

THE POLISH AVANT-GARDE ARCHITECTURE IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD - REGIONALISM, NATIONALISM AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

The article presents the most important Polish architectural achievements from this period and tries to answer the question: which connects regionalism, nationalism and modern architecture. The interwar period was extremely significant moment in the history of architecture. At that time, architectural design was in crisis. Historicism and eclecticism did not work in the post-industrial world. In many countries you can see the search for a new style, on the one hand, adequate for technological development, on the other hand - based on native traditions and referring to regional architecture.

The Polish avant-garde architecture in the interwar period was a very interesting phenomenon. As in a nutshell, different trends have focused here - from the still widespread historicism to secession, from modern trends based on the experiences of leading modernists, such as Stanisław and Barbara Brukalscy, Szymon and Helena Syrkusowie, to the Zakopane style, made by Stanisław Wyspiański. This period in Polish history of architecture not only radically changed the character of Polish city landscape and shaped further developments, it also transformed the experience of reality in a meaningful way. Despite its significant influence on the present shape of our lived environment the importance of the avant-garde remains poorly recognized. Modernist designers usually turned away from historical background, and at the same time they were intensively looking for a justification for the existence of their buildings. They tried to do something new and, simultaneously, were afraid of the reaction of society. Regional architecture, with its details and characteristic solutions, has often become the reference point for modern solutions.

Keywords: history of architecture, polish interwar architecture, regionalism in architecture

Although at the end of the 19th century, historicism was still an important feature of architecture, it already contained many elements characteristic for the modern architecture of the 20th century. The turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries was a significant moment of crystallisation of the modern architectural thought, and buildings dating back to that time feature a particularly interesting

phenomenon. On the one hand, they are deeply rooted in the previous decade, while on the other, they also bring a breeze of modernity. There were two main trends: the first one based on engineering structures, initiating the use of new, non-traditional construction materials, such as steel, concrete and glass; and the other one, preserving the traditional construction style, but also attempting to break with historicism and eclecticism in favour of creating a new style, characteristic for the new times. At the beginning of the 20th century the two trends merged and created a new style in architecture, i.e. the International Style.

One of the major questions asked by architects representing this period was the question about the source of inspiration, about the fundamentals of creation. University education clearly referred to traditional patterns, based on references to classical architecture, its characteristic details and proportions. However, technological progress and the introduction of new construction materials, such as steel, concrete and glass, put such approach under a question mark. Traditional construction methods in public utility buildings were gradually replaced with new, more economical solutions, and a historic detail remained only an attire to be selected by an investor from a vast range of available models, frequently originating from different historic periods. Freedom of choice, not dependant on traditional methods of construction, set out of context, greatly contributed to propagating eclecticism on a large scale. Traditional architecture started to resemble '*a bal masqué*' (Pevsner, 2013), and architects, and shortly after them investors as well, started to doubt the sense of their work.

Education provided by technical colleges in the 19th century encompassed education on modern solutions stemming from the application of the new materials. These solutions were based on complicated theoretical calculations concerning the strength and statics of buildings, and (at least initially) they concerned mostly the newly constructed engineering structures, such as bridges, viaducts, factories or exhibition halls. Engineers designed according to their acquired engineering knowledge, without any references to tradition or historic detail. Such approach caused a gap, and this lack of connection with the past

had a negative impact on public opinion and the level of acceptance of new solutions, particularly by the conservative circles.

Polish architecture of that period did not lag behind the global standards. It is possible to identify therein features of almost all the trends characteristic for that period. The avant-garde Polish architecture of the inter-war period followed the models of France, Germany or England. It was both important to keep up with western solutions, and to develop an individual style of the model solutions.

Regionalism in architecture

Different trends that could be observed in the architecture of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries tried to tackle the aforementioned problems of identity. One of the solutions was an attempt to refer to local features of traditional building style, and traditional rural architecture became a frequent source of inspiration. This trend, which developed primarily on the level of aesthetics of the form, produced finally a new style characteristic for the very end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, which is commonly referred to as the Art Nouveau.

In 1858, William Morris – a designer, and Philip Webb (1831-1915) – an architect, built a house in Baxley Heath which, according to them, was supposed to be a return to old, medieval methods. With this approach, the investor and the architect saw a possibility of renewal of contemporary applied arts, marred with historic eclecticism on the one hand, and with industrial production, on the other. The Red House was an attempt to come back to traditional English countryside development, contrary to the prevailing Victorian style. It was the first building in England, which had an irregular, eye-pleasing form, and which organically blended with the landscape and employed local building traditions. Such an approach was an intermediate phase between the historicism and the modernism in architecture. It did not aspire to introduce a totally new, original style, in complete separation from historic forms. New tendencies in English architecture were further developed by Charles F. Annesley Voysey, an architect

(1857-1941), who worked out his own style, crucial for the development of modern architecture, yet strongly rooted in local architecture of the English countryside. The new aesthetics was based on mutual relations between the mass and the area, and in Voysey's projects, what stands out are the natural forms and their organic unity with the surroundings. Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo (1851-1942), as well as the architects from a Scottish group *The Four* led by Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) pursued a similar path. In the buildings designed by the Glasgow group, apart from the official opposition to historicism and attempts to find a new, rational style in construction, we can also notice references to traditional Scottish architecture, countryside cottages and old manor houses. This tendency is first of all visible in residential buildings, can also be noticeable in the most famous Mackintosh's building, the School of Art in Glasgow (1897-1899; 1907-1909 library building).

The need to justify and to place the architectural works in the context of vernacular architecture is also demonstrated in the works of two (mentally and physically) distant pioneers of modern architecture, namely Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) and the guru of modernist architecture, Le Corbusier (1887-1965). For example, when Wright created the first designs of residential houses, he looked for inspiration in the traditional architecture of American pioneers, whereas in the early works of Charles Edouard Jeanneret we can see how much he was fascinated with fauna and flora of Swiss highland.

Regionalism appears in the architecture of this period as one of the means of finding sense in architectural designing, lost in the process of mechanical imitation of classical details. The concept of national style assumed the need of working out a language of forms corresponding in their nature to the specifics of a given nation and manifesting its distinctiveness. Buildings were to testify to the nation's history and the richness of its culture.

In the Polish architecture we can see such tendencies partially in Art Nouveau architecture of development in many cities, and in the particularly in the then trendy *Zakopane style*, popularised mostly by Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851-1915). Witkiewicz's goal was to lay foundations for Polish modern national

architecture based on the art of Podhale. The style was propagated by W. Matlakowski, W. Elias-Radzikowski and J. Wojciechowski, but despite their efforts, it was mostly adopted in the construction of mountain chalets. The *Zakopane style* was also applied in the manufacturing of furniture, household objects, clothing, china, musical instruments and souvenirs. Elements of highlanders' culture were also reflected in the works of composers and writers. In a wider sense, the *Zakopane style* includes all manifestations of Podhale folk art transposed upon the national culture. Witkiewicz followed the traditional construction style of Podhale highlanders, enriching it with Art Nouveau elements. He expanded the layout of a two-chamber highlanders' cottage transforming it into a villa intended for wealthy visitors from the cities. According to his guidelines, a single-bay or double-bay houses were built with sloping steep roofs covered with shingles, where the first floor level was usually arranged perpendicularly to the ground floor. The characteristic element was the high wall base made of broken stone. Due to the terrain, wall bases were of different height (according to the land incline; on the one side of the building, the wall base was higher and incorporated windows with arched lintel providing daylight to the basement). The walls were made of halved round logs interlocked at the corners by notching. Interlocked saddle notches on the corners of the timber walls made them look more elegant.

Witkiewicz incorporated a great number of decorations typical of Podhale building style. His roofs were decorated with vertical wooden ornaments located at the roof ridgepole on the perimeter rafters, usually resembling a lily or a tulip. Gables, windows and doors were finished with *little suns* (, i.e. narrow slats fixed radially. Halved logs protruding outside the notched corners (*lynxes*) were carved into floral ornaments, typical for decorative motives from Podhale.

Another motive typical for the houses designed by Witkiewicz was an open porch located under an overhang on the southern elevation of the building, supported on the arches of stone wall base, and small attic rooms. Through their shape, they were a reference to open flap doors located on roofs of traditional cabins and sheds on Podhale meadows, which were used to load hay inside. Despite promotion by artistic circles during the inter-war period, this style was not

adopted as a national style in the Polish architecture of the period. Instead, it remained only a local peculiarity, constituting an interesting reference to similar tendencies observed in other countries.

Search for a national style

Apart from the *Zakopane style*, largely as a result of the initiative taken by the Society of Friends of Fine Arts, the manor style was conceived within the *Cracow Art Nouveau* style in architecture and then gained popularity in the 1920s. The movement was inspired with the traditional architecture of noblemen mansions. The main creators of this trend in the Polish architecture during the inter-war period were Józef Gałęzowski (1877-1963), Romuald Gutt (1888-1974), Tadeusz Tołwiński (1887-1951), Rudolf Świerczyński (1887-1943), (Kotula, Krakowski, 1972). The *mansion style* was especially popular in the first half of the 1920s, later it lost its importance, giving way to modernism. At the request of more conservative investors, however, numerous buildings were constructed in this style also in the 1930s.

In the symbolic sphere, this style referred to the golden age in the culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth - which was supposed to be a cure for the crisis associated with the years spent under foreign rule, when Poland for almost one hundred years disappeared from the map of Europe. After Poland regained its independence, many designers returned enthusiastically to the idea of the national style. Architects used characteristic details in various ways, from repetition to free interpretation: a porch with a columned portico, supported by two or four columns, a broken Polish roof, alcoves; the whole composition was complemented with white, plastered walls and roofing made of shingles or tiles. The aim was to get a picturesque structure, both well-defined and well-composed into the surroundings.

Polish avant-garde architecture

Several trends can be noticed in the development of Polish architecture during the inter-war period: Art Nouveau, manor architecture (national eclecticism), historical eclecticism (architectural output of Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, 1883-1948), or the most significant - modernised classicism, mainly associated with state patronage, characterised by representative monumentalism. Independently from those trends dominating in the official architecture, Polish avant-garde architecture was slowly developing during the inter-war period. In 1924 the *Blok* magazine began to be published, and the artists and architects associated with it preached views postulating the creation of functional architecture, in which social radicalism was to be combined with a modern approach to design. The importance of utilitarianism, constructivism was emphasised, and analogies and connections between art, architecture and technology were emphasised. The focus was on the issue of functionalism:

Change of building material, changes in the system and state of building technology, determining changes in the external appearance of the building, the evidence of this are: the aircraft, airship, cruiser, transatlantic steamer (...) the engine is the purposefulness of the building" (*Blok*, 1924, No. 5, p. 10).

Blok also stressed the need to fight individuality in art, treated creativity as a collective work, in which art should provide objective values, and its quality should be determined not by talent, but by conscious and systematic work. The authors referred to De Stijl, to simplification of the means of expression and to mass reproduction of works of art. In the subsequent issues of the magazine, articles by Theo van Doesburg, Mies van der Rohe, were published and activities of van't Hoff, Rietveld, and Le Corbusier were highlighted. Among the Polish artists associated with *Blok*, Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnowerówna focused on architecture and published their projects and sketches of spatial compositions based on a purely artistic construction, referring to the works of Kazimierz Malewicz.

In 1926 a group named *Praesens*¹ was formed, which gathered many former "blockers" and attracted young architects, such as Szymon Syrkus (1893-1964), Józef Szanajca (1902-1939), or later Barbara (1899-1980) and Stanisław (1894-1967) Brukalscy. The group published only two issues of the *Praesens* magazine, which was envisaged as a quarterly (1926, 1930). The group's goal was to propagate new trends in architecture and art. In addition to the articles written by its members, there were texts, among others, by Malewicz, Mondrian and Ouda. Issues related to architecture concerned mainly social problems, economic conditions, and the functionality of the solutions adopted; issues related to the industrialisation and prefabrication of building elements, their standardisation as well as the organization of work at the construction site were also widely discussed. In the first issue of the *Praesens* magazine, Szymon Syrkus published a program text entitled *Preliminary Assumptions in Architecture*. According to its content, an individual flat was to become an "apparatus", and architecture - a function of social, engineering and spatial-artistic factors.

The views of the leading architects associated with *Praesens* were partially implemented in the project commitments they undertook. One of the leaders of the group was Szymon Syrkus, who studied successively at the University of Technology in Vienna (1911), Graz (1912-1914), Riga (1915-1918), Moscow and at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology (1918-1922), where he obtained a diploma. In the following years, he began studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow and an internship at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris. During his stay in Germany, he also visited the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar. After returning from abroad, he got involved with the *Blok* group, where he collaborated with Teresa Żarnowerówna and Mieczysław Szczuka. In 1925 he published his first article *Architectural foundations of housing construction*. Due to the differences of views, he left *Blok* and became one of the founders of the *Praesens* group.

In 1925, Syrkus and Henryk Oderfeld implemented the project of the Old People's Care Home at Wolska Street 18, in Warsaw, with a strictly functional plan and façades completely devoid of decorations. In the years 1927-1928,

¹ After the split in the *Blok* group.

together with Andrzej Pronaszko, he designed the 'Simultaneous Theatre', modelled on Bauhaus solutions, in which the stage consisted of two revolving rings surrounding a separate part of the audience; he created also an experimental theatre stage in Żoliborz (1933), a modest version of the aforementioned solution.

Simultaneously with the design work, Szymon Syrkus published theoretical texts presenting his views and from the very beginning he was actively involved in CIAM works during subsequent congresses in 1933, 1937 and 1956. One of his most important publications was the functional Warsaw study, prepared in cooperation with Jan Chmielewski in 1934 and reported at the CIRPAC in London. This work gained both many supporters as well as opponents; the latter were afraid of the utopianism of the proposed solutions.

In 1926, Szymon Syrkus married Helena Eliasberg/Niemirowska², and from that moment on the spouses worked closely together, both during designing and coining of new architectural theories, jointly participated in the life of the international environment of avant-garde architects. One of their joint projects was a study on the industrial production of apartments, in which the Syrkuses developed a model type of housing with a modular structure, with a span containing a kitchen and a sanitary cabin. In 1933, they were both present at the CIAM IV congress, during the adoption of the Athens Charter.

Their conception of mass produced residential units was implemented in the design of a housing estate for a Warsaw Housing Cooperative - Rakowiec housing estate, at the junction of Pruszkowska and Wiślicka streets (1934-1938). The housing estate was envisaged for 200 homeless, working class families, therefore their costs of use were meant to be affordable for the workers. The new, functional layout of the housing estate assumed the elimination from the residential units of all the functions for which common areas could have been designated. The buildings were designed in steel frame technology, yet in the process of the actual construction it was replaced with the traditional brick technology due to price rises. The sizes of residential units were

² In press publications until 1935, she used the pseudonym Niemirowska, with the exception of publications on architecture which, after being married (1927) she signed with the name H. Syrkus (Piłatowicz, 2009)

standardised on the basis of the human scale analysis - 2.7 m, area of residential units: 32,6m² (31,8m²). Modest fit-out and repetitiveness of solutions were meant to reduce the costs. Helena Syrkusowa wrote about it as follows:

Despite modest fit-out of the residential units, we are of the opinion that Rakowiec design does not contradict the principles of improvement of the living standards. Small size of the units is compensated with the overall house building design envisaged on the same plot of land. The house shall accommodate a common bathroom, a club, a nursery school and a laundry with machines, where the housing estate female inhabitants will be able to wash their clothes cheaper and more comfortably in comparison to a 6 room flat owner. In this way, by further and further eliminations from the residential units of all those activities that can be better performed and at a lower costs in common rooms, we arrive at more and more modest residential units of higher and higher cultural value. We may, thus, risk a statement that the size of a residential unit can be in inverse proportion to fit-out of collective rooms with no impairment to the value of such residential units. (Zespół Preasens, 1931, p. 7)

Another housing estate built on the basis of a design made for the Workers' Housing Estate Association by the Syrkuses was a housing estate of 116 terraced houses in Łódź-Marysin and 17 houses in Grudziądz erected in the years 1934-1936. These terraced houses were composed of the same segments with bedrooms on the mezzanine and their façades were made of prefabricated components and wood, which on the whole rendered an interesting visual effect at low costs.

Working for private clients interested in small houses, the Syrkuses could also experiment with a more expensive solutions. One of such an experimental house constructed with the use of modern building materials was the house built in 1930 for Aleksander Załszypin at ul. Jasiowa in Konstancin (Skolimów) in the steel frame technology developed by Stanisław Hempel, filled with light aerated

concrete components, with prefabricated lining of a thin layer of stone from Pinczów quarries patented by engineer Czesław Pukiński.

After the war had broken out, the Syrkuses started working in the Architectural and Urban Planning Studio, which operated at the Warsaw Housing Cooperative and at a Cooperative Building Enterprise. Until the third quarter of 1942, the Syrkuses ran a team developing the district and WSM Rakowiec housing estate. The team then worked out a study of a social housing estate compliant with the CIAM guidelines, with fresh air, sun and greenery access ensured, based on the three level system of shaping bonds within a community (house - residential complex (colony) - district). The Syrkus model envisaged public space with greenery and buildings housing educational and cultural institutions within the premises of a housing estate and with services, shops and car parks outside, along the streets.

Other well-known architects of this period were Barbara and Stanisław Brukalscy. They designed both buildings, which adhered to their own ideas on residential development, as well as interiors, furniture and neon signs, some of which have been classified as ingenious pieces of applied art. In the 1920s the Brukalscy joined the *Praesens* group that brought together avant-garde architects and artists. In the 1930s they tried to implement the ideas of the *Praesens* group in their designs of housing estates in Warsaw, among others in Żoliborz. In that period they also designed their own house, which became the first avant-garde building in Poland. Irregular, recessed building block of the villa resembled the buildings designed in those times in Holland by artists propagating Neoplasticism (*De Stijl*). On the basis of postulates formulated at the second Congress of Modern Architecture, the *Praesens* group initiated a Polish program called *The smallest flat*. The architects designed buildings and their interiors to be affordable for the lowest social classes. The results of the program were presented at the exhibition in 1930. Barbara and Stanisław Brukalscy also displayed the wooden furniture, with tops and seats covered with grey linoleum to make their cleaning easier. They furthermore designed a kitchen featuring the functionalities of the famous *Frankfurt kitchen*.

Summary

Polish avant-garde in the inter-war period is an interesting example of architectural activities closely interrelated with the international trends, featuring, however, their own, individual style. Analysing the development of that period we can see that almost all significant trends of the international architecture are represented therein. Buildings in Art Nouveau style or in Classical or eclectic style were constructed next to one another, with buildings featuring local traditions, e.g. in the *Zakopane Style* (or *Witkiewicz Style*) or in the manor house style, appearing here and there. Polish architects actively participated in the major field specific events of those times and co-authored new trends in architectural designing and urban planning. Their achievements were recognised in the international arena and at the same time clearly demonstrated the ideas formed out of the Polish realia, through the prism of Poland's complex political situation after regaining independence. In the designs and buildings constructed on their basis by the leading Polish architects of the times we can see both their individual footprint in the area of the proposed functional and formal solutions and high level of engineering know-how, knowledge of advanced technologies and active pursuit of international trends.

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