

## POLISH THEATRE IN POZNAN; A HISTORY OF URBAN DECISIONS

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze design concepts for a part of Poznan city centre, where Polish Theatre is located. Acquisition of the plot and erection of the Theatre are a result of good organization and foresight of the Polish community, which in an oppressive situation, under Prussian administration, succeeded in this enterprise. Placing the Theatre deep in the plot is the best example of it. Its façade appeared after leaving a passage under one of the Theatre's "income houses", which lined the street. After the destructions in 1945, which the Theatre has luckily avoided, and demolitions carried out in the sixties, the problem of its surroundings remains unsolved. In the last fifty years several concepts of rebuilding this part of Poznan have been presented. The earliest one considered complete demolition of the old urban layout of the area, while leaving the Theatre. Subsequent propositions aimed at the exposition of the Theatre while retaining the old urban structure and buildings which survived the war and post-war decisions. Some of these plans are still interesting and worth attention. All of them remain solely a voice in a discussion over the shape of this part of the city centre. Today the Polish Theatre is surrounded by unplanned and randomly built space. Where once a busy frontage of a street was, a strip of grass precedes its façade. The design ideas of the last years bear the stigma of a developer's way of thinking. The designers turn to the form of a pedestrian street. The height of the new development radically surpasses that of the pre-war tenement houses and dwarfs the Theatre façade. In the new economic and social situation new solutions retaining *genius loci* of the place are badly needed.

### Streszczenie

Celem pracy jest analiza koncepcji projektowych dotyczących fragmentu centrum Poznania gdzie znajduje się Teatr Polski. Zakup działki i budowa Teatru są wynikiem poświęcenia, dobrej organizacji i przezorności polskiego społeczeństwa, które w warunkach niesprzyjających przepisów administracji pruskiej i negatywnego stosunku władz przeprowadziły inwestycję. Umieszczenie budynku Teatru w głębi parceli było najlepszym tego przykładem. Fasada Teatru pojawiała się po przejściu przez bramę umieszczoną w parterze jednej z należących do teatru „kamienic dochodowych” stojących w linii zabudowy. Od zniszczeń w 1945 roku, których Teatr uniknął i wyburzeń z początków lat 60. kwestia otoczenia pozostaje nierozwiązana. W ciągu ostatnich pięćdziesięciu lat powstało wiele koncepcji przebudowy tej części Poznania. Najwcześniejsza zakładała niemal całkowite wyburzenie okolicznej z pozostawieniem Teatru. Kolejne w różny sposób uwzględniały wyeksponowanie go przy zachowaniu dawnej urbanistycznej struktury i zachowanych po wojnie i wyburzeniach budynków. Niektóre z nich są wciąż interesujące i warte uwagi. Wszystkie pozostają jedynie głosem w dyskusji o kształcie tej części centrum miasta. Dziś Teatr otacza wciąż przypadkowo zabudowana przestrzeń. Tam gdzie niegdyś znajdowała się ruchliwa pierzeja uczęszczanej ulicy jest tylko pas trawnika. Koncepcje projektowe przygotowane w ostatnich latach noszą piętno deweloperskiego sposobu myślenia. Projektanci proponują formę ulicy-deptaka. Wysokość nowej zabudowy znacznie przekracza wysokość przedwojennych kamienic i pomniejsza fasadę Teatru. W nowych warunkach ekonomicznych i społecznych konieczne są nowe rozwiązania zachowujące *genius loci* tego miejsca.

Keywords: Urban development; Administrative restrictions; Endeavour of Polish community; Plot layout; Urban interior; War and post-war demolitions; Projects.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Big cities seldom retained their historical hubs in a perfect state; their function had changed as the time went by, and so did the buildings. In the last centuries public spaces of the central areas took on different functions as a result of further growth and deep social changes within the communities. Surroundings of the Polish Theatre in Poznań and the building itself, were subjects to a number of basic conversions that have occurred throughout more than hundred years of its existence. Some of the alterations they have undergone were results of intentional actions and some happened because of war, nevertheless they were always triggered by political decisions. History of the past and contemporary surroundings of the Theatre and plans of its developments portray trends and tendencies in town planning and architecture which have occurred in Poland since 1945. The struggle of three generations of architects, who in different circumstances aimed at creating an important boardwalk of growing city centre and appropriate background for an important edifice, may finally come to an end.

## 2. FINDING THE SITE AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE POLISH THEATRE IN POZNAN

The *Polish Theatre* as an institution came into being in the years when the Great Poland was subdivided and Poznań fell under Prussian rule. After a fall of the November Uprising in 1830, the germanization action has achieved its peak. Polish community of Great Poland opposed by building material and financial background for the upkeep and development of Polish identity there.

In 1869 Prussian administration softened regulations concerning repetitive permissions for every play presented in Polish language. This became an impulse for bringing into existence a company that staged plays in Polish. In the first period, the shows took place in different places and rooms which were used by theatre companies, but these interiors were deprived of reasonable technical background [1]. This was the time when the theatre troupes from Warsaw and Cracow visited Poznań, Wojciech Boguslawski's ensemble among them. In advantageous political situation an idea of erecting permanent seat for the theatre germinated within Polish circles. It was taken into account that in the city centre a new *German City Theatre* was already operating [2].

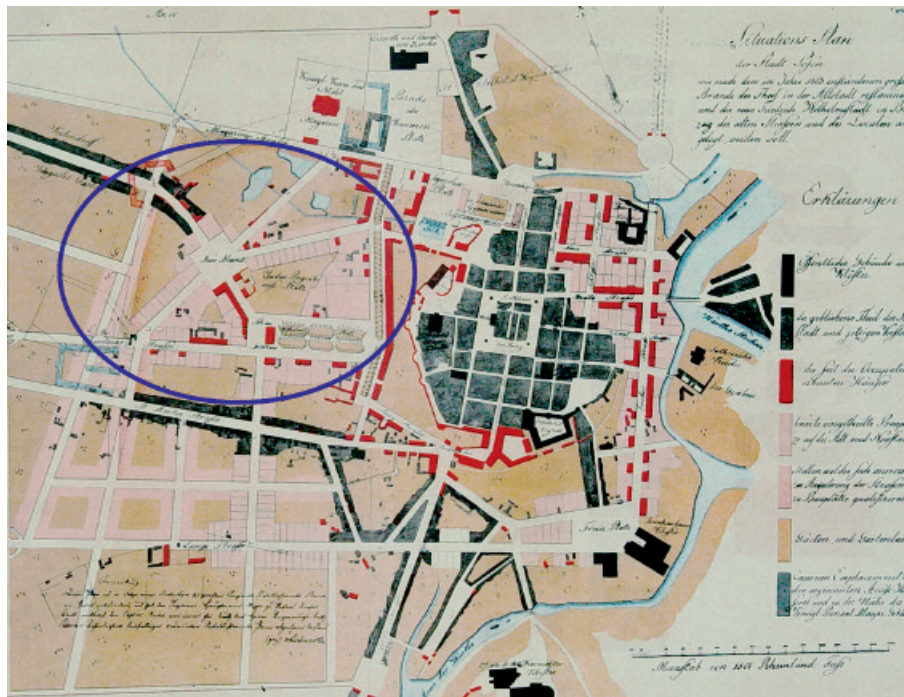


Figure 1. Plan of Poznań dated 1803, and the area covered by the plan by David Gilly; source: Plany Poznania, Wydawnictwo Miejskie 2010

The only way to find financial resources was to start fund-raising action which was undertaken by the charity organizations that reached all social classes of Polish community. Collection was carried out also in Galizia, on the territories annexed by Austria.

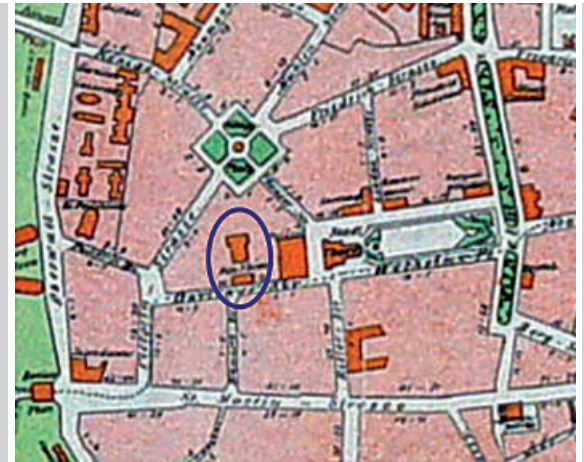
That was the time when Poznan was established Prussian stronghold and rapidly growing, owing to the influx of Prussian subjects. For them a new part of the city, outside the medieval walls was meant. In the years 1793-94, *David Gilly*, architect and town planner working on an assignment for the Prussian King completed the new plan. It was a new district typical for the German cities. Its main features were *Wilhelmsalee* (*Aleja Marcinkowskiego*), *Kaiser Wilhelm Platz* (*Plac Wolności*) and *Neue Markt* (*Plac Cyryla Ratajskiego*) from which four streets branched off radially.

In the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the south frontage of *Kaiser Wilhelm Platz* (*Plac Wolności*) was extended, starting a course of *Berliner Strasse* (now: *ulica 27 Grudnia*). It was planned to run to the rectangular place on the outskirts of this new development. Although the street was never built in a planned way, it can be noticed on the 1803 City Plan. Today, it terminates at the junction of *Gwarna*, *Fredry* and *Mielżyński's Streets* [3].

The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of economical stagnation, better prosperity came in the second half of the century, and the layout planned by *Gilly* was gradually filled with buildings. The owners of the plots and tenement houses in the discussed part of the city were German subjects and rich Poles, such as industrial entrepreneurs, building contractors and architects. The built-up of this part of Poznan was taking on an urban shape [4].

In the first phase of discussions concerning location of the theatre, several concepts of the outskirts locations were taken into consideration. Count *Bolesław Potocki* offered his plot at *Konigstrasse* (now *Libelta street*) which was the out-of-the-centre area in that time. It was not an answer to the ambitions of the Committee who considered the Theatre as a temple of Polish art. Eventually this plot was sold and money obtained from the transaction, increased by the sums from the issued shares allowed to buy the plot on which the Theatre stands now. The struggle for adequate financial background continued throughout the time when the building was constructed and furnished. Generous and wealthy sponsors were acquired, as well as open-handed designers and contractors. The *Theatre Company* had issued shares, and in the period of financial breakdown a new

*Building Company* called *Pomoc* was established. It supervised another enterprise: a tenement house which was meant to earn money for the upkeep of the Theatre. Struggle for money can be traced in changing names of the investment: *Polish Theatre in Potocki's Garden* – to honour the sponsor, and *Polish Theatre by Shares* to boost the shares action among Polish community of subdivided country [5].



**Figure 2.**  
A fragment of the city plan dated 1897 with indicated site of the Polish Theatre and outlet of *Bismarckstrasse* (*Kantaka*) facing it; source: *Książkiewicz-Bartkowiak D., Plany Poznania, Wydawnictwo Miejskie 2010*

This institution was meant for the city of 50 000 inhabitants, as this was the size of Poznan in the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fifty percents of them were Polish. The photos from that time show uncrowded streets, tram service and a lot of greenery. In 1890 there were already seventy thousand citizens, and in 1910 – one hundred fifty six thousand [6].

In year 1872, after many obstacles a large plot at *Berliner Strasse* (*27 Grudnia*) was repurchased from an architect *Stanisław Hebanowski*. There was already a tenement house in a line of the street and a garden behind it. The architect was obliged to prepare a design of the Theatre and to supervise its construction at no additional gratification [7].

Roughly at the same time, *Bismarckstrasse* (*ulica Kantaka*) was drawn as a link between *St Martin* and *Berliner Strasse*. Narrow road and pavements were dominated by very high, four storey, monumentally articulated tenement houses modeled upon Prussian “palatial” neo-baroque and eclectic prototypes. In that time the street was inhabited by higher rank Prussian clerks and was considered to be really metropolitan [8].

In the same period along Berliner Strasse several modest residences were built by Polish landholders, along with some costly tenement houses. On the corner of Kaiser Wilhelm Platz (Plac Wolności) the building of *Police Headquarters* was situated. It was forming the eastern frontage of the Place, facing German City Theatre that occupied its eastern part, and was later extended along the street [9]. Therefore, the location of the Theatre in the city centre and its quick erection despite the modest means, were very difficult tasks.

Its final location deep on the plot was symptomatic for the political and economic situation of Polish community under Prussian annexation. Firstly, it was a way to avoid expected obstacles made by the administration, which was likely to interfere with the prominent edifice built by the Poles. Secondly, existing tenement building was generating some income, and it was planned to be superseded with a new, monumental, profit-making volume, allowing free access to the courtyard where the Theatre dominated.

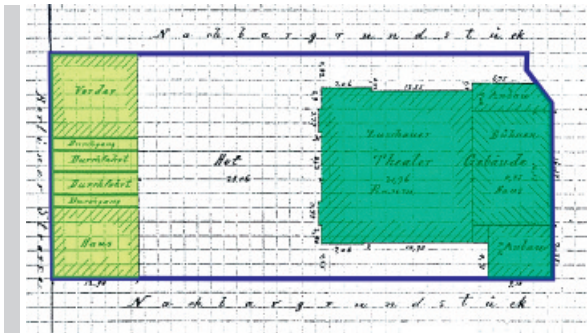


Figure 3. Plan of the first building plot bought from Stanisław Hebanowski, buildings of the Theatre and the first “income house” (study by K. Pleśnińska-Wasik, based on: [10], p.185)

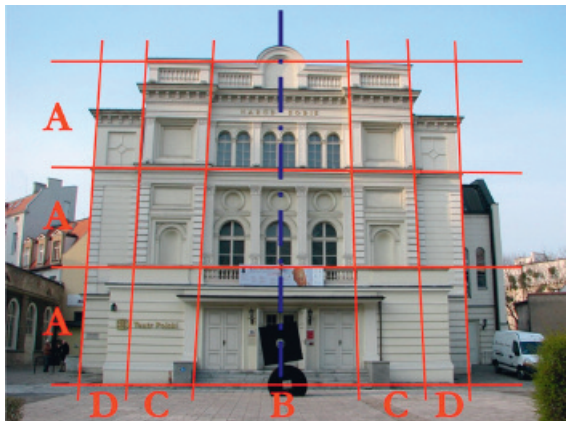


Figure 4. Analysis of the composition of the façade of the Polish Theatre (drawn by K. Pleśnińska-Wasik)

On the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1873 a corner stone for the Theatre was laid and the first performance took place in June 1875. The pace of works was really impressive, even by today's standards. The façade of the Theatre was observed frontally, from the distance of thirty meters after leaving the arched passage under the house lining the street.

In 1873 adjoining plot was acquired by bequest. This opened additional access to the Theatre courtyard and allowed to built a small extension to the Theatre to its west.

In 1890 a competition for the new tenement house was announced. Its functional programme included flats to let as well as premises for shops which were on demand in Poznan at that time. Technical standards of the house had to be high and its volume bigger than before, to ensure high incomes. After some perturbations over the proposed designs, the version by architect *Zygmunt Gorgolewski* was chosen, the author who is best known for remarkable *Opera House in Lwow*.

There were two main tasks to be achieved: to keep the street frontage as elegant as possible and enable access to the courtyard at the back of it. The Theatre had to be perceived as dominating over this space, despite being placed in the second row.

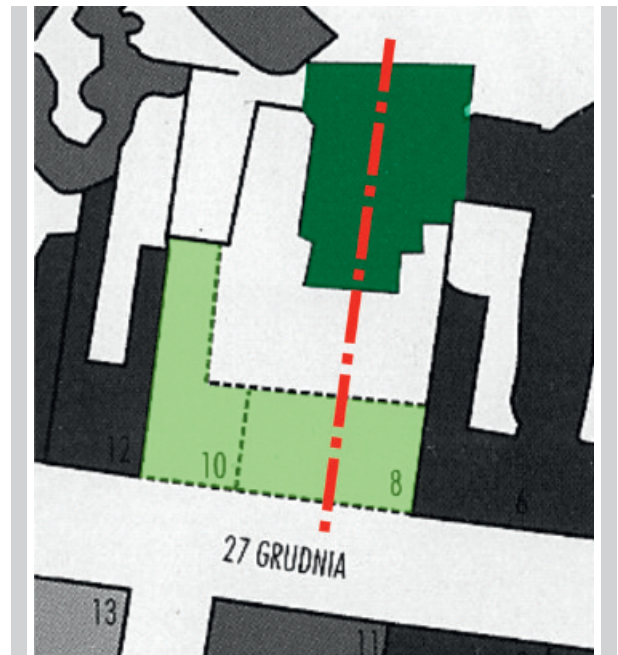


Figure 5. Study of the Theatre plot after extension and composition of the internal court. The second “income house” is developed towards the back yard. (drawing by K. Pleśnińska-Wasik on the basis of the fragment of a plan F39 29244 in Raczyński's Library Poznan)

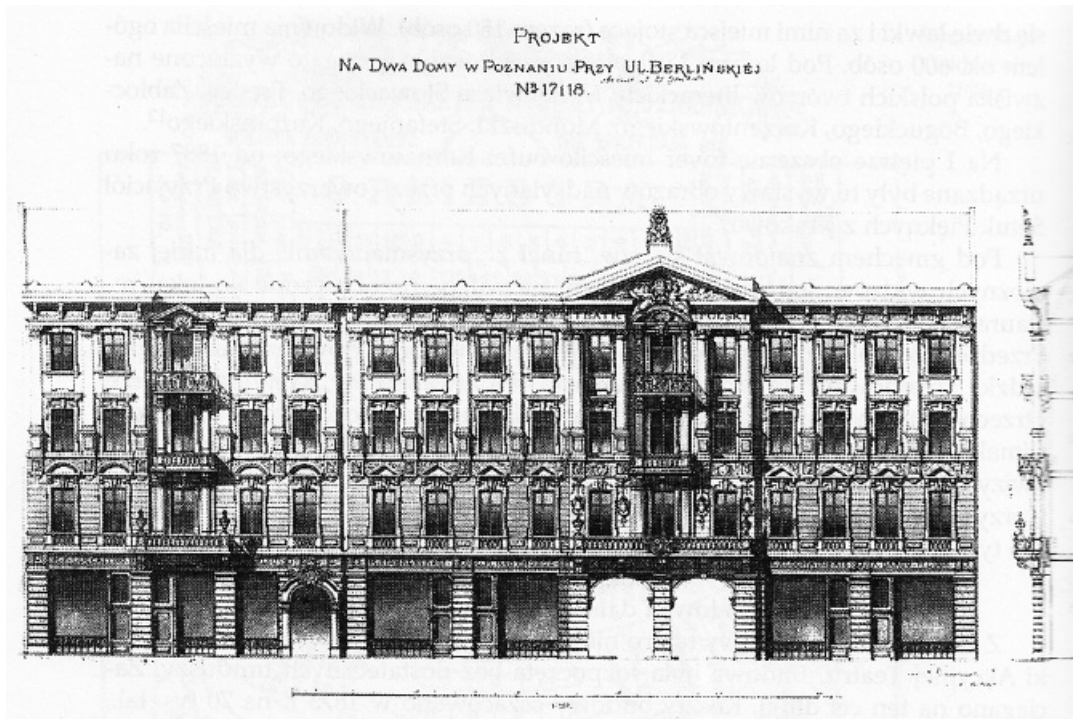


Figure 6.

The façade of the two tenement “income” houses designed by Zygmunt Gorgolewski. The passage leading to the Theatre is strongly accentuated (from: [12], p.190)

*Gorgolewski* had planned two tenement houses, similar in style, one of which, larger and more ornate, had wide double passage at ground level. It distinguished itself by well defined articulation, dominating tympanum and also by a long balcony over the entrance to the Theatre court. Under this balcony, gas, and later, electric lamps were hung. There were shops at the ground level and a hotel on the first floor. Through this double passage the passers-by could get a glimpse of the Theatre façade.

The other tenement house, narrower from the street has long backhouse extended into the plot. The front at the ground level was also let to the shop owners. The premises were called “income houses”, as such was their role in the whole enterprise [10].

After 1890, when the houses were already erected, surroundings of the Theatre were as follows: the courtyard was some 30 meters long, and over 35 m wide, passages under the house were 15 m long. The volume of the Theatre, circa 17 m. high was observed frontally, surrounded by the greenery of gardens. The courtyard was furnished gradually, formed by pergolas; a presentable flowerbed with a fountain facing the Theatre doors was built on its axis and gas lamps were provided. In the 1880s, access for pedestrians and driveway for carriages were paved.



Figure 7.

The Theatre courtyard dated circa 1900. Arrangement of the driveway and the pavements, lawn and pergolas is visible. Central flower bed includes ornate fountain (from [15] p.190)

The inscription *Teatr Polski* (Polish Theatre) was planned to mark the tympanum over the entrance to the courtyard from the street. As it was refused by the Prussian administration, a caption: *The Nation for Itself* (Naród sobie) was placed over the passages from the courtyard side [10]. It was read by everyone who was leaving the Theatre, and had definitely

deeper meaning. As for its presence in the yard, it was not objected by the Prussian authorities. In free Poland, after 1918, this inscription was engraved in the fronton of the Theatre.



Figure 8.  
Theatre court dated circa 1900, the caption: "The Nation for Itself" above the exit to the street is visible behind the group (from [16] p.187)

### 3. SURROUNDINGS OF THE POLISH THEATRE – THE THIRD DISCUSSION

After the war destructions in 1945 only the entrance arches remained marking the front of the "income houses". They were removed, leaving the open space that gradually was changed into a green square. The theatre itself was not damaged.

The state of preservation of the northern frontage of 27 Grudnia Street after the war destructions was as follows: the corner houses of Gwarna Street were demolished and this gap was replaced in 1954 by the characteristic, modern, cylindrical shopping centre by *Marek Leykam*. "Okraǳlak" is now one of few modernistic, listed buildings in the city. Along the street the next two tenement houses remained, followed by the gap left by the two "income houses" in front of the Theatre. The next two houses survived too, but the opposite end of this frontage, where the police headquarters was, was razed down.



Figure 9.  
The remains of destroyed front houses – the ruins of the passages that once led to the Theatre court. (from Jakimiec J. red.), *Teatr Polski w Poznaniu 1875-1975*, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza RSW „Prasa-Książka-Ruch” Oddział w Poznaniu, Poznań 1975

Following the modernistic tendencies in architecture and town planning and the post-war politics, all the "bourgeois" houses along this frontage were demolished in the sixties, opening the whole strip of the former built up frontage. It has opened also the field for discussion over the new shape of the Theatre's surroundings entailing several architectural competitions.



Figure 10.  
Situation of the build-up of 27 Grudnia Street, after erection of "Okraǳlak" in 1954 and before the demolitions carried out in the sixties. (drawing by K. Plesińska-Wasik, on the basis of the fragment of the plan F39 29244 in Raczyński's Library Poznań)

Post-war plans of the city development and competitions were supposed to solve the problem of destructions. After a period of so-called doctrine in culture in the so-called People's Democracy countries creativity was directed towards the trends imported from the West. As the economy of this region proved to be inefficient, the results of great scale competitions were of no practical significance. They remain, however, the statements of evolution of urban and architectural attitudes and trends. They are also the

record of relations between architects who were practicing in Poznan throughout the last fifty years and the 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural heritage.

Development of the city continued and the first period of modernism of the early sixties imprinted itself in Poznan's silhouette in the form of "Alfa" skyscrapers and several other high-rise buildings. Project which was submitted for a competition regarding the city centre in 1969 [11] represents grand-scale modernistic layout in which the Theatre is surrounded by lower than itself buildings while the preceding space is left open.

More moderate propositions were presented at 1972 competition [12], where height limitations were

imposed and the Theatre was perceived as a hub of a cultural centre of the city.

The next competition held in 1985-86 [13], was expected to give final answer to the future shape of its surroundings. The answers were numerous and had covered a wide range of concepts. These can be divided into three groups: concepts based upon reconstruction of the historical situation with its visual, spatial, and functional separation of the Theatre from the street; projects that completely or partially opened the view into the reconstructed green courtyard and projects that left the space in front of the Theatre wide opened, accentuating in a symbolic way its separation from the pavement. The front of the Theatre was always preceded by a green square.

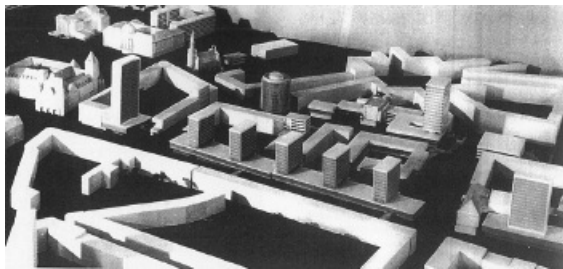


Figure 11.  
Accepted plan for the city centre of Poznan, a result of SARP competition from 1969, (after [5])

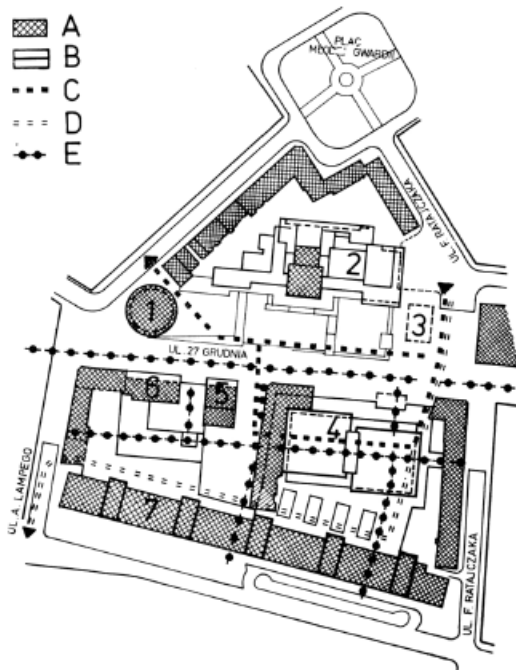


Figure 12.  
SARP competition no 496 a project putting forward the idea of the Theatre as a cultural centre of the city, proposing complete opening of its foreground. Authors of the project: A. Bzdega, M. Pruska, D. Pucek (after [12])

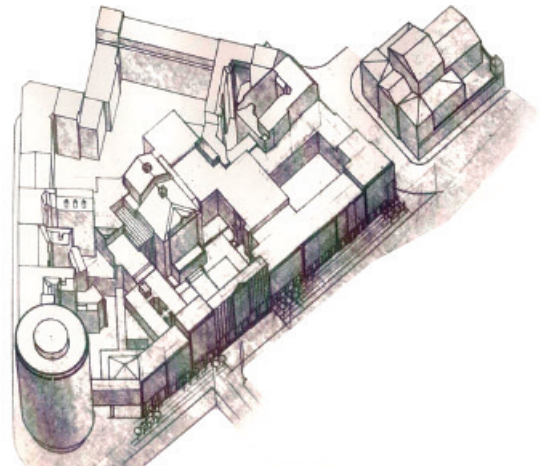


Figure 13.  
Solution adhering to the traditional view of the street. Team: J. Boncer, M. Pawlak, G. Pawlak, competition 1985-1986 (from [14])

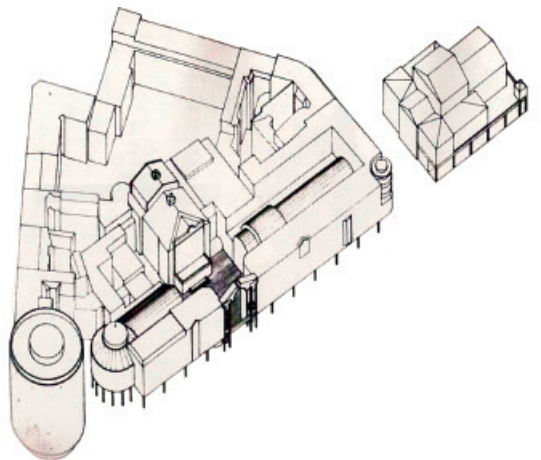


Figure 14.  
Work of team: J. Schmidt, J. Wroński, J. Jurek opens wide the interior of the Theatre court, accentuating it with the monumental "gate", competition 1985-1986 (from [14])

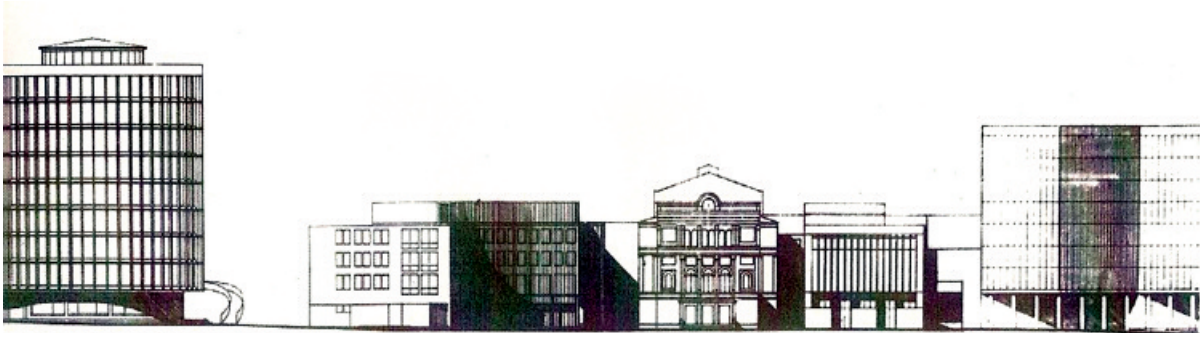


Figure 15.

A project which completely opens the space in front of the Theatre – radically enlarged court is enclosed by two new buildings – not higher than the Theatre. Team: J. Najgrakowski, W. Kolesiński, P. Czermiński, competition 1985-1986 (from [14])



Figure 16.

Also 1985-1986 competition- the Theatre court is kept in its former proportions, symmetry of the façade is continued by the adjoining buildings four and five storey high, which reconstruct the frontage of the street. It is cut off by a row of trees and a small symbolic double gate. Team: P. Wędrychowicz, P. Barekowski, P. Borkowicz, A. Kałużny (photo from private collection)

The last, most recent project is contained within the third of the above mentioned groups. It was presented by JEMS Architects from Warsaw, for the investor named Centrum Development & Investments S.A. Sp. z o.o. and published in the media [14].

According to the presented on the Internet visualizations, the structure along the street and Theatre Square is based on a steel frame grid filled with glass panels. Elevations strongly accentuate rhythms and protruding “windows” echo the structure of the former, 19<sup>th</sup> century frontage. Very high ground floor provides covered passage along the street. The two lower floors contain shops and services. Proposition of converting a street to the pedestrian area responds to the needs of the city's extending centre. The height of the development which repeats the line of eradicated frontage results in proportions of the street like 1 : 1½, which can be easily compared with the pre-

war situation. The street is shown on a number of photographs in which some of the existing houses lining the opposite frontage of it can be recognized. The proportions of the discussed fragment are 1:1.

This means the repetition of the proportions 1 : 1 ½ of nearby Kantaka Street, which was considered to be an urban achievement of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, although in Europe it was already the time of reflexion on hygiene, insulation and healthy living conditions.

For 27 Grudnia Street – a future pedestrian precinct – the concept of such height and proportions is not a return to the historical situation, it is exceeding it in the wrong direction. There is, however, another question concerning the Theatre. The courtyard in front of it, roughly the same size as the former one, was left open to the street with a busy tramline. This means that privacy of the original interior is lost, despite a real need of a shelter for coffee shop gardens, greenery, water etc. in this busy street. The new court took on the shape of a paved square shaded by six-storey office buildings. The Theatre façade loses its dominating role – which was a main target for the predecessors of today's designers.

The time that passed from the first discussions on the site and shape of the Theatre had several turning points when the situation and comprehension of the Theatre surroundings changed. At first it was a plan by *David Gilly*, drawn between 1793-94, giving the layout of the new district of Poznan and tracing Berliner Strasse (27 Grudnia Street). The next steps followed:

- acquisition of a site for the future Theatre from *Stanisław Hebanowski*,
- erection of the Polish Theatre founded by the Polish community, according to the plans by architect *Stanisław Hebanowski* through at the years 1873-1875,



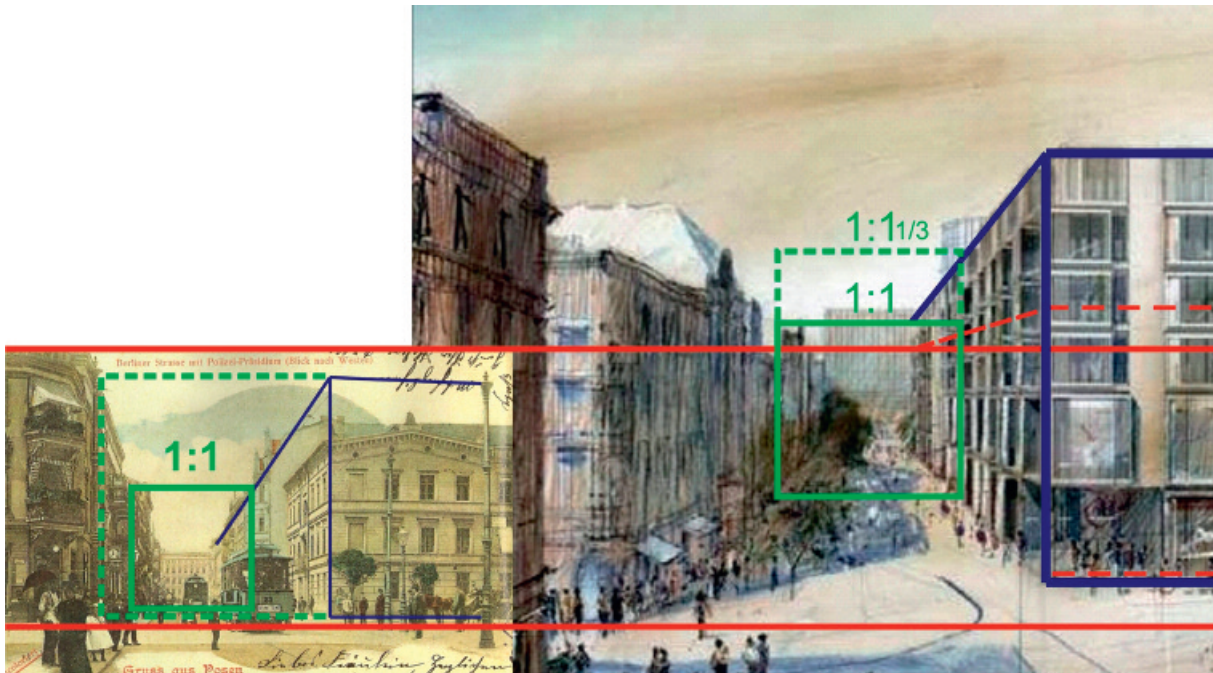


Figure 17.

The latest proposal of reconstruction of the space on which the Polish Theatre was built. New frontage of 27 Grudnia Street from 2008, (from [14]). The proportions of the street has changed in unfavourable way. Formerly, they were 1 : 1 and according to the project they will be 1 : 1 $\frac{1}{3}$ , as the study shows

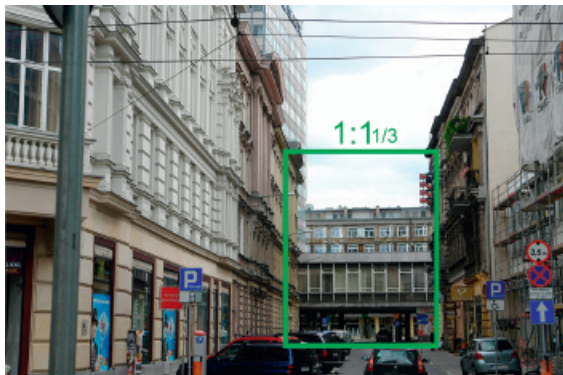


Figure 18.

Proportions of Kantaka Street, which was erected in the sixties of the 19th century, an icon of city architecture of that period. The new development at least repeats the proportions which today will be difficult to accept

- erection of the two representative “income houses” in front of the Theatre that started in 1891; architect *Zygmunt Gorgolewski*,
- 1945 – war damages resulted in opening the Theatre courtyard towards the street,
- 1954 “Okraślak” – the shopping centre was erected according to project by *Marek Leykam*, creating compositional counterpoint to the Theatre,
- in the sixties, post war demolitions extinguished the

rest of the street frontage leaving the space surrounding the Theatre open,

- through at the sixties, seventies and eighties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernistic concepts to rearrange the area were developed,
- 21<sup>st</sup> century – developer’s project of the area.

To summarize the history of old and new proposals and architects’ attitudes towards this unfinished for fifty years part of the city centre, the first conclusion is that it underwent in the most unfortunate way political configurations of that period. These were: post-war politically steered thrive to built “a brave new world” on the ruins of the past, then a short period of realistic look at the problems of developing city (ironically, in the People’s Republic time) and now gradually rising developer’s dictate. Permanent lack of funds, in some moments, may be presumed lucky in this situation.

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