

Modern Architecture: A Diagnosis Attempt

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Motto:

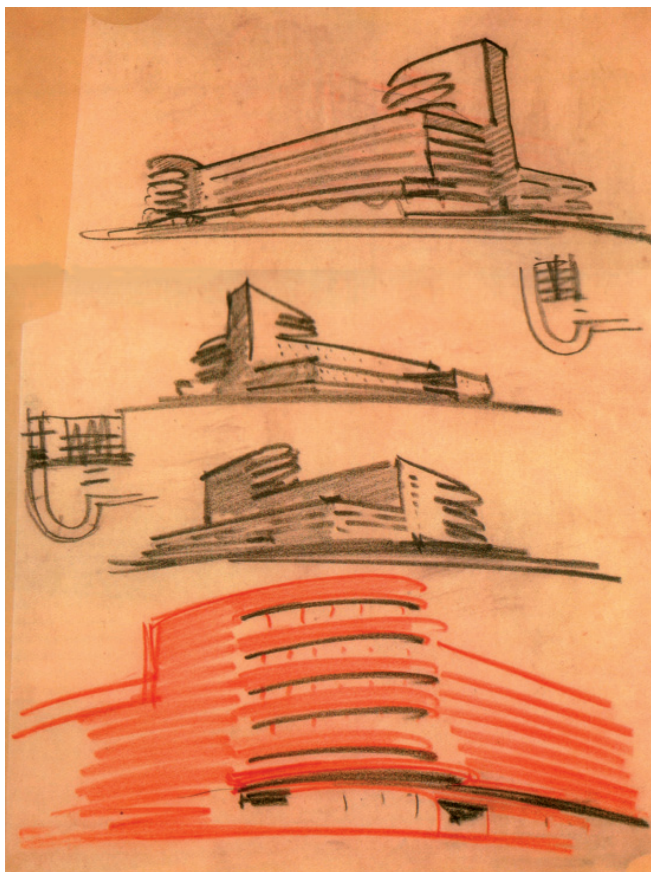
In each radical turning point, it is extreme tendencies that get the upper hand...

With the passage of time and the fading away of harsh criticism of the social failure of the concept of housing estate development, epitomized by bleak housing projects, Modernism is re-emerging as a popular term. Architecture associated with this term is back in grace not only of art historians and theorists, but also of community leaders and local intellectual elites, who seem to be able to discern its qualities worth promoting and safeguarding as historical heritage of the already closed phase in cultural evolution.

Since a handful of enthusiasts in the Netherlands decided to set up an organization aimed at the conservation of the heritage of modernism, a large number of national groups gathered under a common idea called DO-CO-MO-MO (Documentation and Conservation of Modern Movement), have embarked on a difficult task of promoting the values of "Modern Architecture", rightly claiming that its underlying qualities fully deserve not only to be remembered but also protected by the law. However, although this demand is gradually gaining a better understanding among landlords and tenants, it has paradoxically disclosed that there is an apparent obviousness about the very meaning of "Modern Architecture" and, above all, revealed significant differences in recognizing and classifying its stylistic features. While the periodisation of the development of architecture generally covering the first half of the twentieth century causes no substantial controversy, its description within the overall framework of the commonly applied term "Modern Architecture" as well as the very meaning of the term continue to remain a platform for widespread

debate. On one occasion, we tend to consider the term as the name of a specific style, on another – as a commonly used definition of the time interval of 1900-1950, 1900-1965 or alternatively 1914-1970, when characteristic changes in art and architecture occurred. It all depends on who and when determines the beginning of the subsequent period referred to as "Post-modernism". Bearing in mind the current relevance of the problem, it is required that a conclusive opinion be provided on the grounds of reliable research and compliance with hard facts which are frequently forgotten today, thus avoiding a superficial use of rhetoric lacking in basic knowledge. Furthermore, once we consider that the term "modernism" is itself ambiguous – also as used in the academic jargon – the task of defining the meaning of "Modern Architecture" appears to be one that requires urgent verification¹.

1. Acc. to Kopaliński, the term *Modernism* (from Latin *modernus*, meaning modern) defines the aggregate of avant-garde trends in art at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Kopaliński Władysław, *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych*, Warsaw 1988, p. 337); the interpretation offered by J. Wujek explicitly associates the term Modernism with twentieth-century architecture and represents an innovative approach to the existing world order, which included a variety of trends, schools and artistic groups as well as stylistic quests" (Wujek, Jakub, *Mity i utopie architektury XX wieku*, Warsaw 1986, p. 206). It is necessary to develop, also on Polish ground an overall picture that will document the problem of "Modernism" as a period of architectural development in various ideological contexts and aesthetic strands lasting nearly half a century and represented by artists so disparate in terms of architecture as Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Hugo Höfering or Walter Gropius. They all belong to the era defined as "Modernism", although their views of formal meaning of architecture as a specific area of artistic creation remained diverse and their mutual relations (also formulated in writing) were often tinged with open hostility to one another.



1. E. Mendelsohn: expressionist drawings, ca.1920. Source: Archives of Kunstbibliothek Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

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The very understanding and definition of many schools and trends characteristic of the individual phases of the Modern Movement also fail to provide definite conclusions and almost all theorists formulate their own canon of style and ascribe names comprehensible only to themselves. For example, Andrzej Niezabitowski identifies three phases of Modernism in 20th century architecture²:

- phase I, Modernism ca. 1900 (L'Art. Nouveau, Jugendstil, Secession and the like);
- phase II, Expressionism (stage I 1905-1914; stage II 1918-1925/1928);
- phase III, International Style or Functionalism (1925-1965).

On the other hand, Andrzej K. Olszewski follows Jurgen Joedicke in assuming the basis of periodisation as driven by naturally occurring generational changes and places three phases of Modernism in the following periods: 1900-1925, 1925-1933 and 1933-1950³. He regards A. Perret's "structural" Classicism as typical of phase one (1900-1925), International Style as synonymous with "Functionalism" in phase two (1925-1933) and "compromised Modernism" as inherent in phase three (1933-1950)⁴.

According to Andrzej K. Olszewski,

2. After Andrzej Niezabitowski (lectures in the history of contemporary architecture at the Faculty of Architecture of Silesia University of Technology in Gliwice).

3. Olszewski Andrzej K., *Nowa forma w architekturze polskiej 1900-1925*, Wrocław-Warsaw-Cracow, 1967, p. 25.

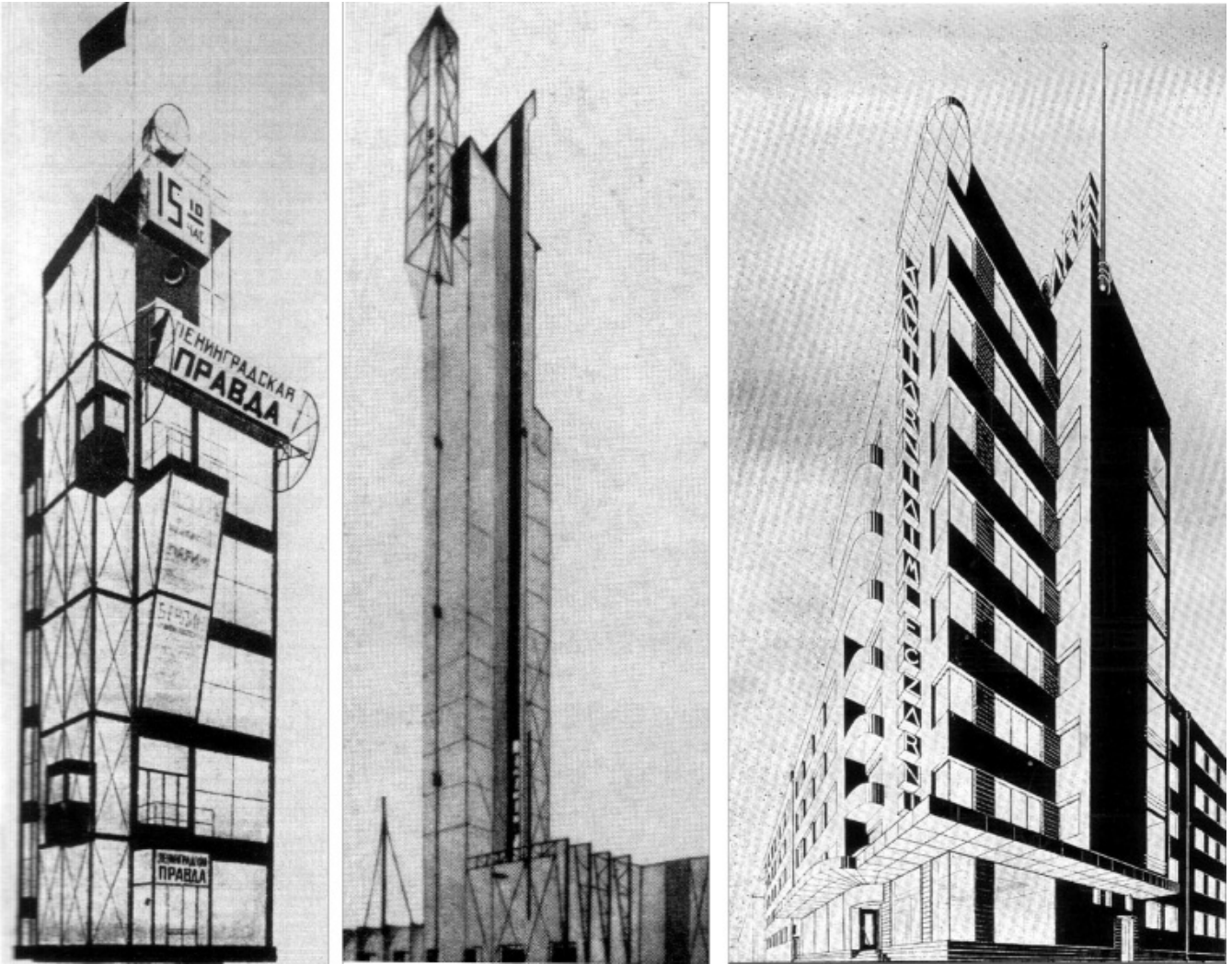
4. Olszewski Andrzej K., op. cit., p. 26.

the following schools, styles and trends are considered as belonging to "Modernism": Art Nouveau, semimodernism (anti-eclecticism), Expressionism, National Style (national styles), Decorative Art, Functionalism, Constructivism, the International Style, free Functionalism and New Vernacular Style. While assigning them to specific sub-periods, he seems to view these trends as development threads (streams and branches) of the same current and explains that *this division only applies to basic conceptual development processes in the MODERN MOVEMENT in its entirety...*⁵. By coincidence, so to speak, he claims that the term *Secession* itself is totally obscure and has been adopted in the Polish classification of trends after Wallis, as a broad term, which besides the Vienna Secession, involves German Jugendstil, French L'Art Nouveau, Modern Style in England, Stile

5. Ibid., p. 27.

2. Two examples of corner buildings similar in style, scale and proportions: **a.** Tenement house in Warsaw designed by J. Żurawski and **b.** Social Insurance Company building in Gdynia designed by R. Piotrowski (both architects based in Warsaw). After: "Architektura i Budownictwo" of 1935, 1938.





3. a. A.L. and V. Vesnin: Design of the "Leningradskaya Pravda" branch office in Moscow, b. I. Leonidov: Design of the "Izvestia" headquarters and print house, c. E. Chmielewski: Designs of an apartment block in Katowice with "a coffee shop and dairy plant" (1930). After: Kyrill N. Afansyev, *Ideen-Projekte-Bauten. Sowjetische Architektur 1917/32*, Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1973

Liberty in Italy, and even the works of Antonio Gaudi, who is totally absent from the history of contemporary architecture until 1950⁶. Combining the expansion of Polish architecture in the first half of the twentieth century with the development of architecture around the world, Andrzej K. Olszewski distinguishes the following trends in Polish architecture: Academic Classicism, Polish manor house, stylistic-decorative forms, Functionalism, Semimodernism (based on classical concepts or Semimodernism of the 1930s), Free Functionalism and New Regionalism. At the same time, he asserts that: *in comparison with all the architecture of that period, the most noticeable and "pure" form was represented by trends which developed in complete opposition to each other, which in his opinion were: academic Classicism and Modernism called "Functionalism, while the rest – he continues – is a variety of forms deriving from Classicism or intermediate between Classicism and Modernism*⁷.

Under the above terminology, Olszewski

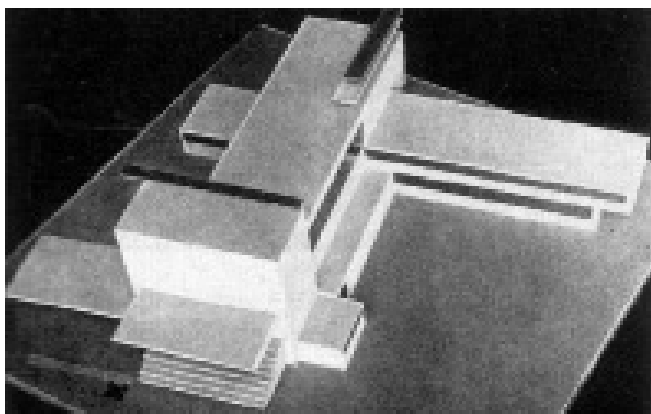
has classified the Social Insurance Company residential building designed by Piotrowski in Gdynia representing *Semimodernism of the 1930s* (besides other examples provided in the final phase of the so-called 'Warsaw school') as exemplary of *architecture as a resultant of returning to Classicism and superficially drawing on Functionalism, losing at the same time its conceptual countenance and the starkness of form and texture*⁸. At the same time, he wholly disregards a legible impact of the symbolic and expressionistic manner continued in Poland in the 1930s not only in Warsaw or in Gdynia, but also in Upper Silesia and in former Galicia⁹, which was largely influenced by Erich Mendelsohn and the buildings erected in Germany to his design.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 31, and p.199, line 1-4 from the bottom.

9. According to this terminology, Academic Classicism is represented by M. Lalewicz and A. Szyszko-Bohusz, manor house style – by R. Gutt, a mixture of Expressionism and the applied arts – by the works of J. Koszyc-Witkiewicz, moderate Functionalism – by E. Norwerth, extreme Functionalism – by the youth of the *Blok and Praesens groups*, Semimodernism – by A. Dygat, and so-called "Free Functionalism" and "New Regional Style" – jointly by M. Nowicki, J. Bogusławski and J. Hryniewicz (ibid., pp. 34-35).

6. Cf. Wallis Mieczysław, *Secesja*, Warsaw 1974 and Olszewski Andrzej K., op. cit., p. 37.

7. Olszewski Andrzej K., op. cit., p. 32.



4. A. Nikolsky Atelier: Design of a community centre (model), ca.1925. After: Kyrill N. Afansyev, *Ideen-Projekte-Bauten. Sowjetische Architektur 1917/32*, Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1973.

This issue has been approached somewhat differently by Izabela Wisłocka, who distinguishes three styles in architecture of the twenty years prior to World War II, which she refers to as "trends": "National Eclecticism" (alternatively called "manor house architecture"), "Academic Classicism" and "Modern Classicism". She also brings to mind an independent "stylized decorative" trend characteristic – in her opinion – of Polish architecture in 1918-1923 and attributes it largely to the circle of architects and artists in Cracow, such as Wyspiański and Witkiewicz¹⁰. While she can recognize distinct traces of the French, German and Dutch influence¹¹ on the Polish avant-garde activity, she never underestimates the impact of works by the Russian avant-garde, including the Malevich's theory of "suprematism" and Russian Constructivism, which was ignored or denied by other researchers of Polish architecture and introduced to Poland mainly via the Berlin avant-garde¹². She marginally discusses new projects completed in the mid-1930s in Gdynia and Katowice, presenting only few details, featured in the 1936 editions of *Architektura i Budownictwo* monthly.¹³ She makes no reference to the earlier solutions conceived in Germany, Italy and France, in particular the experience in constructing aircraft hangars in conjunction to an undoubtedly original design that was the main body of the markets in Gdynia designed by J. Müller and S. Reychman in 1937. It represents a fine example of constructivist structuralism and, in terms of the value, can rival the famous Centennial Hall in Wrocław built to the designs of Max Berg.

On the other hand, in view of the terminology

10. Cf. Wisłocka Izabela, *Awangardowa architektura polska 1918-1939*, Warsaw 1968, pp. 98 and 100.

11. Though she erroneously attributes e.g. the aesthetic influence of the De Stijl group to the Brukalski villa modelled after Le Corbusier's architecture.

12. Wisłocka I., op. cit., pp. 125-126.

13. "Architektura i Budownictwo", R. 1936, No. 5.

used by J. K. Lenartowicz, the concept of "Modernism" appears to be synonymous with a homogeneous architectural style alternately referred to as "Functionalism" and "International Style"¹⁴. While examining the architecture through the lens of subjective feelings evoked in its viewers and users, Lenartowicz holds that: "a key role in terms of architectural design is utility designing", with the purpose of – as he formulates it – "grasping the paradigm that was conceived in the 1920s" and remained "the ruling doctrine in architecture until the late 1950s." Lenartowicz also formulated an opinion – similar to the one shared by Bohdan Lisowski¹⁵ – that this kind of architecture is distinguished by: (1) continued search for new materials and production methods; (2) search for new qualities in the structure of buildings (glass, reinforced concrete, steel); (3) prioritizing the shape: "the characteristics architecture shares with other visual arts is its abstract concept, pure geometrical shape and rectilinear form"; (4) the principle that: form follows function (as an aspect of objective qualities); (5) the assumption of "a standard man"; (6) anti-historicism as an ideology; (7) achieving aesthetic qualities (...) not by means of figurative and associative motifs, but solely through abstract forms¹⁶. He completely ignores other aesthetic trends with

14. The doctrine of Functionalism, as an actual fact, dominates the entire avant-garde architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. This term was explicitly used for the first time in Alberto Sartoris's book: *Gli Elementi dell' Architettura Funzionale* published in Milan in 1932. The author used the word *functional* with the meaning of "rational". A similar meaning was presented by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in the 3rd chapter of their book *The International Style*, N.Y. 1932, which accompanied *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932. (Reyner Banham, *Rewolucja w architekturze*, Warsaw 1979, p. 385., Sartoris changed the original title *Gli Elementi dell' Architettura Razionale* persuaded by Le Corbusier).

15. The features of Modern Architecture acc. to Bohdan Lisowski: (1) no prominence given to bottom and top of the form; (2) no prominence given to points, lines and other formally significant elements (corners, edges, midpoints etc); (3) no prominence given to formal lines and formal directionality running from bottom to top of the form; (4) inconsistency between formal and functional guidelines; (5) no prominence given to beginnings and ends of rhythms; distinguished most simply-structured rhythm (singular, the so-called, pearl string rhythm); (6) no prominence given to beginning, end and culmination of the form; (7) desire to obtain possibly the most equal value of decorative intensity in all elevations of the building (no front, back or sides); (8) desire to integrate interior with exterior space; (9) desire to obtain simplicity, brevity, avoidance of decoration and ornament to the benefit of texture and patterns; (10) desire to apply forms and shapes that ensure functional flexibility (exchangeability of use), enable easy alterations and extensions without changing the principle form and facilitate the use of a variety of modern building materials, cf. Lisowski B., *Rozwój nowatorskiej myśli architektonicznej w Polsce w latach 1918-1978*, [in:] *Architektura i urbanistyka w Polsce w latach 1918-1978*, "Studia i materiały do teorii i historii architektury i urbanistyki PAN" vol. XVII, Warsaw 1989, p. 84)

16. Lenartowicz Krzysztof J., *O psychologii architektury*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, monograph 138, 1992, pp. 161-162.

clearly defined stylistic traits¹⁷ and, at the same time, combines two types of Functionalism¹⁸ into one value. Lenartowicz maintains that: "one important feature of Modern Architecture was its monovalent character..", which means that only a single value or several simplified ones were used. Such architecture – according to Lenartowicz – can be exemplified by a formal system developed by Mies van der Rohe, which used a limited range of materials and was solely based on the right angle geometry¹⁹.

Jadwiga Sławińska²⁰ also identifies the era of Modernism with Functionalism and similarly attributes to Modernism the qualities typical of the doctrine of Functionalism construed as a principle whereby close relation must be maintained between external and internal form. At the same time, she takes no notice

17. For example: Futurism, Elementarism (*De Sijl group*, 17 principles by Theo van Doesburg), expressionism, constructivism, artistic symbolism, structuralism (in its three varieties: constructivist, expressive and spatial), brutalism.

18. That is "national functionalism" (form directly determined by function) pioneered by the *Bauhaus* school and "constructivist functionalism", with its doctrine – formulated by Mies van der Rohe – coming, in the most simple reasoning, down to providing "universal modular space", where ANY function can be located.

19. As a rule, he only used two forms: a cuboid high rise building, (which could mean office building, apartment block or municipal centre) and a one-storey pavilion, (which could mean exhibition hall, villa, theatre, faculty of architecture, meeting room or boiler house). This type of monovalency entails certain psychological repercussions, since such buildings fail to communicate its social purpose. Lenartowicz's comments, while fully justified, remain thoroughly consistent with the essential objective pursued by Mies, which Lenartowicz completely fails to observe in his analysis. (cf. J. Krzysztof Lenartowicz, op. cit., p. 200).

20. Sławińska J., *Ekspresja sił w nowoczesnej architekturze*, Warsaw 1969.

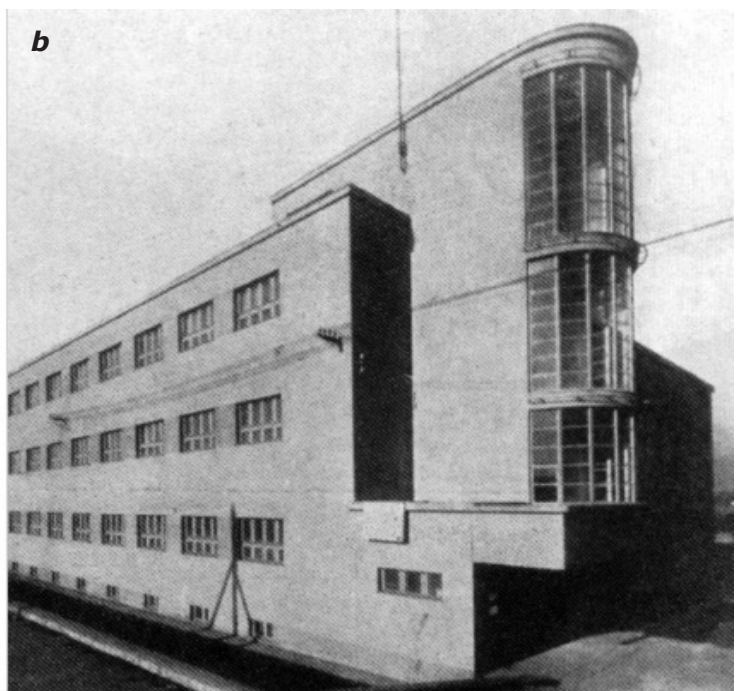
of the fact that the contemporary meaning of "Functionalism" is identified entirely with an extremely avant-garde approach in twentieth-century Modern Architecture, where form is directly determined by function of a building. This principle represents a fundamental characteristic of rational Functionalism.

An attempt at defining the specific style of the Modern era was made by Aleksander Böhm, and Henryk Buszko in their paper authored jointly with Aleksander Franta, and also by Bohdan Lisowski²¹, among other participants, at a symposium entitled *Architecture and Urban Planning in Poland in 1918-1978*, which was organized in 1978 at the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław and generally aimed at assessing the condition of Polish architecture on the 60th anniversary of the restoration of Poland's independence. Böhm mostly focused on describing achievements of the so-called *Cracow school* and, apart from historic Eclecticism of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, he also mentioned: Vienna Secession, Regional Movement, National Eclecticism (also referred to as manor house architecture) and "Academic Classicism", claiming that what was at the time considered avant-garde, was treated with a reserved or even indulgent welcome in Cracow.

Henryk Buszko drew the attention to Upper Silesia and the Upper Coal Basin asserting that Polish architecture which developed in those areas during the twenty-year period between

21. *Architektura i urbanistyka w Polsce w latach 1918-1978*, „Studia i Materiały do Teorii i Historii Architektury i Urbanistyki”, vol. XVII, Warsaw 1989, edited by Olgierd Czerner.

5. a. E. Mendelsohn: Rudolf Petersdorff Department Store in Wrocław, b. T. Kozłowski: Silesian Regional Office in Katowice (1932). Source: 1932 editions of "Architektura i Budownictwo".





6. E. Mendelsohn: "Schocken" Department Store in Stuttgart (1926-1928). After: Peter Gössel, Gabriele Leuthäuser, *Architecture in the 20th Century*, Taschen Verlag, 1991, p.134.

WWI and WWII involved the transformation of stylistic strands ranging from Neoclassical (indicative of the 1920s) through simplified Neoclassical to Neoclassical-Modern, to Modernism classified as "constructivistic". He further discussed "Functionalist Modernism" and indirectly suggested the influence of German architecture of "early Modernism" on Polish architecture, making a reference to a corner commercial and residential building in Gliwice designed by E. Mendelsohn²².

Bohdan Lisowski concentrated on "primary" and "secondary architecture" concluding that: "the ambitious creative work in 20th-century Polish architecture followed two mainstreams: neo-historic and modern". He also claimed that both

22. Ibid., p. 38.

these mainstreams comprised a wide range of creative approaches "initiated by a variety of ideas and supported by changing ideological assumptions adopted by patrons". In his deliberation, Buszko, incidentally as it were, mentioned "geometrizing emotionalism", sculptural "rationalism" and "super-rationalism"²³.

Krystyna Pokrzywnicka, in her philosophical dissertation on the essence of architecture and the specific way it affects the public, presents a number of diagrams and tables showing comprehensive analyses compiled in 1974-1976 by A. Szymski of architectural development phases in definite time periods, along with a proposal of defining major aesthetic approaches regarding the era of Modern Movement in European as well as in global scale²⁴. Those proposals, however, failed to generate widespread discussion which might provide a basis for further methodological specification and give rise to continued comparative research.

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention the work by Jan Minorski discussing a meticulously performed analysis of the original accomplishments of Polish architecture in the twenty prewar years in terms of the evaluation of formal concepts presented at numerous architectural competitions as well as the assessment of the designs actually built. While extensively describing the origins of architecture generally defined as "Modern", he lays particular emphasis on the existence of two opposite conceptions, putting on one side "extreme Functionalism" represented by the Praesens group, and on the other, the search for contemporary "national architecture"²⁵.

23. Ibid., p. 86.

24. Pokrzywnicka Krystyna, *Kontrasty, metafory, styl – czyli rozważania o dynamice przemian architektury XX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Gdańskiej, Gdańsk 2003, pp. 36-45, fig. II.60, II.61, I.66, II.67, II.72, II.73, II.79, II.80, II.88, II.89).

25. Minorski Jan, *Polska nowatorska myśl architektoniczna w latach 1918-1939*, „Studia i Materiały do Teorii i Historii Urbanisty-

7. Z. Karpiński, T. Sieczkowski, R. Soltyński: pseudoclassicist building of district court, magistrate's court and prosecutor's office in Gdynia (1934), Source: Archives of Contemporary Architecture, Design Theory and Methodology Department, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture of Szczecin University of Technology.



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The notion of Modern Architecture today is mostly interpreted as the works of architecture developed until the mid-20th century. Modernism, as popularly believed (at least in Poland), defined as a specific period of time, is commonly mistaken for a "style" in architecture and identified (in my opinion) with the most primitive form of rational functionalism; it is visually classified as a "box" (in the context of architecture) or a "bleak housing project" (in the context of urban planning). It would be desirable, therefore, that the appropriate contents be given to the notion of Modernism in order to erase the popular clichés, also in terms of a better understanding of the ideas represented by functionalism, which undoubtedly dominated the era of Modern Architecture.

A better understanding of the past will enable us to discern the current developments in architecture and to find our own place in the rapidly flowing stream of transformations, which are part and parcel of the present day²⁶.

ki i Architektury", vol. VIII, Warsaw 1970, p. 70.

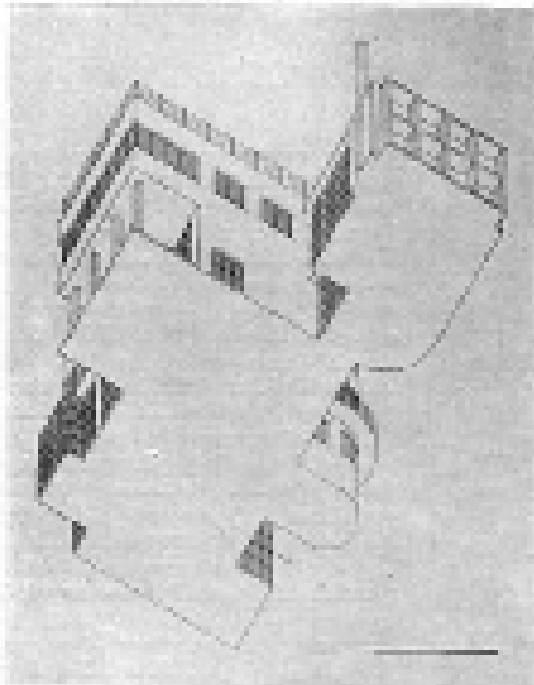
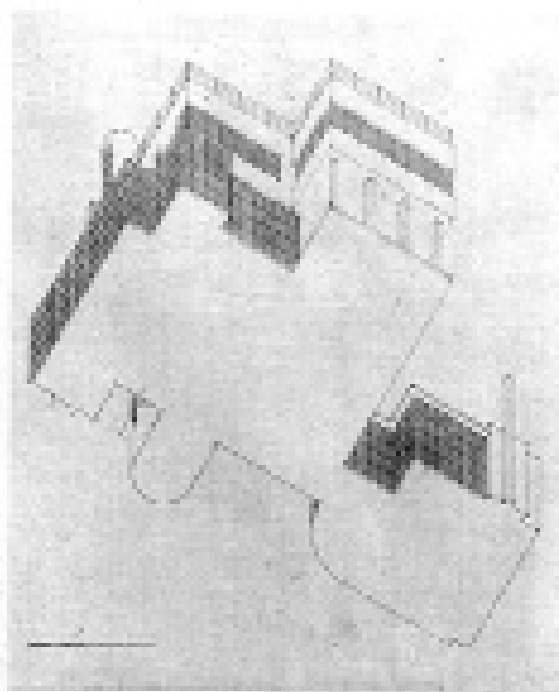
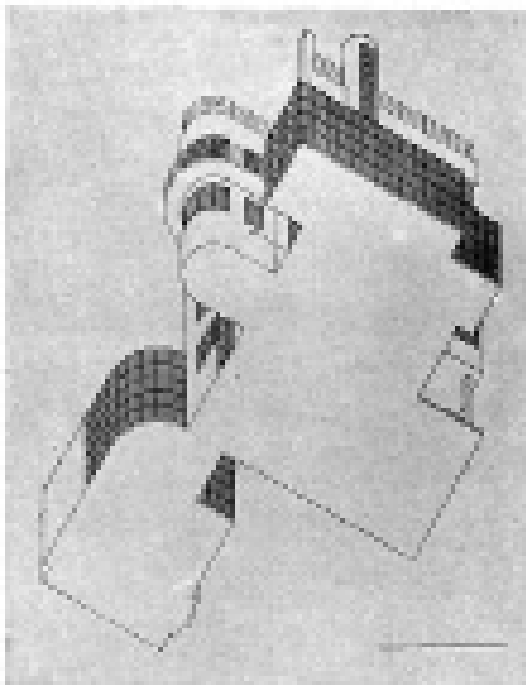
26. Szyski Adam Maria, *Architektura i architektki Szczecina 1945-1995*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Szczecińskiej, Szczecin.

The demolition in St. Louis of a housing estate designed by Minoru Yamasaki not only symbolizes the "end" of a certain era, but it may well provide evidence that no matter how high-minded ideas may be, they turn to dust the moment they are used as a tool of market manipulation and political propaganda. Polish Modernism has fallen prey to the same type of "adventure".

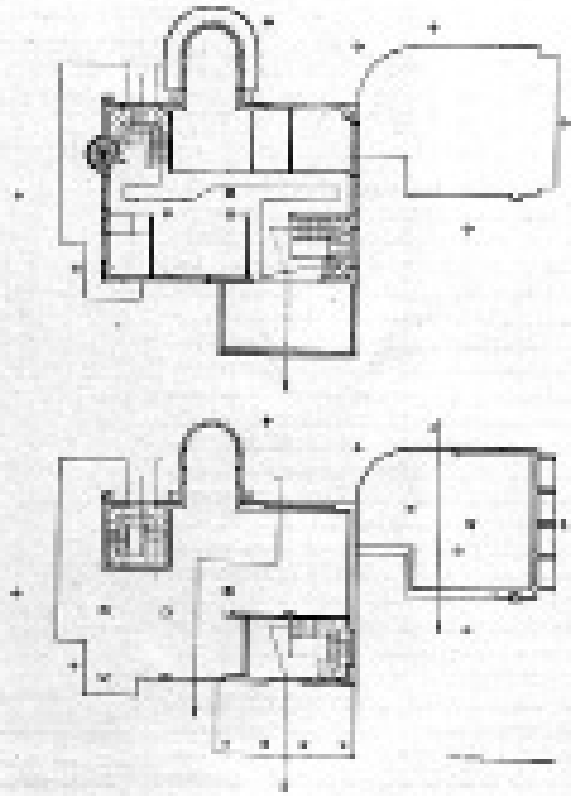
It is not true, however, that architecture in the first half of the 20th century – as once claimed by Jakub Wujek in his (otherwise) brilliantly written and revealing essay *Myths and Utopias in 20th Century Architecture* (Warsaw 1986) – was no more than a misunderstanding, madness and mystification... I sincerely like and respect Jakub Wujek for his personal charm and eloquence. I also have a copy of his book with the author's dedication, where he wrote that "while discussing the rules of architecture, is advisable to remember about utopias." And it would be utopian to think that what came after "modernism" would have been possible without it. The architecture of 19th-century eclecticism had to go through the purgatory of Modernism in its abundance of colours and shades so that architecture might again become a game of



8. Selected publications and periodicals promoting avant-garde movements in architecture between 1918 and 1939 in Germany and Poland. Collage by A. M. Szyski.



Alberto Sartoris, Turin



9. A. Sartoris: Design of a "Modern" villa, Turin, Italy, 1928. After: Juliusz Hoffmann (ed.) „Moderne Bauformen Monatshefte für Architektur und Raumkunst“, XXVII Jahrgang, 1928, 1929.

unpredictable events and the art of expressing emotions restrained only by contemporary technological capacity and the coffers of a wealthy patron.

The best expression of this view can be found in Gdynia, a city which – as beautifully phrased by Piotr Nofski – “has its myth”. The promotional slogan: The City Founded on Dreams and the Sea²⁷ reflects the sense of this

myth, which is dominated by admiration for the potential of construction technology coupled with the mighty power of Nature represented by the sea. The Modernist image of Gdynia conveys the mythological sacred value, although its architectural appearance looks rather complex to a more penetrating eye²⁸.

Gdynia, with its history originated in close relation to the birth of the Second Republic of

27. The slogan actually comes from the title of a popular historical album authored by Sławomir Kitowski: *Gdynia, miasto z morza i marzeń*, Gdynia 1997,

28. Nofski Piotr, *Miasto otwarte – nawigując wśród obcych* [in:] *Nowa architektura w kontekście kulturowym miasta*, Wydawnictwo Sympozjalne KUiA PAN – TaP, Gliwice 2006, p. 191.



10. J. Müller, S. Reychman, Covered market in Gdynia, 1935-1937. Photo: Archives of Contemporary Architecture, Design Theory and Methodology Department, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture of Szczecin University of Technology

Poland, has its own unique myth of modernity. It also embodies the most accurate tangible realization of the utopia. Its beauty, even though borrowed as it were, creates a specific spirit of a pioneering time of Modernism: pure aesthetics with tints of Polish Romanticism, well-understood "provincialism" in conjunction with a mixture of stylistic strands of Bauhaus Functionalism and German Expressionism directly associated with the symbolism of a transatlantic steamer. The dream of our forefathers coming true...

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