

ARCHITECTURE OF RESIDENTIAL VILLAS IN INTERWAR WARSAW AS EXEMPLIFIED IN BOHDAN PNIEWSKI'S DESIGNS

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Abstract

In Warsaw residential architecture of interwar period special place took works by Bohdan Pniewski. It fills in the trend of luxury architecture. In 1930 Pniewski designed Zalewski's villa on Saska Kępa. Openness of the spatial solutions and expanded functional program testify to high standard of that building. His own house, constructed between 1934 and 1935, Pniewski treated as field of the experiments, a manifesto of his creative credo. Using a lot of sorts of stone he brought to life composition which could be named "Stone symphony". Pniewski used precious materials designing in 1935 duplex house at Klonowa street. In composition of that building there are evident echos of Le Corbusier ideas. Luxury villas by Pniewski stands out especially against the background of his earlier designs of co-operative houses, in which all solutions resulted from pragmatism and economy of "machine for living in". Paraphrasing of Le Corbusier words, Warsaw villas by Pniewski could be defined as "machines for nice living in".

Streszczenie

W architekturze willowej Warszawy okresu międzywojennego szczególne miejsce zajmowały prace Bohdana Pniewskiego, wpisujące się w nurt architektury luksusowej. W 1930 roku Pniewski zaprojektował na Saskiej Kępie willę Zalewskich. O wysokim standardzie budynku świadczyły rozwiązania przestrzenne cechujące się otwartością, rozbudowany program funkcjonalny oraz zastosowane materiały. Willę własną, realizowaną w latach 1934-1935, Pniewski potraktował jako pole eksperymentów, manifest twórczego credo. Używając wielu rodzajów kamienia, stworzył dzieło, które można by nazwać „symfonią na kamień”. Szlachetne materiały wykorzystał Pniewski projektując w 1935 roku dwurodzinną willę Urbanowicza i Muszyńskiego przy ulicy Klonowej 5. W kompozycji budynku widoczne były echa koncepcji Le Corbusiera. Luksusowe wille autorstwa Pniewskiego wyróżniały się na tle wcześniejszych jego projektów dla kooperatyw mieszkaniowych gdzie wszystkie rozwiązania wynikały z pragmatyzmu i ekonomii „maszyny do mieszkania”. Parafrazując słowa Le Corbusiera, warszawskie wille zaprojektowane przez Pniewskiego, można określić jako „maszyny do przyjemnego mieszkania”.

Keywords: Architecture of residential villas in interwar Warsaw; Luxury architecture; Designs by Bohdan Pniewski; Zalewski villa; Pniewski villa; Urbanowicz and Muszyński villa; Machine for living in.

1. INTRODUCTION

The villas took a substantial part of both, qualitative and quantitative share of the total range of interwar residential designs. They all showed great diversity of the aesthetic and spatial solutions. On one hand, we could find some traditional projects following the solutions and details worked out in the past and aesthetically classified as ones of the modernist historism.

On the other however, there appeared cubical, geometrical forms, typical for mature modernism, and promoted by the architectural avant-garde of that time. Occasionally some villas joined the reminiscences of the old styles with up-to-date, then modernist patterns.

Outstanding in this group were the designs by *Bohdan Pniewski* – one of the most prominent figures in the hall of fame of Polish 20th c. architecture. His works included numerous public edifices, now appreciated as icons of Polish modernism. The examples may be the Municipal Court building in Warsaw, built from 1935 through 1939, as well as an unaccomplished design of the Divine Providence church. A large part of all Pniewski's work was residential housing, where villas were the most distinctive designs, basically for the materials used and the spatial solutions applied.

Special attention should be drawn to some designs accomplished in Warsaw such as Zalewski villa in Saska Kępa area, the architect's villa in Frascati street as well as Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa in Klonowa street. Significant architectural values were accompanied there by very interesting locations.

2. ZALEWSKI'S VILLA

The house for *Andrzej Zalewski* was built in 1930 – 1931 at 13 Rzymska street in Saska Kępa district. The lot of nearly 2500 m² was twice as deep as the adjacent estates and reached as far as Miedzeszyńska street – part of the Vistula river boulevards then. *Pniewski* exploited such conditions. The villa itself was placed along Rzymska street development line, while the remaining, northern part of the lot was supposed to be a garden overlooking the river. Thus, it was the landscape, not only the architectural trend promoting the modernist slogans to determine the form of the building rich in terraces and balconies (figs 1, 2).

The mass of the villa was based upon interference of cubical elements. The façade overlooking the street was very simple, decorated with small windows decomposing extensive planes of the walls (fig. 3). Such design opposed the dynamically sculptured garden part, opening to the surroundings. It featured large vertically arranged port-fenêtres, balconies on triangular corbels, flights of stairs linking the terraces with the garden and the arcades supported by slim columns (fig. 4). The building was encircled with the roof cornice. The walls were sided with hammered feldspar and terrace floored with terracotta.

With the use of simple forms, all of them components of the modernist architecture, *Pniewski* brought back the spirit of classical architecture with recognisable overtones of three-party Palladian composition.



Figure 1.
Zalewski's villa, garden facade, as in 1932,
from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, No. 8, p. 239

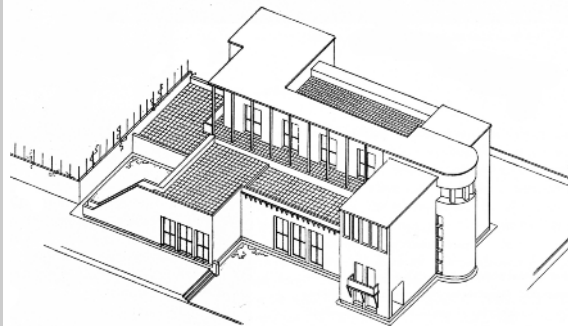


Figure 2.
Axonometry of Zalewski's villa from the garden side,
from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, No. 8, p. 239



Figure 3.
Zalewski's villa, street facade, as in 2006,
photo by the author

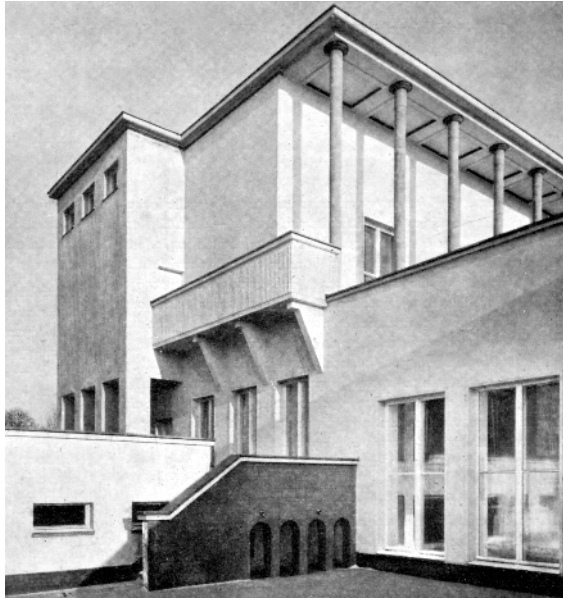


Figure 4.
 Zalewski's villa, fragment of garden facade, as in 1932,
 from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, No. 8, p. 238

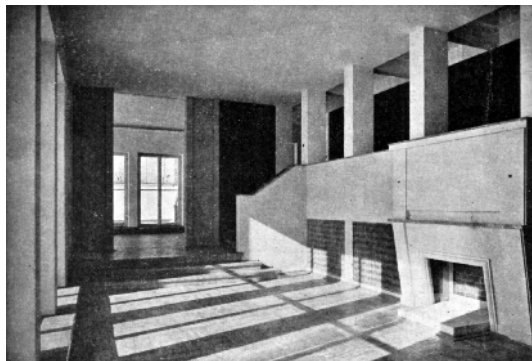


Figure 5.
 Zalewski's villa, hall with entresol, as in 1932,
 from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, No. 8, p. 241

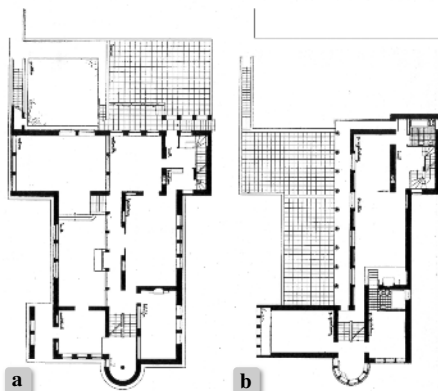


Figure 6.
 Zalewski's villa: a) view of the ground floor, b) view of the first floor, from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1932, No. 8, p. 242

Apart from the advantageous location and well-thought form, high standard of the building was proved also by a rich functional programme as well as spatial sophistication of the interiors. Pniewski emphasised the association of the villa with the landscape, designing the main fine entrance from the side of the garden while the kitchen door was entered from the street. Functional disposition of particular floors corresponded to the pattern developed by Palladio (e.g. in Villa Rotonda). On the basement level there were some service rooms; the living area of *piano nobile* was on the ground floor while bedrooms were designed on the first floor.

The heart of the premises was a sequence of interpenetrating interiors of the ground floor, showing different height and designed on different levels. A low vestibule led two a double-floor hall with a gallery linked with the living room overlooked by the boudoir entresol (fig. 5). All the rooms of 150 m² area surface have large windows acting as frames to the views of the garden. The ground floor was also occupied by the library and a large dining room (45 m²) with an annexe linked by an elevator with the kitchen located in the basement.

All the floors were connected with a staircase, additionally illuminated by a "thermometer" design, with semicircular landings and a column in the middle.

The top floor was divided by a guest room, two bedrooms with bathrooms and a studio opening with its large windows towards the arcades. Near the latter there was a small hall with a staircase leading to *mezzanine* with a shower and the solarium terrace invisible from the outside (fig. 6).

Erection of the villa witnessed the deepening economic crisis, therefore the good materials were used very modestly. Outside, the viewers eye was attracted by a colonnade lined with copper tin. Fine details of interior furnishings were all found in the representation part. Oakwood doors were set in the library and in the dining room. That in the boudoir was made of pear wood. The hall gallery walls were finished with feldspar while the balustrade and the sills were made of Kielce marble. Oakwood parquet with ebony inserts was laid on the floor. Radiators were hidden behind the brass shields.

The luxurious character of Zalewski villa was determined basically by the prestigious location in Saska Kępa area, overlooking the open perspective of Vistula river, perfect functional solutions and masterly spatial arrangements of the mass and of the

interiors. Fine materials, like stone, high quality wood as well as copper and brass details only complemented the sophisticated design.

Zalewski villa was partly destroyed in 1939. After the war it was rebuilt, no special attention was paid however to the details. The interior was divided into four flats and the surroundings were soon degraded. In the nineties of the 20th c., a motorway was built in the place of Vistula boulevard. The road was hidden behind the acoustic screens and in this war the villa lost its touch with the river.

3. THE ARCHITECT'S VILLA IN FRASCATI STREET

Between 1934 and 1935 *Pniewski* accomplished the design of his own house in Frascati street. The design was based upon the existing pavilion of the Masonic lodge built from 1779 through 1781 by *Szymon Bogumił Zug*. Since that time the building underwent numerous reconstructions and only some individual elements showed any historical value. Moreover, the plan was interfered with the designed alley.

Nevertheless, the architect was successful enough to join the restoration problems, restrictions imposed by the existing structures as well the urban planning aspects. The building sunk into the buttress preserved a historical classicist portico at the side of the garden. It was also decided to demolish the front part of the building deformed by lifting the ground level and interfering the course of a new street. It was also planned to add yet another floor.

Eventually, viewed from Na Skarpie alley, *Pniewski's* villa appeared as a cuboid mass, the top floor moved back, topped with a flat extending roof reaching the outline of the outer walls (fig. 7).

The façade from the side of the garden was cascade shapes and a terrace was constructed over the portico with Doric semi-columns found on the garden level. Similar arrangements were provided for the pylons, higher by one floor, supporting the main mass of the building from the top encircled by a balcony (fig. 8).

The largest room of the house was (more than 5 m high) fireplace hall, a reminder of the older building, placed on the garden level. It was that very place



Figure 7.

B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), view from Aleja na Skarpie, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 8.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), view from the garden, as in 2006, photo by the author

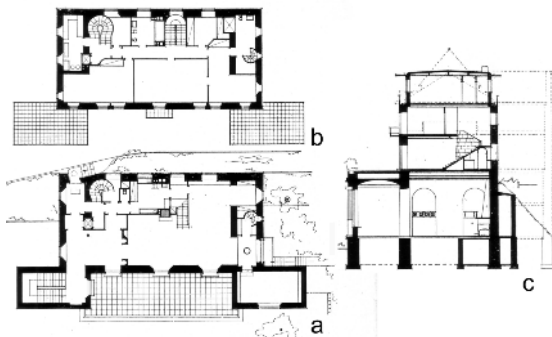


Figure 9.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), a) view of the high ground floor, b) view of the first floor, c) section, from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1938, No. 3, p. 90-91



Figure 10.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), fragment of the front facade, as in 2006, photo by the author

Pniewski converted into his studio. One floor higher, access provided at the level of Na Skarpie alley, he designed the living area with the linked spaces of the hall, the living-room and library supplemented by the service area with the kitchen. The last to come were two relatively low (approx. 2.5 m) floor rooms occupied by the bedrooms, bathrooms, dressing rooms, a kitchenette and a fireplace room (fig. 9).



Figure 11.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), entrance hall, as in 2006, photo by the author

Trying to characterise the villa in Na Skarpie avenue one may say it opens towards the surroundings, this however done in a specific way, taking advantage of numerous terraces and balconies. On the other hand, the main mass showed small windows which provided additional illumination rather than contact with the surroundings. This was probably done purposefully to draw the viewer's attention to furnishings of the interior.

Materials chosen by *Pniewski* for the façade and for the interiors were definitely considered as an experimental area and a way to manifest his artistic credo. The use of various types of stone showing different, often contrasting, texture, from polished surfaces to rustic looks, produced a masterpiece which could be called a "symphony of stone".

A prelude to this piece was broken, raw sandstone seen on the façade overlooking the street. The monotony was enlivened by smooth plates placed in one of the corners to form an irregular field. A Latin sentence in antiqua letters was engraved there. It said: "A climbing one reconstructed the Masonic temple to live in it". On the last floor irregular surface of the outer walls contrasted with the polished siding cut into squares. A detail worth noticing is a balustrade with stone railing supported by forged metal posts. (fig. 10)

The climax of the design is the interior joining several types of stone. In the entrance area, polished two-coloured marble was laid on the floor to produce geometrical patterns and to contrast the travertine wall finish (fig. 11). In the fireplaces found in the

living room and in the sleeping area, raw stone contrasted with smooth plates (fig. 12, 13). The library was also designed in an interesting way. Shelves were made of dark alabaster with bright veins and the ceiling was decorated with the embedded Hutzul mountaineer plates (fig. 14). Brilliant details of the interior are window frames of crème alabaster in the form of a coffer with oval edges.

The finale of such "stone symphony" was the garden façade framed with sandstone rustication which added some refinement to large plastered wall surfaces capped with a stone balustrade.

We would not hesitate to state that Bohdan Pniewski's own villa is the leading example of the luxurious trend in the architecture of Warsaw. It is thanks to the contribution of the following: unique location with picturesque landscape, sophisticated design well set in the historical structure as well as the author's approach who used his own house as a test field and some sort of a building laboratory to experiment in application and joining of a wide selection of stone, supplied mainly by Polish quarries.

Throughout the war period the house suffered only some minor damages and repairs were later supervised by the author himself. *Pniewski* lived there until his death in 1965. In 1966 his heirs sold the villa to Polish Academy of Sciences which converted it into the Museum of Earth and such is the house's present role. The fireplace hall and the living room have been adapted as exhibition space while the remaining rooms are now offices, service rooms and stores. The building is in good condition and the most interesting stone details have been well preserved.

4. URBANOWICZ AND MUSZYŃSKI'S VILLA

Built in 1935, the villa of Urbanowicz and Muszyński appeared as an asymmetrical semi-detached house of masses melting into a single design. It was erected on two lots adjacent to Klonowa street in the south. The owners, a solicitor and an engineer, who intended to join the residential function with work, appreciated the representative function. For this reason the house was located close to the street while some space for the garden was left in the deeper, northern part of the estate. (figs. 15, 16).

While designing the villa in Klonowa street, *Pniewski* was taking after his earlier experience with stone material, inspired additionally by the definition of modern



Figure 12.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), living room (now exhibition hall), as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 13.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), Pniewski's studio, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 14.
B. Pniewski's own villa (now Museum of the Earth), library – fragment of the shelves and of the ceiling, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 16.
Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa at 6/8 Klonowa street, view from the street, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 15.
Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa at 6/8 Klonowa street, view from the street, as in 2006, photo by the author

architecture as defined by *Le Corbusier*. The house was based upon a reinforced concrete structure partly supported by the posts. Such design ensured flexibility of the design and façade formed according to the author's free will. He used this to shape the exterior rich in light and shade tectonics and horizontal window bands. Modernity of the villa is also emphasized by the roof terraces as well as balconies with the garden linked by means of the stairs (fig. 17).



Figure 17.
Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, front facade of the house at No. 6, as in 2006, photo by the author

Geometrical and somewhat abstract expression of the façade was also due to square coffers with openings used in a screen hiding one of the entrances, blended into the fence (fig. 18). An exception to the elementary rules of the avant-garde was the lack of the building elevation on posts.

In the basement of both parts of the villa Pniewski designed the engineer's studio, the solicitor's office, the kitchen and other service rooms. High ground floor was designed as differently organised living and representation space with interpenetrating areas of the dining room, the living room and the entresol-boudoir. The sleeping rooms, the bathrooms and the dressing rooms were on the first floor. (fig. 19)

A great asset of the villa in Klonowa street was a carefully designed façade all made of hammered and rustic sandstone. Inside, home origin marble of "Barwinek", "Dębniak" and "Raclawice" brand were applied for staircases, the balustrade and entresols (figs. 20-22).

A refined element was an alabaster partition wall in a metal frame separating the living room from the dining room (figs. 23, 24).

Each aspect of the design emphasised high quality of Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, determining then the standard of the building, starting with prestigious location near Łazienki and the Belvedere, to end with fine details of the interior.

Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa survived the war time with no damage whatsoever and is the best preserved among the described buildings. In the inter-war period the house was used as a government facility.

In the nineties of the 20th c. the estate returned to the heirs. No significant changes were made and the house is now used for some offices.

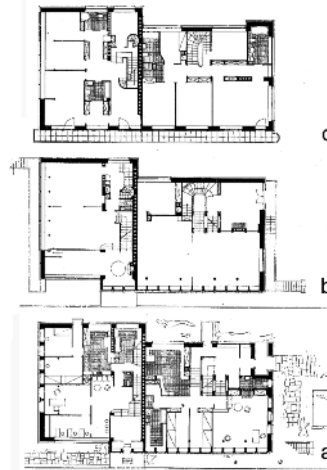


Figure 19. Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, a) view of the low ground floor, b) view of the high ground floor, c) view of the first floor, from: *Architektura i Budownictwo*. 1937, No. 2, p. 36



Figure 20. Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, living room in the house at No. 6, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 21. Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, living room in the house at No. 6, as in 2006, photo by the author

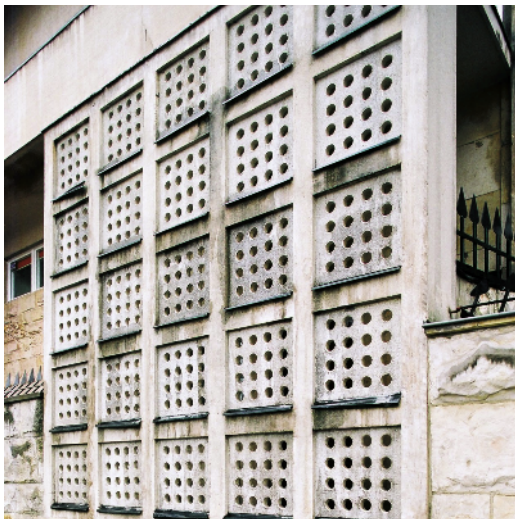


Figure 18. Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, screen by the entrance to the house at No.8, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 22.
Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, staircase in the house at No. 8, as in 2006, photo by the author



Figure 23.
Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, fragment of the living room in the house at No. 8, as in 2006, photo by the author

5. CONCLUSION

Considering the quantity and quality of the materials used to erect the above described buildings, it was definitely Pniewski's own house to take the leading position; this one was followed by the villa in Klonowa street. Both were erected after 1933 when the law on



Figure 24.
Urbanowicz and Muszyński's villa, alabaster screen separating the living room from the dining room at the house No. 8, as in 2006, photo by the author

state assistance for the building sector was enacted. It entitled the investors to write the building expenditures off their overall income and assumed certain relieves in the real estate and real estate revenue taxes. Such legal regulation contributed to the development of luxurious architecture, encouraging to spend more on construction which as a result allowed even to remain within the lower tax rate range.

To realise even better the luxurious trait of the villas designed by *Pniewski*, it would be best to compare them to other designs developed in the thirties, for example by *Lucjan Korngold*, *Bohdan Lachert* and *Józef Szanajca* as well as *Helena* and *Szymon Syrkus*. Their designs were all the offspring of pragmatism and the idea of the "machine for living". In their projects, fine materials were used at least modestly.

To paraphrase the words by *Le Corbusier* we might say that the Warsaw villas were designed as "machines for pleasant living". They are all outstanding examples of the residential villa architecture in interwar Warsaw.

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