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SEARCHING FOR GENIUS LOCI

The article discusses research conducted since 2019 by the Club [PHI]. The assumptions of the research method result from aesthetic evolutionism and concern the atavism inherent in the mechanism of evaluating the perceived form. The existential challenges, repeated for many generations of homo sapiens, have improved the human eye. Our ancestors, encountering an unknown form, especially a living one, had to guess the potential effect of the encounter. In critical for survival situations, it was crucial to read both the potency and intentions of the encountered individual. The assessment of each appearing object had to be made immediately, from a distance that still allowed escape if the intentions of the observed individual turned out to be hostile. It is to this that the anatomy of the human eye has adapted in the course of evolution, creating our field of vision as a system of zones. Each zone simultaneously isolates the relevant fragments of the observed form, automatically combined by the interpreting brain into a meaningful whole. This subconscious mechanism of the decomposition of form on the retina allows us to read what the genius loci implanted in space tells us.

Keywords: interdependencies in urban interiors, aristotelian form of genius loci, critical perceptional distance

1. GENIUS LOCI. THE MORPHOGENETIC THESIS[3]

1.1. A cardinal principle of evolution

Those networks of brain neurons that enable an organisms to survive in critical situations are more freqquently genetically transmitted than a neuronal structure that does not ensure survival [Hall 1984: 234-271]. The owner of a "better" brain lives statistically longer and has more opportunities to pass on a good

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[3] In a highly narrow sense, concerning the visual perception of space: morphḗ [Gr.] – shape, génesis [Gr.] – origin.

genotype to his or her successors. From generation to generation, our species is getting better and better at reading information from the environment and reacting more and more perfectly to threats that arise in it. Experiences of successful attempts at survival are compiled in genetic memory into a "catalogue" of spatial situations and appropriate reactions to them. In this way, as a species, we tuning up the idea of order-harmony in space surrounding. This idea is a mental image – literally spirit – of well ordered environment in which there are no existential threats. The matrix of order "imprinted" in subsequent human generations is the basis for experiencing universal beauty. We constantly improve this complex matrix of harmony [Lorenz 1986: 82].

Aesthetic impressions arise in the oldest part of the human brain. This is the genetic legacy of prehistory, when signals important for life were assessed according to the primordial dichotomy: dangerous-safe. In the life prehistory, in times of the expansion of complex organisms onto land, form and its content appeared simply as an indivisible whole, as a specific signal from the environment. Neither verbal communication nor language existed at that time, because the areas of the brain responsible for them had only just begun to develop, growing on the brain stem (which is responsible only for essential, life-sustaining functions) [Hall 1984: 239]. This lack of "primordial words" is why today we cannot use any language to explain aesthetic emotions. We can only ask: "why does beauty exist?". This question concerns the primar mechanisms that trigger this sense of existential safety = harmony = beauty. A certain clue and circumstantial evidence is the fact of the durability and constancy of the "traditional" aesthetics, which for two millennia revolved around the Greek Great Aesthetics Theory (the universal root of all arts [Tatarkiewicz 1982]). This first holistic codification of the laws of aesthetics had from the very beginning an almost closed form, directly embedded in the human way of perception, deeply rooted in brain stem.

1.2. The "body" of genius loci

"The soul is to the body what seeing is to the eye"
– Aristotle

We can feel the "spirit of place" observing the environment. If the information gained does not cause existential anxiety, the observer feels pleasure knowing that everything is going well. From that moment on one feels that life is becoming good and beautiful thanks to the surrounding forms. Like any new experience, they are initially disturbing but eventually turn out to be "good." This happens because the arrangement of the parts of the form (the tune of its spirit) can be read as "friendly". Such genius loci then resonates with the genetically rooted intuition of beauty – an acquired idea, shaped in the course of human history and individual

life. The key here is the phrase: “the arrangement of the parts of the form”. The formal order must be somehow directly legible and meet the “expectations” of the eye: “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”.

2. RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS

2.1. Zonal structure of the field of view

The crux of the considerations lies in the anatomical configuration of the eye, which has undergone a series of evolutionary adaptations driven by natural selection, thereby ensuring the survival of the species. The critical distance, also referred to as the residual escape distance [Hall 2001: 22, 157], is a pivotal parameter in the study of attentive observation. From this distance, instinctively maintained in the face of a suddenly encountered unknown form (especially a living one), it is necessary to estimate how its important parts could “affect” us in a closer interaction. Evolution has endowed the eye with a zonal character. Each sector of the visual field separates distinct components of the form perceived, which are promptly processed by the brain. Deeply rooted in biogenetic history key shapes (e.g. organic shapes) are embedded in the memory of the retina: evolution has caused the retina had to differentiate into zones corresponding to the structure of these key forms. Currently during perception each zone of the visual field in the eye isolates distinct components of the perceived form, which are immediately processed by the brain. This confrontation of the observed form and the ideal form (form seen and its ideal shape expected by the retina), gives rise to aesthetic experiences. As illustrated in Figure 1 the eye zones and their angles of vision are delineated, along with sections of the environment whose dimensions are determined by the critical distance. Perceptual atavism, defined as a subconsciously maintained distance from the observer to the object of observation, has been estimated to have played a pivotal role in calibrating the anatomy of the human eye to the critical distance during the course of evolution. The surface of the retina corresponds to the field of vision and consists of specialized zones waiting to be filled with images of the appropriate parts of the form being seen. This zonal tool functions as a detector of visual harmony. Each zone functions as an autonomous information channel, systematically collecting visual data that is distinctive to its respective environment. Zones with a narrower angle of vision provide more precise information about the geometry of the form. In contrast, wider zones allow for stereoscopic assessment of the mutual relations of the details of the form and its integrity. The widest peripheral zones are capable of detecting movement and coloration exclusively at the periphery of the field of vision. Physiology itself, without the will of the observer, automatically cuts the observed building into parts and details. [Kozaczko 2005; Malmo 1959]. We subconsciously expect that such multi-channel information will reach us from important zones of the visual field in independent but coherent doses.

2.2. How aesthetic automatism works

So if the "disturbing object" is an unknown person (suddenly encountered, for example, in a forest at night), then intuitively we do not approach them at a distance shorter than that which still allows escape in case of a bad turn of events. In the case in question this instinctive critical distance is 3.6 meters [Hall 1984]. Standing at such a distance from an unknown person, we are able to encompass their entire figure and important parts with one glance (fig. 1).

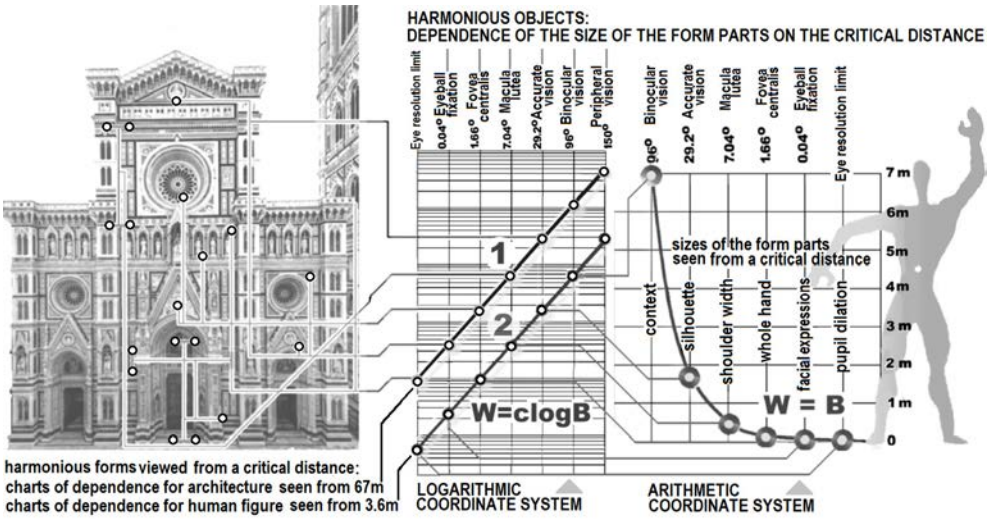

Fig. 1. Harmonious forms are characterized by a peculiar interdependence: the sizes of individual parts create a regular continuum, detectable in the so-called physiological coordinate system (such a system, shown in the center of the drawing, corresponds to the Weber-Fechner law, according to which the aesthetic impression W is directly proportional to the stimulus of strength B that causes this impression, namely: W=c•logB). In the right part of the drawing, the dimensions of the human anatomical parts are placed in the usual arithmetic system, which does not reveal any regularities (until recently, the arithmetic interdependence was wrongly assumed, that the impression is directly proportional to the strength of the stimulus: W=B). Only and exclusively in the physiological system do these dimensions create a straight line 2. The dimensions of other harmonious forms, observed from a critical distance, create similar straight lines (for example: 1 – harmonious architectural form, e.g. Firenze, S-ta Maria del Fiore – critical distance 67 m; 2 – human figure – distance 3.6 m)

With this one glance, we also encompass – although much less precisely – the spatial context of the situation (the scene of the observed event). It may turn out that the observed person is accompanied – or not – by other potentially dangerous forms. Hence, evolution has expanded the total horizontal field of view to almost

half of the full angle. Our eyes – their respective zones – also allow us to detect movement and dynamics of the observed scene. This is possible thanks to binocular, stereoscopic vision. In the "center of attention" (i.e. the horizontal, internal angle of view of 96º), the space clippings observed by the two eyes overlap, differing only in parallax. This stereoscopic vision covers a field of view of 8.7 m in diameter from a distance of 3.6 m. At the same time, the surface of the part of the eye called the yellow spot (representing an angle of view of 7.04º and covering a field of view of 43.7 cm in diameter) allows for reading body language. The yellow spot reveals the intentions of the observed person and allows for estimating the anatomical structure and muscular armor. The fovea centralis of the eye (angle of 1.66º, field of view of 10.3 cm) covers the entire hand and the arrangement of the fingers. Opening them or clenching them into a fist reveals an aggressive, friendly or neutral disposition. The resolution of the eye allows for a quick assessment of the stranger's intentions. From this distance, the pupil enlargement can be clearly seen – for example, its dilation under the influence of adrenaline. Finally, the so-called eyeball fixation (reflex physiological oscillation of the optical axis in the range of 0.04º) extends the field of maximum resolution to a diameter of 2.5 cm. This allows us to see details of the fingers, the strength of the thumb (opposable finger) – and therefore the whole hand, as well as details of facial expressions (position of the eyelids and tension of the facial muscles). Critical distance is the only distance that allows for a simultaneous assessment of the entire observed figure and all its important details. It is from this distance that the "essence" of the seen form speaks to us. Standing a little closer or a little further away, we are not able to fully "receive" all the important information about the observed object, and its form cannot "act" as a kind of independent entity. We do not see its potency, its embodied spirit.

3. PROVING THE THESIS

The Scientific Circle [PHI] has been conducting research since 2019, the aim of which is to verify or falsify the morphogenetic thesis in the field of urban planning and architecture. The morphogenetic thesis states that the measure of order as a measure of vitally important information is rooted in the eye. Self-preservation reflexes are triggered immediately: we compare what we see with the evolutionarily acquired internal idea of a safe situation – the "universal essence of safety". If the "essence" speaks to us through the noticed features of the environment, then we feel existential harmony, order, beauty. This essence – detected and felt in the shapes of created forms – has been called *genius loci* by tradition.

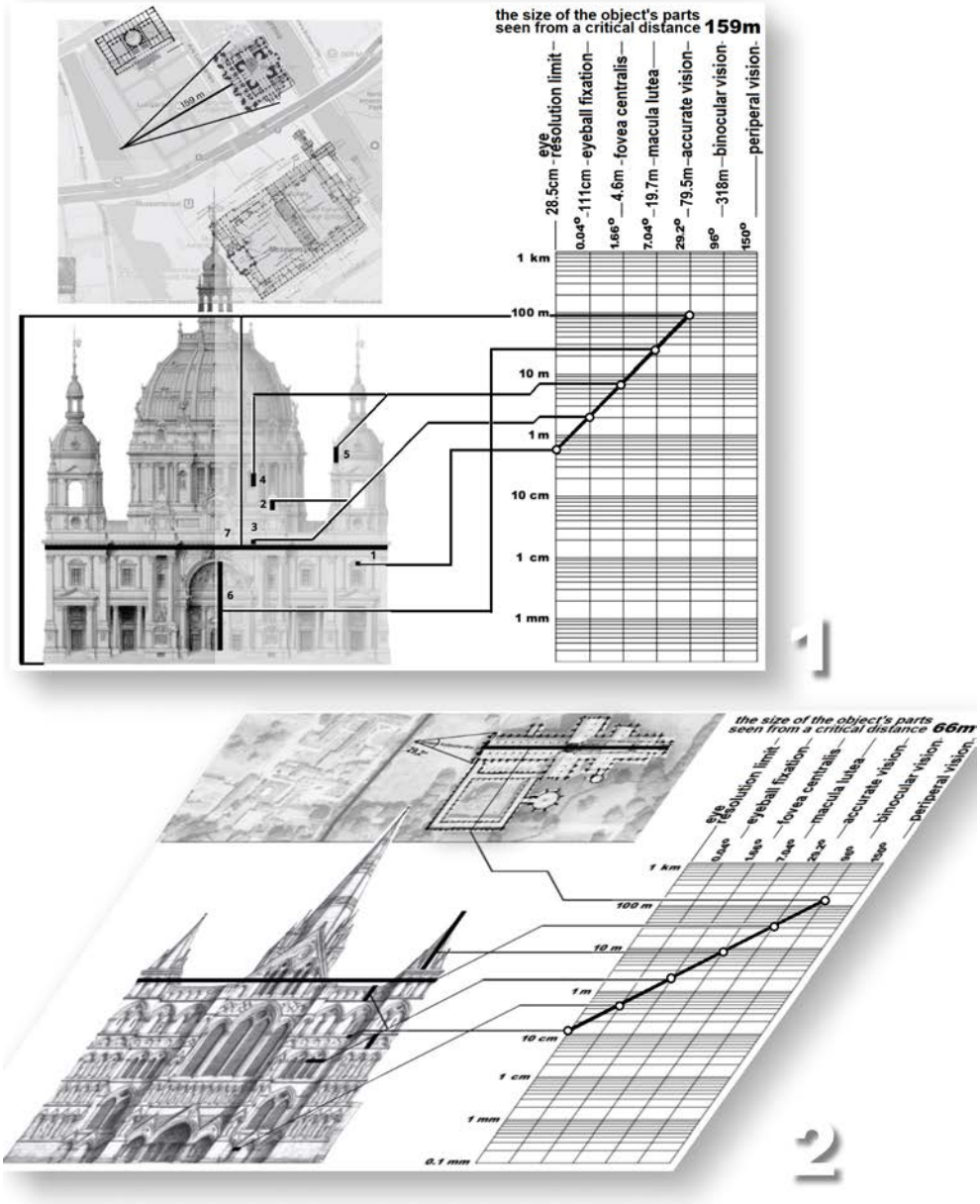

Fig. 2. Initial examination of the object (part 1). Architectural harmony is revealed in the rectilinear forms of the graphs corresponding to the Weber-Fechner law. Card 1. Berlin Cathedral

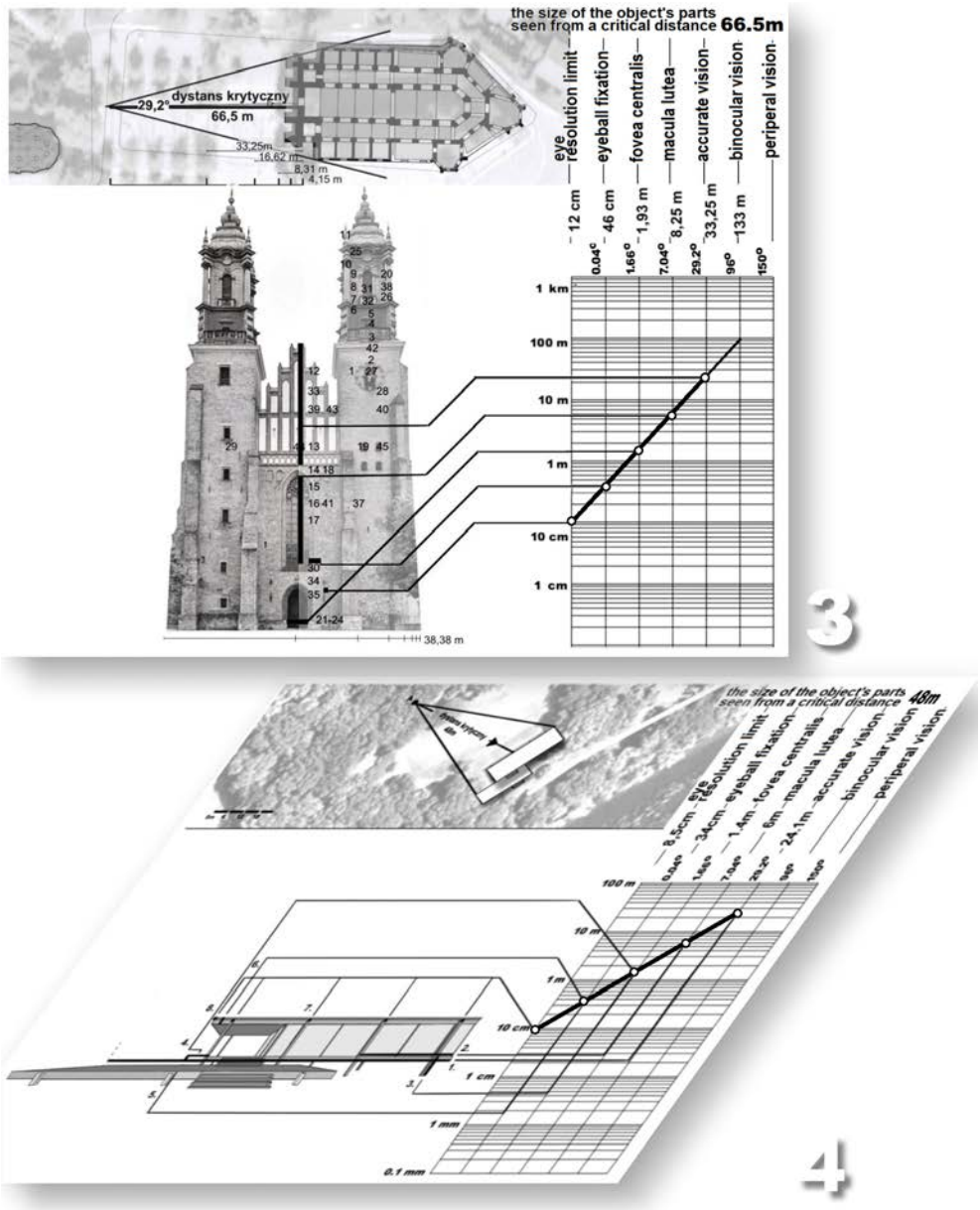

Fig. 3. Initial examination of the object (part 2). Card 3. Poznań Cathedral. Card 4. Farnsworth House in Plano (designed by M. van der Rohe)

Individual, properly shaped architectural objects affect the observer placed within their reach in a way that resembles the action of a so-called subjective entity – a kind of idol, ghost that somehow directs actions of those under its

influence. This distant analogy to the primitive good guardian deity still operates in the recesses of our subconscious. The projection of the child's relationship to the parent, referred to by psychoanalysis, is revealed in the relation of the observer and the object. Its appropriate shapes trigger in the perceiver a sense of harmony radiating to the entire situational context. The sense of existential order emerging in the subconscious reaches us suddenly by the architectural order of the surroundings.

The analyses recently carried out by [PHI] (fig. 2 and 3) supplement the set of studies on individual objects placed in relatively large, open spaces. The harmonies detected in their shapes are revealed when they are observed from a critical distance: the dimensions of the individual parts form rectilinear graphs in a "physiological" coordinate system (cf. fig. 1). Of course, it should be assumed that the "experimenter effect" could emerged at work here: namely from the forms examined, the dimensions of their parts were extracted that confirm the accepted thesis. However, the very fact of detecting harmony between the somehow main parts of objects confirms the morphogenetic thesis. Forms, all of whose parts fill individual zones in the eye, are perfectly harmonious forms, fully meeting visual expectations. However such formal perfection is difficult to give to architectural forms in which various disruptions and deformations related to broadly understood technology appear (determining the dimensions of the whole and parts of the object from a technical, not visual, perspective). In less perfect forms, deformations constitute information noise of varying intensity, drowning out visual harmony.

3.1. In the city space, or the biblical Jonah in the whale's stomach

Formal harmony in urban structure does not have to be related to a single, distinguished point in space – this only one, determined by the interdependence: the size of the object – the critical distance from this object. Incorporating a building into a compact urban space strengthens the impact of the forms that create urban interior. A striking example of an extremely coherent composition of this type is Piazza San Pietro in Rome. Below is presented an morphogenetical analysis carried out for the most important axis of this square. An observer walking towards the Basilica feels a strong effect of genius loci at five of its most important points (fig. 4 at the top). Starting from the entrance to the square: at point 5, field of the stereoscopic vision in the eye (horizontal angle of 96°) is filled completely by the entire elliptical part of the square, precisely framed by the vertical edges of the walls of Piazza Papa Pio XII. From point 5 we see the entire layout "as if in the palm of our hand". This beginning of a "liquid" composition is an aesthetic earthquake. And then the tension grows (up to point 1 on a special plateau just before the entrance to the Basilica) – according to Alfred Hitchcock's recipe for the best film script. The details of this urban scenario can be found below, in the last chapter.

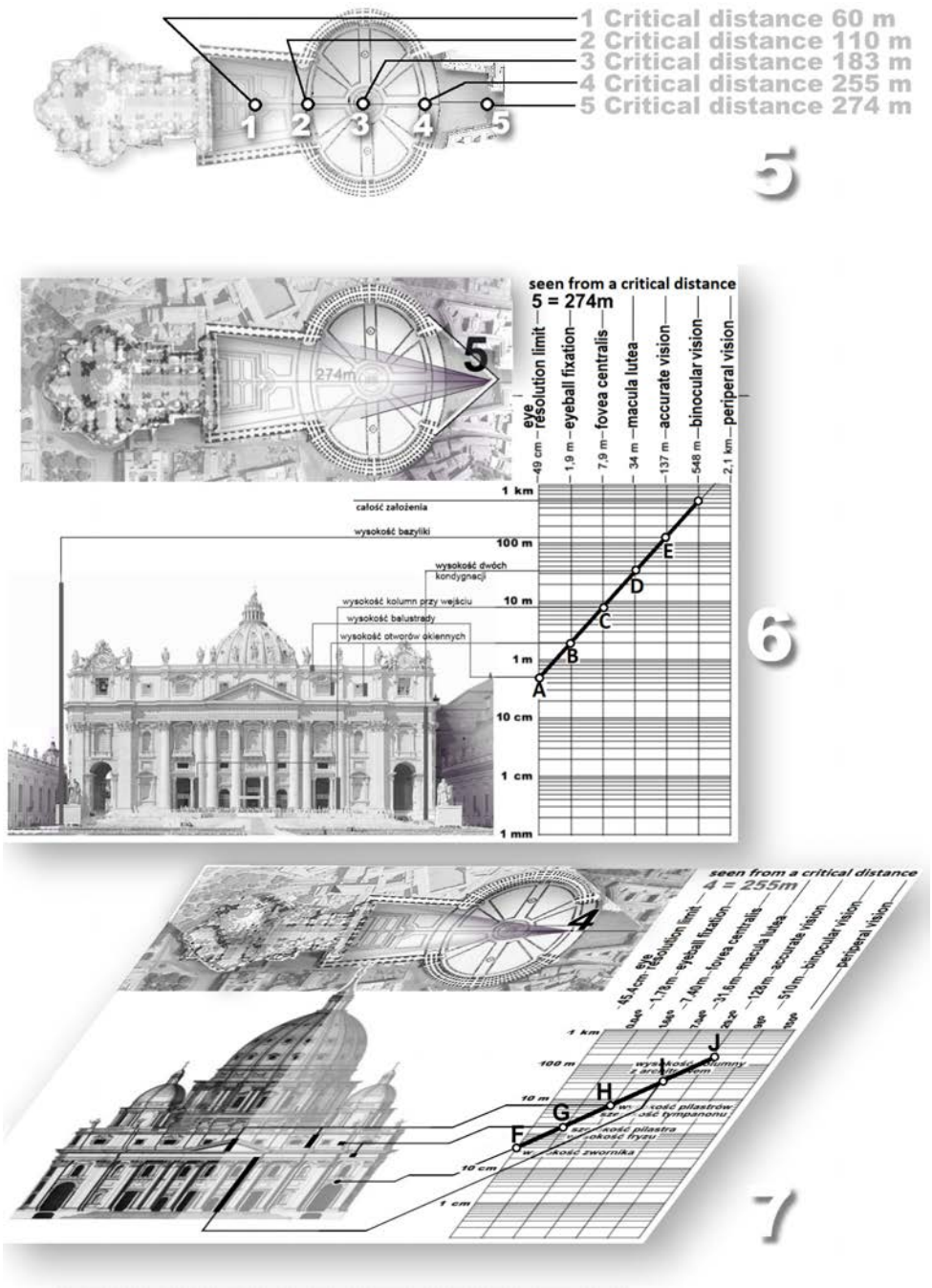

Fig. 4. Genius loci: morphogenetic analysis of the spatiotemporal sequence in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome (Part 1)

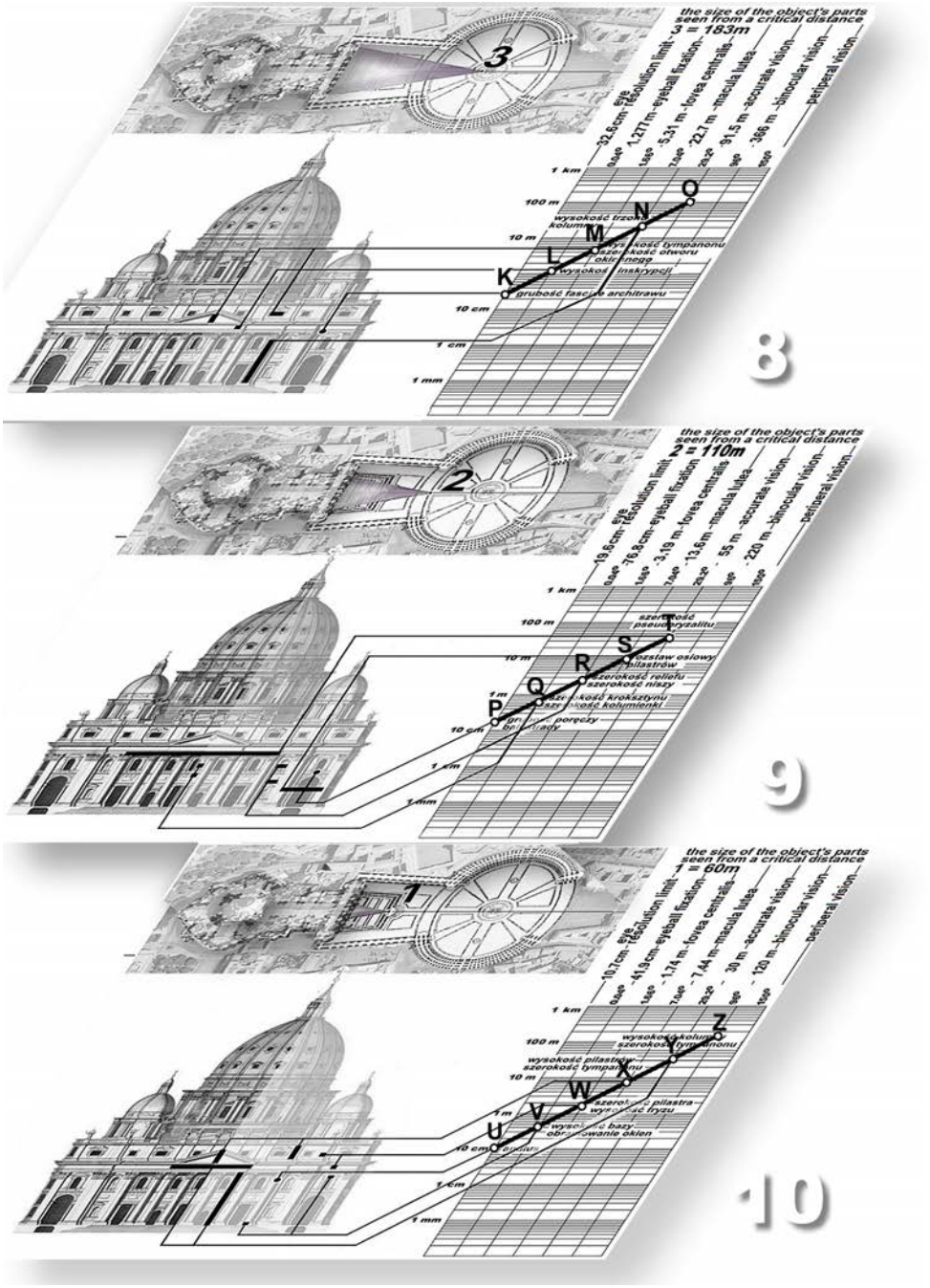

Fig. 5. Genius loci: morphogenetic analysis of the spatiotemporal sequence in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome (Part 2)

3.2. The time-space sequence in front of St. Peter's in Rome. Details of dimensioning the sequence of urban interiors

The structure of the visual organ serves as a perceptual filter through which visual data is transmitted [Malmo 1959; Strasburger, Pöppel 2002]. The intuitions of art theorists [Strzemiński 2016; Wölfflin 2015; Żórawski 1943] have been subjected to a specific formatting, conducted from the perspective of proxemics [Hall 2001; Kozaczko 2005, 2012; Lindegger, Pless 2019]. Each of the anatomical and functional zones of the eye (eye resolution limit, eyeball fixation, fovea centralis, macula lutea, accurate vision, binocular vision) isolates appropriate segments from the observed form. The research adopted parameters defined in anthropometric [Batogowska, Słowikowski 1994] and ergonomic [Wykowska 1994] studies. The anatomical zones of the retina, defining the angular segments of the field of vision, were compared in the studies described here with the critical distance of perception, dividing the observed forms into parts "expected by the eye". The following detailed tables correspond to the charts in figures 4 and 5. The capital letters denoting individual points on the graphs also denote specific parts of the analyzed objects below:

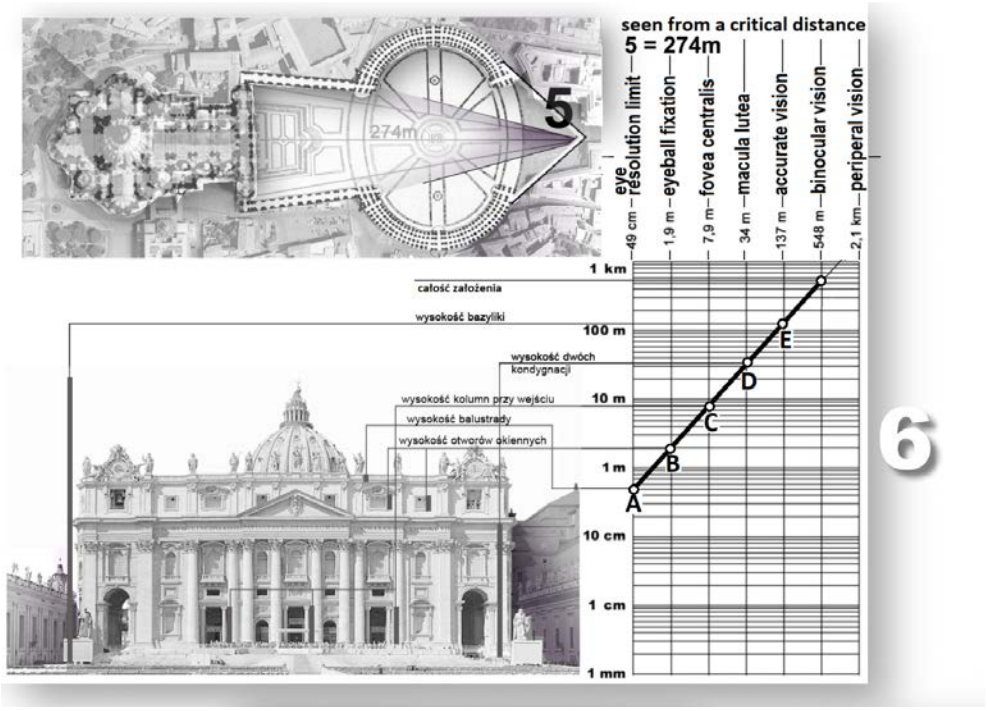

Fig. 4. Card 6. Basilica seen from the entrance to the square. Dimensions of parts of the object. Critical distance 274 m (letter symbols as in the chart):

↓	Field of view zone	angle	the size within the angle as viewed from a critical distance	
A	Eye resolution limit	$0{,}01^0$	49 cm	the height of the roof railing
B	Eyeball fixation	$0{,}04^0$	1,9 m	height of the window openings above the architrave
C	Fovea centralis	$1{,}66^0$	7,9 m	height with architrave
D	Macula lutea	$7{,}04^0$	34 m	column height with base and architrave
E	Accurate vision	$29{,}2^0$	137 m	basilica – non-interpolated height (dome non-offseted)
-	Binocular vision	96^0	~~	the entire composition, framed by the edges of the side walls of Piazza Papa Pio XII

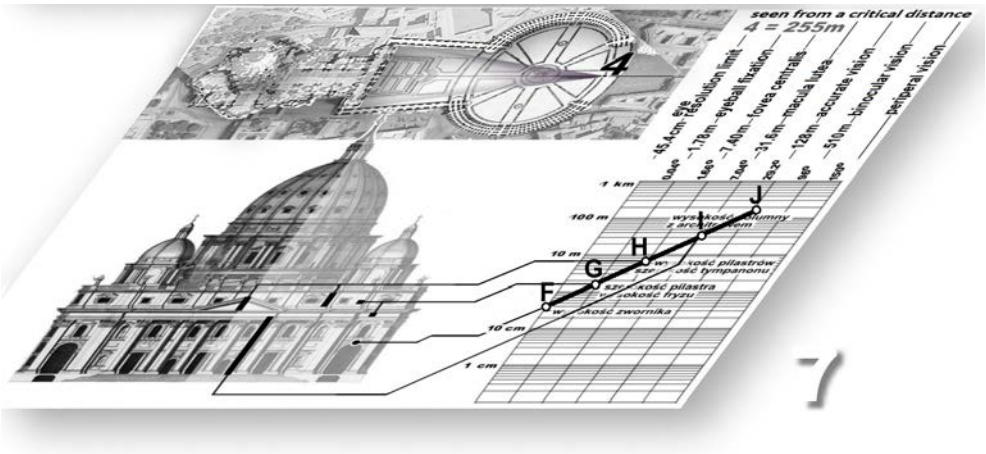

Fig. 4. Card 7. Basilica seen from the farther point on the perimeter of the ellipse of the square. Critical distance 255 m (letter symbols as in the chart):

↓	Field of view zone	angle	the size within the angle as viewed from a critical distance	
F	Eye resolution limit	$0{,}01^0$	45,5 cm	height of the keystone of the great arch of the side risalites
G	Eyeball fixation	$0{,}04^0$	1,79 m	width of the pilaster, height of the architrave
H	Fovea centralis	$1{,}66^0$	7,4 m	height of the main frieze pilasters, main tympanum height
I	Macula lutea	$7{,}04^0$	31,6 m	the width of the main tympanum
J	Accurate vision	$29{,}2^0$	128 m	nominal width of the façade

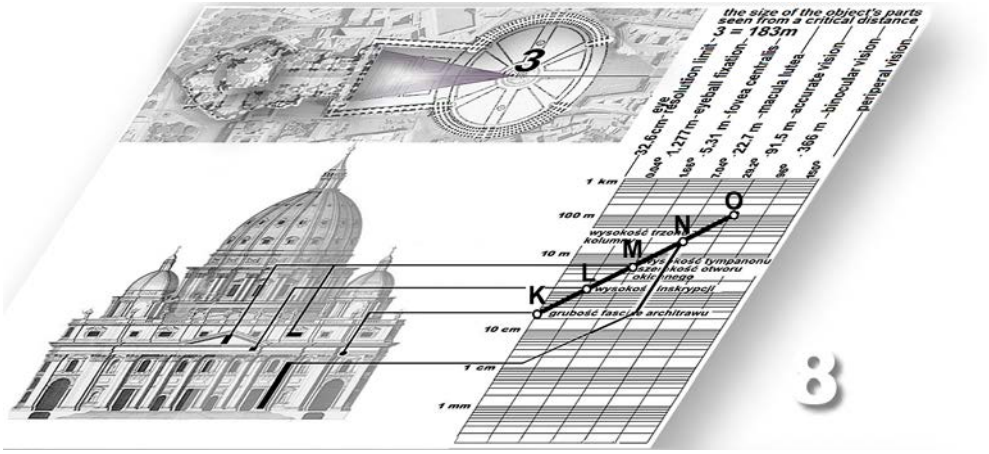

Fig. 5. Card 8. Basilica seen from the center of the elliptical part of the square. Critical distance 183 m (letter symbols as in the chart):

↓	Field of view zone	angle	the size within the angle as viewed from a critical distance	
K	Eye resolution limit	$0{,}01^0$	32,5 cm	thickness of the architrave fasciae
L	Eyeball fixation	$0{,}04^0$	1,28 m	height of the inscription on the architrave
M	Fovea centralis	$1{,}66^0$	5,3 m	height of the tympanum field, main frieze window – width
N	Macula lutea	$7{,}04^0$	22,7 m	column shaft – height, main tympanum – width
O	Accurate vision	$29{,}2^0$	91,5 m	distance between axes of side risalites, main inlet width
-	Binocular vision	96^0	366 m	distance from the entrance of St. Peters square to the façade

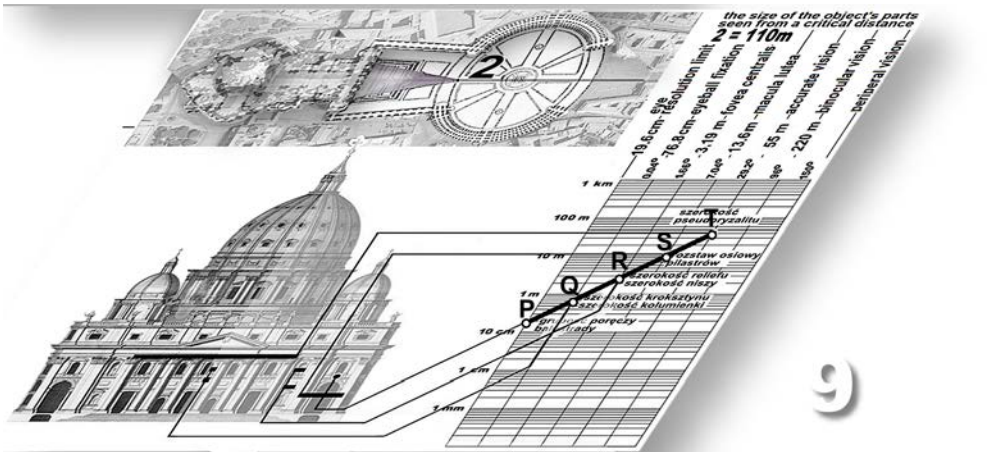

Fig. 5. Card 9. Basilica seen from the closer point on the perimeter of the ellipse of the square. Critical distance 110 m (letter symbols as in the chart):

↓	Field of view zone	angle	the size within the angle as viewed from a critical distance	
P	Eye resolution limit	$0{,}01^0$	19,6 cm	thickness of the railing beam
Q	Eyeball fixation	$0{,}04^0$	76,8 cm	width of the supraport corbel, aediculae column – width
R	Fovea centralis	$1{,}66^0$	3,2 m	relief in the supraport – width, aedicula – width
S	Macula lutea	$7{,}04^0$	13,6 m	side risalit module
T	Accurate vision	$29{,}2^0$	55 m	width of the main risalit, height of the facade
-	Binocular vision	96^0	220 m	context: width of the ellipse of the square

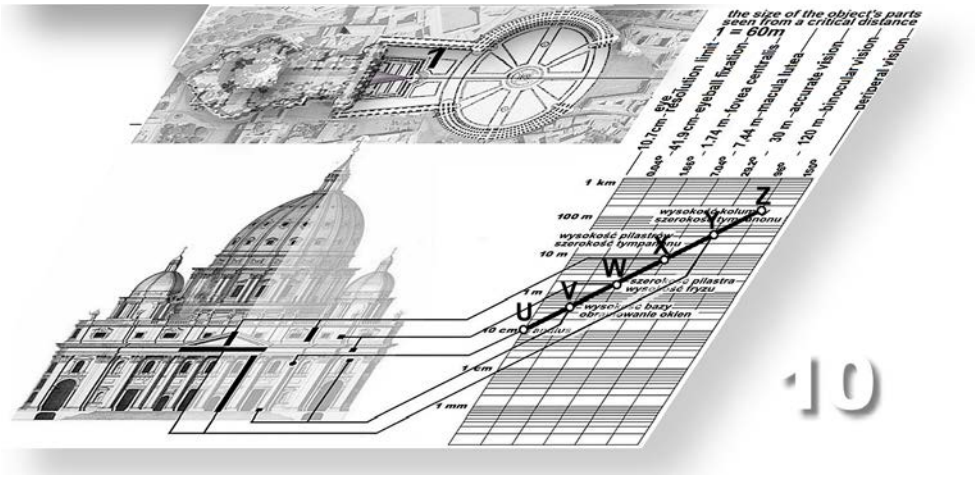

Fig. 5. Card 10. Basilica seen from the axis of the landing of the elliptical stairs. Critical distance 60 m (letter symbols as in the chart):

↓	Field of view zone	angle	the size within the angle as viewed from a critical distance	
U	Eye resolution limit	$0{,}01^0$	10,7 cm	anuli
V	Eyeball fixation	$0{,}04^0$	41,9 cm	base height, window frames (aediculae details)
W	Fovea centralis	$1{,}66^0$	1,74 m	width of the frieze pilaster, height of the architrave frieze
X	Macula lutea	$7{,}04^0$	7,4 m	height of the main frieze pilasters, height of the tympanum
Y	Accurate vision	$29{,}2^0$	30 m	tympanum width, column height
Z	Binocular vision	96^0	120 m	nominal width of the façade

3.3. Conclusion

Urban cases discussed above are the part of the research material collected and analyzed by the [PHI] Science Club since 2019. At the current stage of the research, it can be assumed that the assumptions and the proposed morphogenetic thesis are appropriate. As we can see, the measure of order, inherent in the eye subconsciously triggers a sense of harmony, deeply rooted in the unique features of a place. We subconsciously compare what we see with an evolutionarily acquired internal idea – the "universal essence of safety." This essence embedded in us "appeals to us irresistibly" – in some sense being the same as a Jaspersian idea of an incarnate deity. Therefore, if the seen meets the expected, a feeling of all-encompassing harmony arises in the observer's consciousness – an analogon of the religious feelings stemming from being in protective power of the Absolute. Genius loci – the good spirit of a place resides in harmonious space. The examples analyzed show that the protective genius loci is a projection of "good" form, projected into the surroundings by the eye and hand of a city designer skilled in shaping urban space.

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W POSZUKIWANIU GENIUS LOCI

Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono badania prowadzone od 2019 r. przez Klub [PHI]. Założenia metody badawczej wynikają z ewolucjonizmu estetycznego i dotyczą atawizmu tkwiącego w mechanizmie oceny postrzeganej formy. Powtarzane przez wiele pokoleń homo sapiens wyzwania egzystencjalne udoskonaliły ludzkie oko. Nasi przodkowie, napotykając nieznaną formę, zwłaszcza żywą, musieli odgadnąć potencjalny efekt spotkania. W sytuacjach krytycznych dla przetrwania kluczowe było odczytanie zarówno potencji, jak i intencji napotkanego osobnika. Oceny każdego pojawiającego się obiektu należało dokonać natychmiast, z odległości, która nadal pozwalała na ucieczkę, gdyby intencje obserwowanego osobnika okazały się wrogie. Do tego właśnie dostosowała się w toku ewolucji anatomia ludzkiego oka, tworząc nasze pole widzenia jako system stref. Każda strefa jednocześnie izoluje odpowiednie fragmenty obserwowanej formy, automatycznie łączone przez interpretujący mózg w sensowną całość. Ten podświadomy mechanizm rozkładu formy na siatkówce pozwala nam odczytać to, co mówi nam genius loci wszczepiony w przestrzeń. Metoda badawcza polega na zestawieniu wielkości stref (części) badanych form z anatomiczną strukturą pola widzenia.

Słowa kluczowe: współzależności we wnętrzach miejskich, arystotelesowska forma genius loci, krytyczny dystans percepcyjny