

(Architecture and Avant-Garde in Poland 1918-1939)



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Themes in Architecture

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Errata Corrige

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- 6 There is a historical rule whereby the formal aspect of revival following a period of great upheaval is not subject to transformation with respect to the previous period until the basic needs in building are satisfied. Only then can the path leading to new concepts in architecture be opened up.

Poland, where the consequences of both World Wars left their mark not so much on the formal aspects of architecture as on building, has been no exception to this rule.

Both World Wars bulldozed their way across the territory of Poland in brutal totality, making the rebuilding of the entire country from scratch a universal necessity. At first this rebuilding proceeded within the old forms. The new architecture emerged later, in both instances with the onset of radical change in the concepts of art. The turning points came around 1926, when the International Style and other more or less modern trends were coming to be accepted; and in the years around 1950, when in the onslaught of Stalinist aesthetics the trends in architecture which had experienced their zeniths towards the close of the interwar period were on the wane.

Building in the Postwar Period: A National Historicism and Expressionism

The process of rebuilding which Poland underwent after the Great War was grounded on quite specific principles and had an idiosyncratic formal aspect of its own, since in 1918 as a result of the general reshuffle effected in Central Europe by the War Poland, who had been deprived of her sovereignty and partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria towards the close of the 18th century, was reunited and restored as an independent state. Her postwar programme of rebuilding therefore had to address not just the residential and immediate utilitarian needs of town and country, but also the exigencies of the various institutions of the revived State, which initially was too frail to commit itself to major investment.

The fundamental force regulating building after 1918 was of course the country's economic structure, the relative feebleness, or rather under-development of which was further aggravated by the damage caused by the War. Although the Polish Industrial Revolution had already started growing in the period following the Napoleonic Wars, it was not until the third quarter of the 19th century that there ensued a sudden thrust in the penetration of capital into the country and a concomitant acceleration in industrialisation and urbanisation. This was manifest primarily in the Russian



Partition, where the former capital, Warsaw, was becoming more and more metropolitan in character, and the "Polish Manchester", Łódź (founded in 1824) was thriving and growing.

But the predominant feature – right up to the mid-20th century – was an agrarian economy, and thus in the period under consideration as well urbanisation and industrialisation had a far more modest extent in Poland than in the West. The impact of this specific economic structure, enforcing mediocrity and a limited investment scale, is evidenced by the mass residential construction going on in the restored suburbs and small housing estates in a popular culture which had no recourse to the professional services of architects.

On the other hand the Polish architecture which emerged after 1918 above the provincial sphere in the cultural landscape was not just on a par with the European standard, but also enjoyed its own specific attributes. The over hundred years for which Poland was denied a place on the map of Europe had failed to disintegrate her culture, in spite of the fragmentation of the country, and on the restoration of independence there were no essential differences apparent in the architectural milieu nationwide in respect of tasks and artistic attitudes. It was not important that well into the second quarter of the century the most outstanding Polish architects had been educated abroad, chiefly in the German Hochschulen and the St Petersburg Academy. Some, like Marian Lalewicz (1876-1944) or Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz (1883-1948), were still adherents of the prewar academic Classicism, while others like Adam Ballenstedt (1880-1942) continued to promote the classically-oriented Proto-Modernism of the 1910s.

Such marginal emulation did not resurface until around 1925, and paradoxically this return was contemporaneous with the first experiences of the extreme avant-garde, and also with the origins of the "Third Stream", which was hostile both to tradition and the radical avant-garde.

Warsaw's polytechnical Faculty of Architecture had only been established since 1915, but a decade later its influence was already emanating over the entire country shaping the leading ideas and models in the "art of building". Meanwhile the only Polish Polytechnic in existence before the Great War, at Lvov (now in Ukraine), which had been founded in 1872, did not manage to create its own individual architectural environment. During the interwar period graduates of Lvov, though undeniably fully professional, nevertheless failed to stand out as artistic individuals and adopted Modernism in much the same way that

