Oskar Hansen - An Architect Looking into the Future

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Abstract. In 2015, the Architecture Department of Warsaw University of Technology was celebrating a century of existence. Although the Warsaw College was created during the occupation, it was characterised by the autonomy of its creators. Even in the hostile post-war years, when the leading professors were under the influence of socrealism, the teachers kept elaborating independent ideas about the design. Many started creating according to the new ideology, but some were still developing concepts that were not influenced by the oppressive communist system. Many creators and theoreticians of the Architecture Department influenced the academic, didactic and creative activity of the following generations of architects. Oskar Hansen was one of the many outstanding alumni of the Faculty of Architecture Warsaw University of Technology. He was a teacher at the Visual Structures Studio at the Fine Arts Academy, from 1954 to 1983. His unconventional creativity influenced heavily the research led in the experimental laboratory of the Department of Sculpture at the Fine Arts Academy. Hansen’s character has been widely described, both in academic and popularised literature, in Polish and in English. The most notable are About Zofia and Oskar Hansen by Springer and Zaczyn, Zobaczycy świat (Looking at the world) written by Hansen himself, where he describes his open form theory and his publications in the weekly Przegląd Kulturalny (The Cultural Review) and the magazine Architektura (Architecture). In this research paper, we will question the available literature about the subject - the artist’s own publications, articles and monographies describing his work, and more specifically, the architectural practice using the theory of design called “open form”. The “open form” theory will be analysed under the perspective of the applicability of the semantic narrative of the architecture of meaning. The research will be led through a case study method. We have chosen to analyse ten major semantic subjects: the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the Franciscan monastery in Tychy, the Ronchamp Chapel in France, the ecumenical chapel in Switzerland, Bruder Klaus chapel in Germany, St. Jacob’s chapel in Germany, the Chapel of Reconciliation in UNESCO, the Cymbalista synagogue in Tel Aviv, and the Bełżec memorial for the murdered in Poland. The chosen subjects have been carefully selected, in order to show the multi-layered quality of the open form theory. The influence of the open form theory when designing modern object related to a symbolic narrative, remembrance sites, and sacral spaces, will be a significant element of our study. An innovative element of this work will be the attempt to fully analyse the “open form” theory exposed in Hansen’s writings called Zobaczycy świat. The study of these specific elements and characteristics of the contemporary commemorative monuments and sacral objects belonging to the open architecture school raises the question of the place of semantics in the globalisation era. In the open form theory, the author builds the opportunity for contextualisation, and challenges the user. Does it stand in opposition or does it balance the Kantian theory of sacral spaces? The open form issue can also be connected to the didactics of
1. Introduction “Theory and Practice in the Faculty of Architecture Warsaw University of Technology” - Oscar Hansen open theory

In 2015, the Architecture Department of Warsaw University of Technology was celebrating a century of existence as one of the oldest departments of the university. The founders of the Warsaw Architecture Faculty have been described in a book written by Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the department, called Twórcy i dzieła Warszawskiej Szkoły Architektury 1915–2015 [1] (The creators and the work of the Faculty of Architecture). Oskar Hansen was one of the many prominent alumni of the Architecture Department. He was a teacher at the Visual Structures Studio at the Fine Arts Academy, from 1954 to 1983. His unconventional creativity influenced heavily the research led in the experimental laboratory of the Department of Sculpture at the Fine Arts Academy. It was at the CIAM conference in Otterlo, in 1959, that he first disclosed his “Open Form” theory [2]. The manifesto of this young architect working in Poland was a revelation, due to his contestation of the dogma created by the great masters Le Corbusier and Ludwig Van Der Rohe [3 p.36].

Hansen’s character, and his teaching and creative activities, have been widely described, both in academic and popularised literature, in Polish and in English. The most notable are About Zofia and Oskar Hansen by Springer and Zaczyn, Zobaczyć świat (Looking at the world) written by Hansen himself, where he describes his open form theory and his publications in the weekly Przegląd Kulturalny (The Cultural Review) and the magazine Architektura (Architecture). Yet the Open Form enigma has not been analysed much using examples from the architecture of meaning. It should be noted, though, that all human activities related to space can be seen as semantic objects. There is a moral imperative to the architecture of meaning, due to its semantic layer. In the publication called O Narracji w Architekturze Znaczeniowej [4] (About the Narrative of the Architecture of Meaning) three types of subjects have been differentiated: sacred spaces, remembrance sites, and the “home”, understood as the original human living space. Due to the qualitative nature of the semantic analysis, we will only study here sacred spaces and remembrance sites. The influence of the Open Form theory on contemporary works, in the scope of sacral architecture at large, show how this vision, imagined 60 years ago, is still relevant nowadays.

2. The “Open Form” concept, described by architect Oskar Hansen

The “Open Form” concept, described by Hansen in his works „Ku Otwartej Formie” [5] and „Zobaczyć świat” [6] (Towards the Open Form and Looking at the World) has to be understood through several anthologies. The architect, in his analysis, has been concentrating on the understanding of “time-snaps”, i.e. the processes that happen in space. In order to fully grasp the “Open Form” concept, the author also uses “big and small numbers” that depict the OF and the CF in a different light: the value of life itself, fashion, masks, authenticity, free-will, chaotic collections of forms, environmental pollution, ecology, visual pollution, visual comfort, the dangers of war devastation, the organic meaning of war [6, pp.28-31]. An interesting aspect of the answers given by the “Open Form” was the author's fundamental belief that man was in a crisis in relation to his existence on Earth. The search for alternative meaning was an attempt to comprehend and define the attributes of space. The most important, though, was not only the critical analysis but the design method used, which allows us to see the work from the perspective of the onlooker [7 p.128]. This approach towards design can be called an “idiosyncratic creative empathy”.

In his work called Zobaczyć świat Hansen shows several examples of historical and contemporary architectural works that illustrate the open form theory. Architecture is described as a background for
events, being both an open and a closed form. Such a collection of examples of architectural works illustrating the “Open Form” theory does not always seem consistent. It is very clear, in the subjects chosen by the author, that he is negatively biased towards father figures and the authority that they represent, and towards tradition at large. The architect neglects on purpose of the analysis of the semantic layer, the signs and the symbols. It seems that such a procedure ensues from his assumption that the use of symbols is necessarily a tool used by authorities to dominate, as it is a form imagined by man. A significant portion of the linguistic and cultural research, though, often follows Kant and his theory that symbols are not cultural products, but that they have a prior existence, and that they are discovered during the inculturation process. (Cassirer, Hani, Otto, Eliade). Such assumptions can be explained by the fact that Hansen was creating in difficult times, and that he was fighting with communism with his manifesto. The paradox lies in the fact that the architect was designing in the spirit of modernism - which has a “total” nature at its core - and yet, he still could experiment with his ideas [8]. In the chapter about the “Closed Form” [6] he classifies the historic monumental forms as closed forms. One of the examples he uses is Hagia Sofia, built in Constantinople in the Vith century by the Emperor Justinian. Hansen thinks that this object embodies a semantic conflict, since “this Christian church, looking at its visual structure, is a faulty imitation of the space-time characteristics of the pagan Pantheon, a semantic misunderstanding that laid the ground for further monotheist temples in this area of the world.” [6 p. 80]. Such semantic conflicts can be interpreted as a closed form that stands against man and his needs. The comparison between Hagia Sophia and the Pantheon is interesting. This Roman temple has been built in 125 B.C, and has been transformed, in the Vith century, into a Christian church named Santa Maria ad Martyres. In this case, the architect classifies the subject into “open forms”, [9] due to its composition of forms and the fact that man is treated as a priority. Such a classification occurs from the scale of the subject, and to the primary destination of the monument as a place of worship. Nevertheless, the basis for interpretation remains unchanged and is expressed in the quality of the architecture. The cosmic origin of form does not deny the open form; especially as the Kantian interpretation of the meaning of symbols allows a wide scope of explanations. The cosmological symbolic is thus both open and closed. As he analyses the historical objects, Hani notes, with reason, that “the relationship between the cosmical order and the architectural order is expressed in the symbolic cosmology of basic forms and geometric figures, in which the entire structure of the temple is condensed”. But even though he distinguishes the “open form” and the “closed form” categories, he does not use this distinction here [2a, p.30]. Hansen, in his creative work, never had the chance to realize a sacral building institutionally related to religion. It is hard to actually understand why, but we can guess that his hostility toward authorities and religion did not encourage him to commit to this kind of creative work.

2.1 The “Open Form” concept – the “Road” project Birkenau Camp Monument. Jerzy Jarnuszkiewic, Julian Pałka, Lech Rosiński, Edmund Kupiński, Zofia Hansen and Tadeusz Plasa, 1957

Hansen states that some objects are a background for man and nature. It is clearly visible in the unrealised project of the Birkenau Camp Monument (Figure 1). The hansenian collective (Jerzy Jarnuszkiewic, Julian Pałka, Lech Rosiński, Edmund Kupiński, Zofia Hansen and Tadeusz Plasa) who entered the contest was looking for a new language for remembrance, one that wouldn’t refer to a traditionally composed monument. The evolution of ideas that occurred even before the promulgation of the Open Form theory as a background for the events is clearly visible in the works presented on further steps of the contest. The first design, the “Slab Sculpture” has finally been rejected and modified by Hansen. In one of his interviews, he justified his decision saying “I rejected the first design for being too traditionally Christian. We don’t want forgiveness in front of an altar, we want to experience what the four million went through”. That’s why I’m thinking about a road, a background displaying the characteristic elements of a camp, authentic witnesses of the tragedy” [10]. Years after that, Hansen confirmed that this design has also been rejected for its static nature, and the reference to the Judaeo-Christian tradition [11, p.130]. Finally, the “Slab” project became the “Road” project, a large asphalt road, irrevocably circling the structure of the camp itself, this rational instrument of
death. In this concept, Hansen also stated that remaining objects should not interfere or be conserved, so the nature could absorb this dreadful place. Eventually, the project was rejected, and the actual realisation was supposed to be a compromise between the propositions of several collectives, but Hansen removed himself completely and did not work on the final project. The unachieved “Road” project, even if it remained in the conceptual sphere, allowed new thoughts about how monuments could be designed. (Figure 1). These new ideas would lead to the in the object commemorating the victims of the Treblinka extermination camp, that aim at including the onlooker, created in 1962-1963 by Franciszek Duszenko, Adam Haupt and Franciszek Stynkiewicz. Hansen would later qualify it as an extreme CF-OF discord (figure 2) Criticising not the form, but the solemnity of the “huge mushroom, a pathetic, aggressive overbearing form, I’m contemplating the end” [6 p. 157]. An openness allowing interpretation can be attempted, and lead to various narrative streams. Symbols, even if they are rejected at first, remain an important element of the rhetoric in the hansenian theory.

The “Open Form” theory appeared in modernist times, and was closely related to modernism. It didn’t accept indiscriminate solutions, solutions that didn’t reach out towards individuality. Modernism, in the same manner, rejected tradition and symbolic elements, considering that they were useless cultural remains.

Figure 1. The unrealized project of the Birkenau Camp Monument, arch. O. Hansen
2.2. The concept of semantic narration theory by Anna Maria Wierzbicka – Three groups of objects distinguished for the analysis

The “open form” theory, even with its inconsistencies, can be useful to analyse semantic objects, as it can be difficult to use traditional research tools on them. Besides research about the pure aesthetics, what can be useful is a research exploiting narration as an element consolidating symbolic constituents. Five aspects affect the narration of semantic objects: (1) story (to what event does the object refer, what are the ideas presented), (2) location (where does the story take place: country, region, continent), (3) time (the perspective of the narration, the cultural and historical context in which the object is created), (4) the creator responsible for the narration (architect, artist, sociologist, historian), (5) purpose (what is the aim of the narration: commemoration, remembrance, expiation, liturgy) [4, p.44]. The history, the event itself, is here the primary element welding the narration together. It will be open to interpretation, and will not be in opposition with the semantic layer.

Figure 2. The German Nazist Extermination Camp - Treblinka in Poland, created in 1962-1963 by Franciszek Duszenko, Adam Haupt and Franciszek Stynkiewicz.

The analysis of the semantic objects from the angle of the narration, and in relation to the “Open Form” theory can be an interesting case study. To fully understand this analysis, ten contemporary semantic creations will be presented. Their similarities and differences derive from the semantics of space. Three groups have been distinguished for the analysis: (1) chapels designed for individual
meditation, (2) places connected to liturgy, (3) remembrance places. The objects have been selected by an intuitive method, in order to show a narrative relationship to the “Open Form” theory.

2.3 The sacred minimalistic contemplation objects
The first three subjects that will be analysed are the Bruder Klaus chapel in Wachendorf (Figure 3), Germany by Zumthor (2006), St. Jacob’s chapel in Auerberg Fischbachau in Germany by de Lucchi (2015) and, as a counterpoint, Pawson’s newest sacral project, in Swabia next to Unterliezheim (open in 2019). All these objects are devoted to the Christian faith, their narrative about salvation and the story of their creation are Christocentric, and they stand on fields, with nature as their background. The background of the narration is the nature and how the architectural objects stand in contrast with it. Chapels are works of art created by contemporary sacral architecture - the sanctity of the small - and they have been created in the times when Europe was growing more and more secularised. These works have been created thanks to their investors. The Bruder Klaus chapel is a place of prayer for the owners and the passing-by visitors. The owner stresses the fact that she did not want an object that would be a monument to the glory of the architect but a place where a man could meet God. St. Jacob’s chapel stands on the road of the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimages, and it is a votive offering, a manifestation of the owner’s gratitude. All the artists are renowned architects. Zumthor, de Lucchi and Pawson built many sacral objects, but we can suppose that they all create from the perspective of the contemporary agnosticism. The natural setting of these objects is also interesting. Both the Bavarian chapel and Pawson’s construction are open towards nature, which is a source of ultimate knowledge. With reference to the analysis of the “Open Form” theory, both Zumthor and Pawson reach towards new forms, even if they remain archetypal. The Bruder Klaus chapel, where the opening towards the sky plays a key role, refers to the allegory of the burnt grain, and Pawson’s chapel is framed into a prism of straight logs. De Lucchi, on the other side, reaches to archetypal forms, and the forms used to make reference to Noah’s arch - reminding of a traditional shelter - opened with a bull’s eye looking on a cross hidden amongst trees. All these chapels are both open and closed, their sanctity lying in their symbolic adequacy, open to interpretation, originating from the structure of the universe itself.

Figure 3. Bruder Klaus chapel in Wachendorf, Germany
An interesting phenomenon in architecture is how the contemporary sacred objects are linked to the sanctity of the liturgy. Three subjects have been chosen for this analysis: the Franciscan monastery in Tychy Poland (Figure 4a), started in 2000, the Ronchamp Chapel in France (Figure 4b), built in 1955 by Le Corbusier, and the Cymbalista synagogue in Tel Aviv (Figure 4c), built by Mario Botta in 1996-1998. All these objects have been designed by known and highly valued architects, who had reached their creative maturity. The link between these works is not obvious at first glance. Both the chapel and the cloister are Christian, the Synagogue being a Jewish place of worship. It is their elaborated symbolic layer, open and closed at the same time, that connects them together.

The three buildings refer to the sacred universalism of the Holy Trinity of the One God. The Ronchamp chapel is built on the site of an old pilgrimage, the cloister in Tychy is a shelter for Franciscan monks among the modernist housing complexes of the city, and the Cymbalista synagogue is a sacred university “chapel” for Jews. In Tychy, the most important element of the narrative is the reference to the mystical Corpus Christi, the mystical body of Christ, which build the ground for the story of redemption. Le Corbusier, looking at the world with his agnostic eyes, was looking for form and narration that would create a state of mind through a thorough design of lighting. In his synagogue, Botta uses the language of architecture and links the forms of the quadrature and the circle. The mood inside is created through the alliance of form and light. The narration in all these objects, even if slightly different, seems consistently understandable. The purpose of the narration has been reached thanks to a coherent symbolic design. A shallow interpretation would make the forms seem closed, but the multi-layered quality of the semantics creates the “Openness of the Form”. This short analysis shows how symbolic meaning can be used for interpreting in many ways sacred architectural Judaeo-Christian objects.

2.5 Remembrance places as a state of open form.
Remembrance places are peculiar spaces, which are created through a deep need to sacralise unconceivable events. In order to understand the sense of the narrative analysis relating to the “Open Form”, we have compared the memorials of three historical events: (1) the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Holocaust-Mahnmal - Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas) in Berlin by Peter Eisenman (2005), (2) the Belżec memorial for the extermination German Camp in Poland (Figure 5), a project by the Architecture Practice DDJM in Kraków - authors of the museum building and designers of the complex: the architects Marek Dunikowski, Jarosław Kutniowski, Piotr Czerwiński, Piotr
Uherek, sculpture designed by the collective formed by the artists Andrzej Sołyga, Marcin Roszczyk and Zdzisław Pidek (2004), and (3) the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (Figure 6) in Warsaw by the architects Rainer Mahlamäki and Ilmari Lahdelma (2013).

All these works make reference to the history of European Jews, but the two first specifically concern the Holocaust. Even though the Polin museum does not omit the genocide, it is not the most important element of this architectural object. It is interesting to know the location of these objects. The Berlin monument has been built in central Berlin on purpose. Its surface equals to that of two football stadiums, in order to symbolize the scale of the mass murder. The Polin Museum is built on the grounds of the former Warsaw Ghetto, next to the Ghetto Heroes monument created by the artists Natan Rappaport (sculptor) and Leon Suzin (1946). The memorial in Belżec lies on the exact grounds where the historical events it refers to occur. The camp, once it has been destroyed by the Germans
when they closed it, became a huge collective cemetery. The context does not favour contemplation, but the tragic events that occurred here define this space. The time when these monuments have been created has also an influence on how the designed form is expressed. All these objects came to life at a similar time, as the events and the fate of the people were being processed. In this case, the time is highly significant, due to the existing testimonies about the events. The relationship to the designed object is also interesting. The Finnish collective who designed Polin found a new way to link the history of the Jewish people to the Biblical crossing of the Red Sea. The Berlin monument, designed by an architect with Jewish origins, refers to the Jerusalem cemetery. Bełżec is a collective work, and the reference to the Auschwitz monument “The Road” that laid the basis for the “Open Form” is very clear. The purpose of the projects also needs to be defined. If we look at the Polin Museum, the purpose of the building is not specifically to tell the story of the Holocaust, but to document the whole history of the Jewish people in Poland. When Mahlamäki was describing this object, he said that it needed to be bathed in light, as the narrative of hope was the most important element of the story. In Bełżec, the “road” monument is designed to actively engage the user of this space. The crossing of this symbolic road is a tribute to the victims. The wall of tears, the crevice, the light, everything leads us towards the firmament, the sky, here, being the purpose of the narrative. Eisenman’s project is somewhat lacking in consistency.

The reference to the Jewish cemetery in Jerusalem is unclear, and the soulless chaos does not portray Jewish culture well. The scale does affect the onlooker, but it does not create the intended dignity, which is visible when observing the behaviour of the visitors. After many discussions, an underground exhibition, telling the story of the Holocaust, has been added to the project. In Bełżec, the “Open Form” and the “Closed Form” create, at the same time, a background to the narration, and a very specific story of the events that happened there. There is no room for interpretation here, only a reference to events, and the visitors engage in the object and become part of the narration. In the Berlin object, man feels lonely and lost, which implies that he may behave inappropriately. This state of mind was intentionally conveyed by the creators. In the Polin Museum, on the other hand, the knowledge of history is necessary to understand the form, and the association of the museum and the sculpture can give the impression that the narration is closed.

3. Results and discussions
The idea of “Open form” found many supporters. Contemporary architectural works show how difficult it is to actually implement it. Hansen though that art, architecture and design are nothing else than monuments to the glory of their creators [12 p.99]. On the other hand, according to the “Open Form” theory, the portrayal of buildings and complexes has to be understood, and open to interpretation. Hansen was an idealist, and through his assumptions about space, he hoped men and the world would change. He thought that systemic solutions needed to be found, in order to save the world through architecture [13 p. 251]. Many of his creations, though, among which the housing project on the abutments of Grochów designed in 1963 to shelter a great number of citizens, are due to necessity, not a choice [12, p. 240]. As shown by numerous creations, in an era of post-modern pluralism, man is still not ready for interpretation. The return to traditional forms, created by a priori understanding, comes from a sense given to events past. If we follow Hansen’s footsteps, then, where architecture is a background for the event, the even precedes space, and symbolically sanctifies it [4]. As we can see it in many manifestations of the sacral space through small chapels, remembrance spaces, big musical projects or temporary architectural happenings, a man still needs the companionship of the narrative and the identity of sites and locations. Making the world more aesthetic is not enough. Man needs meaning, and the multiplicity of interpretation does not make the matter easier. Multi-confessional universal chapels are a good example of this. Even if they are detached from meaning, and open to interpretation, they remain empty, without narrative. An example of this is the chapel built in 1998 on the side of the highway in Switzerland, the Chapel of World’s Relations of Guignard and Saner (Figure 7), or the universal UNESCO chapel (Figure 8) in Paris designed in 1995 by T.Ando.
4. Conclusions
This work about Oskar Hansen’s art is a part of a wider research project led at the Faculty of Architecture Warsaw University of Technology, and is a part of the research led by the Faculty of Architecture about Theory and Practice. The Architecture Department of Warsaw University of Technology was celebrating a century of existence in 2015. A book, written by Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński and called Twórcy i dzieła Warszawskiej Szkoły Architektury 1915–2015 (The creators and the work of the Faculty of Architecture 1915-2015), has been published by the university press of the Warsaw University of Technology to celebrate this occasion [1]. The author described there the
activity of various alumni of the ADWUT. Oskar Hansen is a prominent artist, and his “Open Form” theory was a consequence of the times in which he lived. Hansen has not realized many projects himself. His theory about linear towns was too much avant-garde, and it remained on paper only. He was a visionary. The vision conveyed by the artist and his work was strong, even if it was filled with many internal contradictions, and he had numerous followers. The Bergen Arkitehogskole (BAS), the Bergen School of Architecture founded in 1983 in Norway is one of the most prominent examples. It has been created by Svein Hatloy, who was Hansen’s student in the 1960s, and who was an assistant professor at the Warsaw Academy of Fine arts [1, p. 132]. Hansen’s work also influenced the curriculum of the first semester of the Architecture Department of Warsaw University of Technology, and more specifically the module about design. This course has been elaborated by the prof. Konrad Kucza–Kuczyński, and resumed by prof. Ewa Kuryłowicz, the coordinator of the design module taught in the second semester of the engineering curriculum. Teaching emphasising the importance of man and his individual needs is still led at the ADWUT. The creator of the “Open Form” theory reminds that the architecture is the language of space. Space is a language. Language should not serve to gibberish, even if some do gibber. Space is a mean to convey ideas [14, s. 237]. The “Open Form” is ready for interpretation, and interpretation does not stand in opposition to the theory of narrative understanding. Hansen thought that sacral objects belong to the closed form at their core, since they convey individual ideas. Contemporary expressions of the sacred applied to space, though, are a proof that we need to find meaning in the world, and to find meaning in the past. The sacred architecture expresses the needs of modern humanity. A man still has a yearning for the sacred, in numerous manifestations, in what we call a “semantic narrative” [4, s. 11]. The narrative is here a generator of experiences that come from individual interpretation of specific units, discovered in the process of experiencing the semantics of space.

Explanation of the abbreviations used in the paper: OF - Open Form - CF - Closed form - ADWUT - Architecture Department of Warsaw University of Technology.

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