

Openness to Architectural Change in Cities: The Role of Cultural Capital, Place Attachment, and Features of Places

People want to live in aesthetically pleasing environments. This is one of the reasons why they would often react vehemently to architectural and urban changes, which may affect their image of the place, whether of a close neighborhood or a city in general. Some changes to an urban tissue will probably meet with general acceptance while others will be unanimously rejected. More often, however, the proposed changes will lead to disagreement and clashes within the community. For example, one of the hottest topics for debate in Toruń, a city in north-central Poland with a spectacular medieval downtown, is ‘the first Toruń skyscraper’. Should it be constructed at all? If yes, how high should it be and where should it be located? Far from the center in a special business district? Or close enough to offer a stunning panorama from a top-floor restaurant? Or on the other bank of the river, perhaps? Ultimately, will such a project only serve to destroy the city’s historical *genius loci* and discourage tourists from visiting, or will it in fact modernize the city and attract new business and investment? The above discussion also shows that the cultural tastes of people and their willingness to accept change differ.

The project has two parts. In the first part, we seek to determine the general patterns that underlie people’s aesthetic tastes as applied to architecture, and identify the physical features of architectural and urban constructions that are most predictive of people’s aesthetic judgments. Numerous studies show that people in general like historical architecture which is rich in detail and ornamentation, and they prefer it to some other architectural styles, such as uniform and ornament-free modern architecture and (perhaps) to the bizarre shapes of some postmodern constructions. Drawing on the theory of place as a meaningful location elaborated elsewhere, in Study 1 we will collect judgments of different architectural constructions, as presented on photographs, by asking a representative group of Poles to evaluate them on a set of various descriptive criteria (e.g., historical-modern, distinctive-uniform, homogeneous-heterogeneous, legible - illegible etc.), associated affect (e.g., relaxing-irritating, exciting-boring), and aesthetics (e.g., beautiful-ugly). The photographs will present buildings/urban layouts typical for three types of architecture: historical, modern, and postmodern.

In the same study, we will also test how architectural tastes are related to other forms of cultural tastes, for example, in literature and music. Do the different cultural tastes form clusters or are they independent of each other? In addition, we will test how other measures of cultural capital, such as the level of education, are related to architectural tastes. In line with the ongoing discussion in the relevant literature, we will assume that people with higher education will be more omnivorous in their cultural tastes than people with lower education, that is, they will be willing to judge as aesthetically pleasing various architectural styles while not differing from those with lower education in the (positive) evaluation of historic architecture.

In the second part of the project, we will focus on the processes that are responsible for the acceptance of architectural change. First of all, we predict that changes that are gradual (“organic”) will meet with more acceptance than radical changes. For the second, we assume that changes in some direction, for example, from modern to historical, will meet with more acceptance than changes in the opposite direction (from historical to modern). Therefore, we will graphically modify pictures representing three different styles, introducing all kinds of changes (historical to modern, historical to postmodern, modern to postmodern, and the other way round). There will be three consecutive changes to the picture. We will also test whether the hypothesis of higher omnivorousness of people with higher education also applies to the acceptance of change, that is, that people with higher education will accept more and more diverse changes than people with lower education.

In addition, we predict that since people are usually attached to their place of residency, they will be less willing to accept changes in their own than in some other cities. Nevertheless, since place attachment is not a uniform construct, we expect that some forms of place attachment, i.e., active place attachment characteristic among others of local activists, may be associated with more openness to change.

To reach a broad and differentiated sample of participants, both studies will be run online.