

## Comparison of Art Déco and Modernism Illustrated by Churches in Białystok and Tulsa (USA)

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Years ago, while browsing through *Tulsa Art Déco*, a book by David Gebhard, I saw a picture of the United Methodist Church in this Oklahoma city of half a million, and my first association was with St. Roch's Church in Białystok<sup>1</sup>, Poland. The central layout of the main body of the structure, concentrating around a soaring reinforced concrete tower, as well as decorative elements making up a system of geometric forms dispelled any doubts; both structures are in Art Déco style, although there are some major differences between them due to their different functions. St. Roch's Church is a Roman Catholic temple, designed for liturgical purposes only, while the United Methodist Church in Tulsa is a multifunctional building, where a prayer hall is just one of the rooms. Both buildings were erected in 1926. The church in Białystok was designed by Oskar Sosnowski (and constructed by engineer Czesław Kłoś), while the Tulsa church by Ms Adah Matilda Robinson, who was not an architect but a painter and graphic artist, teaching art at a high school and later at a local university. Moreover, she was not a Methodist but a Quaker. The architectural shape was designed by her student, Bruce Goff, a young architect at that time and apprentice at the architectural studio Rush, Endacott & Rush, which constructed the building in 1929. The church was extended in 1961<sup>2</sup>.

Basically, the shell of St. Roch's was completed in 1938, but work on its body and decoration went on until 1966. The main feature of both buildings, the tower, does not make their floor plans similar. St. Roch's was built on an octagonal plan. Each of the sides is adjoined by an annexe: the eastern annexe is a chancel, the north-eastern is a square base of the tower, the other house chapels and entrances. Octagonal pillars support the dome. The body of the building rises up in offsets. The 82-metre tower (the figure may not be precise) rises above the whole structure<sup>3</sup>.

The plan of the Tulsa church is more complicated: it is a rectangle with an adjoining huge semicircle. On four

storeys, there are as many as 125 rooms. In the rectangular part, there are classrooms, offices and utility rooms; the semicircular part houses an auditorium with a capacity of 2,000 (first level) and a prayer hall called sanctuary (second level). Both parts are spanned by a 68.5-metre tower with classrooms, offices and a small chapel at the top.

Given such big differences in their plans and functions, the comparison of both churches may not seem convincing. However, considering their forms and details expressing – by means of decorative geometrism today called Art Déco – religious symbols, the temptation to make such a comparison seems justified.

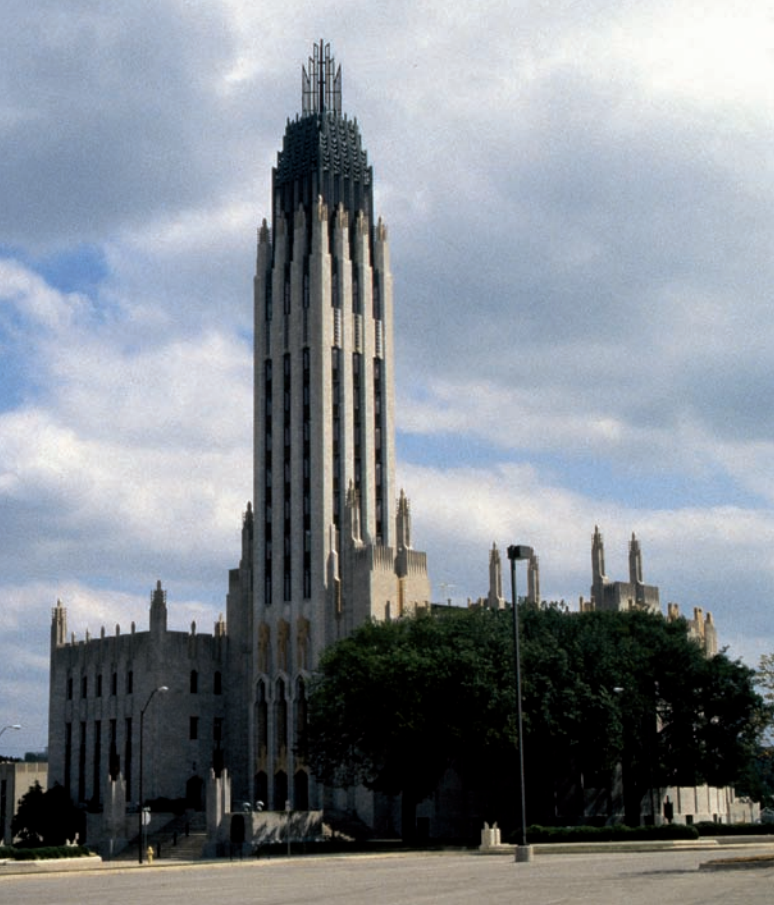
1. *St. Roch's Church, Białystok, by Oskar Sosnowski, 1926-1938-1961*



1. Gebhard David, *Tulsa Art Déco: an architectural era, 1925-1942, introd. by David Gebhard; contemporary photographs by David Halpern*, Tulsa, Oklahoma Junior League of Tulsa, c. 1980.

2. Harris Jo Beth, *More than a building. The first century of Boston Avenue United Methodist Church*. The Centennial Celebration Committee Boston Avenue United Methodist Church, Tulsa 1993, passim; *Robinson Adah Matilda (1882-1962)*, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/R/RO008.html>, 2009-07-13; *Bruce Goff Architect*, [http://www.schildrotharchitect.com/FOK/bruce\\_goff\\_architect.htm](http://www.schildrotharchitect.com/FOK/bruce_goff_architect.htm), 2009-07-13; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce\\_Goff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Goff)

3. Dolistowski Adam, *Kościół św. Rocha w Białymstoku – syntezą twórczości Oskara Sosnowskiego*, „Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki” 1981, z. 3-4, pp. 247-269 passim; Jabłoński Krzysztof Antoni, *Budownictwo kościelne 1795-1939 na terenie archidiecezji białostockiej*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 2002 pp. 188-192; Kraśnicka Urszula, *Kościół – pomnik. Kościół na wzgórzu św. Rocha – pomnik wdzięczności za odzyskaną niepodległość*, Ośrodek Badań Historii Wojskowej. Muzeum Wojska w Białymstoku, Białystok 1998.



2. The Boston Avenue United Methodist Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma, by Adah Matilda Robinson and Bruce Goff, 1926-1929-1961

In designing the Tulsa church, Adah Robinson wanted to give a symbolic meaning to every detail. As she said, "The church was designed artistically to Honor of God, to serve as an inspiration for the ages, and to identify its members as people of God [...] Every line expresses a thought"<sup>4</sup>.

Triangular arches suggest God's blessing flowing down on those passing under them, while wavy lines symbolise God's outpouring love. Numerous details were derived from popular plants growing in the prairies of Oklahoma, torch lilies (*Tritoma*), whose cascades of petals are to suggest the structure and magnificence of faith. Geometric forms of the torch lily are echoed in architectural details, stained-glass windows, floors, lights, radiator covers, and inner staircase

4. Harris, op. cit., p. 102.

3. St. Roch's Church, Bialystok; main entrance

4. The Boston Avenue United Methodist Church, Tulsa; northern entrance



banisters. Geometric forms are pure Art Déco, consistently expressing the ideological programme of the temple. Another motif is *Coreopsis Tinctoria* (also called calliopsis), which grows in dry soil and is supposed to symbolise the perseverance and joy of faith. It can be found in stained-glass windows, outer doors and northern lighting of the hall.

Two entrances lead to the church. Preceded by grand stairs, a threefold portal of the northern entrance (from the tower side) is crowned with Gothic-like finials in the form of triangular arches. Their bottom parts (just above the doors) constitute sculpture bases. Each sculpture depicts a standing female figure with two other kneeling at her feet. These figures symbolise spiritual life, religious education and worship. At the top, the angles of arches are more acute. They support three terracotta statues, depicting the founders of the Methodist movement (1729), John and Charles Wesley, and their mother Susanna. They were sculpted by Robert Garrison (another Robinson's student), and their form is close to cubistic angularity with a strong touch of verticalism<sup>5</sup>. Above the Wesleys' heads, the verticalism is accentuated by radial shapes of geometrised torch lilies. The soaring slenderness of the composition continues into the tower.

A similar solution was applied in the southern entrance, accessed from a small courtyard. Three figures in the bottom part of the portal symbolise spiritual uplift, brotherly love and human service. On the lintels, there are verses of the Bible. Three equestrian statues adorn the upper part of the portal; they depict Bishop Francis Asbury, the father of American Methodists, and Bishop William McKendree, the first Methodist bishop born in the United States, whereas the middle statue depicts an unknown horseman, meant to resemble a wanderer travelling across the Indian territories of Oklahoma (T.L. Darnell, a church official, modelled for this statue).

The whole building – made of Indiana limestone, Minnesota granite, steel and terracotta – is rich in ornamentation, whose geometric forms have symbolic meaning. Above the windows of the semicircular part, there are rectangular terracotta panels bordered by stars and prism-shaped pinnacles. They are filled with a pattern of wavy lines, symbolising God's outpouring love. The same motif is echoed in windows, the dome's ceiling and altar mosaic.

5. Harris, op. cit., passim; Robert Garrison, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Garrison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Garrison). 2009-07-13: Boston Avenue Methodist Church, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston\\_Avenue\\_Methodist\\_Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Avenue_Methodist_Church), 2009-07-06.

5. St. Roch's Church, Bialystok; detail



Seven-pointed stars symbolise the seven virtues: patience, purity, knowledge, long-suffering, kindness, love and truth. Adah Robinson explained the symbolism of 62 pinnacles representing "cubist" hands raised upward in prayer: "Closed lines and horizontal lines have been associated with finality. Modern lines are flowing, upward, open, are confident of the receptivity of divine grace". All the windows and doors are topped with triangular arches, numerous vertical façade strips are prism-shaped, as are tower windows. Consistent verticalism of lines and small details suggest a path to God. The top part of the tower is step-tapering; its metal openwork finial has the form of stylized torch lily. The form is echoed in lamps standing around the church. As it has been said before, these motifs can also be found in other details, both interior and exterior. The sanctuary is a huge semicircular hall with a semicircular dome, which is supposed to symbolise infinity.

In the 1960s, a building for children, a columbarium and a jubilee hall were added, being harmoniously integrated with the body of the building. New mosaics were installed in the sanctuary in 1960 and in the stately Bishops' Hall in 1993<sup>7</sup>.

The forms and ornamentation of St. Roch's in Białystok express both religious (*Litaniae lauretanae*, the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary) and national messages. The church was erected as votive offering for Poland's regained independence (Sosnowski expected several more throughout Poland as verses of the Litany<sup>8</sup>). This programme resulted from the fact that the church, originally, was to be dedicated to the Morning Star of Independence. The idea is reflected in its architecture and ornamentation: the star-shaped floor plan, diamond star-shaped motifs decorating parapets, ceilings, roofs, window pediments. The climax is the figure crowning the tower of the Blessed Virgin Mary as Queen of the Polish Crown. She is standing on a crescent moon, as Morning Star. Below, there is a crown, modelled after that of King Casimir's the Great, found in his tomb at Wawel in Kraków. The central plan of the church reflects the order of the Universe; Christianity is an ideal world, formed by people who come to church. From the glass dome, with the depiction of the Dove and symbols of the Four Evangelists, divine rays flow down on the worshippers.

6. Harris, op. cit., p. 19.

7. Ibid, passim; *The Boston Avenue Church. United Methodist* (a brochure, no publication date given).

8. According to Kraśnicka this was promised in an oath made by a pilgrimage to Rome of Polish engineers during World War I. Kraśnicka, op. cit., p. 18.



6. St. Roch's Church, Białystok; tower detail

There are some differences between the original design and the finished building. The ideas of a lift in the tower and the Evangelists' statues on the top parapet may have been given up by Sosnowski himself. After his tragic death in 1939, the project was taken over by architect Stanisław Bukowski. He reduced the height of the two-storey retrenchment gallery surrounding the pilgrims' courtyard to one storey, making the church look less "fortified". He also designed the stairs leading to the gallery, the four gate pavilions and the Holy Missions cross in the pilgrims' courtyard<sup>9</sup>. Interior and

9. Wicher Sebastian, *Życie architektury. Życie i twórczość Stanisława Bukowskiego* (1904-1979), Unikat, Białystok 2009, pp. 86-87.

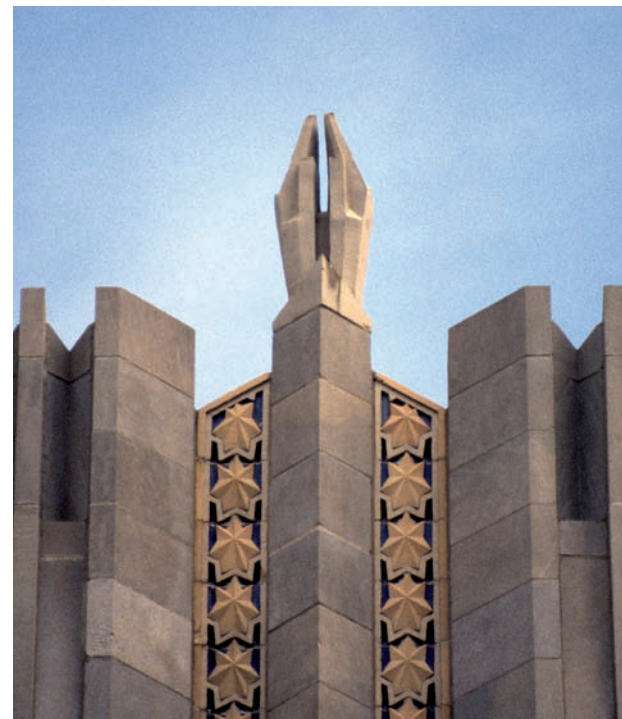
7. The Boston Avenue Methodist Church, Tulsa; tower detail



8. The Boston Avenue Methodist Church, Tulsa; ornamentation symbolising the outpouring of divine love. Stars symbolise the seven virtues

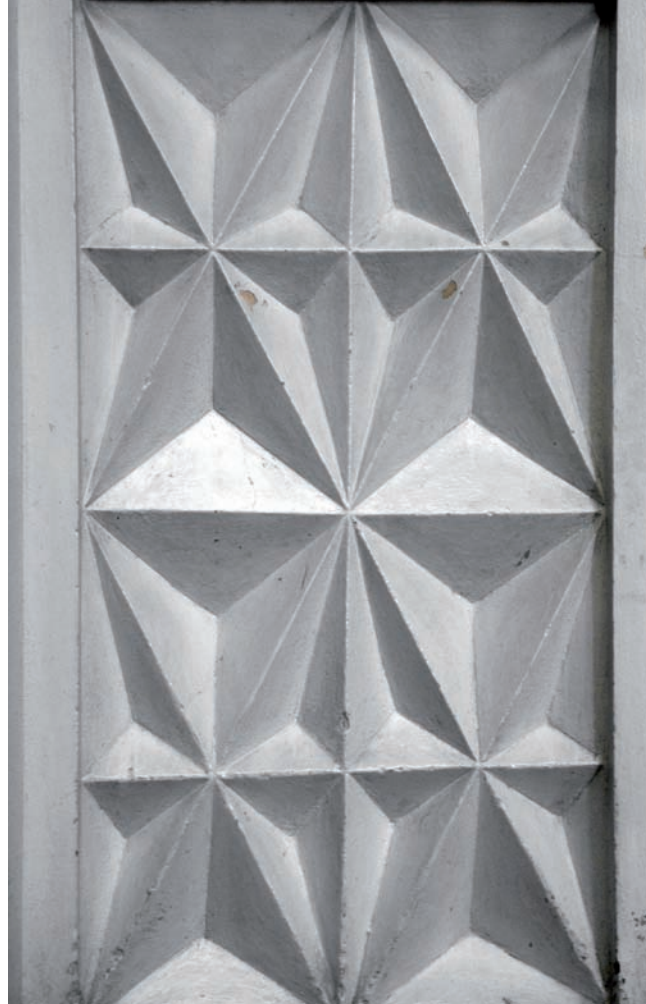


9. The Boston Avenue Methodist Church, Tulsa; pinnacle in the form of hands raised in prayer





10. St. Roch's Church, Białystok; interior fragment



11. St. Roch's Church, Białystok; exterior detail

exterior decorations were made after 1945 by a number of artists. The main feature is a sculpture by Stanisław Horno-Popławski, *The Good Shepherd*, placed above the main entrance to the gallery. Stanisław Horno-Popławski is also the author of the statues of Christ (in the high altar) and the Madonna and Child (in the western outdoor altar). Other artists include Stanisław Bukowski, Irena Pławska, Placyda Siedlecka-Bukowska and Aleksander Wels<sup>10</sup>.

The origins of the forms at St. Roch's were studied by many authors, including the monographer of the church, Adam Dolistowski, as well as Adam Miłobędzki, Krzysztof Jabłoński, and the author of this article<sup>11</sup>. Without going into details, we should go back to the architectural elements that both St. Roch's in Białystok and the church in Tulsa have in common, i.e. geometric forms both in their interiors and the structural elements; a typical feature of Art Déco. These forms reflect the traditions of Expressionism, German Expressionism in particular, with its Gothic mysticism of rock crystal, and Perret's structuralism which established reinforced concrete aesthetics. In this context, a kind of Modern Architecture developed that held on to both tradition and symbolism. The rationalism of the reinforced concrete structures, together with motifs of crystals, triangles and stars, create the synthesis of Déco forms, a contemporary transposition of Gothic, expressing symbolic meanings.

According to Gebhard, the Tulsa church represents the transformation of Gothic verticalism into Déco expressionism. (It must be noted here that ornamentation once regarded as Expressionistic is now considered Art Déco – after all, it is geometric in form). In his opinion, its creators derived their

inspiration from Dutch, Danish and German architecture, as well as from works of American architects. It is a fact that the influence of Expressionism on American architecture, especially the architecture of New York, was particularly strong in the 1920s<sup>12</sup>. The Tulsa United Methodist Church is regarded as an antecedent of the New York Chrysler building<sup>13</sup>. Oskar Sosnowski's works showed strong Expressionist influence. His sketches depicting mysterious rocks and mountain structures, and his earlier, never executed designs (St. Anna's Church in Lvov 1912, the cathedral in Katowice 1925) parallel the works of German Expressionists. Sosnowski filled the structures of crystals and rocks with deep religiousness and patriotism<sup>14</sup>. Of these Polish analogies, it is the Polish Pavilion (designed by Józef Czajkowski) for the 1925 Paris International Exhibition that is known best.

I rated the Białystok church, towering the city like a rock hill, among the masterpieces of Polish Decorative Arts (called the Kraków School at that time) many years ago, when the term Art Déco was not yet in use. I regarded the church as Expressionistic, and other researchers share this view<sup>15</sup>. Extensive studies conducted within the last four decades revealed numerous buildings and structures that enable comparisons, like the Tulsa United Methodist Church and St. Roch's Church in Białystok.

10. Ibid; Dolistowski, op. cit.

11. Dolistowski, op. cit.; Miłobędzki Adam, *Oskar Sosnowski jako architekt*, [in:] *Sztuka i historia, Księga pamiątkowa ku czci profesora Michała Walińskiego*, Warszawa 1966; the same, *Oskar Sosnowski – architekt i badacz oraz jego Zakład Architektury Polskiej*, "Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki", XXX 1998, z. 3-4, pp. 131-138; Olszewski Andrzej K., *Nowa forma w architekturze polskiej 1900-1925. Teoria i praktyka*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1967, p. 162.

12. Gebhard David, *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America*, John Wiley & Sons Inc., pp. 172-174. Olszewski Andrzej K., *Nowojorskie Art Déco a europejski ekspresjonizm*, "Rocznik Historii Sztuki", t. XXXII 2007, pp. 101-123. Olszewski Andrzej K., *Art deco i lata trzydzieste w Ameryce a sztuka europejska*, Warszawa DiG.

13. Bruce Goff Architect, [http://www.schildrotharchitect.com/FOK/bruce\\_goff\\_architect.htm](http://www.schildrotharchitect.com/FOK/bruce_goff_architect.htm), 2009-07-13.

14. *Oskar Sosnowski. Twórczość plastyczna*, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie 26 czerwca-20 sierpnia 1995, katalog. Texts by Maria Brykowska, Krzysztof Załęski, Anna Rudzińska.

15. Olszewski op. cit.; Dolistowski, op. cit.; Miłobędzki, op. cit.; Jabłoński, op. cit.