis, part of which is a design created in my studio. As the director of the Warsaw Rising Museum announced, in addition to the designed pavilion […] bays will be built so that buses and cabs can stop and drop off tours. We also want the visitors to be able to walk through the greenery from the nearby subway station to the museum [9].

Summary

In 2013, in an interview with Jolanta Ruszkiewicz of the Magazif website, I declared: I am interested in socially and culturally engaged projects. In the work of an architect, it is not only the structure that is important to me, but the context, the functions of the place. Working on public buildings provides many opportunities and satisfaction. With such projects, the analyses I conduct with historians and sociologists are important [10]. In a nutshell, this is what the philosophy of my work on each project boils down to, immersed in a series of contexts, forces and vectors that constitute it. Concern for the highest substantive quality, respect for the context of the place, time and history to which the designed space/building relates, a special commitment to dependability, stable form, beauty and precision, detail, material, form and message are for me indispensable components of daily conceptual, design and implementation work. After all, I would like my work and that of my studio team to be perceived as Monika Komorowska writes: In the more and more technologically advanced world where we often feel more and more uprooted and homeless, the authoring architecture of Nizio Design International seems to enable creation of the feeling of belonging and find the identity of the place [3, p. 21].

Translated by
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References

Abstract

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The article presents the design philosophy of Mirosław Nizio, architect and sculptor, creator of many realised and conceptual museum projects, founder and owner of the Nizio Design International studio. The author of the paper pays particular attention to the idea of dialogue, to which he has subordinated all his projects, and which he understands in a multifaceted way as: a personal dialogue with the audience through architecture, a discussion between architecture and landscape, as well as an inner monologue touching on his personal feelings and experiences. The text presents Nizio Design International’s best-known projects, such as the Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów, The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa or The Blessed Father Jerzy Popiełuszko Museum in Okopy.

Key words: contemporary architecture, architectural design, architecture of dialogue, museum

Streszczenie

Od wyobraźni do przestrzeni. Architektura i ekspozycja muzealna jako dialog i interakcja


Słowa kluczowe: architektura współczesna, projektowanie architektoniczne, architektura dialogu, muzeum