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## CONTEMPORARY HOUSE AS A NEED TO CONTINUE TRADITION

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### WSPÓŁCZESNY DOM JAKO POTRZEBA KONTYNUACJI TRADYCJI

#### Abstract

The starting point for this discussion is the regional architecture, which is characterised by the harmony between form, construction as well as function and landscape, along with the ambiance of a place. Any attempts to integrate contemporary architecture into a city context do not necessarily mean monotony, lack of diversity or uncritical conservatism. In this article, the author conducts a critical analysis of chosen projects of public buildings constructed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Poland. Taking into consideration the formal criteria, she tries to answer the question if there is the tendency of *new regionalism* present in Polish architecture, and how it is reflected in the realised architectural projects. One of the greatest challenges for the contemporary world architecture is to find solutions that would link a place's tradition with modernity and innovation. Having that in mind, the author recalls the views of architects, critics as well as users and recipients of the objects constructed in the recent years in the public space of Polish cities.

*Keywords: modern regionalism, regional architecture, critical regionalism, context.*

#### Streszczenie

Punktem wyjścia do rozważań jest architektura regionalna, którą cechuje harmonia pomiędzy formą, konstrukcją i funkcją a zastanym krajobrazem oraz atmosferą miejsca. Próby wkomponowania współczesnej architektury w kontekst miasta nie muszą oznaczać jednak monotonii, braku różnorodności lub bezkrytycznego konserwatyzmu. W niniejszym artykule wybrane projekty budynków użyteczności publicznej powstałe w XXI wieku na terenie całej Polski zostaną poddane krytycznej analizie pod tym kątem. Uwzględniając przyjęte kryteria formalne autorka postara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy w polskiej architekturze zaistniała tendencja *Nowego Regionalizmu* i w czym przejawia się ona w zrealizowanych dziełach architektonicznych? Mając przekonanie, że jednym z największych wyzwań współczesnej architektury na świecie jest poszukiwanie rozwiązań, które łączyłyby tradycję miejsca

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z pragnieniem nowoczesności i innowacyjności, w przeprowadzonej analizie odwołam się do postaw zarówno architektów, krytyków architektury jak i użytkowników oraz odbiorców obiektów architektury zaistniałych w ostatnich latach w przestrzeni publicznej polskich miast.

*Słowa kluczowe: nowoczesny regionalizm, architektura regionalna, regionalizm krytyczny, kontekst.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary architecture, after the period of functionalism and weariness caused by modernism, is facing the problem of new identity. Postmodernism did not quench the thirst for creation amongst many architects, as it did not solve the ideological dilemma of the architecture – where do we look for an inspiration to create our cultural environment, so that not only our (architects’) artistic aspirations are satisfied? How to construct, so that the recipients approve aesthetic concepts of architecture and, what is more important, identify themselves with it? Along with the urban development of a city, new buildings are becoming a part of previously organised areas. Usually, they include standard spatial and architectural solutions. For some time now, we could have observed in the world trends the need to create an architecture with individual characteristics. Moreover, it should be more closely related to the local culture, tradition and history of a region. For this reason, the architects are facing a challenge of creating constructions, which not only have the utility, cultural and aesthetic function, but also can be integrated harmoniously within the environment. Taking into consideration local cultural conditions, they will co-create harmonious and unique quality. The need to place the newly created architecture in a cultural and landscape context was first observed at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Poland, this idea had a form of separating various trends with local architectural styles. In Western Europe, *vernacular architecture* was a local architecture that started to have special meaning<sup>1</sup>. The value of architecture set in a context begun to be noticed, its distinctive features and local character. S. Ozkan distinguished two approaches towards architecture referring to the vernacular idea – *conservational and interpretative* (called neo-vernacularism)<sup>2</sup>. The first one implied faithful recreation in the modern architecture of traditional materials and solutions. The other, however, pointed to the fact that the traditional form should be reinterpreted in order to adapt it to new functions and necessities. In 1975, Christian Norberg-Schulz introduced the name of *pluralistic architecture*<sup>3</sup>, and six years later, architects Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre proposed in their article “The Grid and The Pathway” the term *critical regionalism*. This name was popularised in 1983 by Kenneth Frampton in an essay titled “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance.” It suggests the need of critical, but progressive, inspiration from

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kurzątkowski, *Architecture vernaculaire = architektura rodzima?*, *Ochrona Zabytków* 1 (148), 1985, p. 3–16.

<sup>2</sup> S. Ozkan, *Critical Positions in Architectural Regionalism*, [in:] Canizaro Vincent B. (red.), *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2007, p. 104–109.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. Norbert-Schulz, *Znaczenie w architekturze zachodu*, Murator, Warszawa, 1999.

the contemporary architecture, having in mind its setting in the topography, climate, light and tectonic context. He clearly distinguished between the vernacular and regionalising architecture, which does not copy direct models from a place's conditions, local materials and traditions, but is rather a creator's reflection on a place for a new building. This architecture is inspired by a local tradition and culture, keeping at the same time the freedom of one's interpretation. Tzonis and Lefaivre, who understood critical regionalism a bit differently than Frampton, underlined that architecture should not be suggested directly by a context, but instead it should have its own identity.

## 2. THE SUBJECT

One of the biggest challenges for contemporary architecture is taking into consideration its local character in the process of designing and constructing new buildings. At the same time, they should be designed in a modern, innovative and functional way, meeting the utility requirements imposed by new technologies and construction rules.

The aim of this article is to describe the objects that were created in the recent years. These constructions of public use in our country are set in the context of an architecture described as *modern regionalism*. This trend, not a movement, was born in the western culture. What is its importance, then, comparing to all other tendencies and creative pluralism of western architecture? What criteria decide of its existence in other cultures and cultural regions of the contemporary world? How deeply is this tendency rooted in local cultures in Poland? Do contemporary culture objects form a uniform trend and what is the participation of Polish and foreign architects in it? Is there an authentic image of contemporary regionalism in our architecture?

## 3. THE SCOPE OF ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

In this article, the author conducts architectural analysis of the selected public buildings constructed in Poland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in terms of distinguishing characteristics of contemporary regionalism. This type of architecture usually has special cultural and social tasks to complete. It should be functional, visitor friendly, reflect a place's character, often represent some symbolic values, and at the same time, it should have its unique character and make use of modern technological solutions. The features taken into consideration during the analysis include the following formal criteria: – a place's cultural context, – harmonious integration of an object into the urban environment, – creation of public (social) spaces, – scale of an object, – originality of implemented architectural solutions while keeping local traditions, – rationality in the means of architectural expression (the choice of colours, elevation materials, lights, architectural detail etc.).

The chosen architectural realisations have been appreciated by architects, architecture critics (the awards received), and the local as well as the national society. Every one of them represents a different function (a library, a museum, a congress centre, a leisure-cultural centre, a chapel, a science centre) and diverse location (a city centre, a post-industrial area, a city square, a bend of a river, a village, an open-air museum). This diversity is challenging for the creators when it comes to the criteria mentioned



previously. It also shows multiple dimensions of the contemporary regionalism approach and its broad influence on the creation of new, harmonious public space, regardless of the location.

The analysed objects fall in the domain of social (public) demand. In a broader aspect of the problematics, one can wonder how a particular object influenced forming and functioning of public spaces in the structure of a city, a district, a region, and how it was accepted by the society. As there are no statistics in this field, the author used opinions of critics presented in the specialist press (architectural) and reports on architecture found in opinion-forming press (e.g. *Polityka*, *Newsweek* etc.).

#### 4. CONTEXT ARCHITECTURE

For some time now, and not only in Poland, we have been able to see the tendency to take more seriously into consideration characteristics of a local culture when creating a new project. After years of fascination with modern technologies and loud and strong forms, present buildings form more frequently a harmonious part of their surrounding landscape. It seems that at the moment this trend does not include commercial architecture, especially office and services buildings, where investors' pressure still implies the use of aggressive, monotonous, industrial means of architectural expression, showing the power of companies residing inside. A completely different situation is with the category of public buildings, including cultural architecture, where in order to participate in a contest, architects must show features characteristic for the values of modern regionalism. Currently, architects are trying more often to go back to "the roots" and construct buildings that reflect the local or regional tradition. Cultural context of a place is one of the key values that allow us to place a building in the regionalising trend.

One of the examples is the Marina in Bydgoszcz, which in its form refers to the context of the entire Wyspa Mlynska (Mill Island) and the buildings nearby, most of which were storehouses, granaries, mills and mints. Simple and compact design of the objects required a new solution. According to the trends of western regionalism, this could be interpreted by the architects. The building's facade, made of wooden panels placed crosswise, refers to the neighbouring brick objects with half-timbered construction. "The building, gazing friendly at the river, is a perfect match for the landscape and it has an interesting relation with the late-modernism structure of Opera Nova on the other side of the river. At the same time, it is

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- III.1. Raczynski Library in Poznan  
([http://poznan.lubimyczytac.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/B\\_Raczynskich\\_4792.jpg](http://poznan.lubimyczytac.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/B_Raczynskich_4792.jpg))
  - III.2. European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk  
([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a6/Europejskie\\_Centrum\\_Solidarno%C5%9Bci\\_ECS4.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a6/Europejskie_Centrum_Solidarno%C5%9Bci_ECS4.JPG))
  - III.3. Malopolska Art Garden in Krakow  
(Purchla J., Sepiol J.(red.), *Forms Follows Freedom. Architektura dla kultury w Polsce 2000+*, Kraków 2015, p. 195)
  - III.4. International Congress Centre in Katowice  
([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Katowice\\_05.15\\_MCK\\_3.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Katowice_05.15_MCK_3.JPG))

a very good architecture, not imitating anything, slightly narrative (...), modern, well thought in details”<sup>4</sup>.

Another example of the influence of a place’s cultural atmosphere on the shape of a new object is the European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk (Pic. 2). Its creators definitely valued the cultural-historical message of the place more than the attempt to fit the building within the landscape. It is difficult to talk about a well-organised space as this area has just started to be revitalised. The building, realised with the use of raw, industrial technique and finishing materials, shows a clear message. Inclined concrete walls, covered with Corten steel, clearly point out to the shipyard in its finest period, full of life and repaired ships. The structure and the organisation of the centre leave space for future development of the post-shipyard terrains. This also includes the general values of regionalism, which say that a building should be closely related to the area and not an excluded from the context of the place. The Centre is “a fascinating example of a cultural institution promoting freedom and solidarity. The events that it recalls and the institution’s programme make it the forum of contemporary Europe”<sup>5</sup>.

The Museum of the Mazovian Countryside building is an object, which refers to the rural, traditional values of the Mazovian area. Pitched roofs with no eaves, construction referring to a farming building, and the minimalistic form make it a reinterpretation of a peasant building. This is similar to the project of the Waterwijk district in Ypenburg near Hague, and to the building of The Opole Village Museum. These objects have shown that referring to the regional architecture and including peasant origin could be a part of the international architectural trend and create modern quality. An original solution applied in the Cultural and Recreational Centre at the Museum of the Mazovian Countryside involved the use of other local finishing materials in every building. This allowed for rooting every object in the popular culture and giving them symbolic meaning of elements. The new building was integrated within the urban area in a harmonious way. This fact gave more challenges to the architects. How to adapt a building to a completely different style, keeping in mind the latest architectural trends? How to give it a modern, individual look? And finally, how to ensure that the new building has all the functions required by investors and users? An excellent example of an answer to these questions is the edifice of the Raczynski Library in Poznan (Pic. 1). The structure of the place is a harmonious continuation of a historical building. The new part adapts to the palace’s facade, which is similar to the elevation of Louvre, and it keeps the classic division of piano nobile. In its proportion and layout, the building is a modern interpretation of a classical architectural design. The scale is also adapted to the historic part of the building and the storage and utility space is much bigger. The spatial planning makes its size invisible from the outside. Apart from this, the continuity and connecting both structures with a glass hall give it back the city character of its home avenue. All of this is done pointing out to the regional, “tectonic” feature.

The proposed by Frampton form-place of a building could be found in the Leonardo da Vinci Centre in Podzamcze Checinskie. To fulfil the needs of both, a modern science centre and a historic manor-house from the 17<sup>th</sup> century situated next to it, the architects suggested a third elevation running from the classical building and being the prolongation of the historic gardens. This smooth passage, as well as the size of the new building, show how to adapt

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<sup>4</sup> P. Sarzyński, *Piątka na piątkę!*, Polityka, nr 2907, 2013, p. 92–95.

<sup>5</sup> The verdict to the Museum Prize of European Commission 2016.

harmoniously a modern structure into surrounding scenery. When architects design a modern building integrated with its urban surroundings and they try to set it in a local tradition, they must think of one more aspect – conservation requirements and spatial development plan. They define the form of architectural expression that architects must use, but do not necessarily always agree with. One of the structures that fulfilled all these formal requirements, and at the same time includes elements of modern regionalism, is the Malopolska Garden of Arts in Krakow (Pic. 3). With the proper scale, geometry and divisions, the building fits in perfectly with the existing 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century houses. It managed to keep the height of the neighbouring roof ridges and cornices, even though they are different. The architects recreated the scale of the old horse riding-hall that stood here in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They reconstructed its front wall and the shape of the roof with the skylight. According to the rules of regionalism, apart from the local context, the scale and landscape adaptation, the architects created their own interpretation of classical models. They created a building of an open form, which has its unique, modern image. They reinterpreted the elevation materials of the riding-hall and made the facade using ceramic fittings of a brick colour. They created a multi-functional construction, innovative in architectural solutions, and at the same time, classic. It seems that the authors marked with it a new level of contemporary regionalism in Polish architecture. “The building is an exact and culturally important message of combining past and experience with the future and a chance for future generations”<sup>6</sup>.

An unusual object of more vernacular characteristics, but also reflecting a lot from critical regionalism, is the Votum Aleksa Chapel in Tarnow nad Wisla. The building stands in the place of an old wooden church, it brings the order to the degraded area, it matches perfectly the Mazovian countryside and brings back the central axis to the place. Its scale, proportions and materials as well as the minimalistic form make it a very special piece of public, and especially religious, building. “It is natural and folkloric, and these are the important aspects of it. The first one is expressed by the full symbiosis with the virgin landscape of the Vistula River, and the second one by the use of traditional elements of vernacular architecture. Simple and even archaic technology of the chapel, together with the local inhabitants’ work make it a low-tech architecture”<sup>7</sup>. The building can be compared to such places as Bruder-Klaus-Feldkapelle by Peter Zumthor or Oberalta Chapel by Christian Kerez and it is an example of how a small architectural scale of a structure can bring wonderful aesthetic results and cultural expression.

Kenneth Frampton in his approach towards critical regionalism underlined that a building architecture should include an organised, compact and transparent structure that would take into account the topography of the location. Public buildings should also revitalise cultural tasks and organise social space of the area. In Poland, it ought to integrate the society. These features are seen in the International Congress Centre in Katowice (Pic. 4). The building is a smart combination of architecture and urban connection with the place. It was designed in a coherent and logical manner, as all of its functional space is within a cuboid. What makes it special is the deconstruction of the main body and the creation of a walking path across the deformed roof. The path has a shape of a grass valley, which refers to the historic district of

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<sup>6</sup> From the decision on the Prize od Malopolskie Voyevodship, Stanislaw Witkiewicz competition, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> T. Malkowski, *Kaplica Votum Aleksa, Tarnów nad Wisłą*, [in:] Purchla J., Sepioł J. (red.), *Forms Follows Freedom Architektura dla kultury w Polsce 2000+*, Kraków 2015, p. 149.



Bogucice. “A big, black, shining structure with flexible and functional solutions of interior architecture, was cut across with this popular walking canyon, fitted in the artificial green hill with a viewing platform. It is not only an iconic meeting place, but it also complements visually and functionally the green public area of the neighbouring wonderful cultural structures of Katowice”<sup>8</sup>. With this form, the architects have not only skilfully organised the surrounding area, but also reflected metaphorically the attributes of the local Upper Silesian culture. This edifice can be seen as a subtle interpretation of post-industrial workings of the region. The Silesia Museum, which is a part of the same cultural sphere of the city and which was designed on the territory of the former mine of Katowice, is also an attempt to identify the new vision of post-industrial area. Its form is an example of public space creation and area revitalisation, and it takes into consideration the context of a place in the middle of a complicated landscape – the view of post-industrial buildings. The architects broke down the structure into cuboids of various sizes made of matt glass. This allowed to create a cosy space that invites for a walk, and it integrated modern buildings with the neighbouring 19<sup>th</sup> century shaft, engine room and a storage. Green landscape is omnipresent here. High grass between the buildings reminds us of other abandoned mines in the area. “This architecture stems from the acceptance of an ugly place, it does not correct it, it does not try to isolate itself. It is poetic, as it seamlessly links the delicate with the raw, the high with the low”<sup>9</sup>.

Another great example of an architectural structure that follows contemporary trends and uses the topography to adapt to already existing local buildings is the Dialogue Centre Przelomy in Szczecin. It is the first building in Poland with no clear boundaries between the structure and the space surrounding it. This single-storey form situated mainly underground respects the presence of the representative St. Paul and St. Peter’s Church and a new city icon – the avant-garde Szczecin Philharmonic. The structure of the latter was the biggest challenge for the architects when fitting the new building into the local context. Elevated corners help to define the space, but the museum keeps characteristics of an open area. “The cosy structure is characterised by aesthetic simplicity, which allows for a quiet moments after seeing an exposition. The authors left intense expression behind and focused on a precise, logic and rational structure. They created an ideal background for the past events, and at the same time a contemporary place in fast-growing Szczecin”<sup>10</sup>. The structure is an example of minimal contextual architecture, which in a gentle, but clear manner blends itself with the city’s landscape, as if it was always there. It proves that it is possible to completely blur the line between the architecture and the public space.

## 5. INNOVATIVE FUNCTIONAL SOLUTIONS

The principles of modern regionalism not only follow the character of a place or the free reinterpretation of cultural context, but they also take into account the need to create individual features of architecture. Peter Fauset, who popularised Frampton’s views in Poland, writes that the creator of the critical regionalism: “Suggests also that, even though the trend is

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<sup>8</sup> From the jury’s verdict on the Prize SARP for the best architectural object realised in Poland in 2015.

<sup>9</sup> M. Mozga-Górecka, *Muzeum Śląskie, Katowice*, [in:] Purchla J., Sepioł J. (red.), *Forms Follows Freedom Architektura dla kultury w Polsce 2000+*, Kraków 2015, p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> P. Śmierzewski, *Spektakularna przestrzeń*, *Architektura*, nr 259, 04/2016, p. 62–63.



critical towards modernisation, it should never ignore independent and progressive features of the modern movement<sup>11</sup>. This modernity and individualism can be observed in the functional solutions applied in the recent years' constructions realised in the new aesthetics.

The Raczynski Library is one of the examples here. The architects took the library accessibility into consideration and placed the books warehouse on the top three levels. This solution enabled placing the entire functional user area in a convenient location. It required a special construction made of a raster of three-storey walls. This, in addition, freed the space above the reading room from columns and it gave a special effect of a smooth surface of the extensive ceiling. The building's elevation is another original idea. It involves the classical division with the *piano nobile* rule. However, through the original architectural solutions, it is a modern interpretation of the historic facade. When watched from a distance, the elevation seems simple and monotonous. As we approach the building, however, we note that it is an illusion. The three dimensional facade, formed with slightly twisted columns, makes the form dynamic and its monumental character is kept. The top two floors have no marked ceiling between them. The higher we look, the lighter it feels. The structure composed of few plans allows the observers to look through the entire interior, and at the same time, it eliminates very bright light that could disturb comfortable work in the reading room.

In the Malpolska Garden of Arts building, inside the glass orangery of the reception hall, there is a historic wall, and its creators used the original demolition brick for its reconstruction. They also recreated the roof skylight and reinterpreted the facade's material of the neighbouring houses by using on the facade of the new structure brick fittings. They skilfully found the cubature in the narrow space of the plot. Few entrances were created for the long building and each of them was highlighted and given an individual character. Even though the functional parts were stretched, they create one linked space, and at the same time, they can be independent.

An original architectural solution in the Przelomy Dialogue Centre is a movable elevation on the ground level. During the opening hours, the external plates are turned, creating a shadow for one of the entrances. Opening and closing the building's structure with massive elements forming blinds makes the surface of the square cut out and waved, and the bright entrance is a contrast to the dark space of the exposition below.

The examples shown above prove that Polish contemporary architects also use modern, functional solutions and innovative materials, keeping in mind the modern regionalism trend. The solutions add to the character of constructions and prove that classic architecture does not have to be monotonous.

The idea of critical regionalism underlines that architecture should reflect local characteristics, such as topography, light and climate. In accordance with them, we should pay attention to means of architectural expression, which we use to construct new buildings. When chasing individuality, we must consider if these means are not too provocative. Or on the other hand, if we want to make a building fit within a landscape, they cannot be too restraining.

It seems that currently created public use buildings in Poland are an example of a rational use of architectural means of expression. In the Przelomy Dialogue Centre, the elevations made from concrete plaques are a continuation of the square's ground and they are contrasting with the blackness of the museum's interior. This allows the visitors to concentrate better on the

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<sup>11</sup> P. G. Fauset, *Potrzeba krytycznego regionalizmu w architekturze polskiej*. *Achivolta* 1/1999, p. 20–24.

works and have the impression of infinite space at the same time. The building of the Marina in Bydgoszcz refers to a ship's body and to the neighbouring, historic mill, as it has horizontal wooden panels with vertical narrow windows. The International Congress Centre in Katowice has elevation walls covered with expanded sheet painted black. The sun makes them shine as if they were coal. Together with the black interiors and the use of wood and concrete, it refers to the local mining culture. Another clear symbol is the Corten steel covering the European Education and Solidarity Centre. The building is recognisable from a distance and it has become a new icon of the city. Other solutions were used by the architects of the Raczyński Library in Poznań. They chose "great construction and plastic features of concrete, and its result is a modern building that fits in perfectly with the urban area. Subtle and matt surface of the washed concrete that was used for the elevations is a perfect match for the structure of elevation of the historic, 19<sup>th</sup> century library edifice. Specially formed concrete becomes in this case a contemporary equivalent of plasterwork and it visually links both buildings"<sup>12</sup>.

## 6. SUMMARY

The analysed structures clearly show that Polish contemporary architecture of public use is full of features, which are typical for the modern regionalism trend. Cultural context of a place is taken into consideration and the buildings are harmoniously adapted to fit in the surrounding landscape. The well-chosen form and scale help to create new, functional public and city areas. They quickly become an integrated part of the local culture and are socially accepted. The architects create structures that have original, innovative solutions, at the same time respecting the traditional environment. Precisely chosen means of expression help them to show the recipients intended values, to create incredible, but at the same time, not too loudly individual, buildings. Most of the described objects resulted from architectural competitions for public demands and from the work of the laureates who received prizes. This shows that the area of design is pointing to a new, uniform direction in Polish architecture. One can hope that it will stay in the future years and will move also to the commercial architecture.

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<sup>12</sup> From the jury's verdict for the Prize "Polski Cement w Architekturze 2014".

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