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AVANT-GARDE OR PRAGMATISM? POLISH RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE 1930S

AWANGARDA CZY PRAGMATYZM? POLSKA ARCHITEKTURA MIESZKANIOWA LAT 30. XX WIEKU

Abstract

In the residential architecture of Polish cities, the postulates of the Athens Charter had in many cases been realised even before it was founded. The new generation of architects of the 1930s identified their creative stance with the avant-garde tenets of modernism. A good example of this phenomenon is the activity of the Praesens group, where it was clear that they followed the spirit of the avant-garde and dissociated themselves from classicism, which was still present in Polish architecture. Functionalism became a language that was easily adopted in the newly emerging state. The absence of references to the past, which was a source of social disappointment, allowed a focus on the future. The attractiveness of the architectural avant-garde, apart from its aesthetic and symbolic layer, was also linked to its practical application in economic and rapid construction. This coincided with the aspirations of the authorities of the developing country.

Keywords: avant-garde in architecture, Polish modernism, residential architecture of 1930s

Streszczenie

W architekturze mieszkaniowej polskich miast postulaty Karty Ateńskiej były w wielu przypadkach realizowane jeszcze przed jej powstaniem. Nowe pokolenie architektów lat 30. utożsamiało swoją postawę twórczą z awangardowymi założeniami modernizmu. Dobrym przykładem tego zjawiska jest działalność grupy Praesens, gdzie wyraźnie widać było, że podążają oni za duchem awangardy i odcinają się od klasycyzmu, który wciąż był obecny w polskiej architekturze. Funkcjonalizm stał się językiem, który łatwo przyjął się w nowopowstającym państwie. Brak odniesień do przeszłości, która była źródłem społecznych rozczarowań, pozwolił na skupienie się na przyszłości. Atrakcyjność awangardy architektonicznej, oprócz warstwy estetycznej i symbolicznej, wiązała się także z jej praktycznym zastosowaniem w ekonomicznym i szybkim budownictwie. Zbiegało się to z aspiracjami władz rozwijającego się kraju.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda w architekturze, polski modernizm, architektura mieszkaniowa lat 30.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. AVANT-GARDE AS THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF ARCHITECTURE

A special role in the creation of architectural space in the Second Polish Republic (from 1918 onwards) was played by efforts to organise the new Polish statehood. The dominant manor house style, the origins of which can be traced back to the 19th century, was initially used not only in public construction but also became a common styling language for private investors. Its appeal was linked to a strong symbolic message. In the case of housing, especially single-family housing, the manor house national form followed the stylistic trend inherent in the garden cities that were emerging in Europe. Similarly, the architectural language of frontier stanzas, officer housing or emerging residential settlements became a characteristic element of the new Polish state. The classicism of early modern architecture gradually gave way to functionalist aesthetics after a few years. Throughout the interwar period, both stylistic sensibilities were present, existed in parallel and constituted the cultural landscape of the Republic consolidated after years of captivity. It can be noted, however, that particularly state investments geared to a quick and economically justifiable effect were, over the years, implemented in the spirit of functionalism. It is difficult to judge now whether this is the effect of evolving modernism, which is a continuation of Ignacy Dexler's thought, in which the Lviv-based professor-urbanist suggests that "the mark of good design is noble simplicity"¹. One can get the impression, however, that functionalism was gaining strength with the rise of the next generation of architects, educated after independence and fascinated by the activity of the European avant-garde².

The attraction of the avant-garde was mainly linked to its dissociation from the past and the introduction of new cultural paradigms and criteria for aesthetic judgements into architecture, and a new language based on the functionality of forms. The power of this language turned out to be so strong that, as Rem Koolhaas notes, "architectures that were once specific and local have become seemingly interchangeable and global"³. The identification of the young generation of architects with the new idea integrated the Polish creative community with the aim of building a better world in which architecture was to play an important role in levelling social inequalities. Thus, *l'art utile* [useful], *l'art social* [social] and *l'art engagé* [engaged] were mentioned side by side. The ideas presented by the Praesens art group (from 1926–1930) began to be put into practice after some time with the establishment of the Warsaw Housing Cooperative [WSM].

It is no coincidence that the history of the Polish avant-garde of the interwar period is divided into two phases: (1) a phase of a theoretical nature (1919–1926), described as doctrinaire and utopian, and (2) a realistic phase (1925–1934) shaped by the 'young' generation, i.e. the generation of architects-modernists, continuators of the so-called Warsaw School⁴.

¹ I. Dexler, *Odbudowanie wsi i miast na ziemi naszej*, Księgarnia Polska Bernarda Połonieckiego/Gebethner i Wolff, Lwów–Warszawa 1916, p. 105. "cechą dobrego projektu jest szlachetna prostota" [noble simplicity is the hallmark of a good design].

² M. Jędrzejczyk, Szymon Syrkus. *Preliminarz architektury* [in:] *Teksty modernizmu. Antologia polskiej teorii i krytyki architektury 1918–1981*, t. 1, D. Jędruch, M. Karpińska, D. Leśniak-Rychlak (eds.), Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2018, pp. 63–65.

³ R. Koolhaas, S. Petermann, *Absorbing modernity 1914–2014* [in:] *Fundamentals*, R. Koolhaas (ed.), Marsilio, Venice 2014, p. 22.

⁴ M. Leśniakowska, *Awangarda w architekturze* [in:] *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku. Od awangardy do postmodernizmu*, G. Dziamski (ed.), IK, Warszawa 1996, p. 164.

1.2. THE PRAGMATISM OF THE AVANT-GARDE

The attempt to purge architecture of its historical trappings and to focus on architectural forms that were simple in design and functional was successful in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Functionalism, which was initially the language of the avant-garde, became so widespread that almost an entire generation of Polish architects began to make use of it. The new, fashionable style was also well received by investors. The convergence of interests and proper communication between the two groups led to a situation in which the avant-garde very quickly became the mainstream of architectural space. It can therefore be hypothesised that the key assumptions of the avant-garde architects of the 1920s proved pragmatic and easily adaptable for the construction industry.

The research method adopted for this study is to analyse the activities of state, social and private institutions towards the realisation of buildings with a functionalist style in the 1930s. The change that took place in the way architecture was perceived in interwar Poland in just twenty years is a phenomenon, the reasons for which should also be found in practical and technical issues.

There is an extensive literature on architecture concerning the period of the Second Republic. The main research source for this study are publications by architects of the interwar period. Since the 1990s, probably as a result of political changes, another wave of great interest of researchers in the interwar period and the topic of the architectural avant-garde can be observed. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that many articles and monographs on architecture have been written in the last decade.

2. ASSIMILATION OF IDEAS

2.1. PRAESENS – NEW GENERATION

In the early 1920s, the Polish architectural community was enriched by graduates of the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology. The staff of the Warsaw School of Architecture was educated in various parts of Europe, which resulted in an exchange of experience and the achievement of a high level of teaching⁵. Already the first generations of graduates became part of the European architectural avant-garde.

In 1926, the Praesens Group of Modernists was founded by Szymon Syrkus and brought together avant-garde architects and artists with a predominantly leftist orientation. Among them were Barbara and Stanisław Brukalski, Bohdan Lachert, Helena Syrkus, Józef Szanajca and artists Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski. The milieu centred around the issues of a new approach to art published in the journal 'Praesens'. In the pages of this quarterly for four years, the artists published articles in the nature of manifestos and introduced Polish readers to the postulates of the European avant-garde. The architects associated with this new ideological and artistic formation also presented their views in professional architectural magazines such as 'Architektura i Budownictwo' and 'Dom. Osiedle. Mieszkanie'. The adopted strategy of press publications was a necessary instrument for

⁵ K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Twórcy i dzieła Warszawskiej Szkoły Architektury 1915–2015*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, Warszawa 2017, pp. 33–53.

popularising views, facilitating dialogue with the public and contributing to the dissemination of the group's postulates to a wider audience.

The alliances with social movements, the striving for transnational integration of artists, the openness to the outside, the mobility of architects, the contacts established with the CIAM milieu (from 1928) and the active participation in congresses abroad (e.g. Congrès international d'architecture moderne, CIAM) made Polish architects part of a larger, international community of architectural reformers. They became part of the modern, universal international style, and became shareholders in the Comité International pour la Réalisation des Problèmes d'Architecture Contemporaine (CIRPAC). It is worth recalling at this point that the success of the leftist orientation was the reform of the curriculum at the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology – the introduction of functionalism and constructivism into design classes (academic year 1925/26). This reform in the spirit of modernity, “unfettered experimentation and creative freedom” was criticised in the press as leading “(...) to the proselytising of the ignorant”⁶.

Avant-garde postulates, especially those associated with economical functionalist architecture and devoid of historical references, began to be a common tool in the hands of architects in the 1930s. They were identified with modernity in the broadest sense. The new architecture had the potential to become a trademark of the new state.

2.2. THE ECONOMIC ATTRACTIVENESS OF FUNCTIONALISM

In addition to the symbolic influence of functionalism on the perception of new architectural space, the aesthetic assumptions of this trend were linked to the rational and economical realisation of residential architecture. The abandonment of ornamentation, the positioning and economic floor plans of dwellings and technological innovations aimed at lowering construction costs significantly legitimised the new style in architecture. Małgorzata Rozbicka draws attention to the efforts of the architects and constructors of the time to develop the most optimal form possible. These included attempts to use a variety of materials, including aerated concrete, steel and even wood⁷. Functionalism became a key tool to combat the housing shortage in interwar Poland. During the 1930s, almost all institutions concerned with general housing promoted this economical and pragmatic style. From the activities of the Warsaw Housing Community (WSM for short) to the great state investments of the 1930s, functionalism played a dominant role in Polish architecture.

One of the most spectacular state investments of the interwar period in Poland was the realisation of the Central Industrial District (COP for short). Along with the construction of industrial facilities, housing estates were built. Those intended for workers were realised with the participation of TOR (Workers' Housing Association), which had developed standards for low-cost housing, offering 1.5-, 2.5- and 3-room flats⁸. The housing estates in the COP cities met most of the demands of the Athens Charter. Their avant-garde character is pointed out by

⁶ M. Leśniakowska, *op. cit.*, p. 174, “(...) do protegowania nieuctwa” [to protect ignorance].

⁷ M. Rozbicka, *Małe mieszkanie z ogrodem w tle w teorii i praktyce popularnego budownictwa mieszkaniowego w międzywojennej Polsce*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, Warszawa 2007, pp. 287–302.

⁸ M. Furtak, *COP Centralny Okręg Przemysłowy 1936–1939. Architektura i urbanistyka*, Księży Młyn, Łódź 2014, p. 235.

Adam Rybka in his book “The Central Industrial District and Polish avant-garde urbanism between the wars”⁹.

The Army, which had invested in housing throughout the interwar period, moved away from the manor house style in the 1930s in favour of economic housing in the spirit of functionalism. The prevailing Great Depression, which greatly affected the Polish economy, may have largely contributed to this. As early as 1933, the architect Colonel Leopold Toruń, who headed the Construction Department of the Ministry of Military Affairs, in the pages of the magazine ‘Architektura i Budownictwo’, drew attention to the search for economical forms that would ensure a minimum of hygiene for the inhabitants in times of crisis¹⁰. He invited Romuald Gutt and Józef Jankowski to design model buildings for officers on Koszykowa Street in Warsaw. Toruń himself designed an extremely economical building for officers at Okęcie in Warsaw. It seems that it was these buildings that gave a new direction to the residential architecture realised for the Polish Army by the end of the 1930s.

Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK), the largest lending institution for housing investments, promoted economical, functionalist architecture on a large scale. It published catalogues of model houses and organised architectural competitions, which were often won by architects of the younger generation. In 1935, the BGK Building and Housing Exhibition was opened at Koło in Warsaw, where model residential buildings were realised.

2.3. NEW TECHNIQUES, FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND FORMS

Praesens’ design creativity adapted the standardisation foundations of Le Corbusier’s functionalism (‘5 points’), including the free plan and free elevation rule and the abstract mass.

Attention was paid to the efficient use of every square metre of small flats, their versatility and the possibility of change (flexibility). This was to be made possible by modular design, frame construction and lightweight partitions. The industrial production of components and new construction technologies were to meet the huge housing needs of the post-war population boom.

There has also been experimentation with materials. Examples include the use of lightweight concrete, timber and steel frame structures and prefabricated façade elements. The new reinforced concrete frame structures effectively displaced traditional brick wall systems, offering much greater scope for shaping and modifying the interiors of modern buildings. The already well-known Klein and Ackerman beam ceilings began to compete with the increasingly superior reinforced concrete ceilings including ribbed ceilings. Larger glazing and horizontal windows allowed a wider view of the world.

Worth mentioning is Bohdan Lachert’s villa in Warsaw (9/11 Katowicka Street) from 1928–1929, one example of an architect’s own house. As Ernest Niemczyk writes, these houses are a form of a kind of ‘self-reflection’ or ‘dream projection’. “They are,” the architect further explains, “the simplest experiments on oneself and one’s own family. They are manifestos, and often advertisements for creativity. They are self-portraits [...] and also a materialised statement on social reality and even – culture”¹¹.

⁹ A. Rybka, *Centralny Okręg Przemysłowy a polska urbanistyka międzywojenna*, Oficyna Politechniki Rzeszowskiej, Rzeszów 1995.

¹⁰ L. Toruń, *Kryzysowe domy Funduszu Kwaterunku Wojskowego*, “Architektura i Budownictwo” 1933, 2, pp. 33–38.

¹¹ E. Niemczyk, *Domy własne architektów wrocławskich 1900–34. Utopie kultury i artystyczne wizje* [in:] *Sztuka dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, A. Marczak (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 1982, p. 169.

The practical realisation of the programmatic postulates of the avant-garde formations was, in many cases, a synthesis of technical inventions and social expectations, bringing them close to Le Corbusier's functionalism. Noteworthy among the realisations of the inter-war period is the so-called 'red' housing estate in Warsaw's Żoliborz, an investment by the Warsaw Housing Cooperative.

The WSM realised nine experimental housing estates for workers and lower clerical staff, maintained in the form of purist functionalism (B&S Brukalscy, Zborowski, Żakowski). The linear housing estate designed by Helena and Szymon Syrkus in Rakowiec (1930–1936) was to use a steel structure, but this was replaced by brick during construction.

Criticism was levelled at the 'chaos in the urban fabric', due to the use of free planning, supported by the guidelines of the Athens Charter, and implemented in isolation from local urban planning recommendations (e.g. axial or radial layout). Warsaw's Saska Kępa – a villa district, full of exclusive residential houses – was also a training ground for the international style.

In the 1930s, there was a turn away from the international style towards modernised classicism and neo-regionalism. This 'style of the 1930s' – especially the style of monumental architecture – was a turn towards academic constructivism, not shying away from the classical rigours of symmetry, axiality; a turn towards what already existed, i.e. the modernism of the pre-war years (1910–1914).

This artistic phenomenon, new at the time, was aptly characterised by Szymon Syrkus, who in 1933 brought home news of current stylistic trends from an international meeting of architects – the CIAM congress. In one passage he wrote:

The same principles, functionalism – the construction, the plasticity of space created modern architecture. And that is why the pilgrimage to Greece strengthened us in the view that the PRINCIPLES of Greek architecture, not its EXTERNAL FORMS, are the guideposts for new construction (...) the early primitive – the image of young efforts – has more vitality than the mature thing, let alone the declining thing.¹²

3. CONCLUSION

The convergence of functionalist assumptions with the need for austerity does not exclude the symbolic layer of avant-garde architecture. It is worth noting, however, that the pragmatism associated with the application of avant-garde assumptions at the time may have been the main driving force behind the rapidly spreading style in the architecture of the interwar period – in the construction of the new Polish state; construction that expressed the state and nation in terms of power and dignity. Logic and rational building, as well as economic considerations, did not dominate architecture then, as is the case in contemporary real estate development projects far from the avant-garde.

¹² S. Syrkus, *Informacje o IV Międzynarodowym Kongresie Architektury Nowoczesnej* (1933). Citation: W. Baraniewski, *Klasycyzm a nowy monumentalizm* [in:] *Klasycyzm i klasycyzmy. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki*, T. Hrankowska (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 1994, p. 231.

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