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Polish avant-garde architecture of 1918-39 in relation to contemporary trends in Europe

In 1918 Poland recovered its sovereignty after nearly 150 years of subjection to the neighbouring superpowers. That year, which also marked the end of World War I, became the starting point for an exceptionally intensive, if unbalanced, development of the country. Reconstruction from the ravages of war, and the new needs of the State which in many ways had to start from scratch, required architects to cope with an unprecedented volume of construction projects. The realization of those projects would require an army of well-trained professionals. Before the newly-created Technical University of Warsaw could provide them, the country had to employ the expertise of the older generation of architects who, in the absence of a Polish state, had received their education in a number of European academic centres, such as Vienna, Dresden, Karlsruhe, Graz, or Darmstadt. A significant group was made up of graduates from Russian universities, especially from St. Petersburg. There was also a smaller group of Moscow graduates. That generation, educated under the influence of historicism and eclecticism, took the lead, which explains the conservative character of Polish architecture in the first phase of post-war development, *i.e.* the Twenties. Those architects, who created their works in a newly free country, developed a number of major tendencies, very traditional in character, which attained a prominent position and dominated the picture of Polish architecture of that time.

The first of these was a direction which was vaguely related to pseudo-style: decorative tendencies which stemmed from the Secession (Art Nouveau). An example of this is the work of Jan Koszczyc-Witkiewicz, especially his building for the library of the Higher School of Business (Wyzsza Szkoła Handlowa) in Warsaw (1926) and the Experimental Plant of that School (1925). The work of J. Czajkowski, author of the Polish Pavillion for the 1925 Paris Exhibition also belongs here. The direction they represented was sometimes referred to as «crystalline». It showed distinct analogies with German expressionism, especially some works by Höger or Sharoun. Expressionist tendencies

are also clearly articulated in the work of L. Wojtyczko, especially in his home for the professors of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow from the beginning of the Twenties and in the works of W. Nowakowski, exemplified by the residential house in Cracow built in 1929.

The other important development tendency was the so-called «manor style», with its clear references to Polish architectural tradition. The bodies of the buildings were covered by tall hip roofs, and the entrances to the interior were often through four-column porticos with triangular pediments. Good examples of that style are seen in the detached house in Zoliborz in Warsaw by K. Tolloczko (1925), the Town Hall in Slonim by J. Beill (1925), or the railway station in Gdynia by R. Miller (1926).

The third typically traditional direction was «academic pseudo-classicism», which made references especially to Palladianism in its Russian version. Its leading exponent was A. Szyszko-Bohusz, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. The most representative building in this group is certainly the building of the General Savings Bank (Powszechna Kasa Oszczednosci) in Cracow by Szyszko-Bohusz (1925), which shows ample analogies with Russian classicism. Another exponent of this direction was M. Lalewicz, author of the State Agricultural Bank building (Panstwowy Bank Rolny) in Warsaw (1926-27). A similar style was adopted in the building of the Providential Government and the Silesian Parliament in Katowice, based on a design by Wojtyczko, Wyczanski, Zalewski, and Jurkiewicz (1924-29).

The most characteristic trend in the official architecture of the period, however, and one that was particularly popular for state buildings, was the so-called «modernized classicism». This architecture was characterized by a monumentalization of the simplified, classically-oriented form, often employing large vertical divisions supported by massive rusticated plinths. Prominent crowning conics appeared, while the details of the architectural orders were either neglected or extremely simplified. Examples of this style are the buildings of the Ministry of Religions and Public Education in Warsaw by Z. Maczenski (1927-30), the Ministry of Transportation in Warsaw (1928) and the National Economy Bank (1928-31) by R. Swierczynski, the National Museum in Warsaw by T. Tolwinski (1927-34), or the Syndicate of the Polish Steel Mills in Katowice by T. Michejda and L. Sikorski (1931). This

tendency survived in the architecture of public buildings almost till the end of the Thirties, and prominent examples are: the buildings of the Municipal Courts in Warsaw by B. Pniewski (1935-39), the library of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow by W. Krzyzanowski (1937-39), or the National Museum in Cracow by B. Szmidt, J. Juraszynski and J. Dumnicki (1936-39).

Against this background and partly in opposition to the four directions described, and almost totally independent of them, avant-garde architecture developed. The formation of its theoretical foundations relied heavily, as was the case in other European countries, on the innovative developments in the plastic arts. We must emphasize the contribution of those Polish artists born in Russia who studied in Moscow which, unlike the more conservative St. Petersburg, had always been a breeding-ground for avant-garde concepts. These were Edgar Norwerth, Wladyslaw Strzeminski and Katarzyna Kobro. They had the opportunity to get in touch with the avant-garde experience in Russian plastic arts in 1910-14, as well as in the period following the Russian October Revolution. In 1919, Strzeminski studied under Kazimierz Malewicz and later became his assistant. He had also made personal acquaintance with Tatlin and other great constructivists. After Poland regained its sovereignty, these artists returned to their homeland, bringing with them the experiences of their youth. Other Polish artists influenced by innovative Russian artistic concepts were Mieczyslaw Szczuka and Teresa Zarnowerowna. The former was inspired by the constructivist works of Tatlin and Rodchenko; the latter displayed some strong influences from Malewicz's suprematism in her quest for a universal architectural form. The only actual contact between these two environments took place on two separate occasions. The first was a visit Malewicz paid to Warsaw in 1926, accompanying an exhibition of his works. His suprematist ideas were reflected to a certain extent in the doctrines promoted by the avant-garde groups of Polish artists and architects, in particular the «Blok» and the «Praesens». The abstract-geometrical spatial arrangements created by Malewicz, the so-called «planites» and «architectons», were prototypes for modern architectural forms; they were of great significance for the formation process of a new language of architecture; therefore their influence on avant-garde formal research in Polish architecture was enormous. Russian innovative architectural concepts were well-known among the Polish avant-garde, and

they were initially met with vivid interest, which was reflected in numerous publications in Polish. Later on, however, constructive dynamism was gradually abandoned, because of the objection that it was too formalistic. The social ideas that underlay the commune-house concept were criticized, the ideas of de-urbanization also raised serious doubts. The attention of Polish avant-garde architects was chiefly concentrated on the ideas of functionalists which flowed in from Western European centres such as the Bauhaus and De Stijl. It is worth remembering, however, that the Bauhaus itself owed a lot to the Russian rationalists clustered around Moscow's INKHUK. We could thus speak of a secondary impact those ideas had on the Polish avant-garde, via Western Europe.

Another significant event in the history of the contacts between the Polish and Russian architectural avant-garde was the Modern Construction Exhibition in Moscow in 1927, which was also attended by Polish architects. That was, in fact, the debut of the Polish avant-garde on the international scene.

A significant role in the development of the Polish avant-garde was played by the ideas propagated by the «Blok» group, also published in a magazine of the same name. It was founded in 1924 and edited by Mieczysław Szczuka. Besides the previously mentioned Malewicz, articles and designs by such European celebrities as Mies van der Rohe, Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian, Thomas Gerrit Rittveld, van Hoff, van Esteren, or Wills were published here. The list of names alone points to an exceptionally strong influence from the Dutch avant-garde, especially from De Stijl. The Polish supporters of the «Blok» postulated a functional architecture, as they strove to combine social radicalism with artistic innovation. A strong emphasis was put on utilitarianism, analogies with machines, and the world of technology. 1926 brought about a schism within the «Blok», as a result of which another group emerged, the «Praesens». Many former «Blok» members were in its ranks, plus a group of young architects such as Szymon Syrkus, Bohdan Lachert, Jozef Szanajca, and Barbara and Stanisław Brukowski. They published a quarterly under the same title (in fact, only two issues were printed), where they published works by Malewicz, van Doesburg, Mondrian, Oud, and others. «Praesens» was of a positively functionalist orientation. Issues emphasized were those of utilitarianism, industrialization of architecture, prefabrication, and standardization of building elements,

as well as the social and economic problems of building. Most of the members were positively left-wing, which was especially manifest in the addressing of important social issues, such as cheap housing for the poor, the building of creches and nurseries, hostels for the homeless, and cheap, generally available health-service facilities. The principals for such actions were, among others, the Social Security Institution, the Association for Workers' Housing Estates, or the Warsaw Housing Cooperative. The radicalism of those views and actions was, however, kept within the bounds of the existing system, never reaching such extremes as the commune-houses. The idea was not to «construct» a new society and a new type of man, but rather to perfect the existing system and to level its inconveniences. Thus, it was not an architecture of the revolution, although its general character was no doubt determined by socially progressive ideas. The «Praesens» became the core of the architectural avant-garde in Poland, in that it not only created a new architecture, but also fought for and propagated the innovative ideas within the CIAM of which they were co-founders. One manifestation of Polish architects' joining international activities was the fact that five Polish teams took part in the competition for the League of Nations building in Geneva in 1927.

The formal characteristics of Polish avant-garde architecture indicate a convergence with the formal-visual features that were present in the functionalist architecture of Western Europe. There have been numerous attempts at synthesizing all the formal features of avant-garde architecture of the Twenties and Thirties. It seems that the most succinct presentation of the repertoire of those means was offered in the Twenties by Le Corbusier himself, whose ideas were soon to become extremely popular in Poland. His experience up till then and his deductions led him to put forward the five principles of modern architecture. These are:

1. House resting on piles (*i.e.* free ground floor).
2. Free plan.
3. Free façades.
4. Horizontal bands of windows.
5. A flat roof with a terrace garden.

The first four principles are a consequence of the introduction of skeleton construction and they would not be possible with the application of traditional building methods. It should be added that the bodies

of buildings by Le Corbusier had a geometrical shape of cuboids with even, usually white, outer surfaces. These features were possibly the reason for the scornful reference by opponents of the new architecture to «cigarbox style», «white architecture», etc. Although the summary presented by Le Corbusier has merit—primarily for its clarity and succinctness—it is inevitably superficial, as a result of the popular character of his publications. As such, it cannot claim to generalize the specific plastic and artistic features of the newest architecture of the Twenties and Thirties.

Among the many attempts at a synthesis of that kind, one outstanding example is the systematization done by Hans Sedlmayr in *The Revolution of Modern Art*, which dealt with the whole of the avant-garde phenomenon in plastic arts. The author isolates four basic features of the latest art which, incidentally, were most strikingly manifest in the avant-garde architecture of that period. These are:

1. A desire for purity.
2. Geometric tendencies (non-organic and constructivist).
3. Absurdity as the refuge of freedom.
4. Primitivist inclinations.

Bohdan Lisowski, a Polish researcher into the architecture of the 20th century, also attempted a formulation of the primary characteristics of the avant-garde architecture of the beginning of this century which were present in the concept of space and visual considerations. He states that the most prominent characteristic of this architecture is its predilection for the so-called «freedom of formations». This characteristic is most clearly visible in the following manifestations:

1. Penetration of space (*i.e.* communication between the enclosed space and the surroundings).
2. Visual multiplicity (*i.e.* equal visual intensity of all the views of an architectural composition).
3. Simplicity, succinctness, and clarity of formations, characterized by:
 - a) Employing large homogenous planes.
 - b) Dislike of decorativeness.
 - c) Elimination of ornaments in favour of designs and textures.

4. Treatment of regional external characteristics of architecture as variables.

The above summary, based on some generalizations by S. Giedion and H. Sedlmayr, is one of the best formal characterizations of avant-garde architecture of the Twenties and Thirties.

Most of these characteristics can be easily found in the Polish avant-garde architecture of the period in question. It is not easy, however, to answer the question of whether those sets of formal features previously discussed were conceived in one centre or another to be subsequently exported to other areas. We are afraid that an unequivocal solution to the question of whether avant-garde ideas in Polish architecture were formed under influences from Eastern or Western European concepts may not be fully possible to find. We should suppose, rather, that there was a relative independence of the occurrence of analogous concepts (despite totally different conditions), a circulation and mutual penetration of ideas from one centre to the others, and, finally, a constant clash of contrasting influences coming from different directions.

A dynamic development of avant-garde architecture in Poland can only be seen in the Thirties, which is precisely when innovative architectural ideas in both Germany and the USSR were stifled by political decision. Of the avant-garde centres in Europe, only two were left: France and Holland. This fact could partly account for the popularity of Dutch and French ideas in the Polish avant-garde architecture of the Thirties. In Poland, two leading centres of modern architecture could be distinguished: one being Warsaw, the other Katowice, the major town in Upper Silesia. Warsaw was the seat of both of the major avant-garde groups: the «Blok» and «Praesens»; it was also the home ground of such prominent architects as the previously mentioned Brukalski, Syrkus, Lachert, and Szanajca. Here, also, there was one of the two major architectural education establishments, the Department of Architecture of the Technical University of Warsaw, where avant-garde ideas were forged. In the Thirties, a number of architectural realizations were carried out in Warsaw, which were characterized by many of the above-mentioned features of the avant-garde architecture of that period. In the field of residential construction, there are the multi-dwelling unit in Saska Kępa by H. and S. Syrkus (1937), the residential house in Katowicka Street by B. Lachert and J. Szanajca (1928-

29), a villa by B. and S. Brukalski in Niegolewskiego Street (1927-28), houses for officials of the Social Security Institution by S. Brukalski and J. Szanajca (1935), or the buildings of the Warsaw Housing Cooperative in Zoliborz by B. and S. Brukalski (1935), clearly inspired by German or Dutch examples. In the field of public buildings there are, among others, the postal building in Nowogrodzka Street by J. Puterman (1935), the Children's Hospital by R. Miller (1930-32), the Social Security Institution building by J. Jankowski (1930), the «Prudential» building by M. Weinfeld (1933, reconstructed after the war in the socialist-realist style), or the Horse Races houses in Sluzewiec by Z. Zyberk-Plater (1938-39).

In the second important centre of development of Polish avant-garde architecture, Katowice, there were a number of realizations in the Thirties which were of a particularly high standard, equalling that of Western Europe. We must mention the tall residential house in Wojewodzka Street by E. Chmielewski (1930), the so-called «skyscraper» by T. Koslowski and S. Bryla (1931-32) —the first housing tower in Poland—, and the residential house for railway employees (1931) and a villa in Bratkow Street (1931) by T. Michejda. The field of residential construction is also represented by a number of houses in the so-called South District of Katowice. Public building is represented by, among others, the Municipal Office in Katowice-Janow by T. Michejda (1930-31), the Food Inspection building by T. Koslowski (1931), the Silesian Technical Scientific Institution by J. Dobrzynska and Z. Loboda (1928-32), the Town Hall (1929-30), the Insurgents' House by Z. Rzepecki (1937), the Polish Radio building by T. Lobos (1938) or the Silesian Library building by Tabenski and Rybicki (1934). Other interesting realizations in the avant-garde idiom, scattered all over the country, are the Social Security Institution building in Gdynia by R. Piotrowski (1935), the Market Hall in Gdynia by S. Reychman (1935), the «Patria» guest house in Krynica by B. Pniewski (1934), the «Wiktor» sanatorium in Zegiestow by Z. Wardzala (1937), the TB sanatorium in Istebna (1929-37) or the State Savings Bank building in Poznan by J. Dobrzynska and Z. Loboda (1937). An interesting example of industrial architecture is the grain silo in Gdynia by B. Szmiedt (1937). Most of the examples quoted are characterized by the previously mentioned features of European avant-garde architecture, which corroborates the view that it had one facet in common, while local peculiari-

ties were maintained. Thus, we see horizontal bands of windows *à la* Le Corbusier, free facades and asymmetrical plans, flat roof terraces, simple Platonic solids which penetrate each other after a cubist or suprematist fashion, dismissal of ornaments, penetration of space effected through ample glazing and large even surfaces of walls, textural effects, and geometrical abstractionism of the composition of bodies and facades. The specific local traits, particularly strongly present in Upper Silesia, are group windows (contained mostly in horizontal, rather than vertical, bands); corner windows; juttings on semicircular plans, generously glazed and protruding strongly from the façades; balconies with rounded ends, one or two-sided; plain walls with, at the same time, strongly segmented bodies; and so-called «marine» architectural forms, like railings on terrace roofs and staircases, or small round windows letting light into utility rooms. Most of the general characteristics, as described by Sedlmayr, can also be observed, especially the desire for purity, geometric tendencies, and primitivist inclinations. The innovative character of most of these realizations is not only seen on the formal plan. They are also fully modern in the technical aspect, *i.e.* in construction, materials, and the technology applied. The carrying structure for most of these buildings consists of welded steel skeletons, filled with light structural clay or concrete tiles. The functional designs were also fully modern, based on the latest developments in ergonomics, hygiene, and the physics of construction. We could thus conclude that the output of Polish avant-garde architecture in the period between the Wars, and especially in the Thirties, reached a level comparable to the predominantly high standards of modern architecture in both Western and Eastern Europe, as it maintained a distinct relationship to the innovative concepts forged by them.

For Poland, this architecture was a tangible, specific, and rational solution to a number of socially important problems. It lacked the revolutionary flourish or the ambition to rebuild the world. It was neither Utopian nor experimental in any sense, as its formal and technical characteristics seem to fit well into the contemporary domestic environment. Neither was it an import, a mechanical transfer from any one of the European avant-garde centres, as it managed to develop a number of exclusive, specific local features. It can be deemed a creative translation of inspiration and stimuli from the outside world, enriched by unique indigenous elements. In this, it does not differ from Polish

architecture at any other time. Poland, due to its unique situation between the East and the West, had always been Europe's melting-pot, where various ideas blended to produce new values. The lessons learned during the experience of that time have been well used to contribute to further development. At the same time, the architecture of that period is a closed chapter, and there is no return to it. The imagination of Polish architects is inspired by other sources and absorbed by other problems. And yet, who knows whether maybe one day that closed chapter will be opened up again.

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