

UPPER SILESIA MODERNISM AND ITS INTERWAR LUXURIOUS ASPECT

Ryszard NAKONIECZNY *

* Faculty of Architecture, The Silesian University of Technology, 7 Akademicka street, 44-100 Gliwice, Poland
E-mail address: ryszard.nakonieczny@polsl.pl

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Abstract

Four major periods may be distinguished in modernist architecture of Upper Silesia.

1. early stage (Jugendstil, expressionism)
2. mature phase (functionalism, Neues Bauen)
3. late stage (organic or angular trend within the sculpture style, brutalism and prefabricated standardisation)
4. return to the aesthetic patterns of radical modernism (neomodernism)

Among many other outstanding examples of interwar functionalism, the second period showed also the so-called luxurious trend, denying the principles of radical modernism. It may be distinctively recognised in the architecture of public buildings, throughout both, Polish and German sides of Upper Silesia, separated then by the state border. The luxurious trend in residential estates was present only in Polish part of the region, mainly in Katowice – the capital of the autonomous Silesian district. The Germans focused mainly on social housing financed from the state funds, thus the luxurious features would appear absolutely irrelevant.

Streszczenie

Modernizm w architekturze Górnego Śląska można podzielić na 4 podstawowe etapy:

1. wczesny (jugendstil, ekspresjonizm)
2. dojrzały (funkcjonalizm, „Neues Bauen”)
3. późny (nurt organiczny lub kanciasty w ramach stylu rzeźbiarskiego, brutalizm, standaryzacja wielkopłytkowa)
4. powrotu ku estetyce radykalnego modernizmu (neomodernizm)

W 2 etapie rozwoju tego stylu, wśród wielu wybitnych przykładów międzywojennego funkcjonalizmu zaznaczył się również tzw. nurt luksusowy, który przeczył zasadom radykalnego modernizmu. Szczególnie widoczny jest on w budowach publicznych zarówno po polskiej jak i niemieckiej stronie Górnego Śląska, podzielonego wówczas granicą państwową. Nurt luksusowy w budownictwie mieszkaniowym występował wyłącznie w polskiej części regionu, głównie w Katowicach – stolicy autonomicznego województwa śląskiego. Niemiecka część rozwijała przede wszystkim socjalną zabudowę mieszkaniową, finansowaną ze środków państwowych, stąd nurt luksusowy w takim przypadku stał się całkowicie nieodpowiedni.

Keywords: Modernism; Expressionism; Functionalism; Neues Bauen; Late Modernism; Interwar Luxurious Trend.

1. MODERNISM IN UPPER SILESIA

It has been commonly known that modernism, understood as an artistic phenomena in arts, appeared in Europe in the early 20th century to spread soon throughout the continent and leave its marks even in the architecture of provincial towns. Upper Silesia, distant from any European metropolises promoting new architectural patterns, soon welcomed the new trend. It was there where reminiscences of the major architectural transformations settled for good.

Starting with the 20th century, the booming industrial capital attracted numerous modern projects which praised the civilisation development of this region. In the first stage those were marks of the building culture expanding from Berlin which radiated with the proto-modernist concepts, and then the early modernist ideas, like Jugendstil and expressionism, which had actually been the first stage of this trend in the region. Following World War I (1914-1918) the Plebiscite took place in Upper Silesia to decide about the national

status of the region. The consequence of that event of the 20th March, 1921 was Silesia divided into Polish and German part, as eventually accomplished in 1922.

Turbulent history of those years brought many estates designed by prominent and well-recognised German architects, like *Georg and Emil Zillmann*, *Hans Poelzig*, *Bruno Taut*, *Erich Mendelsohn* or *Dominikus Böhm*. Numerous designs were also developed by some talented Polish architects. *Tadeusz Michejda*, *Tadeusz Kozłowski*, *Karol Schayer*, *Adolf Szyszko Bohusz*, *Stanisław Tabieński*, *Witold Kłębowski*, *Zbigniew Rzepecki*, *Stanisław Gruszka* or *Kazimierz Soltykowski* were the ones who shaped the new image of the emerging Silesian district. The interwar period in Polish part of Upper Silesia showed dualist development of architecture. On the one hand, the avant-garde stood out against former aesthetical, technical and spatial canons which comprised the extreme types of modernism, i.e. constructivism and functionalism, also referred to as an international style. On the other however, the conservative trend was based upon traditional understanding of the form, function and technology. Actually there appeared also an intermediate stale, numerous examples of which associated the traditional form with new solutions provided by the modernist means of expression, i.e. so-called modernist costume. Four major directions may be distinguished here. Polish decorative art, manor style, academic classicism and modernised classicism.

Katowice which was the capital of the autonomous Silesian district, showed the greatest economic power of all districts of II Polish Republic. In consequence it turned into the major centre of innovative architectural designs, competing in this realm with the joint forces of German Upper Silesian cities: Gliwice, Bytom and Zabrze. Across the border, architecture developed in a different way based upon pluralist coexistence of the major modernist trends: expressionism and functionalism. Both reflected two paradigms of attitudes showed by the German society, the first of which was the romantic-national one referring back to home artistic traditions while the latter promoted the cosmopolitan attitudes and abstract patterns. During the Third Reich period, i.e. since 1933, the national – socialist ideas were expressed in architecture by so-called “Heimatstil”, which soon tended to transform the expressionist motives into the “native” peasant’s or craftsman’s elements found within the national tradition, yet eliminating the abstract features of “Neues Bauen” origin. However,

some elements of functionalism could still be observed as so-called semi-modernism, present mainly in residential housing. Public buildings, on the other hand, were shaped by different patterns of monumental neoclassicism.

The second expansion of modernism which took place in Upper Silesian architecture throughout the interwar period was followed by yet another wave which commenced as soon as World War II ended and lasted until the eighties of the 20th century. The third expansion of modernist idea could be divided into three stages:

- 1945-1949: continuation of former functionalist avant-garde, i.e. the international style;
- 1950-1956: decay of modernist concepts replaced by the classical costume of real socialism which took effect from the Cold War and polarisation of global ideas dividing the world into two hostile political groups (capitalism versus socialism);
- 1957-1975: return to the global trends of late modernism, manifesting political liberalisation of social life in the country as well as artistic adaptation of the progressive world building technologies.

In the 80’s however, the modernist ideas suffered major perversion imposed by over-schematic and over-simplified application of large scale prefabrication. That practically hampered any progress in building.

The protest and defiance of such reality were expressed by the alternative postmodernist movement which seeking its expression returned to the classical and historical architectural rules determining both, the overall form and the detail.

Contemporary pluralism of styles showing even more emphasised acceptance of the forgotten modernist concepts, appears as the fourth wave of return to the origins of this architectural trend.

2. LUXURIOUS ARCHITECTURE OF KATOWICE IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD (1922-1939)

2.1. Introduction

Analysis of the four stages in modernist architecture of Upper Silesia, shows the second, interwar period as the most spectacular one. This has been for numerous examples of avant-garde architecture showing the highest *niveau* in shaping the space. Paradoxically, the architecture based upon the economy of the functional, aesthetic and technical solutions, was accompanied by a remarkable share of the

top shelf, expensive projects, apparently denying the principles of radical modernism.

Katowice – the capital of Silesia district, economically the strongest among all Polish regions – showed a substantial share of so-called luxurious avant-garde architecture in the overall number of buildings erected throughout the twenty-year interwar period (1922-1939) [1]. All those projects shaped the space in an innovative way, both in terms of their form and function as well as materials used for interior and exterior design. Quality of the solutions offered as well as the material and technological infrastructure made the projects the state-of-the-art designs of that time. As such, they determined the prestige of the user as well as of the investor accomplishing projects of public buildings (state administration, banking or health service sectors, etc.) or rented tenements and individual villas complying with the top of the range housing standards. The regional policy along with a friendly fiscal system ensured cheap credits which guaranteed revenues from the funds invested. High economic development rate stimulated the building projects in the city; this was proved by numerous buildings accommodating head offices of the industrial plants, corporate headquarters, commercial representative offices, banks or even foreign consulates of such countries as the UK, Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Spain, Latvia, Germany, Sweden, Hungary and Italy [2]. That only twenty-year long period of progress and economic boom brought not only sky-scrapers but, what is even more characteristic, the luxurious estates.

2.2. The notion of luxury

The notion of luxury was considered by *Tadeusz S. Jaroszewski* who defined such architecture as: “solid, representing very high building standards, marked by extremely careful finishing of every single detail, provided with the state-of-the art furnishings to make the user’s life pleasant and to ensure the best comfort possible” [3].

This notion may also be considered in the Vitruvian categories, where the following would stand for:

- **luxury of form** (*venustas*) – selection and appropriate composition of the means of artistic expression to affirm the aesthetical attitudes and the social standing of the investor. Initially, some classical forms of typically Polish origin were used (vestibule of the Silesian Parliament) to be followed by the so-called semi-modernist form which joined the innovative concepts with the conserva-
- **luxury of function** (*utilitas*) – appropriate size and disposition of the urban and architectural space, complying with healthy and hygienic life standards of that time, to ensure convenience and proper psycho-physical comfort. On the one hand segregation of the outer and inner space was ensured by functional zoning, yet on the other joining and functional penetration volumes were allowed. In the apartments this was accomplished by elimination of enfilade functional patterns in favour of the zones. The service zones were defined through separate staircases and doors for the servants and for the inhabitants. The bathrooms ensured the hygienic comfort while winter gardens were places to relax and to experience at least the semblance of nature.
- **technological and material luxury** (*firmitas*) – the use of appropriate technologies and materials to ensure the feeling of reliability and durability and to enhance perception of comfort and prestige among the inhabitants. A steel framework and steel profiles patented by Katowice engineer *Henryk Griffel* ensured the demanding bearing capacity and durability. Some modern solutions to provide comfort were also used, e.g. lifts with collapsible seats, rubbish chutes, central heating system, central radio wiring as well as permanent technical supervision. The materials used were: large glass panes for the winter gardens or staircases ensuring maximum transparency of the contact with space; and nichrome elements of furnishing making it easier to keep them tidy as well as expensive finishing materials, dematerialising the aesthetic expression of a detail, among them: marble, travertine, granite, terazzo, fine plaster, veneer and floors. All those contributed to the unique character of the design and confirmed the care for the aesthetic sense, starting with minor detail to end with the overall structure of the building. The bygone glory is now recalled by carpet fastening clamps or by an empty porter’s lodge where years ago an attentive eye of a janitor prevented unwanted intruders from entering the house.

2.3. Luxury of the public buildings

It was quite common to meet air conditioning in the public buildings, e.g. Polish Radio studios in Ligonia street. A solution unique countrywide was the escalator turned on by a photocell, applied in the Silesian Museum, designed by Karol Schayer, who after World War II continued his work in Beirut, designing more than 80 buildings representing so-called late modernism [4]. That building was the most remarkable example of luxury in the public estates. Awaiting commissioning by the end of 1939, the building was disassembled by the Germans during the occupation years. The only part to avoid demolition was the residential wing with a roof terrace at 5 Kobylańskiego street. Some other public buildings representing the luxurious trend are:

- the building of the *Silesian Parliament* (vestibule and the sitting hall) at Sejmu Śląskiego square, built in 1923, designed by *Kazimierz Wyczyński, Ludwik Wojtyczko, Stefan Żeleński* and *Piotr Jurkiewicz*
- the edifice of *Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego* (State Commercial Bank) (especially the interiors) in Mickiewicza street, built in 1928, designed by *Stanisław Tabęcki*
- the building of *Polish Steelworks Syndicate* (interiors) in Lompy street, built in 1928, designed by *Tadeusz Michejda*
- the building of the *Non-affiliated Offices* (exterior) at Sejmu Śląskiego square, built throughout 1935-1936, designed by *Witold Kłębkowski*
- administrative offices of the *Health Fund* (exterior, vestibule) in Reymonta street, built in 1938, designed by *Stanisław Gruszka*
- the *Insurgents House* in Matejki street, built in 1936, designed by *Zbigniew Rzepecki*

2.4. Luxury in residential estates

The first to manifest the avant-garde luxury of the residential buildings was the villa of counsellor Kaźmierczak with a garage at 4 Bratków Street [5] designed by *Tadeusz Michejda* [6]. Among the pioneering group of Polish architects, he applied a steel framework for single-family residential houses, the form not different much from the avant-garde European concepts. Out of five features of modern architecture, as defined by Le Corbusier, the only one missing is a complete, empty ground floor marked only by a symptomatic, corner undercutting of the main entrance. A typical luxurious detached

house as met in Katowice is a villa showing a modest spatial form accomplished through combination of a few simple geometrical solids, in most cases fully linked with the ground, with a flat roof as well as quarter-circular or semi-circular elements of bay windows, balconies, loggias and terraces. Some good examples may be provided by Zagrodzki's villa at 6 Zajączka Street, built in 1934 and designed by *Kazimierz Sołtykowski*; Dr Kowal's villa at 16 Mazowiecka Street from 1937, designed by the same author or the villa of Antoni Pająk, located at 16 Poleska Street in the civil servants estates in the district of Ligota, The latter was probably designed by *Karol Schayer* which may be proved by its similarity to Chmielewski's house at 4 Frascati Street in Warsaw.

Karol Schayer is also the author of four extensive, high end, multi-family residential houses, erected in 1936, 1937 and 1938. The earliest accomplished projects were two 6-storey houses: the residential house of counsellor Żytomirski at 6 PCK Street with a terrace on the roof and the tenement of Augustyn and Karol Łabuś at 24 Dąbrowskiego Street as well as a 7-storey residential and commercial estate of the International Commercial Bank at 10 Mielęckiego Street. The next to come were: the residential and service estate of Dr Radowski at 60 Korfantego Street and director Kędzior's single-family house at 68 Korfantego Street. All those show extreme functionalism and a rational, geometrical mass close to a cuboid. Characteristic for most of his designs are terrace roofs and curved walls of a flat S-letter profile (the arcade wall by the entrance at 6 PCK Street; south loggia walls at 24 Dąbrowskiego Street; west side balconies at 60 Korfantego Street; ground floor balcony at the northern side at 68 Korfantego Street; top floor line at 165 Poleska Street). Moreover, a densely built luxurious residential estates were erected in Skłodowskiej-Curie, PCK, Rymera and Jordana streets. The tenements show different spatial arrangements based upon the use of succinct geometrical shapes of balconies, loggias or the winter gardens. All those are pure solids with flat roofs. However, when analysed from the urban planning standpoint, they comply with no assumptions of the Athens Charter as dense development within a quarter pattern stretching over small area prevents proper ventilation or exposition to sunlight. Such solution was imposed by the shortage of buildings. Lots of them within the city and those which were not threatened by mine subsidence (like the very centre of the city) had to be utilised to their maximum. Such was the origin of the urban pattern adopted.

Nevertheless, these have never reduced the architectural value of individual buildings and the estate as such is recognised among the best, coherent and innovative, modernist estates in Poland.

3. CONCLUSIONS

This brief outline has just symptomatically marked the existence of the luxurious trend which appeared as a symbol of the developing political, social, economic and cultural prestige of the city which, originally being a provincial town, was soon promoted to play the role of a major regional, Polish and European centre.

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Figure 1.
Tadeusz Michejda:
Counsellor Kaźmierczak's villa at 4 Bratków street (1930-1931)



Figure 2.
Karol Schayer:
Łabuś family house at 24 Dąbrowskiego street (1936)



Figure 3.
Karol Schayer:
The house of counsellor Żytomirski at 6 PCK street (1936-1937)



Figure 4.
Karol Schayer:
Pająk villa at 16 Poleska street (1936-1937)



Figure 5.
Henryk Schmidtke:
The seat of Henryk Franck and Sons Co. at 7 Rymera street (1937)



Figure 6.
Filip Brenner:
Felix family house at 3 Podchorążych street (1936-1937)



Figure 7.
Stanisław Gruszka:
Dr Wędlkowski's house at 10 PCK street (1937-1938)



Figure 8.
Stanisław Gruszka:
Health Fund edifice at 8/10 Reymonta street (1938)



Figure 9.
Karol Schayer:
Silesian Museum (1934-1939) non-existent, only apartment wing survived