La Biennale di Venezia

19. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura

Partecipazioni Nazionali

LARES ET PENATES

LARES ET PENATES

ON BUILDING A SENSE OF SECURITY IN ARCHITECTURE

[EXCERPTS]

EDITED BY

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ZACHĘTA — NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WARSAW, 2025

Atlas of Things

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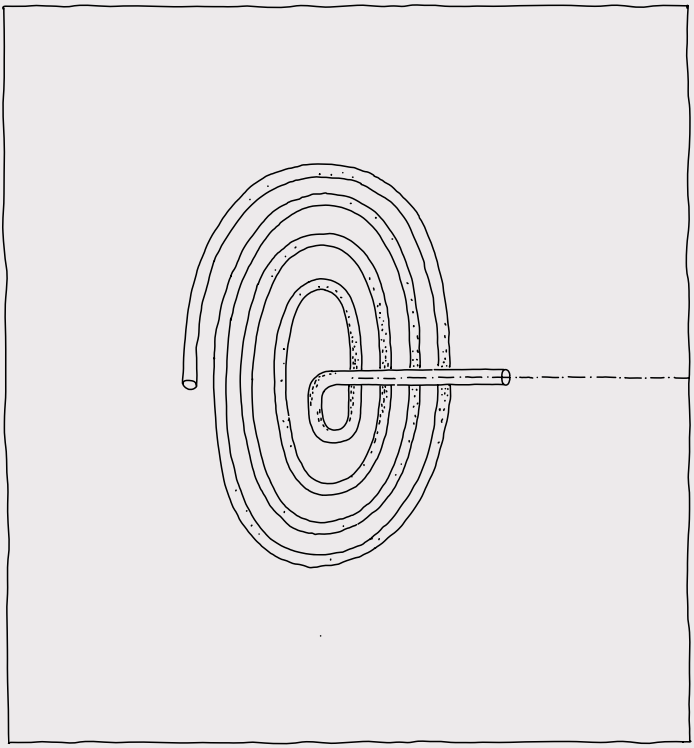
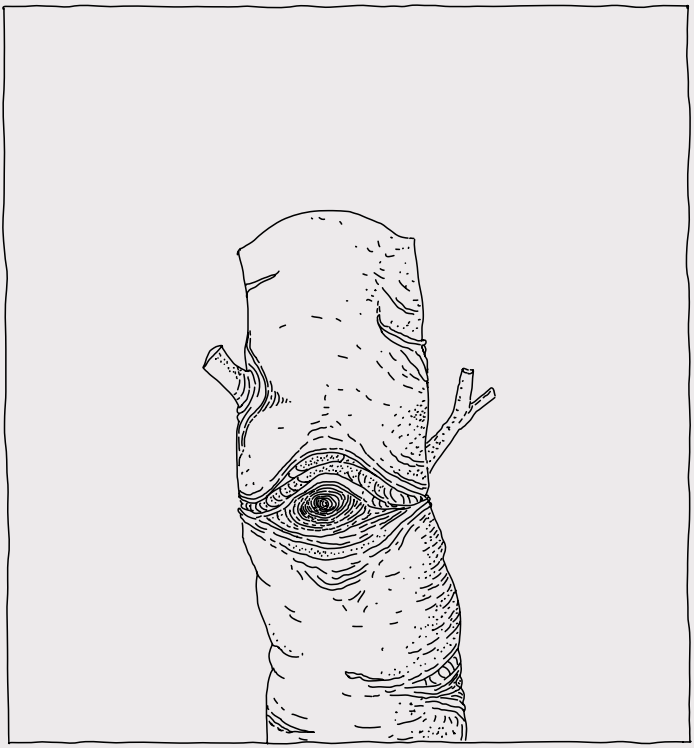


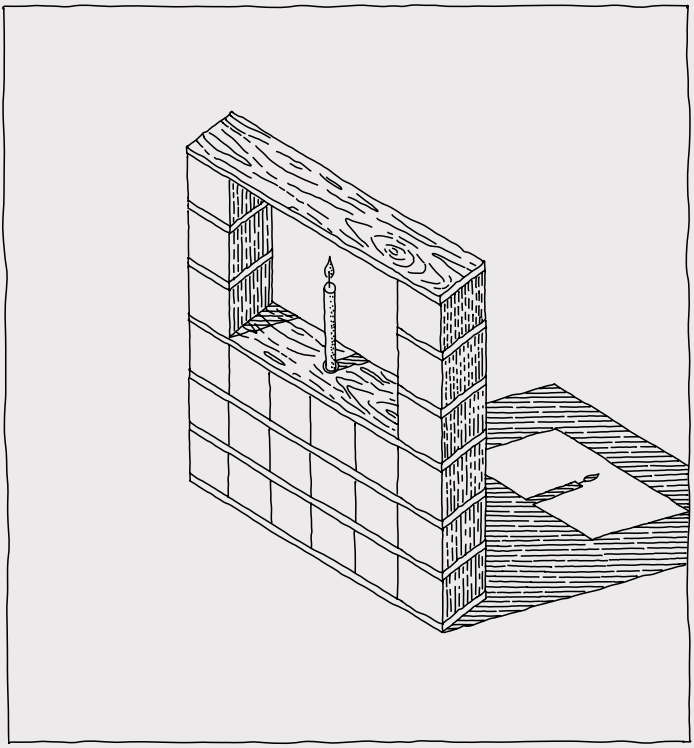
ANTI-RADIATOR

Harmful radiation discovered with a radiesthetic rod or pendulum can be neutralised in various ways. Before building the house you can put stones under the concrete floor, such as pebbles, which are natural anti-radiators (radiesthetic specialists point out the link between this method and the tradition of inserting a cornerstone). Inhabitants of buildings touched by harmful radiation got DIY solutions from radiesthetic handbooks of the 1980s and 90s: placing pebbles around or in the base of a couch, putting chestnuts near a television set or radio, hanging copper spirals on the wall. At present, new-age shops offer anti-radiators to shield you from electromagnetic smog generated by high-tension lines, routers or smart phones.



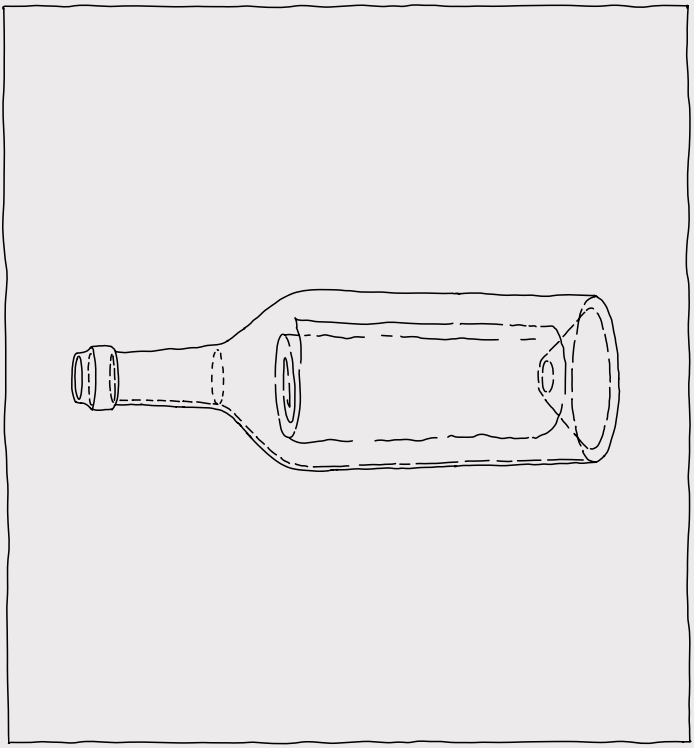
BIRCH

A holy pagan tree symbolising life and abundance, associated with spring and rebirth. Birch wood was used to make amulets to ward off evil spirits. Birch switches were good for staving off illness and demons. Birch cradles gave protection against the evil eye, and birch crosses on graves sheltered their souls. The leaves and branches of a young birch decorated the home on Pentecost to protect it from disasters and ensure a good harvest. It was believed no lightning would ever strike a birch tree. Its branches were used to decorate altars for Corpus Christi; after the procession they were gathered up and taken home as protection from storms. Faith in the birch tree's fire resistance has a basis in botany — owing to the structure of the crown, the higher water content and lower content of flammable sap, leafy trees burn less readily than pines. Rows of birch trees in a forest often create natural fire-proofing.



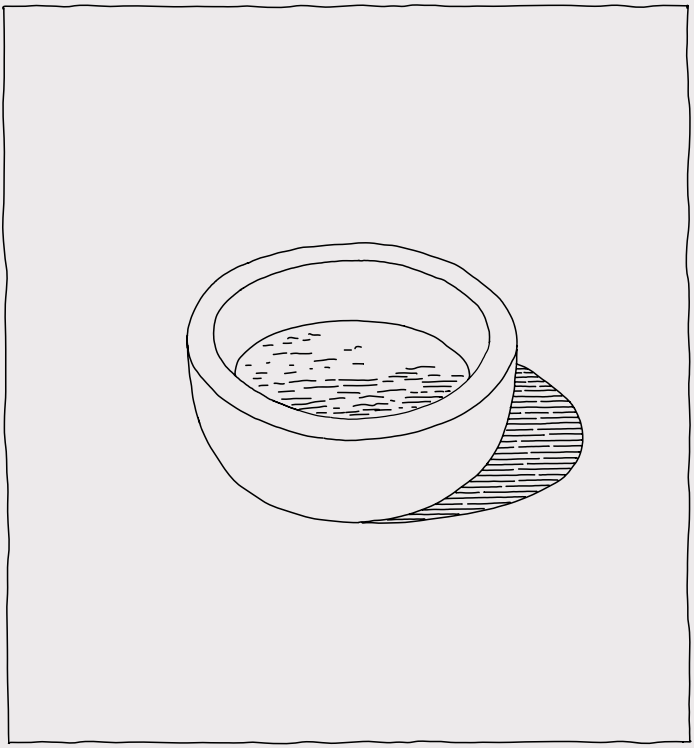
BLESSED CANDLE

A beeswax candle (*gromnica*) protecting the house from lightning (or thunder — *grom*), it was blessed during the Candlemas Day (2 February on the Catholic calendar, 15 February on the Orthodox one). If its flame stayed lit on the way home from church, this was a good omen. After arriving home, you were meant to circle the building and the farmyard with it, and then burn the sign of the cross on the middle beam over the door to your room to protect you from evil. The candle was kept in a place of honour and lit on special occasions. During storms, it was lit and placed in the window to protect the house from lightning. It was used in rites of passage (e.g. it was placed in the hand of a dying person) and in healing rituals (to help with headaches or sore throats). Pieces of the candle were scattered on boundary lines to keep wolves at bay.



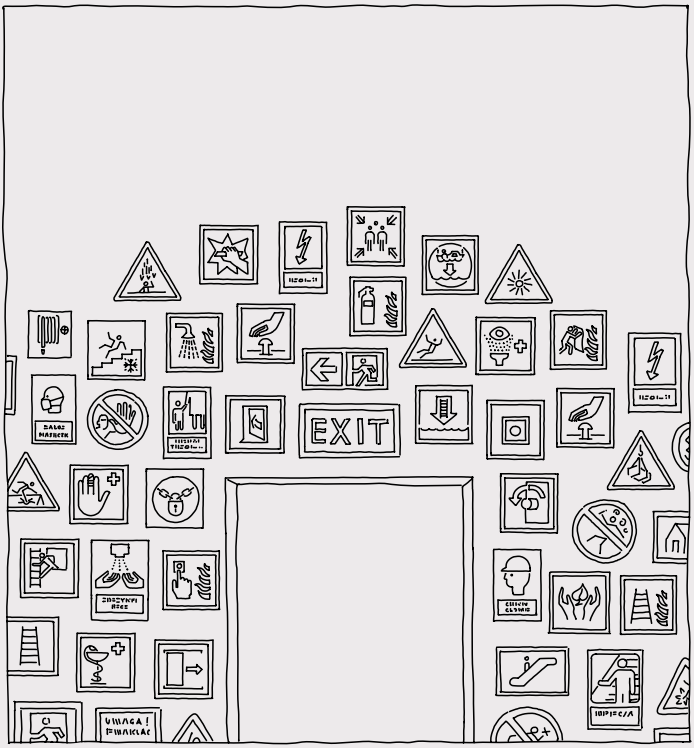
BOTTLE

Walled up, stuffed with a piece of paper with workers' signatures and a newspaper from the day of construction, it points to builders' urge to leave something behind in the building they make. This is an offshoot of the act of building — a document initiating construction, which, after being signed by the founders and initiators, is hidden in a metal tube and walled up for posterity. Cultivated to this day, this tradition reaches back a long way: Antoni Magier, a nineteenth-century chronicler of Warsaw, states that in 1776 the workers installing lightning rods in the Royal Castle found a parchment in the knob in the tower flagpole with signatures of their precursors and the date the castle construction was finished: 1 September 1622.



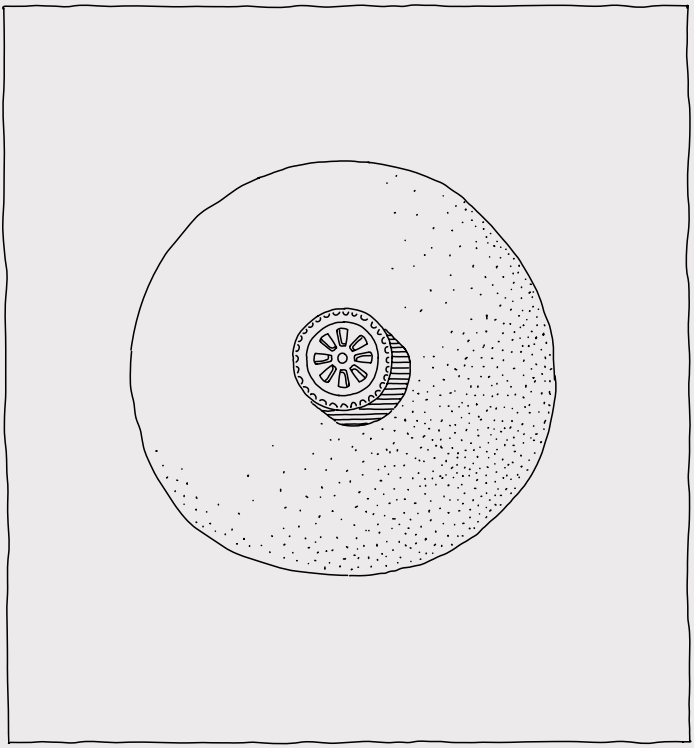
BOWL FOR HOUSEHOLD SPIRITS

Slavic homes were full of spirits and demons that inhabited various nooks and crannies. Sounds gave away their presence: scratching, rustling, howling, footsteps. The snake, caretaker of the house, lived under a high threshold, and in the attic, the household devil. Around the stove there were protective *domowiki*, *ubożęta*, *chochliki*, *popelniki* and *piecuchy*. The *domowicha* helped women do their work, and the nasty *kikimora* clattered the dishes and tangled the threads at night. An invisible household demon circled the farmyard, which is why you couldn't toss dirty water outside in the evening, as you could soak him by accident. If properly tended to, household spirits were useful. Groats were left in the holy corner, millet was scattered in the corners, a spoonful of Christmas-Eve meal was tossed in the stove, drops of vodka were spilled on the floor. The spirits repaid these gifts by multiplying grain and money. If neglected, they could bring misfortune to a home.



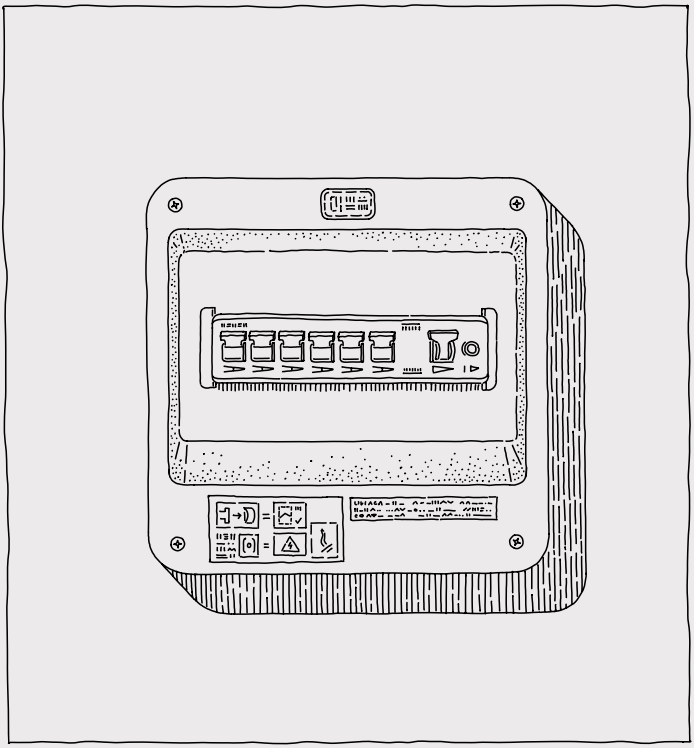
EVACUATION SIGNS

These are signs and pictograms that let you quickly find your way through an area in the event of an evacuation. Often illuminated by a separate power system, they show evacuation routes, doors, and ways of opening them. Following international ISO 7010 standards published in 2003 and with several amendments, they are to be green with white pictograms and white frames. Their form is meant to make them easy to read in stressful situations. They are filled by red square fire safety symbols, indicating the location of hydrants, extinguishers and alarms, and yellow triangular warning signs. The use of basic colours (yellow, red, blue, green) and shapes (circle, square, triangle) has been mandatory since the first effort to internationally standardise the signs at a Viennese road sign and signal convention in 1968.



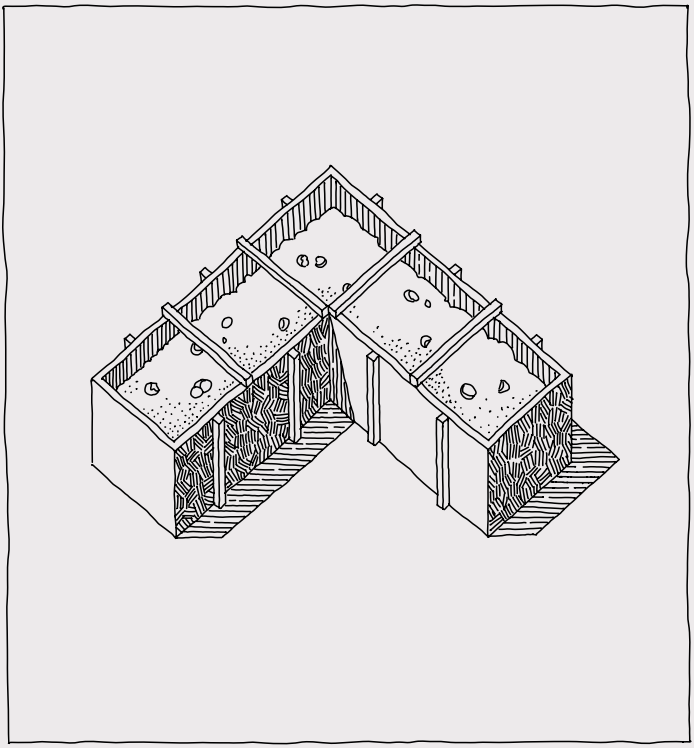
FIRE SENSOR

Installed in an interior, generally near the ceiling, it detects and responds to a fire before it spreads. Sensors can react to different things, such as heat or smoke. They detect the presence of smoke with the optical method, emitting and then registering a beam of infrared light. If the beam in the space encounters smoke, this absorbs or scatters some of the light and the device registers this change. When a fire is detected, the (visual or sound) alarm goes off, and some devices, particularly those found in public facilities, automatically inform the fire station. The first devices to automatically detect fires appeared at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — Francis Robbins Upton, a co-worker of Thomas Edison, patented an electric fire alarm in 1890, and in 1902, George Andrew Darby came up with a heat detector. The smoke detector came about by accident — in the 1930s, Swiss physicist Walter Jaeger failed to develop an electrical poison gas sensor, and irritated by his failure, lit a cigarette. Sensors designed for private spaces appeared in the 1960s and 70s. This was also when the now-popular smoke detector came to be (patented by Donald Steel and Robert Emmark of Electro Signal Lab, 1972).



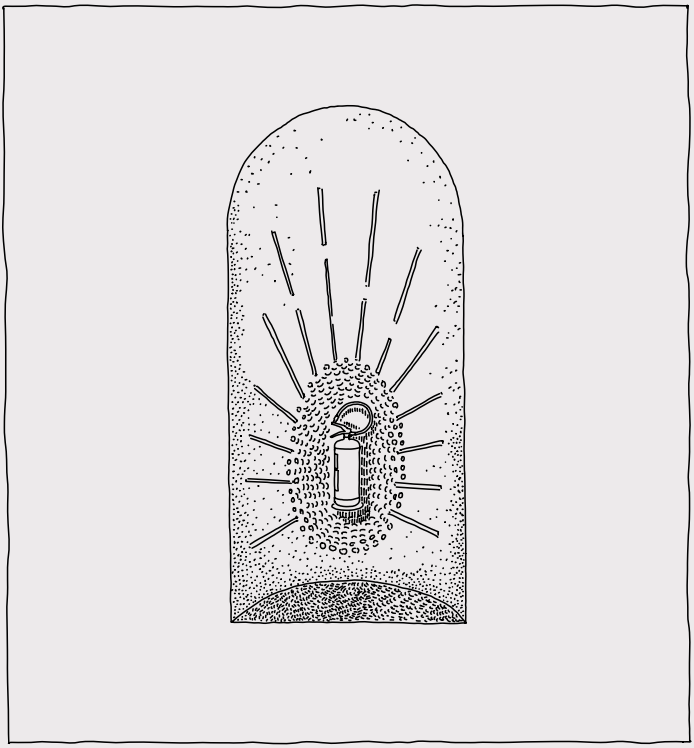
FUSE

Part of an electrical installation, patented by Thomas Edison in 1890, which prevents a short circuit or overload from causing damage to devices, explosions or fire. Part of it is made of a thin wire that melts when power surges through it, causing the circuit to break automatically. With their oblong shape, the old fuses recalled porcelain corks (thus their Polish name, *korki*). Today's automatic fuses take a different form; a power cut is signalled when a little switch drops, though they are still commonly called *korki*.



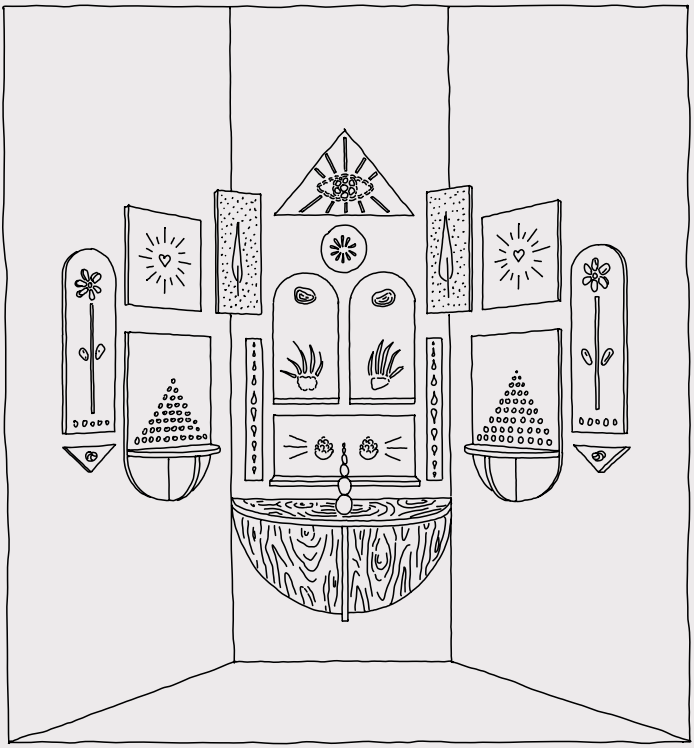
FOUNDATION OFFERINGS

After the building site was established — a process which observed animal behaviour (choosing, for instance, a favourite place for cattle to rest or the site of anthills) and local prohibitions (against building on a fire pit, for example) — it had to be properly secured. This was done with foundation offerings (*zakładziny*). Under the home's cornerstones they buried eggshells (a symbol of life), bread, grain and money (so it should never run out), a rosary, bits of Easter and blessed candles (for protection against evil forces) or wreaths and objects blessed in the church (such as salt blessed on St. Agata's Day and butter on St. Lawrence's Day). In some areas, the corners were smeared with honey or sugar (offerings for spirits). Food and drink were consumed with the foundation offerings. The celebration was meant to bring blessings to the home and safeguard it from evil forces.



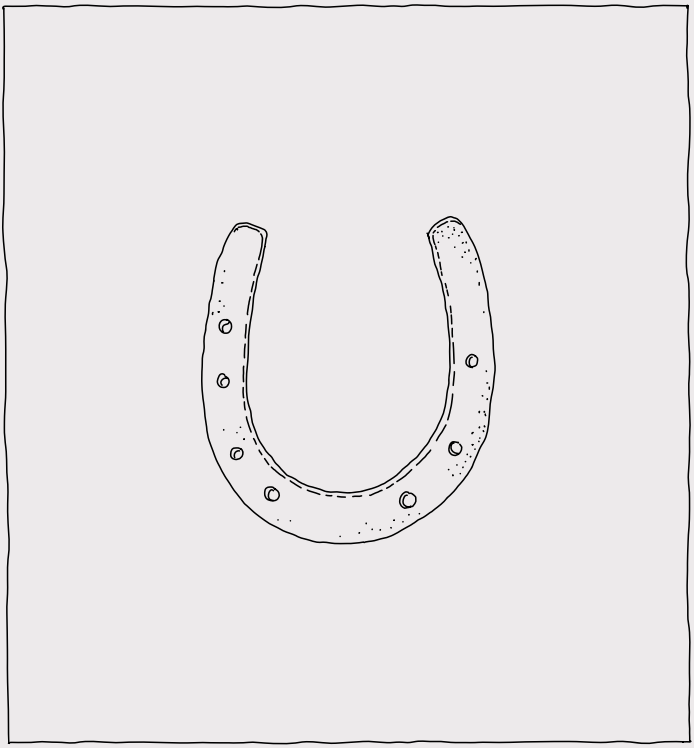
HAND EXTINGUISHER

Fires have been an ongoing threat to human domiciles. Buildings have been protected by lightning rods (invented in the mid eighteenth century) and fire walls (*Brandmauer*), separating the roofs of tenement houses. People fought fire by pouring water or sand from buckets passed in human chains ('bucket brigades'). This was improved by various kinds of stirrup pumps, devices with a water receptacle and hand pump. Fire flappers, flat brooms made of fir, birch, or wicker branches and covered with burlap sacks, were also used to stop flames before they grew. The 1930s saw the advent of 'fire grenades' — glass vessels filled with water and table salt with ammonium chloride, thrown right into a fire. The first extinguisher was patented by Ambrose Godfrey in 1723. This device, made of a container with fluid and a chamber with gunpowder, was started by lighting a wick. In the early nineteenth century the portable extinguisher with 'pearlash' (a potassium carbonate solution) was released, in 1881 came the cartridge extinguisher, in 1905 the foam extinguisher, and in 1928 one that used powder. The CO_2 snow extinguisher used to this day was developed in 1924 on a commission from Bell Telephone, which serviced phone headquarters — it let you swiftly put out a fire in places full of electronic equipment.



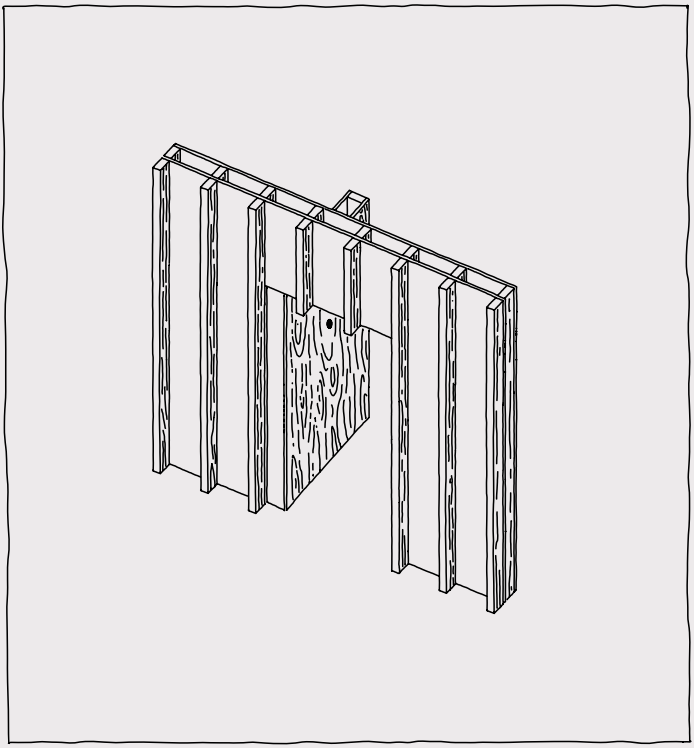
HOLY CORNER

Also known as the *pokuć*, a blessed place inside the traditional Slavic home, by the eastern wall at a diagonal from the entrance. This was the home's sacred zone. When one moved into a house, pictures of saints were hung in one corner, up near the ceiling. They were decorated with fabrics, mainly linen, hand embroidered, with flowers and herbs. Its location at an angle from the entrance meant that everyone who entered bent their heads to the saints (this was also encouraged by the low doorways, forcing you to stoop as you entered). Apart from the icons the holy corner had a cross, a prayer book, a rosary or scapular, and valuables stashed behind the icons. With the spread of mass media, the holy corner evolved — first the radio was installed there, then the television set, covered with a lace doily, with family keepsakes displayed on top of it.



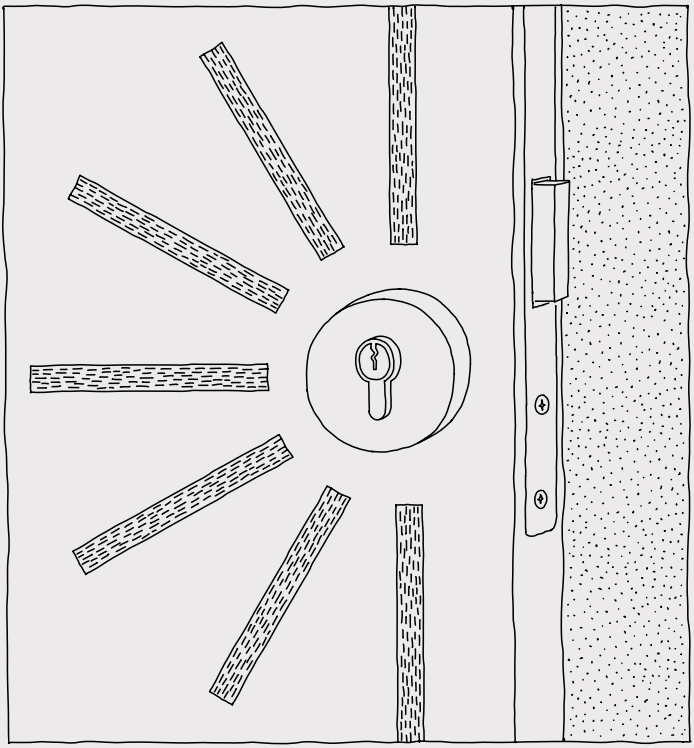
HORSESHOE

Hung over the doorway for luck, most often with the tips upwards, in the shape of the letter ‘U’ (so the luck won’t pour out), more seldom pointing downwards (so the good luck flows onto the person entering). It should be found by accident. Its power is enhanced when it has seven holes (a lucky number) and is made of iron (a metal that staves off evil forces). In Great Britain the horseshoe’s power is explained by a legend of Saint Dunstan, a monk who outwitted the devil. He horseshoed him and only pulled out the nails when the devil promised not to cross the home’s threshold if a horseshoe was hanging there.



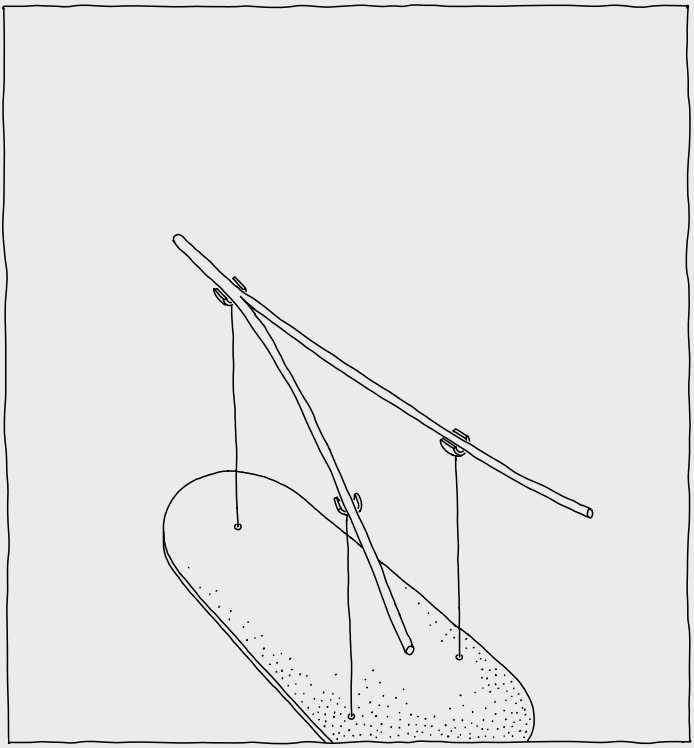
PEEPHOLE

Invented by George Winningham in 1932, in Poland also called a ‘Judas’, it lets you see what is happening through a door without stepping outside. Placed at eye level, the peephole is made of a lens system that provides a wide-angle (or ‘fish-eye’) view and one-way visibility. This means that, unlike the earlier sliding peepholes at front gates, the identity of the looker is kept hidden. Like the later intercoms and electronic viewing devices, it protects homeowners from undesired guests.



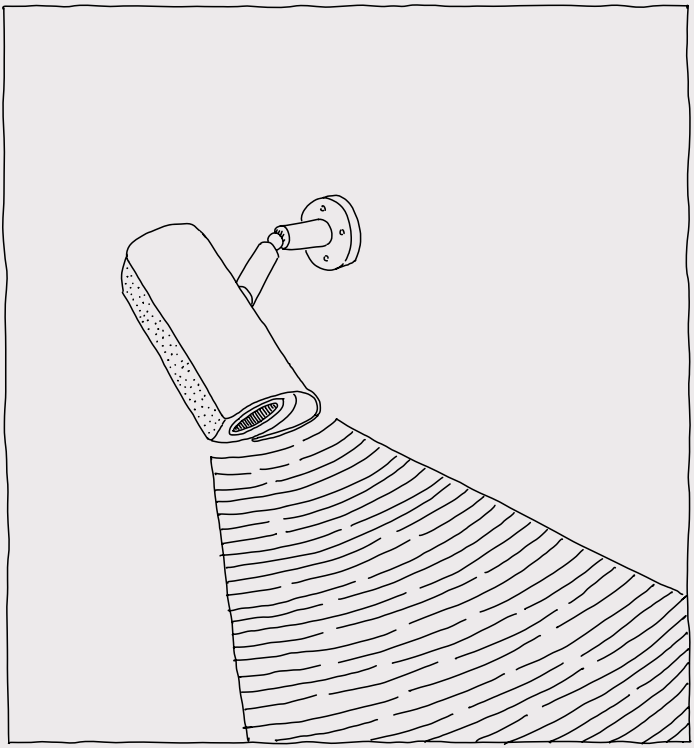
PIN TUMBLER LOCK FOR THE DOOR

The contemporary pin tumbler lock was in invented in 1848 by American mechanic Linus Yale Sr, but the roots of the concept reach back to Antiquity. Archaeologists have found wooden locks in the lands of what was Mesopotamia (the oldest surviving wooden bolt, dating back to around 2000 b.c.e., was discovered in the ruins of the Palace of Khorsabad, near Mosul in Iraq), Egypt or Greece. Yale Sr was directly inspired by a lock used in Ancient Egypt — a sliding bolt raised parts that blocked the mechanism. He perfected this idea. A key inserted in the lock raises the metal pins inside the tumbler and only the key that fits raises them to the correct height, thus unblocking the mechanism. This solution was developed over a dozen years later by Linus Yale Jr: he created a flat key with serrated edges and introduced pins of various lengths into the tumbler. Despite technological advancements such as the advent the master key system or electric, magnetic or biometric locks, pin tumbler locks remain widely used to this day.



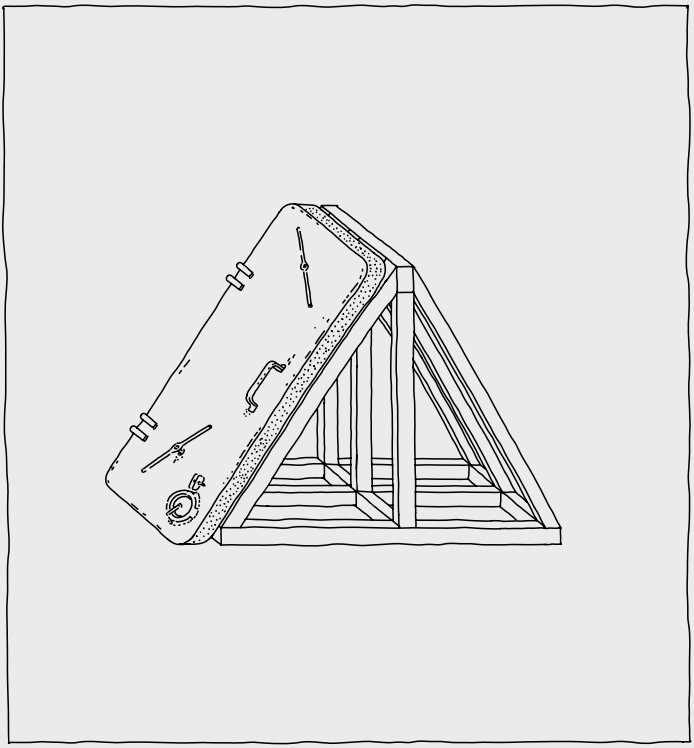
RADIESTHETIC ROD

Made from a forked branch (willow, hazel, maple, oak) or of metal (copper), it serves to find underground veins of water and locate zones of geopathological radiation. The ‘Y’-shaped branch should be carved during the full moon, when the wood has the most sap, which makes the rod more flexible. Metal rods have a cap for a ‘witness’ at the tip — you can hide an object of importance for the dowser there, and thus improve its actions. The dowser holds the ends of the rod in both hands and observes its movements. When it moves, the rod reveals the presence of water veins — it shows where is right for digging a well or wrong for building a home (especially where not to put a bedroom). Today considered a pseudoscience, in the 1980s and 90s radiesthesia was used in Poland by design bureaus and popularised by handbooks. This was based on embodied knowledge: the body of the dowser receives the radiation, and the rod (or pendulum) and its motion serve to register the interaction.



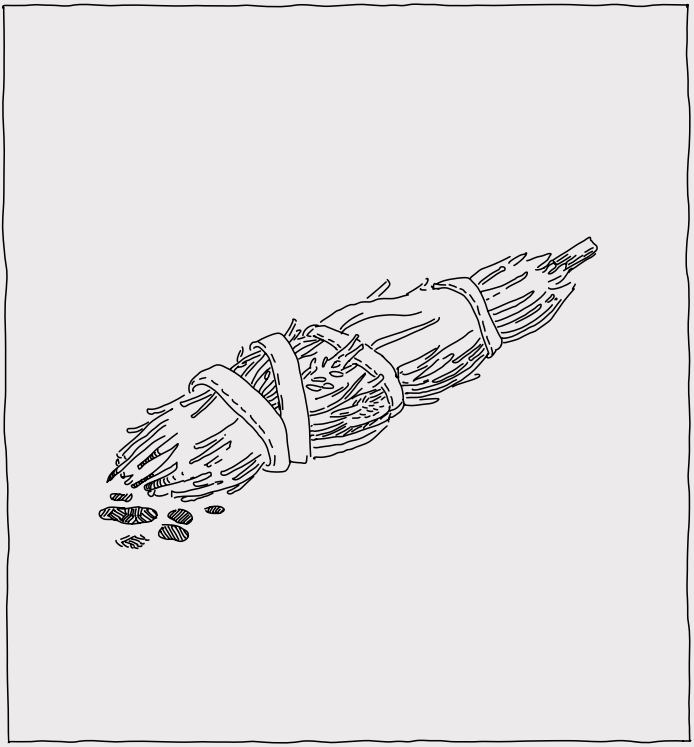
SECURITY CAMERA

The aim of visual monitoring, also known as CCTV (Closed Circuit Television), is to enhance security by the recording and non-public transmission of an image in a given range. The system is made up of cameras, video recorders and monitors, and since the 1970s, of devices to record and store data as well. A monitoring prototype was created in 1927 by Leon Theremin, a Soviet physicist and cellist, creator of the theremin, to monitor visitors to the Kremlin. In 1942, German engineer Walter Bruch used a similar system for military purposes: monitoring the take-off of V-2 rockets. It was released for commercial use (mainly to prevent break-ins and theft in banks and shops) in 1949 by America's Vericon. It was first used in the private space in 1969 by Marie Van Brittan Brown, a Black nurse from Queens, New York. Fearing for her own safety, she and her husband developed home monitoring system, by which you could see who was lurking around your home, communicate with an uninvited guest, and, should it prove necessary, inform the relevant services. Though monitoring has often brought an improvement in safety statistics, we now are paying more attention to its flip side — joined with Artificial Intelligence and facial recognition technology it can be used for mass tracking.



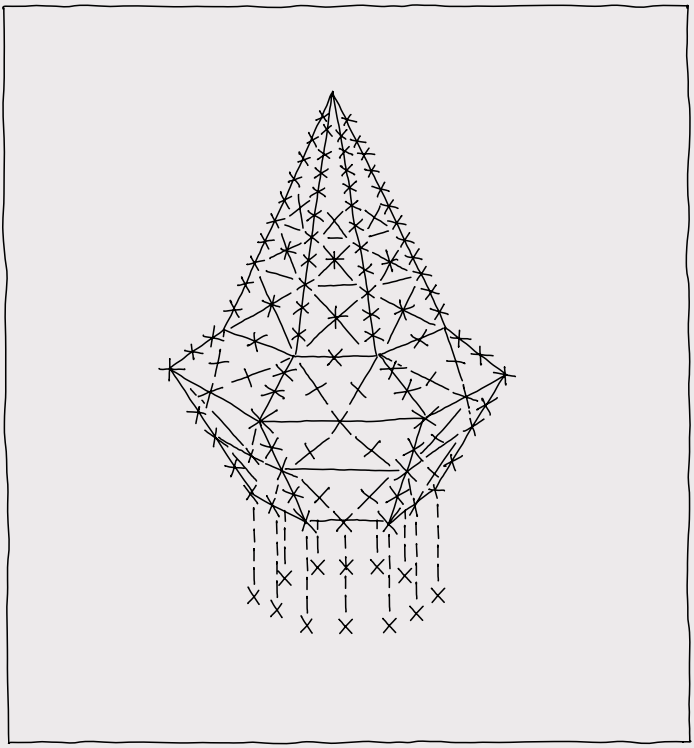
SHELTER DOOR

Hermetically sealed armoured doors are essential to the proper functioning of a shelter — most often underground spaces used to protect people during an armed conflict. A shelter's reinforced concrete construction must be strong enough to hold off the shock waves after a bomb drops, and nuclear shelters must block radiation. The ventilation, power supply and gathered provisions and drinking water are to help people survive for long periods of time. The shelters built during World Wars I and II played a major role in the architecture of the Cold War era. In Poland, for the most part, they come from the World War II period (the largest is the ex-German Stettin HBF-Kirchplatz near the central train station in Szczecin, built in 1941 as a shelter for 5,000 people, today a tourist attraction) and the communist era. According to the Main State Fire Fighter Command report of 2022, the existing shelters and hideouts in Poland have room for less than four per cent of the population (impromptu shelters, such as cellars, will fit everyone). With the growing threat of an armed conflict, the 'shelter act' was passed in 2024. It lets people make household shelters without building permits, and beginning on 1 January 2026, developers of multi-family buildings are obliged to design underground floors and garages to serve as hiding places should they be necessary.



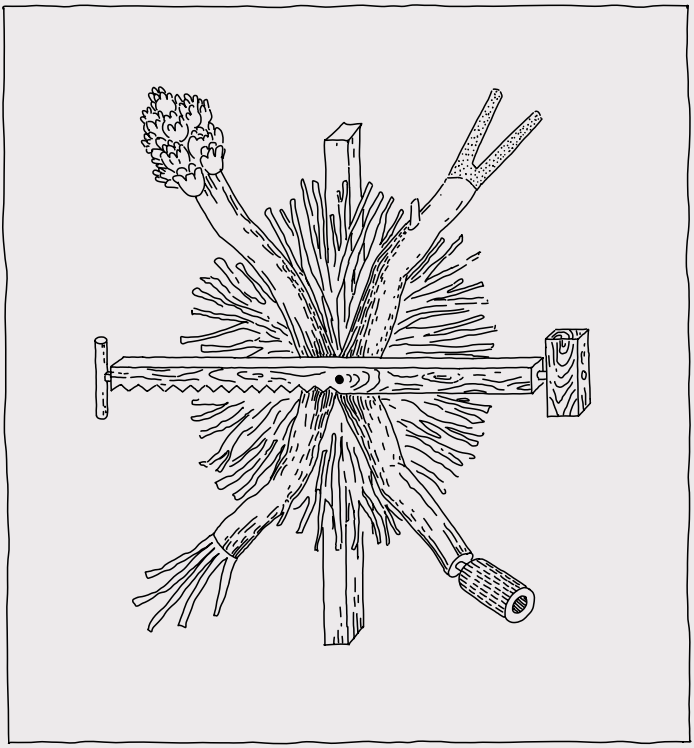
SMUDGE STICKS

Bundle of herbs, Slavic incense — these serve to 'smudge' the house or flat to cleanse it of negative energy. Made of cut herb bouquets tied with natural twine, they are ready to use when the herbs dry. Then you light the end of the fragrant stick, blow on the flame, and, with circular movements, spread the herbal fragrance around the house. The herbs can be composed according to your needs. Juniper berries help with sickness, lavender and marigold aid sleeping problems. Sage cleans away bad energy, tansy and Aaron's rod protect from evil, common wormwood drives off the evil spirits that cause a storm, and periwinkle and thyme protect the farmyard animals from bad spells. At present, smudge sticks are coming back into fashion as part of the mindfulness trend, as a local equivalent of *palo santo*.



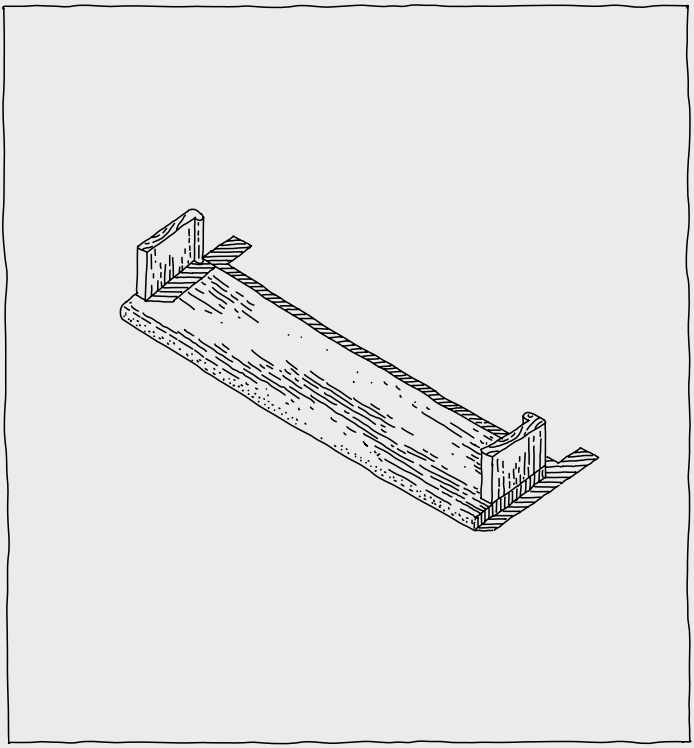
STRAW MOBILE

A spacious, open-work decoration known as ‘spider’ (*pająk*) was made of straw, yarn, coloured tissue paper and other paper hung in the house near the ceiling or in the holy corner before the Christmas holidays, sometimes before Easter as well, and meant to bring good fortune and prosperity. It spun in the breeze. It adopted various shapes, depending on the region. Round spiders (known as ‘worlds’) were made from cut straw stuck into the clay, dough or a potato. The crystal ones were created by threading the straw together into larger constructions on pyramid bases. The discs were supported on woven frames of straw. The richly ornamented, colourful spiders were shaped like church and court chandeliers. Straw mobiles that bore a resemblance to the Slavic spiders also appeared in the Baltic countries (the Lithuanian *sodas* — gardens, chandeliers) and in Scandinavia (the Finnish and Swedish *himmeli* — sky).



TOPPING-OUT

A ceremony tied to the completion of the main building stage (in frame construction this moment came with the building of the rafters, at present when the building has roughly taken shape). This involves hanging a wreath of branches (*wiecha*) decorated with colourful ribbons on the top of the construction. In Poland the workers traditionally add symbolic representations of tools: a saw, a hammer, an axe. Placing the branches on the roof is meant to win over the spirits inhabiting the trees used in the construction. This custom, going back to the fifteenth century, is also widespread in the Baltic states, Germany, Scandinavia, Great Britain and the United States. Topping-outs come in a variety of forms. In Denmark they are made of three horizontal wreaths, in the United States it is a beam signed by the workers. In Scandinavia they used to also use coniferous tree cuttings. This had a practical purpose: when their needles fell, they knew the construction was dry and ready to be covered with a roof. The topping-out is also time for a rousing celebration, with food and drink for the workers. The Dutch *pannenbier* is a similar tradition where the contractor treats the workmen to beer when the building is finished (when the tiles were put on the roof, a flag was hoisted; it flew until all the beer had been poured and drunk). Today this is also a PR opportunity, a chance to boast of a finished construction in the media.



THRESHOLD

A symbolic boundary between the space of the home and the outside world, with all its dangers. Unlike the walls, which ensured constant protection, the threshold was a boundary that was often crossed, and thus was vulnerable to evil powers. There were many protective practices and prohibitions connected to it. Under the threshold lived a snake, a protector of the home fires and the souls of the dead. Owing to their presence, it was forbidden to greet a person or talk over the threshold, eat on the threshold, or pass bread or pour water over it. Nor were you to chop wood here — you could cut the legs of poverty, who would stay in the home forever. You could not walk backwards over a threshold, return home for an object you forgot, or pass someone else on the threshold, as this could mean breaking the boundary and letting in evil spirits. The threshold acquired special significance at births, nuptials and deaths. It was a place to bury a placenta or a dead, unbaptised child. Carrying out a coffin, you knocked several times on the threshold for the deceased to bid farewell to the home. Using objects buried under the threshold, you could ensure good fortune or bring someone misfortune. Iron, such as a nail or horseshoe attached above the door, helped seal this magical border.

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❤Danuta and Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, 'Symbolika domu w tradycji ludowej (cz. I)', *Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty*, no. 3, 1990.
❤Jan Bystroń, *Czynniki magiczno-religijne w osadnictwie*, Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia, 1939.
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❤Aleksander Jackowski, *Polska sztuka ludowa*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2002.
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EXHIBITION
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10 May–23 November 2025

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