

Modern Poland in the Borderlands: Public Architecture of the 1930s in the North-Eastern Areas of the Second Republic of Poland

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During the Second Polish Republic, the term Eastern Borderlands (Kresy Wschodnie) referred to Wileńskie and Nowogródzkie Voivodeships, and to the easternmost areas of Białostockie Voivodeship¹. This was an area of considerable ethnic, national and religious diversity. For a long time, most of the new buildings designed between the two world wars followed traditional styles: adherence to vernacular tradition was meant to help restore the Polish *genius loci* to the Borderlands. It was only in the mid-1930s that modernist architecture started to appear in the region: first in Vilnius, and then in other north-eastern cities.

Vilnius, the largest city of the Borderlands and its undisputed capital, was a cultural and religious melting pot. Owing to a complicated political situation, the first government investments in the city had not been made until the second half of the 1920s. The new architecture of Vilnius was, above all, deeply rooted in historic tradition. This trend is represented by, e.g., the school in Antokol (1930-1931)², the Technical School in Holenderska Street (1926), the redeveloped seat of Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk (Society of Friends of Science) (1929), and the residential house for officers in Wileńska Street³.

Modernist public architecture was first seen in Vilnius at the beginning of the third decade of the 20th century.

1. Kirwiel E., *Kresy Północno-Wschodnie Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1918-1939. Oblicze polityczne*, Lublin 2011, p. 15.

2. Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas in Vilnius (LCVA Vilnius), sygn. 64-9-2903.

3. Małachowicz E., *Architektura dwudziestolecia międzywojennego w Wilnie*, [in:] *Architektura i urbanistyka w Polsce w latach 1918-1979, "Studia i Materiały do Teorii i Historii Architektury i Urbanistyki"*, vol. XVII (1989), pp. 124-127.

1. Vilnius, The twin school in Antokol – front view, designed by Stefan Narębski. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012



They included: the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (1931-1932, designed by Zygmunt Tarasin)⁴ and the new building of the Polish Radio in Vilnius (1931, designed by Antoni Dygat)⁵. These were, however, isolated cases as the early 1930s brought a stagnation to the development of architecture in the city. The peculiar political situation, combined with a general economic crisis, severely restrained investment activity. This changed in the second half of the 1930s, when Vilnius entered a phase of thorough modernisation. The process was initiated by Romuald Gutt of the Municipal Urban Planning Bureau, who supervised the redesign of the Cathedral Square. The project was profoundly modernist: it involved a variety of axes and a diversity of perspectives, rejecting rigid principles of traffic. The City Council's decision to implement the plans signalled a willingness to abandon the conservative approach to spatial planning and to embrace modernity⁶.

Later, the conservative society of Vilnius received a breath of fresh air from Warsaw architects and their innovative designs. Among them, the most noteworthy is the complex of three buildings in Mickiewicza Avenue (currently,

4. LCVA Vilnius, sygn. 64-9-3232.

5. *10 lat rozgłośni wileńskiej: radio dla miasta i wsi*, Wilno 1938, pp. 15-16. Łoza S., *Architekci i budowniczowie w Polsce*, Warszawa 1954, p. 67.

6. "Architektura i Budownictwo" R.XIV:1938, No. 11-12, pp. 366-375.

2. The former Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Izba Przemysłowo-Handlowa) in Vilnius - main entrance; designed by Zygmunt Tarasin. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012





3. Vilnius, the complex of former PKO buildings, designed by Juliusz Żórawski and Zbigniew Puget: in the foreground - office building, on the left - residential building. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012



4. Vilnius, the former seat of BGK (Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego), designed by Stanisław Gałęzowski and Jerzy Pańkowski. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012

Gedimino prospektas 12, 14, 27), the seats of *Polska Kasa Oszczędności* (1936-1937), *Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego* (1936-1938), and *Ubezpieczalnia Społeczna* (1937-1938)⁷.

The first two establishments formed a coherent compound, whose architecture was mutually complementary⁸. The PKO edifice had been designed by the team of two architects: Juliusz Żórawski - Zbigniew Puget, already renowned for a bold concept of a bank building in Poznań⁹. Unlike that unrealised avant-garde project, the PKO building is architecturally restrained. The interiors were mostly classicistic, with *art déco* details. The spacious main hall was decorated with a tryptych entitled *Praca, Fortuna, Oszczędność* (Work, Fortune, Frugality) by Ludomir Sleńdziński. Allegorical compositions by the same artist could also be admired inside the Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego. Its quarters, designed by Stanisław Gałęzowski and Jerzy Pańkowski, was a four-storey building, modernist in shape, with a Le Corbusier-style motive on the façade: a curved screen wall concealing the risalit of the staircase. The third modernist building, the seat of *Ubezpieczalnia Społeczna* – a competition entry project by Jerzy Sołtan and Stanisław Murczyński was erected a few blocks away.

The three buildings are the most notable achievements of the public architecture of Vilnius in the interwar period. Other contemporary designs were pragmatically functional in

character, e.g., the hall of residence at Stefan Batory University (4, Bouffałowa Góra Street), the office building in Kijowska Street (currently, Kauno gatvė 13), and the comprehensive school in Belina Street (Liepkalnio gatvė 18).

The Hall of Residence (1934-1937) is one of the most significant works by Irena Heilman¹⁰. The body of the building follows the principle of contrast between the forms and materials used. The same motive of contrasting juxtaposition can be observed in the other two of the mentioned projects. The office/residential building in Kijowska Street (1939) was constructed from materials commonly used in Warsaw's architecture: grey concrete brick and brown clinker¹¹. The school in Belina Street designed by Romuald Gutt (1939) is noteworthy for its rationally laid out function as well as for a symbiotic fusion of architecture and nature¹².

10. LCVA Wilno, sygn. 64-9-3906, Franciszek Wojciechowski was the co-designer of the project.

11. *Vilnius 1900-2012. Naujosios architektūros gidas*, Vilnius 2011, p. 70.

12. Małachowicz E., *op.cit.* p. 135.

7. *Ibidem*, pp. 393-401.

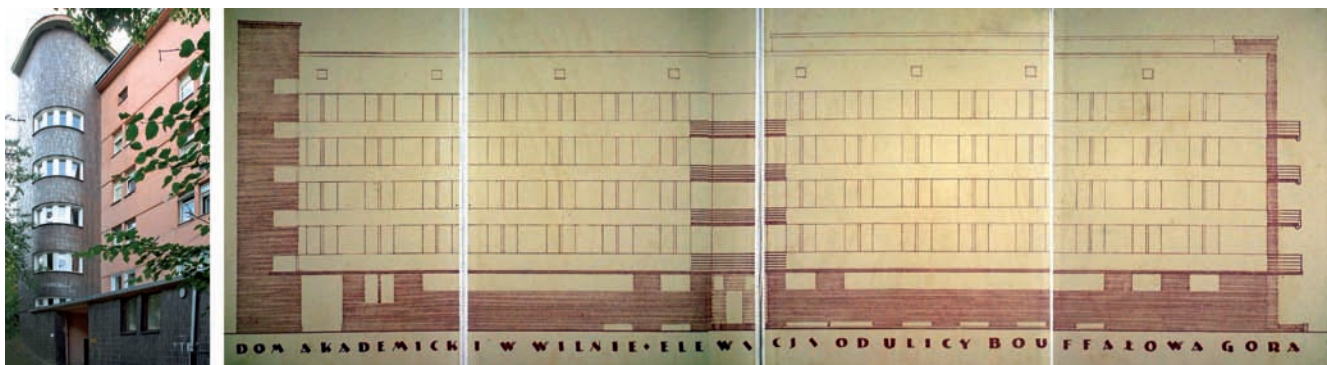
8. Błaszczak D., *Juliusz Żórawski - przerwane dzieło modernizmu*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 111-114.

9. "Architektura i Budownictwo" R. X: 1934, No. 8, pp. 235-244.

5. Vilnius, the former seat of *Ubezpieczalnia Społeczna*, designed by Jerzy Sołtan and Stanisław Murczyński. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012



5a. Side entrance - detail. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012



6. I. Heilman, F. Wojciechowski, project of the hall of residence in Vilnius (LCVA, sygn. 64-9-3906); on the left: front view of staircase. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012

The influence of this style is also apparent in the new architecture of two holiday resorts: Druskininkai and Augustów. In the years 1929-1932, the former town, where Scandinavian methods of climatotherapy were promoted, gained a complex of modernist wooden pavilions which housed spa facilities. The project was developed by Edgar Norwerth and Jan Jabłoński, the latter of whom also designed the new mineral water pump-room¹³. Although Augustów did not have a medical health spa certificate, its excellent location amidst lakes and forest made it a fashionable holiday spot. Elements of the local landscape were incorporated in the design of the Military Yacht Club by Juliusz Nagórski (1934-1936). The Tourist Hostel, constructed in the years 1937-1938 under the initiative of the Tourism Promotion League, and designed by Maciej Nowicki, was also an open space

13. "Architektura i Budownictwo", R.VIII:1932 No. 12, pp. 381-384.

7. Vilnius, The school at Belina Street, designed by Romuald Gutt, 7a. Detail - footbridge from the main building on school playground. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012



construction. That modern holiday lodge, situated on top of Biała Góra near Necko Lake, truly blended with the natural surroundings¹⁴.

In other north-eastern towns of the Second Republic, building activity was far from intense. Some growth was recorded in mid-1930s. It was then that several public and military buildings came into being: the Polish Bank in Grodno, the Post Office in Baranowice (based on a design by M. Goldberg), and the Officers' Club in Grodno (by A. Dubanowicz, 1935). The opening of the broadcasting station of the Polish Radio in Baranowicze (Tadeusz Łobos, 1937-1939) was an occasion of some significance as it became, along with the radio station in Vilnius, a symbol of modernity in the Eastern Borderlands.

Characteristically, the modernist constructions of the north-eastern territories of the Second Republic were created with little participation of local architects, who mainly focused on residential designs. The majority of the designs for public buildings came from the Warsaw School and were made by such authors as Romuald Gutt, Juliusz Żórawski, Antoni Dygat, Maciej Nowicki, Jerzy Sołtan, or Maksymilian Goldberg. Although not too numerous, those projects visibly influenced the character of the existing spatial structure.

A discussion of the 1920s and 1930s architecture in north-eastern Poland would not be complete without referring to the contemporary architecture of Lithuania. In those years, Vilnius and Kaunas found themselves on different sides of a state border, becoming major cities of two politically antagonized neighbours. The shaping of their spatial identity

14. Barucki T., *Maciej Nowicki*, Warszawa 1986; Szlasyński J., Makowski A., *Augustów. Monografia historyczna*, Augustów 2007, pp. 457- 458.

8. Augustów, The Military Yacht Club, designed by Juliusz Nagórski. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012





9. Augustów, *The Tourist Hostel*, designed by Maciej Nowicki. Photo by M. Dolistowska, 2012

was, therefore, believed to be of key importance. In Kaunas, the style of the public buildings constructed in the 1930s created a new scale of city space: the monumentalism of the official architecture tended towards the Italian patterns¹⁵. Meanwhile, on the other side of the border, Vilnius remained faithful to the conservative school, clearly emphasising the continuity of tradition. The modernist breakthrough was nevertheless inevitable; in the 1930s architecture played a significant part in creating the identity of both so-called New European states and the Second Republic of Poland,

15. Nakas A., *Architektas inžinierius Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis ir jo darbųkonstruktoriai*, Vilnius 1997.

reborn after decades of foreign rule¹⁶. In that context, the modernist architecture of Vilnius was a successful attempt at incorporating that borderland city into the mainstream of Poland's architectural development.

The outbreak of World War II brought an abrupt halt to the construction industry in the region. Subsequent architectural practice was heavily affected by the post-war situation and the new geo-political status of the area.

16. Szczerski A., *Modernizacja. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 1918-1939*, Łódź 2010, pp. 267-269.