

SŁAWOMIR GZELL

ORCID: 0000-0003-4924-2679

Warsaw University of Technology, Poland

AMONG THE MYTHS OF TRADITION AND MODERNISM. WARSAW SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

POMIĘDZY MITAMI TRADYCJI I MODERNIZMU. WARSZAWSKA SZKOŁA ARCHITEKTURY

Abstract

Discussion concerning influences of international modernistic movements (Bauhaus, CIAM) on curricula of Polish schools of architecture just after 1918 should be treated as the myth. Warsaw school of architecture was rather to support traditional approaches to forms of buildings, however, after ten years modernistic understanding of architecture also was present in curriculum of the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology.

Keywords: Bauhaus, CIAM, Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology

Streszczenie

Dyskusja o tym, co miało wpływ na kształcenie architektów w Polsce po odzyskaniu niepodległości w 1918 r. toczy się pomiędzy zwolennikami tezy o przewadze międzynarodalnych prądów modernistycznych a zwolennikami tezy, że w architekturze szukaliśmy pomocy w wyrażaniu własnej tradycji. Analiza obu poglądów, poparta przeglądem dokonań szkoły Bauhausu a potem dokonań Międzynarodowych Kongresów Architektury Współczesnej CIAM, wskazuje że warszawska szkoła architektury szła własną drogą, a znaczące wpływy tego, co działo się za granicą są raczej mitem – zwłaszcza w początkowych latach istnienia Wydziału Architektury na Politechnice Warszawskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Bauhaus, CIAM, Wydział Architektury Politechniki Warszawskiej

1.

The Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology was established in 1915, so Bauhaus is its junior by four years, which means that there could not be any adaptation or transfer of the Bauhaus didactic program to Warsaw. Moreover, in the initial period of the existence of schools, their programs differed significantly from each other, as schools were created having different, varying goals. Let us remember that in 1915 Poland was not on the map of Europe, the First World War was ongoing, the Polish lands were divided between Germany, Russia and Austria. At the beginning of the war, Warsaw was passed from the hands of one occupant to another. Despite such conditions, the work continued on the development of the architectural specialization program of the Technical Faculty of the Society of Scientific Courses, which replaced the Russian Polytechnic, closed in 1907 for political reasons. In 1914, Mikołaj Tołwiński worked on the program, and at the same time, in 1914, members of the Warsaw Circle of Architecture developed

the Higher Architectural Courses. On August 5, 1915, the Germans occupied Warsaw and after some time they responded positively to the demands of opening universities, of course under the supervision of German superiors. And so, on November 15, 1915, the Warsaw University of Technology starts with the Faculty of Architecture. Despite the difficult war conditions, classes begin.

2.

Bauhaus was created differently. The creation of the school can be derived from the movement initiated by William Morris in the mid-nineteenth century in England, postulating the fight against industrialization destroying culture. He recommended the use of craft methods in the production of the highest quality furniture, rugs, fabrics, dishes, etc. This is how the New Art was born, and at the same time it was expected that the products of the work of craftsmen-artists (or vice versa) would be relatively cheap. When the Second German Reich was established in 1871, the artistic organization of education in England was analysed and, accepting the idea of Morris, schools-workshops, were started to be established, including in 1907 in Weimar. In the same year, in Munich, the Deutscher Werkbund was founded, whose aim was to promote construction crafts. One of the leading figures in Werkbund was Walter Gropius, in his twenties, who believed, as his teacher Peter Behrens, that a building, including a residential building, made of industrial elements was the best form of architecture. Concrete, steel and glass have become iconic building materials. Gropius found a place for realizing his ideas in 1919 in Weimar, changing the local school into a university called Bauhaus.

This name, as indicated in the manifesto published in the same year, also meant the direction of thinking applied in the school, not just its name. This means the permitted duality in the use of the name, firstly as the name of a school or a specific place, secondly – as a general concept. The validity of this second understanding was emphasized by the cover of Lyonel Feininger's project with an expressionist cathedral, which emphasized the importance of the project and its orientation towards the future.¹

According to the aforementioned project, students were to be inspired on both sides: artistic and craft. That's why avant-garde painters were employed, representing different directions and different nationalities. Also weavers, as well as photographers, and potters – there is no point in giving their names, they are widely known. The volume of their achievements caused interest in the school, also in very distant places. For example, Rabindranath Tagore, looking for designs for the art department in Santiniketan, India, where he wanted to educate both "creators" and "producers," demonstrated his interest in Bauhaus. But he did not mean to transfer the curriculum, it was only, as in Weimar, about educate craftsmen-artists.²

Did other schools, and if so to what extent, follow the example of Bauhaus teaching? And if so, how? If there were any, the Warsaw Architecture Department was certainly not one of them. And this was despite including in the curriculum elements such as painting, drawing,

¹ *Prehistory of the Bauhaus* [in:] *The Bauhaus Collection: Museum of Design*, Bauhaus Archive Berlin, H. Heenemann GmbH&Co. KG, Berlin 2019.

² A. Dasgupta, *Santiniketan – Rules of Metaphor and other Pedagogic Tools* [in:] *Bauhaus imaginista*, www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/4343/santiniketan (access: 10.06.2021).

sculpture, then photography, work on models, the involvement of the most courageous constructors, trips to the west of Europe, and everything that would contribute to the loss of teaching and creative autonomy.

3.

Perhaps there were several reasons for maintaining curriculum autonomy. You may have to start from big politics. Here we must ask the question: was the Bauhaus, seemingly engaged only in art, “political”? To answer this question, you have to look at the times in which both schools were created.

First Germany, 1918. This is the time of the central states’ defeat in the war and its end. In Berlin and Bavaria, communist republics are established but in January 1919, the social democratic government suppresses insurgent fights. In August 1919, the Weimar Republic is formed, but in the same year, NSDAP is created in Munich by Adolf Hitler, who four years later attempts to seize power in an unsuccessful coup. As if in response, in 1923, the workers’ uprising in Hamburg breaks out, and is suppressed as well. There are several years of stabilization, but the upcoming crisis of 1929 favoured nationalist and fascist slogans so much that in effect in 1933, Hitler comes to power. What happened then – we know.

Now, let us describe the same times from the Polish perspective. Poland returns to the map of Europe on November 11, 1918, after 123 years of captivity. The difficult political and economic reconstruction of the country begins. In 1920, Poland refutes the attack of the Red Army, which came to the foreground of Warsaw. During battles with Germany, borders were formed in the west and Silesia (until 1922). In 1926, after the so-called May coup, you can observe a departure from democratic principles in favor of a strong central authority, which some historians call the fascistisation of the country. The crisis of 1929 caused the failure of unemployment. The situation is improving in 1937 and it lasts until the outbreak of war in September 1939. What happened then – we know.

These brief descriptions of the historical surroundings of the Bauhaus and the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology are needed to answer the questions: was the Bauhaus “political” in addition to being a school of architecture and was the WUT’s Faculty of Architecture “political” and whether both schools might not be “political”?

4.

The first question was being discussed by the participants of the conference organized on January 19, 2019, at the House of World Cultures in Berlin, where (perhaps according to a fairly common opinion that architecture is the most politicized art) the question was how (or how far) political was the Bauhaus? The conference was divided into four sessions. During the first, named Theory of Education / Society Education, the thesis prepared by the organizers assumed that Bauhaus fought for the democratization of society by proposing thoughtful architectural projects and the media that served the creation of a new man, intellectually moving in the progressive urbanization of the world. This included economic education in this area. During the Housing Issue / Urbanisation session, it was recalled that Bauhaus had moved from Weimar, controlled by right-wing parties to Dessau, at the

invitation of the social-democratic authorities of the city, hoping that Bauhaus would help in resolving the housing crisis. Unfortunately, hope failed, and social democrats withdrew aid. The municipal housing estate Dessau – Törten was not cheap enough, which put the city in financial trouble. In the third part of the conference, Emancipation / Internationalism, Bauhaus's hopes were presented that social emancipation and internationalism would replace nationalism and old social hierarchies, including deleting the class and bad position of women. Finally, the fourth session's topic was the Political Role of Cultural Institutions. It was remembered that from the beginning, the Bauhaus was the target of attacks by nationalists, conservatives and finally the Nazis, which resulted not only in the closure of the school but also the emigration of many teachers and students, as well as the death of a number of them.

In fact, the Bauhaus viewed against the background of historical events, could be perceived as a definitely leftist institution. Just the basic ideological assumption that the work should take place in a group, more, in a community of creators and implementers of architecture, instead of a traditional master-student relationship, raised suspicions about the final goal of the work, especially that according to critics the goal could be determined on the basis of revolutionary Russian experience. The arrival of teachers from abroad at the Bauhaus increased the feeling of such fears. It is not surprising then that after Gropius was replaced as a director in April 1927 by Hannes Meyer, who did not hide his leftist views, the Bauhaus in Dessau was liquidated in 1928. It can be said that Meyer soon confirmed the opinion that circulated about him. He arranged for himself and for a few students to work in the Soviet Union and as the Red Bauhaus Brigade went to work there, as well as a number of other well-known German architects. People from Bauhaus were also included in the Brigade of Ernst May: Hans Schmidt, Erich Mendelsohn and Mart Stam. Unfortunately, in April 1932, the decree of the Central Committee of the WKP(b) (Wszelchwiązkowa Komunistyczna Partia (bolszewików))³, and later the resolutions of the architects' congress, rejected the functionalist or constructivist architecture that Western architects brought with functional projects of the cities. The Moscow CIAM congress was cancelled in 1933, i.e. the Athenian Charter, although it could have been the Moscow Charter. And then the purges began. Those who could, fled (Meyer, Schmidt), those who failed, were arrested and usually executed. At least several dozen such people were counted.⁴

5.

When defining the above-described Bauhaus activity, one can say that its aim was to WORK FOR SOCIETY.

An analysis of what was happening at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology indicates that the goal here was to WORK FOR THE NATION. The creators of the Warsaw program came from various universities. Józef Dziekoński, Mikołaj Tołwiński, Jan Heurich, Czesław Domaniewski and Kazimierz Skórewicz were pupils

³ Eng. All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks.

⁴ D. Taliesnik, *Moving Away to the Other End of the World. Reflections on the Letters Between Tibor Weiner and Hannes Meyer from the DAM Archive* [in:] *bauhaus imaginista*, www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/4180/moving-away-to-the-other-end-of-the-world (access: 1.06.2021).

of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, and Jarosław Wojciechowski of the local Institute of Civil Engineers. Franciszek Krzywda-Polkowski graduated from the Art School in Moscow, Karol Jankowski and Apoloniusz Nieniewski from the technical university in Riga, Juliusz Kłos from the Vienna polytechnic, Tadeusz Tołwiński from the technical university in Karlsruhe, and Rudolf Świerczyński studied in Dresden and Darmstadt. According to Jan Zachwatowicz, they represented various creative trends: Dziekoński's eclecticism, Heurich and Jankowski's modernism, and Mikołaj Tołwiński's "new art" in the form of Vienna's secession. However, the common thing for all of them is the search for the Polish National Style. In the Faculty's curriculum, we read the overtones of these longings and words about the development of artistic culture in the Polish lands, "so that we can stand up, as in previous centuries, to compete with the art of Western Europe."⁵

At the same time, in the program implemented afterwards, it is said (in the introduction, and hence quite generally) about the unity of architecture as an art, with painting and decoration, but the emphasis is on objects related to construction, historical objects, design for village. The program of the Urban Design (and Town Planning) was expanded, a new thing in architectural education. Of course, architectural design took a prominent place.

Rudolf Świerczyński, Karol Jankowski, Tadeusz Tołwiński built creative directions in designing, as well as Stanisław Noakowski, Czesław Przybylski, Oskar Sosnowski and Marian Lalewicz who arrived a little later. Their works have recently been shown at the 100th anniversary of the Faculty of Architecture, and it is clear that when they came to work at the university they were not masters of the latest architectural trends at that time. Tołwiński has just won the competition for the design of the garden-city Żabki near Warsaw, showing the classic work in the Howardian spirit, similarly, Przybylski, winner of the third prize in the same competition. The plan of Warsaw made under the direction of Tołwiński in 1916 also has many of Howard's proposals and urban experiences of the French Enlightenment. The Polish Theatre in Warsaw and the theatre in Kalisz by Przybylski have distinct neoclassical features, just like the Staszic Palace reconstructed by Lalewicz. In 1909, Sosnowski designed the historicizing church of St. Jacob in Ochota in Warsaw, etc.

6.

The change "towards modernism" takes place in Warsaw around the mid-twenties. Tołwiński designs the National Museum (1926), Świerczyński Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (1927) and the Ministry of Transport (1928), Sosnowski's magnificent church of St. Roch in Białystok (1927). It should be added that their students at the same time do course projects in the spirit of "modern architecture" and this happens without changing the program. Bohdan Lachert thought that just after the period of the Faculty's focus on participation in consolidation, through architecture, independence of the country, the time came for broader contacts with foreign countries, including the perception of new trends and interests, also in the field of art and architecture.⁶ Lachert also believes that the proliferation of "modern architecture"

⁵ J. Zachwatowicz, *Zarys historii Wydziału* [in:] *Warszawska Szkoła Architektury 1915–1965*, PWN, Warszawa 1967., p. 28.

⁶ B. Lachert, *Katedry projektowania architektonicznego* [in:] *ibidem*.

at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology is due to his students who, inspired by the enthusiasm of Szymon Syrkus, created the Praesens group, which operated most intensively in the years 1926–1930. It is the year 1926 that can be considered a breakthrough. Then in Warsaw, one could see the International Exhibition of Modern Architecture. In June, the first issue of the Praesens magazine, with the subtitle *Kwartalnik Modernistów* (Modernists Quarterly), was published. Also in 1926, Bohdan Lachert defended his diploma thesis under the supervision of Professor Świerczyński “Architect’s house on a slope,” one of the best single-family building projects ever prepared at the Faculty of Architecture of Warsaw University of Technology.

Members of Praesens quickly found their way to similar groups abroad and from 1928 they formed the Polish CIAM group. The oldest of them was Syrkus, he was 35 years old, the youngest was Józef Szanajca – 25 years old. But although it is said today that they followed the Bauhaus trail, there is nothing in the first issue of their magazine. It is interesting, however, that in addition to reprints from *De Stijl*, a text by Kazimierz Malewicz appears, explaining the theses of suprematism, rejected for ideological reasons at the Bauhaus. As we know, Malewicz came to Warsaw in 1926 on his way to Berlin. He was welcomed by our modernists very well, a banquet was given in his honour. In Germany, however, despite the dedication of the entire department of the Great Art Exhibition in Berlin to him, despite the ongoing preparations for the publication of one of his most important manifestos “The World as Pointless”, the meeting took place on April 6–7, 1926 in Dessau, where Gropius and the entire Bauhaus received him quite coldly and sceptically. The thing that worked was perhaps that Malewicz’s work was full of interpretative ambiguities and turned the constructivist slogan “Eye under touch control!” to “Eye under soul’s control,” i.e., feelings.⁷ Besides, Malewicz liked to appeal to God and transcendence. There is no place for revolution here, nor for a rational man, home builder! Helena Syrkus also writes about this, citing the introduction to the Malewicz Treaty published by the editors of *Bauhausbuecher* in 1927: “we are glad that we can publish, but in the main issues, Malewicz’s views diverge from our point of view.”⁸

The above information about the different interest of Malewicz is needed to state the sources of Polish modernism somewhat different than in Weimar. And on top of everything, when Szymon Syrkus after graduation goes to the West to gain experience, he only stays briefly in Germany, he doesn’t like it here (as Helena Syrkus writes later), he quickly goes to Paris.⁹ There, as in case of many later Warsaw architects, he joins the circle of Le Corbusier, the views of the latter begin to shape the architectural thinking of Syrkus and his colleagues. They go to Paris and come back, but for now they do not have much to say at the Faculty of Architecture. Few students, however, were inspired by German examples, e.g. the later outstanding urban planner, professor and creator of threshold theory, Bolesław Malisz, performing in 1933 a diploma thesis under the direction of Tadeusz Tołwiński, rebuilds historic Kielce into a kind of mega Dammerstocksiedlung from Karlsruhe, a project, as we know, of Gropius. But even when after the Second World War authors of Functional Warsaw Jan Olaf Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus became professors in 1947

⁷ J.W. Kwiatkowski, *Oko pod kontrolę dotyku duszy... Suprematyzm we współczesnym dyskursie intelektualnym*, Wydział Geografii i Studiów Regionalnych UW, Warszawa 2013.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

⁹ H. Syrkus, *Ku idei osiedla społecznego*, PWN, Warszawa 1976.

and 1949, and activists of the Praesens group Barbara Brukalska and Stanisław Brukalski in 1948, and Helena Syrkus in 1955, the Warsaw Department does not become Bauhaus (nor Le Corbusier's agenda). When Kazimierz Wejchert and his team win the competition for Nowe Tychy (1951), it turns out that as the only large city built in Poland after the war, the modernistic form of Tychy is closer to the New British Towns than to the Bauhaus settlements.¹⁰ Which does not mean that the ideas of Bauhaus are not known to us.

7.

When the exhibition "Radical Pedagogies" was presented at the Biennale in Venice in 2014, it was meant to show that the key to changing the curriculum (even one subject) is coming to school for one or two people with a clearly delineated educational plan. In principle, there were no examples of school impact on school. It seems that it is and was so obvious that it is not rational to expect that, for example, Bauhaus school programs will appear in other places. Which does not mean, let us repeat, that the ideas of the Bauhaus are not known to us.

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Author's Note:

Prof. Sławomir Gzel, PhD, DSc, Arch.

Tenured professor, *habilitated* doctor, certified architect and urban planner, Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology. Dr Honoris Causa of Poznan University of Technology. Head of Architecture and Urban Planning Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences and member of the Deutsche Akademie für Städtebau und Landesplanung DASL. Long-term deputy chairman of Main

¹⁰ S. Gzell, *Tezy projektowe a plan miasta Nowe Tychy i przemiany planu*, Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2002, no. 47(2), pp. 190–201.

Advisory Commission at the Ministry of Construction and member of the Central Commission for Scientific Titles. Previously, a member of the City Commission for Architecture and Urban Planning in Warsaw and the board of the Society of Polish Town Planners. Author of many urban planning and architectural projects and awarded competition works. Author of over 250 professional texts, including several books. Lectures on contemporary urban planning at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology and at other schools of architecture, also abroad. Supervisor of 20 and reviewer of over 60 doctoral theses, supervisor over 150 master's theses. City of Warsaw Councilman in the '90s. s.gzell@wp.pl