

Between the Lines:

Western influence on Polish architecture under Communism

Simon Cygielski

ARCH 586

Spring 2010

Professor Anne Pedret

May 5, 2010

In his essay “CIAM and the Communist Bloc” Eric Mumford argues that there was little or no real interaction between Soviet-bloc architects and their Western counterparts despite the ingrained opinion that the work done behind the Iron Curtain drew on the Modernist ideas of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus. However, the Soviet Bloc was not quite the monolith it appeared to be from the outside. For one, the intellectual elite in Poland, often sarcastically referred to as the “happiest barrack in the Communist camp”, maintained a fierce, if carefully masked, independence of thought. Poland also enjoyed more contacts with the West than most other Soviet satellites at the time. Some Western literature was imported even through official channels, with plenty of other, ideologically unacceptable work being smuggled in and disseminated illicitly. Though the opportunity to build architecturally ambitious projects was extremely limited and influences from capitalist countries in the West could not be overtly acknowledged in professional literature, many projects show the clear influence of contemporary Western architectural thought. Communism also limited the spread of Polish architectural ideas to the West by the usual means of building and publication, but in several notable instances Poles contributed to Western disciplinary discourse after leaving behind their homeland.

It is difficult to talk about Polish architecture under Communism because of the nature of the political system that shaped it. Between the end of World War II in 1945 and the downfall of Communism in 1989, ideological imperatives did not allow Western influence to be directly acknowledged. In order to elude official censorship, Polish intellectuals commonly resorted to communicating “between the lines” – most often by indirect suggestion or analogy with a “neutral” theme. Because they were meant to evade censors, these references are often hard to read outside of the context of their time, especially by outsiders.

However, signs that contemporary architectural thought did penetrate into Poland can be found in many places. For instance, when CIAM contributor Helena Syrkus published her husband Szymon’s correspondence about J.L. Sert from 1946, she illustrated it with Sert’s 1967 Harvard student housing project and 1972 Martin Luther King Jr. school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, neither of which is mentioned anywhere in the text itself.¹ What seems like a dissonance may have been an indirect way of showing that she had kept up with the Spanish architect. Her use of his American projects may have served to reinforce that point. Even if that was not her intention, it is obvious that she was not completely cut off from current Western thought projects or Western architectural thought. And since after the war both she and Szymon Syrkus worked as professors at the Warsaw School of Architecture, neither were her students and younger colleagues.

Though contemporary Polish primary sources are difficult to obtain in the United States, and ideological taboos of the time make it difficult to be certain whether their authors intended to communicate the extent of their contacts with the outside world, it is clear that the work of

1 Syrkus, Helena. *Ku idei osiedla społecznego [Towards the Concept of the Social Housing Estate]*. Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwa Naukowe, 1976, pp. 388-389.

the world's leading architects was known in Poland's professional circles in the 1960s and 1970s. This may have been helped by the fact that Poland had the most liberal information policy of the entire Soviet bloc, as exemplified by the existence of a Foreign Book and Press Club (Klub Międzynarodowej Prasy i Książki), where a limited range of ideologically neutral materials could be obtained. However, further research would be required to determine which contemporary architectural publications made their way into Poland in those years.

Still, even at this stage it is clear that some news of the outside world and its architectural discourse filtered through to Polish practitioners. For instance, a book on Finnish housing published in Warsaw in 1979 detailed Alvar Aalto's hopes for modular prefabricated components in developing a new way of building. As only a footnote reference of this publication is available at this time² it is difficult to speculate to what extent it discussed contemporary developments. However, the very fact that such a book was published at all shows that Polish architects of the time were not completely cut off from the Western world.

Western influence was not exerted only through publications. In his 1979 overview of contemporary Polish architecture Przemysław Szafer cites Renzo Piano's and Richard Rogers' 1971 project for the Centre Pompidou as a "mechanistic" counterpoint to the more human-oriented designs submitted to the same competition by three teams of Polish architects. He also uses Le Corbusier's never-implemented post-war Saint-Dié plan as an example of an anti-humanist approach to urbanism, comparing it unfavorably with the more sensitive attitude exemplified by competition designs for the also never-built Łódź Museum of Art.³ This shows three things – that even behind the Iron Curtain there was no escaping Le Corbusier's long shadow, that relatively new Western projects were discussed even in officially-sanctioned publications, and that Polish architects took part in at least one large-scale international competition in the West.

Some of this "between the lines" communication can be seen in several architectural projects of the time. Though at times it took as many as two decades for it to filter through to the Eastern Bloc, Polish projects show the definite influence of projects completed in the West already after Poland's sequestration behind the Iron Curtain. For instance, the *béton brut* structure of the 1973 main railway station in Katowice, designed by a team consisting of Wacław Kłyszewski, Jerzy Mokrzyński and Eugeniusz Wierzbicki, (Fig. 1) seems like a direct echo of Le Corbusier's sculptural Brutalism, most notably the massive pilotis of his Unite d'Habitation (Fig. 2). The roof, consisting of eight square reinforced concrete-shell funnels (Fig. 3), is also reminiscent of Alison and Peter

2 *Kształtowanie środowiska mieszkaniowego w Finlandii*, [The Shaping of the Housing Environment in Finland], author's name not provided, cited in: Roguska, Jadwiga. "Helena i Szymon Syrkusowie: Koncepcje typizacji i uprzemysłowienia architektury mieszkaniowej" [Helena and Szymon Syrkus: Concepts of type and industrialization in housing architecture]. *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, 2 (2000): 117.

3 Szafer, T. Przemysław. *Nowa Architektura Polska [New Polish Architecture]*. Warsaw: Arkady, 1979, pp. 126-127.



Fig. 1. Interior view of the Katowice main train station, Fig. 2. The pilotis of Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation showing the *béton brut* funnels of its roof structure.

Smithson's 1951 competition design for the Coventry Cathedral (Fig. 4). However, the Smithsons' apparent absence from Polish architectural literature of the time and Le Corbusier ubiquity in it suggest the project's French provenance. This impression is further reinforced by the fact that the Katowice project does not appear to have been motivated by the ethical issues that according to Reyner Banham characterized British New Brutalism.⁴ While Szafer praises the station for the

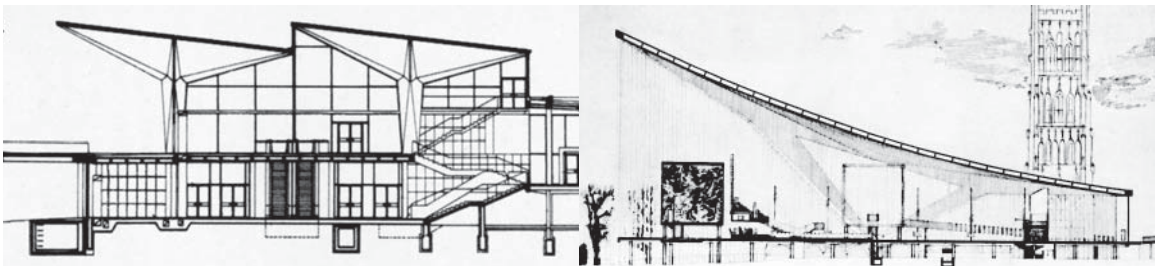


Fig. 3. Transverse section of the 1973 Katowice train station. Fig. 4. The Smithsons' 1951 Coventry Cathedral project.

sculptural quality of the roof structure, and its "clear spatial arrangement, ease of orientation, good connection with the urban fabric and the integration of external and internal spaces", the design shows no social ambitions beyond offering the city an expressive and functional train station.⁵ On the other hand, considering the difficulty of building such an elaborate structure, the raw finish can hardly be attributed simply to Communism's economically motivated reductionism, so apparent in much of the other work built in Poland at that time.

4 Banham, Reyner. *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966, pp. 132-133.

5 Szafer, p. 245.

However, the Katowice station was not the only project that reflects relatively contemporary influences from the West. For instance, the similarities between the Ściana Wschodnia project in Warsaw (Fig. 5), designed in 1960 and completed in 1969, and the 1951 Lijnbaan scheme for the center of Rotterdam by the Dutch CIAM group OPBOUW (Fig. 6)⁶, seem too great to be a simple coincidence. Ściana Wschodnia, like the Rotterdam project, is an urban core that integrates the four functions of the Athens Charter. It consists mainly of three large department stores with three tall apartment towers that grow out of a stretch of low buildings containing theaters, cafés and restaurants, with a pedestrian area joining the two sides. This development, completely atypical of the severe functionalism of the Soviet bloc, shows the definite influence of CIAM 8 thinking about the city core. It creates a public place for people to gather informally, and though the state of the commercial establishments in those times did not allow much enjoyment, it was still a far cry from the Soviet-dictated *existenzminimum* thinking of the time.



Fig. 5. The Ściana Wschodnia project in Warsaw (1960-1969)

Fig. 6. The Polish project bears a remarkable similarity to OPBOUW's Lijnbaan project in Rotterdam.

One other major factor contributed to the spread of contemporary architectural ideas in Poland under Communism. The Catholic Church's relative independence in Poland's public life was unlike that of any other social organization in the Soviet sphere of influence. In addition to its usual religious function, it was a bulwark of resistance against Communism, with many prominent clerics also involved in dissident activities. The later Pope John Paul II was one of the most outspoken critics of the Communist authorities during his term as the archbishop of Krakow. The Church also sponsored and shielded a variety of independent cultural activity, affording artists possibilities for expression they would not have enjoyed in "official" cultural milieus. Its sponsorship provided Polish architects with an opportunity to depart from the official functionalist canon of the time, and to explore more contemporary international trends. Though this research unearthed no direct theoretical link between Polish post-war church architecture and Western Postmodernism, there are parallels in the projects of that time that would be hard to explain by coincidence. Consideration for both functional and physical context, and the distilling of traditional forms into geometric

6 Bakema, Jacob B. "Relationship between Men and Things", in *CIAM 8: The Heart of the City: Toward Humanization of Urban Life*. Ed. Thyrtwitt et al. London: Lund Humphries, 1952, pp. 67-68.

primitives seem to be the main characteristics shared by Polish religious architecture of the late 1960s and 1970s and the work of such Postmodernists as Robert Venturi and Michael Graves. A certain proclivity to historical forms may have been a result of the religious function of these projects. However, this tendency corresponded closely to some of the main precepts of Postmodernism – the embracing of historical context, type and signification in architectural design.

Located in Krakow's Socialist Realist Nowa Huta satellite, Wojciech Pietrzyk's Ark of the Lord church (Fig. 7) built between 1967 and 1977,⁷ is clearly inspired by Le Corbusier's 1954 late Modern Ronchamp chapel (Fig. 8). The physical similarity is too striking to be a simple coincidence, and the fact that Le Corbusier's work was widely discussed in even official publications at the time suggests that the link was direct and intentional. Still, the Krakow church, designed nearly 20 years later after Ronchamp uses the potent religious symbol of a boat as its roof, pointing to a departure from a purely Modernist approach. However, at this stage the influence of Postmodern thought can only be inferred, and further research would be needed to explore this issue.

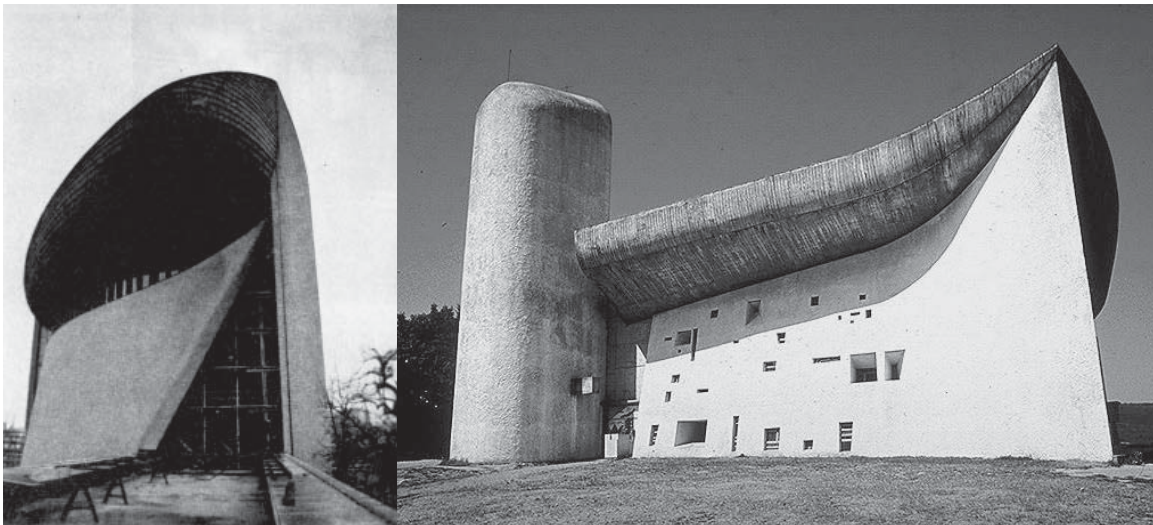


Fig. 7. Wojciech Pietrzyk's Ark of the Lord near Krakow, Poland. Fig. 8. Le Corbusier's 1954 Ronchamp chapel.

One of the most iconic buildings created in Poland under Communism, Marek Budzyński's 1982 Church of the Ascension in Warsaw's drab rationalist Ursynów district (Fig. 9) shows a mature Postmodern concern for tradition and historic detail in clearly contemporary package. The design came quickly on the heels of the 1978 Solidarity movement that for a short time expanded social and artistic freedoms that Polish artists enjoyed, and allowed Poles more personal freedom, including travel to and communication with the West, than at any time before or after during Communist rule. Considering the fact that throughout the 1970s Budzyński showed no inclination towards historicism or eclecticism, the correlation between this increased freedom and the sudden shift towards a more Postmodern approach seems not to have been coincidental.

7 Szafer, op cit., p. 171-175.



Fig. 9. Marek Budzyński's Church of the Ascension in Warsaw's rationalist Ursynów district.



Fig. 10. The Gothic-inspired interior of Jan Bogusławski's 1972 church in Stalowa Wola.

Even before then, however, some projects created under the Church's sponsorship show historicist leanings. Jan Bogusławski's 1972 church in Stalowa Wola (Fig. 10) puts a contemporary spin on gothic construction, with its slender, angular concrete columns splitting near the ceiling to echo the ribs of gothic vaultings. While this departs from Postmodernism's overall fascination with Classical themes, in light of the importance of gothic architecture to Poland's religious traditions, it parallels Postmodern explorations of site specificity and historical themes. Szafer quotes Bogusławski as saying that his aim was to create an interior "with a contemporary expression, relating to the gothic".⁸

A number of other projects explored traditional Polish rural themes. A good example of the latter is Wojciech Pietrzyk's 1974 Sacred Heart church in Bukowina Tatrzańska, (Fig. 11) which builds modern form on traditional highland architecture. Though this project predates Kenneth Frampton's *Towards a Critical Regionalism* by more than a decade, it would be a fair illustration of the ideas presented in it.

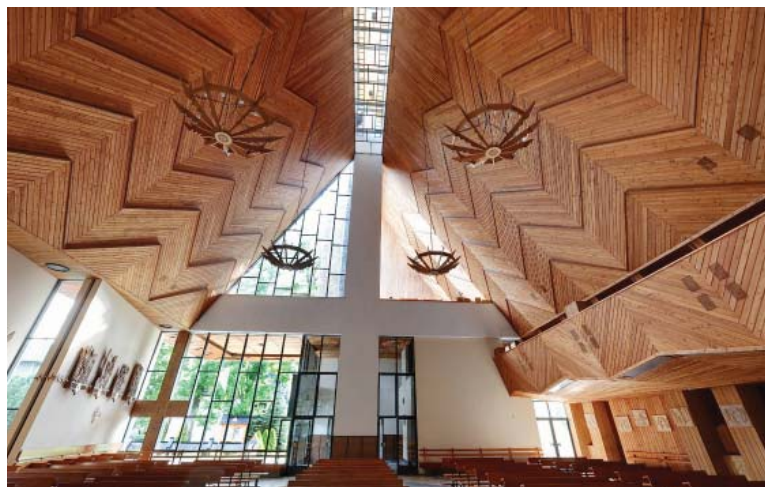


Fig. 11. The interior of Wojciech Pietrzyk's regionalist church in Bukowina Tatrzańska

8 Ibid.

However, none of the above is to say that the exchange of ideas that took place between Polish and Western Modern and Postmodern architects under Communism was lively or free of obstruction. Despite the Polish Communist regime's relatively liberal approach to information control, especially with regard to overtly non-political issues such as architecture, international contacts were restricted and largely unidirectional (post-war Polish architectural thought had little observable influence on the discipline either in Europe or globally). While Polish architects participated in at least several international competitions, they had few successes, and most of those were limited to the Communist bloc and Third World countries.

Besides Beaubourg, only one other example of Polish participation in a Western architectural competition came to light during this research: a competition for a large housing project in Espoo, Finland, won in 1967 by three Polish architects (Ludwik Borowski, Jerzy Szczepanik-Dzikowski and Andrzej Szkop), who were also responsible for the monotonously megalithic Ursynów Północny project in Warsaw. Unfortunately, as no further information could be located regarding the project, and it appears to have never been built, this only serves to reinforce a broad impression that Polish architects maintained some form of direct contact with the outside world at that time.

When Polish architectural ideas were exported to the West, it was generally by those who chose to leave the country behind entirely. Jerzy Soltan, one of Poland's most gifted Modern architects, ended up working with Le Corbusier, where he helped to develop the Modulor concept.⁹ He participated in post-war CIAM meetings, and went on to teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where his students included a number of well-known architects such as Michael Graves.¹⁰

Another notable Polish émigré was Waław Zalewski. An architect and talented structural engineer, before leaving for Venezuela and later tenure at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology he designed two of Communist Poland's most technologically advanced buildings: the Supersam supermarket in Warsaw and the Spodek stadium/congress center in Katowice. Spodek's roof was one of the first large-scale applications of Buckminster Fuller's tensegrity principle in the world, and certainly in Europe. Before its demolition in 2006, his Supersam was generally considered one of Poland's best Modern buildings of the era. It was a forerunner of several similarly constructed buildings he designed in South America. However, at MIT he taught structural engineering, and it is not immediately apparent what influence he had on architectural education there.

In conclusion, Polish architecture under Communism appears to have been influenced by contemporary Western thought and projects despite its relative disconnection from the mainstream of the Modern and Postmodern movements. Much of that influence took place through books and publications that were available through official channels. Also, though the opportunities were limited, Polish intellectuals managed to bring in materials outside official control, with contraband

9 Malczyk, Agata. *Tracing Praesens: Roots and Context of Modern Movement in Poland*. Unpublished Master's thesis submitted to the University of British Columbia, 2002.

10 <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2005/10/28/in-memoriam-jerzy-soltan-jerzy-soltan/>

books forming what became known as the “second circulation”. There is no reason to believe that books on contemporary architecture would have been excluded from this.

There were also at least two official architectural journals – *Architektura*, published by the official Polish Association of Architects, and *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, an academic journal published by the Polish Academy of Sciences. Both of them dealt mostly with Polish projects, and the only reference to a Western project located during the research for this paper was a review of the Centre Pompidou competition in *Architektura*.

This research also uncovered several instances of Polish architects taking part in international competitions. Each such instance would create the opportunity for an exchange of thoughts, whether as direct communication or more indirectly by the ability to review other entries.

Finally, though the influence of Polish architecture on Western thinking was negligible during the Communist period, at least two important Polish architects left the country to teach at prominent institutions in the United States. While their direct influence on their students would require more in-depth research, both the Harvard Graduate School of Design and MIT educated a number of outstanding practitioners during their tenure there.

The scarcity of materials available in the United States on the subject of Polish post-war architecture means that this paper has barely scratched the surface, and raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps the most significant of these are how the influences apparent in many of the projects discussed above were actually transmitted, how widely were “unofficial” sources of books and publications available, to what extent they shaped Polish architects’ awareness of Western disciplinary discourse, and what role architectural educators such as Helena Syrkus had in disseminating the information they had to their students. The impact of the Catholic Church in Poland on fostering an exchange of architectural ideas with the West under Communism would also be a fascinating field of inquiry. However, the scarcity of materials on the subject in US libraries and the fact that Polish libraries only make their resources available locally, this and many other related questions could only be answered through research on location in Poland, preferably including interviews with architects who practiced in those times.

Bibliography

Bakema, Jacob B. "Relationship between Men and Things", in *CIAM 8: The Heart of the City: Toward Humanization of Urban Life*. Ed. Thyrwitt et al. London: Lund Humphries, 1952: 67-68

Banham, Reyner. *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966.

Ciborowski, Adolf. *Town Planning in Poland 1945-1955*. Warsaw: Polonia Publishing House, 1956.

Ecole Speciale D'Architecture-Paris, Muzeum Architektury-Wrocław. *The Polish Avant-Garde, Architecture Town-Planning, 1918-1939*. Concept: Czerner, Olgier and Listowski, Hieronim. Warsaw: Interpress, 1981.

Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle: Bay Press, 1983: 16-30.

Giedion, Sigfried, ed. *A Decade of New Architecture*. Zurich: Editions Girsberger, 1951.

Gzell, Sławomir. "Modernizm a planowanie miast po II Wojnie Światowej. Nowe Tychy jako Przykład" [Modernism and urban planning after World War II: Nowe Tychy as an Example] *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, 2 (2000): 149-155.

Kłosiewicz, Lech. "Modernizm Polski. Seminarium w stulecie urodzin pokolenia modernistów polskich" [Polish Modernism: A Seminar at the Hundredth Anniversary of the Births of the Generation of Polish Modernists]. *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, 2 (2000): 84-92.

Leśnikowski, Wojciech, ed. *East European Modernism, Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland Between the Wars, 1919-1939*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1996.

Malczyk, Agata. *Tracing Praesens: Roots and Context of Modern Movement in Poland*. Unpublished Master's thesis submitted to the University of British Columbia, 2002.

Mumford, Eric. "CIAM and the Communist Bloc, 1928-1959". *The Journal of Architecture*, 2/2009: 237-254.

Roguska, Jadwiga. "Helena i Szymon Syrkusowie: Koncepcje typizacji i uprzemysłowienia architektury mieszkaniowej" [Helena and Szymon Syrkus: Concepts of type and industrialization in housing architecture]. *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki*, 2 (2000): 105-119.

Szafer, T. Przemysław. *Nowa Architektura Polska [New Polish Architecture]*. Warsaw: Arkady, 1979.