

## Juliusz Żórawski's Glass House in Warsaw - 73 Years Later

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One of the most accomplished architects of the 1930s, Juliusz Żórawski (1898 - 1967) created his designs when the idea of modernism had reached maturity in a variety of architectural forms, with a more relaxed interpretation of functionalism and a tendency to depart from the rigorous "box style". Situated at 34/36 Mickiewiczza Street in Warsaw, the Glass House was built between 1937 and 1941, the result of a competition to build a house for the workers of the White Collar Workers Mutual Insurance Company. Before he designed the Glass House, the architect already boasted some outstanding pieces of work in Warsaw such as the Wedel House at 28 Puławska Street (1935-1936); a house at 3 Aleja Przyjaciół Avenue (1936-1937); a house at 1 Kręta Street (1937-1938) and a number of others apartment buildings. Completed in 1941, the building never made it to the papers that feature top architectural accomplishments. In addition, the original plans went missing during the war and had to be reproduced.

The Glass House is a huge L-shaped building, comprising two blocks at the intersection of Mickiewiczza and Bohomolca streets. With five storeys, the building is based on a reinforced concrete structure and houses 117 flats; 100 of the flats are privately owned and have the total area of 6,306.02 m<sup>2</sup>; 17 flats comprising the total of 487.01 m<sup>2</sup> are council flats. All flats have an area of 6,793.03 m<sup>2</sup>. There are two shops with a total of 206.9 m<sup>2</sup>, and a garage to accommodate 16 cars at 463.89 m<sup>2</sup>. The area of the entire building including staircases adds up to 7,525.14 m<sup>2</sup>. The size of the flats is: entrance I and II – the ground floor with one flat each sized 65 m<sup>2</sup>; two flats sized 85 m<sup>2</sup> are divided into two smaller ones; entrance I and III - 82 m<sup>2</sup> flats; entrance IV – flats bigger than 102 m<sup>2</sup> and 85 m<sup>2</sup>; entrances V-X with flats sized 66 m<sup>2</sup>; in the gallery section: flats 36 m<sup>2</sup>; between entrances III and IV the original flats were 177 m<sup>2</sup> big but were split into smaller ones in the 1950s. There is one 115 m<sup>2</sup> flat remaining between entrances IV and V.

1. The Glass House, Warsaw, view from Mickiewiczza Street. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski





2. The Glass House, view from Mickiewicz Street. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski

Entrances I, II, III and IV have lifts. The last lift goes up to the terrace on the fifth floor. Entrances from V to X do not have lifts. The galleries are accessed from entrance X<sup>1</sup>.

There is consistency in reflecting Le Corbusier's five points of architecture: a monumental yet light body of the building resting on pillars, long horizontal windows and a roof with a two-storey recreational terrace resembling a ship's deck (there are also two smaller terraces). With a beautiful texture and a rich plastic shape of the lower storeys, the building is a typical contribution of the 1930s. Dariusz Błaszczuk, the author of Juliusz Żórawski's monograph, has this description of the Glass House:

"A colossus fitting perfectly into the sloping terrain and showing great attention to detail. It was clearly one of the most excellent constructions inspired by Le Corbusier architectural theories and practice. A five-storey edifice with a skeleton structure was built on an L-shaped plan. It boasts a splendid façade from Mickiewicz Street, more than a 100 m long glazed with lines of ribbon windows, undercut in the ground floor to accommodate shops. With a wide clearance in the ground floor supported on stocky elliptical pilotis, the enormous building seemed light, as if floating. The pilotis were probably inspired by the Swiss Students Dormitory by Le Corbusier in Paris (1930-1932). Closed with a decorative wrought-iron grille with a characteristic design [...] the clearance leads to what would have been a very large underground garage for twenty [16 - A.O.] cars which

1. All the data were provided by the Residents' Association. I would like to thank Bartosz Antosik, Monika Powalisz and Joanna Rozwoda for allowing me to view the documents, visit the building and take photographs.

4. A terrace undergoing improvements in 2012. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski



3. Arcades from the side of Mickiewicz Street. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski

was also a shelter. The second entrance to the garage is from Bohomolca Street. The façade there is cut across by a variety of windows alternating with staircase verticals. The outermost façade's only decoration along the axis are the balconies running vertically (all three external façades are decorated with a subtle doubled line to imitate elevation panels, the size of casements). The backyard elevation, in the north wing, is composed with a chiaroscuro three-dimensional "raster" line-up of the balconies against the backdrop of the windows [...], the south end of the main wing accommodates galleries. The roof of the building has recreational terraces (including a two-storey terrace) whose forms imitate gangways, with a whole set of superstructures crowned with concrete roofs supported on pillars. The top level, separated by a set of stairs, accommodated a semi-circularly enclosed solarium [...]"<sup>2</sup>.

It is clear that the Glass House is a full synthesis of how Poland adopted Le Corbusier's work. And it is not just the "5

2. Błaszczuk Dariusz, Juliusz Żórawski. *Przerwane dzieło modernizmu*, Salix Alba: Warsaw 2010, pp. 101-104. The most recent piece about the building is by Anna Cymer: *Le Corbusier z Żoliborza*, "Stolica" 2012 No. 10, pp. 14-16.

5. The terrace after the improvements. Photo by Bartosz Antosik





6. Stairs to the garage. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski



7. Refurbished door. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski

points" composition, but some very specific references (the terrace, stairs to the garage) to the Villa in Poissy. As I said before, the second half of the 1930s features a more relaxed approach to the principles of the functional style, involving richer textures with discreet decorative accents suggesting a less rigorous approach to the straight lines of the "box style". Typically used in the architecture of those times, "baroques" features such as concave façades are also found in the Glass House's entrances<sup>3</sup>. The picture is complete with the winding ribbons of the balustrades and window gratings in the arcade and the ornamented gratings and lights concealed in the niches<sup>4</sup>. Years ago I wrote that the building is a synthesis of those artistic values that evolved in the modern architecture between 1925 and 1935.

During the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 the building suffered damages but was rebuilt as early as in 1946. The residents seem to think that in 1948 the city authorities hosted a banquet on the house's terrace to celebrate the visit of Pablo Picasso<sup>5</sup> to Poland. But there is no documented evidence of that event.

In 1967 the White Collar Workers Mutual Insurance Company handed the building over to the city authorities giving way to a number of complications involving its maintenance. The state of disrepair continued. It was not until 1989 that the building became listed. The designation, however, only applied to the outline of the building, and not to the entire property. In the 1990s the municipality sold a stretch of land to land owners to the back of Tucholska Street. Next the garage driveways were made part of municipal land including access to entrances I, II and III. The next disastrous move the city made was to separate a stretch of land from the side of Bohomolca Street in 2002

and cut off the garage exit. Next, a large building was erected on the other side of the narrow Bohomolca Street which was not designated for development. All this weakened the foundations of the Glass House.

Faced with the constant neglect and progressing disrepair, the residents decided to take the matter in their own hands. In 1999 a group of enthusiasts set up a Residents' Association to save the building. Because the city did not provide sufficient funding, a commercial loan was taken out in the amount of two million two hundred and eighty seven thousand Polish zloty (the conservation grant was ten thousand). Repairs started in 2001 and complied

8. Original coal stove and gas cooker. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski



3. Olszewski Andrzej K., *An Outline of Polish 20th Century Art and Architecture*, Interpress: Warsaw 1988, pp. 66-67.

4. Olszewski Andrzej K., *Idee Le Corbusiera w Polsce [in:] Podług nieba i zwyczaju polskiego. Studia z historii architektury, sztuki i kultury ofiarowane A. Miłobędzkiemu*, Warsaw 1988, p. 488; Błaszczyk Dariusz, op. cit., p. 104.

5. Błaszczyk Dariusz, op. cit., p. 104.



9. Refurbished terrace stairs. Photo by Irena and Andrzej Olszewski

with the conservation principle of restoring elements of the structure and fittings that suffered from the passage of time and makeshift repairs.

Between 2001 and 2012 the work included a new gas system, water supply and sewage system, central heating and electrics. Improvements were made to the garage joist, pavements in the arcades and the roof between entrances III and VI. Plaster was also secured. During the repairs in the staircases, water and sewage pipes were concealed in the walls and the new windows and entrance doors were made to look as if they were manufactured in the Lubert Brothers factory in Warka. The hardware was commonly used in the 1930s and is a permanent fixture of the style of that time. The recently completed terrace makes the Residents' Association success complete. As a community they make sure that the best housing ideas of modernism are still alive with the focus not only on the flats but on how habitable they were. According to a recent cost calculation the work so far has cost PLN 3,498,469. The conservation grant was ten

thousand. More funding will be required to finish work on the façade which has had its new design ready since 2008<sup>6</sup>.

The Glass House exemplifies a number of conservation issues faced by modernistic architecture. They have been frequently discussed at meetings in Gdynia. On the international level the Glass House could be compared to Moscow's Narkomfin by Moisei Ginzburg in 1928, a top example of Russian Le Corbusier style. In this case the problems of the repairs were much more complicated<sup>7</sup>.

The Glass House is one of Poland's leading examples of its fairly significant contribution to Europe's modernism.

6. Based on materials developed by the Association.

7. Kokkinaki Irina, *History of Narkomfin Flats and the problem of their restoration*; Rezvin Vladikmir, *Original construction and actual condition of narkomfin Flats*, "DOCOMOMO Newsletter", 1991 November No. 6, pp. 61-67; Rezvin Vladimir, *Problems of reconstruction and usage of the Narcomfin apartment house in Moscow* [in:] DOCOMOMO Conference Proceedings. Second International Conference, September 16th-19th Bauhaus Dessau 1992, pp. 275-276.