

# THE CASTLE MANOR OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND IN WISŁA AND TUGENDHAT VILLA IN BRNO – TWO CONTRADICTORY FORMULAE OF PRESTIGE IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF INTERWAR AVANT-GARDE

Ewa CHOJECKA \*

\* Professor Emeritus of Silesian University in Katowice

E-mail address: [ewachojcka@poczta.onet.pl](mailto:ewachojcka@poczta.onet.pl)

Received: 27.06.2008; Revised: 05.08.2008; Accepted: 13.08.2008

## Abstract

The paper is a comparative analysis of two outstanding architectural achievements – the Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła, by Adolf Szyszko Bohusz and Tugendhat Villa in Brno, by Mies van der Rohe. The objective of such comparison is to show the wide scope of shades and nuances of those architectural masterpieces as well as fine art which by its very programme was assumed as uniform. So different in their appearance, both projects were denied by the brown and red totalitarianism. The Nazi notion of “degraded art” marked Tugendhat Villa while the manor in Wisła was regarded as the product of capitalist exploiters and enemies to the people. Throughout the post-war decades both buildings were used regardless their artistic values. The villa used to accommodate the stables, a dancing school and an outpatient clinic, the manor in Wisła served as a penal institution and a holiday resort. In 1993 the villa was granted the status of a museum and a monument of national culture and placed on the UNESCO list of cultural heritage. The president’s castle was renovated in 2006 to regain its function of the manor of the head of the state.

## Streszczenie

W artykule dokonano analizy porównawczej dwóch wybitnych dokonań architektonicznych – Zamku Prezydenta RP w Wiśle, autorstwa Adolfa Szyszko Bohusza i willi Tugendhat w Brnie Morawskim, autorstwa Miesa van der Rohe. Porównanie to ma na celu pokazanie wielorakości odcieni i niuansów tej architektury i sztuki, która uchodzi za programowo jednolitą. Te dwa tak odmienne dzieła były negowane, w okresach rządów totalitarnych. Nazistowskie hasło „sztuki zdegradowanej” przystawało do willi Tugendhat, natomiast zamek w Wiśle uznano za wykwit kapitalistycznych wyzyskiwaczy i wrogów ludu. Przez dziesięciolecie powojenne obydwa budynki były wykorzystywane z pominięciem ich wartości artystycznych – w willi znajdowały się stajnie, szkoła rytmiki i ośrodek leczniczy, zamek wiślański był natomiast miejscem odosobnienia i zwykłym domem wczasowym. W 1993 willa otrzymała status muzeum, narodowego pomnika kultury i została wpisana na listę dziedzictwa kultury UNESCO. Zamek prezydenta został w 2006 roku zmodernizowany i ponownie pełni pierwotną funkcję rezydencji głowy państwa.

Keywords: Modernism; the architecture of interwar avant-garde; prestige; comparative analysis; artistic values.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The artistic landscape of the middle European avant-garde of modernity is rich in phenomena which have frequently been considered as separate issues. This contribution is an attempt to compare two outstanding architectural accomplishments in order to recognise the diversity of shades and the nuances of architecture and art so far assumed uniform in terms of their pro-

grammes. Both works were completed exactly at the same time, in Poland and Czechoslovakia – two countries which emerged following World War I – and where the search of new cultural identity involved also discussion with the new art to come.

## 2. THE CASTLE MANOR OF THE PRESIDENT IN WISŁA

The presidential manor in Wisła was erected following the initiative of the autonomous authorities of the Silesian region and of the voivode – *Michał Grażyński*. The building was intended to serve as the residence of the President of the Republic of Poland and the construction was supported by the Silesian Treasury funds. The architectural design was delivered free of any charge by *Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz* of Kraków.

Construction started in 1929 and was completed in 1930; in January, 1931 the building was commissioned by the Office on the President Ignacy Mościcki.

The manor's furnishings include the formist polychrome by Andrzej Pronaszko and furniture designed by the same artist. The furniture of bent chrome steel and sycamore veneer originate from constructive Dutch solutions of De Stijl as well as Bauhaus.

The manor is situated on a steep slope in Beskid mountains overlooking the mountain landscape and, what is symbolical, the springs of Vistula river nearby.

The manor park preserved the natural forest character. The castle manor was erected on the 1/5 circle plan producing therefore a double effect: dynamic expansion towards the mountain panorama and the centric one from the courtyard and the forecourt side. The building mass incorporates two contradictory segments: the elongated middle body with a stately entrance along its axis and two asymmetrical side tower blocks giving the building a distinctive castellated style. Such character is emphasised even more by the stone siding in the form of "opus spicatum". Large and regular window openings are made more dense by fine woodwork.

Apart from the private side suites and service rooms, the spatial focus of the interior is a tremendous living room-veranda, preceded by a hall and stretching along the ground floor.

This is where the residents gathered for their reunions.

The concept of the manor replaced the traditional defensive castle pattern with a manifesto of opening to the nature and to the civil life ideals. The manor exteriors make clear references to the old manor traditions as well as those of villa rustica. On the contrary, the interior is shaped following the modern avant-garde mode. This gave birth to an interesting dichotomy of representation and privacy.

Old records point to an interesting colour pattern of the interiors where grey-yellow-pink shades contrasted with navy blue woodwork, yellow accents and light grey floor. These provided the background for shiny chrome lines of the furniture as glass table tops. As commented at that time it was the expression of "modernity containing lucidity and clarity, sophisticated simplicity, discretion and refinement".

The manor in Wisła is the accomplishment of the model of modern representation, in the attempt of defining it as a republican-intelligentsia one, deprived of any dynastic or ancestral prestige, as legitimization of the building bases upon the authority of the elected leader of the state.

Another role of the castle manor in Wisła was to emphasise the presence of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic in the territories then referred to as Western Borderland.

## 3. TUGENDHAT VILLA IN BRNO

A remarkable contrast to the Polish phenomenon described above is a fine Tugendhat villa in Brno.

The building was erected exactly at the same time, i.e. 1929 through 1930, for *Fritz Tugendhat* and his wife *Greta Löw-Beer*, representatives of the German-speaking great bourgeoisie of Brno, showing Jewish ancestry, cosmopolitan cultural orientation and a tremendous financial potential. To them, the vanguards of Berlin, Dessau Bauhaus and its leader *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*, appeared as perfect contractors supposed to design a modern, urban villa serving as a private residence.

The building is situated on a steep slope high above the city, overlooking the panorama of Brno, the Spielberg castle and the cathedral towers. While the manor of Wisła entered into a dialogue with the mountain nature, the villa of Brno talks to the city.

The traditional spatial order is reversed. Hidden behind the rounded milky glass wall, the entrance from the street is invisible, while a "dumb" façade of this side resembles a warehouse rather than a villa. The only enlivening element is the span with the view of the city.

Expression of the building should be sought at the garden side while the reversed spatial order leads from the main entrance to the top floor where the bedrooms are situated. Only following a narrow spiral staircase, the main living space of the ground floor is reached; as a single continuum it stretches across the width of the building. Smaller elements have been separated from this large space to provide the mas-

ter's of the house studio, a place to eat and a space to relax, those marked by partition walls of Moroccan onyx and a semicircular ebony apse. Glass plates filling the whole window openings ensured proper thermal insulation, yet providing an undisturbed view of the urban panorama. The steel skeleton of the bearing structure may be recognised in thin shiny chrome posts.

Such an architectural design was “transparent” by its very assumptions; flowing spaces of the interior and of the exterior interfere with each other, the furniture follow a formula similar to that applied in Wisła and the furniture themselves contain minimum of the material to bring yet another transparent structure. This is emphasised by the white floor lino as well as white ceilings and walls which seem to disappear or rather melt in such a spatial beam. Some contrasts are produced by the yellow and ochre tone of the onyx wall, brown shades of ebony and rosewood as well as a golden shine of the travertine floor.

Whereas the furnishings in Wisła have been relatively well preserved, those of the villa in Brno were just small remnants and therefore were then reconstructed.

Tugendhat villa with all the luxurious materials used, showing off onyx, travertine, ebony, rosewood, moving walls and curtains of shantung silk, appears as the contradiction of the Bauhaus idea of a cheap minimum-apartment. The message it conveys comprises the ideas of family privacy, technical comfort, refined aesthetics, avant-garde simplicity and luxury. An inhabitant of such a fluid and not ultimately defined space is always capable of shaping it depending on his own needs and to govern it, both in terms of physical criteria as well as those of his imagination.

#### 4. TWO CONTRADICTORY FORMULAE OF PRESTIGE IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF INTERWAR AVANT-GARDE

None of the works quoted should be analysed in terms of valuation, distinguishing among any better or worse modernity. I suggest then to apply another criterion – that of their individual dissimilarity. Both buildings were erected during the interwar period, when illusive optimism and the end of the great world crisis seemed to bring hope. Therefore, both designs appear as if charming the history. They assume an Utopian vision of a marvellous world arranged according to the modern norm, or rather two norms, I shall now try to compare:

**Table 1.**  
**Comparative analysis of features of buildings**

THE PRESIDENTIAL MANOR IN WISŁA	TUGENDHAT VILLA IN BRNO
state residence	private family house
referring to old castle and noblemen manor traditions	no historical reference assumed
national allusions	cosmopolitan
pluralism in style	orthodox formal homogeneity
located in the mountains	located in the city
reinforced concrete skeleton masked by brick and stone siding	steel bearing frame seen in chrome posts in the living-room
no architectural context	extensive context of modern urban architecture

Another question that accompanied Tugendhat villa since its very beginning has been: “Can one actually live in a house like that?”. A similar question could be asked about the castle manor in Wisła and answers would probably differ depending on the time.

The fate of both works was very similar. The life of Tugendhat villa ended in 1938 while the end of the castle manor came a year later. Both totalitarian regimes, the brown and the red one disapproved of them, although for quite different reasons. The Nazi notion of “degenerated art” matched perfectly the villa in Brno, while the manor in Wisła was sentenced to oblivion first as the work of a country regarded as ‘the bastard of the Versailles treaty and then as one erected in a capitalist state of exploiters and enemies of the people.

Throughout the post-war decades both buildings were used, their artistic values abandoned; Tugendhat villa served as stables, a dancing school and an outpatient clinic whereas the manor in Wisła was the destination of political exile and later an ordinary holiday resort.

The fortunes changed only when a new way of thinking was allowed to bring back and appreciate the heritage of the interwar period. Those who contributed most were the scientific circles of art historians, architects and restorers.

In Brno the breakthrough come along with the Prague Spring 1968 when a large exhibition of *Mies van der Rohe*, an international conference and the presence of Greta Tugendhat broke the conspiracy of silence. Unfortunately this had not been for long as the period of “normalisation” cancelled the issue. It

was only in the eighties that first renovation works were commenced and a scientific discussion initiated by an art historian – *Wolff Tegethoff* and a restorer – *Iwo Hammer*. In 1993 the villa turned then into a museum, gained the status of the monument of national culture and as such put on UNESCO list of world cultural heritage.

Neither such restitution momentum nor promotion campaign in the media have been witnessed in Poland. Although the manor underwent a thorough and careful renovation which completed in 2005 restored the original shape of the building as well as its original function of the residence of the head of the state and the museum, this was accompanied by the populist protests of some groups, complaining about the alleged waste of public money.

Tugendhat villa has seen restitution of its cultural and artistic prestige. As the monument of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde it was promoted by the media recognising it as a unique phenomenon worldwide. Such was the concern of the Czech and German scientists, journalists and opinion-forming circles. Analysis of this process of restoring the remembrance and prestige could be enough for a separate project.

Yet, widespread popularisation of the cultural, historical and artistic merits of the manor castle in Wisła needs some more calm waiting.

## REFERENCES

- [1] *Borusiewicz-Lisowska M.*; Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz – twórca Zameczku w Wiśle (Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz – creator of the castle manor in Wisła) (in:) *Ziemia Śląska*, 4, Lech Szaraniec ed., Katowice 1997, pp. 207-214, (in Polish)
- [2] *Długajczyk E.*; Nowy Zamek w Wiśle – jego budowa i użytkownicy do 1945 roku (New Castle in Wisła – construction and users before 1945 (in:) *Ziemia Śląska*, 4, pp. 215-229, (in Polish)
- [3] *Chojcka E.*; *Pomiędzy historią a nowoczesnością. Treści ideowe Zamku Prezydenta RP w Wiśle (Between History and Modernity. The Ideas Behind the Castle of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła)* (in:) *Ziemia Śląska*, 4, pp. 231-245, reedited along with the English version, Jacek Purchla ed., Cracow 2005, pp. 11-20.
- [4] *Świechowski Z.*; *Awangarda na usługach elity władzy. Wystrój i meble Zameczku Prezydenta RP w Wiśle (The Avant-garde in the Service of a Power Elite: the Interior Decoration and Furnishings of the Castle of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła)* (in:) *Ziemia Śląska*, 4, pp. 275-285, reedited along with the English version, Jacek Purchla ed., Cracow 2005, pp. 21-28.
- [5] *Mrozek J.M.*; *Zameczek Prezydenta RP w Wiśle na tle twórczości Adolfa Szyszko-Bohusza (Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland against the Background of the Work of Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz)* (in:) *Ziemia Śląska*, 4, pp. 311-322, (in Polish)
- [6] *Purchla J.*; *Zamek Prezydenta RP w Wiśle. Pomiędzy tradycją II i III Rzeczypospolitej (The Castle of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła. Spanning the Tradition of the Second and the Third Republic)* (in:) *Zamek Prezydenta RP w Wiśle*, Jacek Purchla ed., Cracow 2005, pp. 7-10.
- [7] *Wiśniewski M.*; *Architektura Zamku Prezydenta RP w Wiśle (The Architecture of the Castle of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła)* (in:) *Zamek Prezydenta RP w Wiśle*, Jacek Purchla ed., Cracow 2005.
- [8] *Wiśniewski M.*; *Konserwacja Zamku Prezydenta RP w Wiśle (The Conservation Project for the Castle of the President of the Republic of Poland in Wisła)* (in:) *Zamek Prezydenta RP w Wiśle*, Jacek Purchla ed., Cracow 2005, pp. 39-44.
- [9] *Konarzewski D.*; *Zanim powstał Zamek (Before the Castle was Built)* (in:) *Zamek Prezydenta RP w Wiśle*, Jacek Purchla ed., Cracow 2005, pp. 45-48.
- [10] *Kudelka Z., Teplý L.*; *Vila Tugendhat*, Brno 2001.
- [11] *Tugendhat D., Tegethoff W.* (ed.); *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Das Haus Tugendhat*, Wien – New York 1998 (collection of essays).
- [12] *Das Haus Tugendhat. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*, Brunn 1930, Salzburg 1999. (collection of essays on conservation of architecture and furnishings).
- [13] *Lizon P.*; *Villa Tugendhat in Brno. Continued Restoration* (in:) *DO.CO.MO.MO. International working party for documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of modern movement. Journal 17*, September 1997, pp. 16-18.



**Figure 1.**  
Wisła. Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland, the entrance portal



**Figure 2.**  
Wisła. Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland, the terrace side view



**Figure 3.**  
Wisła. Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland, the ground floor hallway



**Figure 4.**  
Wisła. Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland, the main corridor



**Figure 5.**  
Wisła. Castle Manor of the President of the Republic of Poland, president's studio furnishings



**Figure 6.**  
Brno. Tugendhat Villa, view of the façade from the street



**Figure 9.**  
Brno. Tugendhat Villa, living-room with the onyx wall and reconstructed furnishings



**Figure 7.**  
Brno. Tugendhat Villa, entrance with the viewing span



**Figure 8.**  
Brno. Tugendhat Villa, view from the garden



**Figure 10.**  
Brno. Tugendhat Villa, perspective of the main interior with a line of chromium plated structural columns

All photos by Ewa Chojecka.