

LONGING FOR ORDINARY HOUSE

TEŃSKNOTA ZA ZWYCZAJNYM DOMEM

Abstract

The thought of the state of a house in the town can be perceived in many aspects. One often analyses the extent to which the house is situated in certain currents of contemporary architecture. Today's state of architecture is dominated by new trends, be it deconstruction, minimalism or the latest trends that are still not fully named. While the breakdown of the buildings' forms has become quotidian, architects often want to shock the audience. The contemporary audience who dreams of the buildings seen in Vienna and Bilbao may find the architecture of the second Republic of Poland outdated. Yet, this architecture carries nostalgia for rationalism in construction and for the art whose scale was adequate to the function. Once houses were ordinary, they did not need to create constant novelty with their form. It must be emphasised, though, that at the time they were innovative. The building in Chocimska Street in Cracow and designation of Cichy Kącik receive the "cult" status today, and despite their small size, they become important places of pilgrimage not only for professionals. Perhaps it is an expression of longing for a "normal" building, the named house. The one in which we can recognise facades, where the walls are vertical and windows suitable for placing flowers. It seems to be an unattainable dream in post-modern times. Today, everything has to be unique, showing the power and wealth of the investor, even in the once ordinary residential buildings. The advertising function, as Charles Jencks put it, is paramount and there is no place for prosaic ordinariness even in the construction of houses.

Keywords: modernism, house, Cracow, ordinariness

Streszczenie

Myśl o stanie domu w mieście można rozpatrywać pod wieloma aspektami. Często analizujemy, w jakim stopniu dom mieści się w określonych nurtach architektury współczesnej. Dzisiejszy stan architektury jest zdominowany nowe kierunki, czasami jest to dekonstrukcja, czasami minimalizm z nurtami najnowszymi, które jeszcze do końca nie są nazwane. Rozbicie formy budynków stało się czymś codziennym i architekci często pragną odbiorców zaszokować. Architektura drugiej Rzeczypospolitej może wydawać się współczesnemu widzowi marzącemu o budynkach, które ogląda

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w Wiedniu czy Bilbao niemodna, jednak niesie nostalgię za racjonalizmem w budowaniu, za sztuką, której skala była adekwatna do funkcji. Kiedyś domy były zwyczajne, nie musiały swoją formą tworzyć nieustającej nowości. Trzeba podkreślić jednak, że w swoich czasach były nowatorskie. Budynek przy ulicy Chocimskiej w Krakowie i założenie Cichego Kącika uzyskują dziś status „kultowości”, stają się mimo swych niewielkich rozmiarów ważnymi miejscami, do których pielgrzymują nie tylko profesjonaliści. Może jest to wyraz tęsknoty za „zwykłym” budynkiem, takim nazwanym domem. W którym możemy rozpoznać elewacje, ściany są pionowe, a okna nadają się do ustawiania na nich kwiatów. Wydaje się to w czasach ponowoczesności marzeniem nieosiągalnym. Dziś wszystko musi być niepowtarzalne, pokazujące potęgę i zamożność inwestora, nawet w kiedyś zwyczajnych budynkach mieszkalnych. Funkcja reklamowa jak pisał to Charles Jencks, jest najważniejsza i nie ma już miejsca dla prozaicznej zwyczajności nawet w budowaniu domów.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, dom, Kraków, zwyczajność

The thought of the state of a house in the town can be perceived in many aspects. One often analyses the extent to which the house is situated in certain currents of contemporary architecture. Today's state of architecture is dominated by new movements, be it deconstruction, minimalism or the latest trends that are still not fully named. While the breakdown of the buildings' forms has become quotidian, architects often want to shock the audience. Ewa Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich's words describe the creation of the latest architecture: "Contemporary architecture, implemented in historical environment, is the art of adding new value to the existing spatial and cultural context – regardless of the adopted method of harmony or contrast"¹. In these considerations, the existing architecture both constitutes a value and becomes the background for the creation of the new one.

Buildings from the past are different, perhaps slightly old-fashioned today, built according to partially forgotten rules. However, despite the fact that they were based on other assumptions, it must be remembered that they were once modern and pleasant to live in. We move among them, they leave us some room for numerous analyses and thoughts. Finally, they acquire the status of real artworks today. The "cult" epithet they are slowly gaining and the interest that surrounds them, ennoble them. There are a lot of such buildings in Cracow, which try to be different, "more beautiful" with their character, they are situated in the corners of the streets due to the small cadastral division of urban plots.

Although sorely neglected today, the building at 15 Chocimska Street is one of the most interesting examples of buildings worthy of notice in Cracow. Compared to the inner city buildings, it seems microscopic, which is one of its advantages rather than drawbacks. The house designed by Józef Gołąb and Eugeniusz Siwek is not often found in professional literature. Perhaps due to its scale, a better known design of these creators is the tenement house at 4 Pędzichów Street. The width of the building at Chocimska Street is only seventeen meters. This is the scale of a villa or a larger single-family house from the early twentieth century. We

¹ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Architektura najnowsza w historycznym środowisku miast europejskich*, Kraków 2013, p. 5.

can consider the whole as an urban villa inscribed in the street frontages, limited with buildings added on adjacent plots. Only the front elevation is “ornamented”, either the architects did not have enough ideas or, as it used to be, the investor had no money left for the back one. The building is single-storey. On the ground floor, there are rooms for the household. In the basement, there is the kitchen, the laundry and the storeroom. This is where the servants probably lived. The front elevation is thoroughly modernist with banded windows even Corbusier would not have been ashamed of. However, Władysław Strzemiński warned us already in 1931: “manipulating straight lines, a flat roof and continuous bands of standardised windows do not constitute a solution of modern architecture yet”². We are not certain whether the Polish avant-garde theorist did not like Cracow’s architecture, but the house resembles a painting slightly. It seems to be closed in a frame and filled with the abstract content. Nowadays, Strzemiński’s words about construction seem obvious, but architecture today is already past postmodernism and has other, more recent experience and new materials, which enable to unrestrictedly shape the form of the building. In defence of the design, we can recall the words of Juliusz Żórawski, so often quoted in the Faculty of Architecture at Cracow University of Technology. His assessment would have probably been quite different, as he stressed that: “Man considers horizontal and vertical directions privileged and reacts strongly to minor deviations from them. The existence of this phenomenon is affected, among others, by gravity. In architecture, where the shaping of forms is structurally dependent on this gravity, privileging these directions is particularly understandable. This does not infer, however, the need for the use of precisely geometric verticals and horizontals in architecture. Meanwhile, man categorically demands verticals and horizontals, and distressingly feels the slightest deviation from them. They are offended by a vertical which is a non-geometric vertical and a horizontal which is non-geometric horizontal”³. Such directions are the most important in the design by Gołąb and Siwek, as they build the form of the whole building. The recessed windows of the ground floor “extend” the façade. The entrance door and glazed staircase constitute a competitive element completed with a decorative “1933” inscription in the style of the Cracow crystal school⁴ showing the date of construction. Neighbouring buildings emphasise the artwork’s small size with their scale, but one has to keep in mind that size does not matter in real art and Hans Hollein’s small designs of shops in Vienna went down in the history of architecture. The comparison to the design from Vienna may be exaggerated but it does capture the author’s fondness for such “small” architecture in Cracow.

An example of Corbusieran – Cracow’s “game of forms assembled in the light” may be a modest complex in Cichy Kącik. Adolf Loos foretold: “By style was meant ornament. I said: weep not. Behold! What makes our period so important is that it is incapable of producing new ornament. We have out-grown ornament, we have struggled through to a state without ornament. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the cities will glow like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, the capital of heaven. It is then that fulfilment will have come”⁵. This complex, or rather a group of ten houses, can be an expression of such a way of looking at architecture. Constituting a separate part of the city, it was established between 1936 and 1937. It was constructed as the colony for the employees

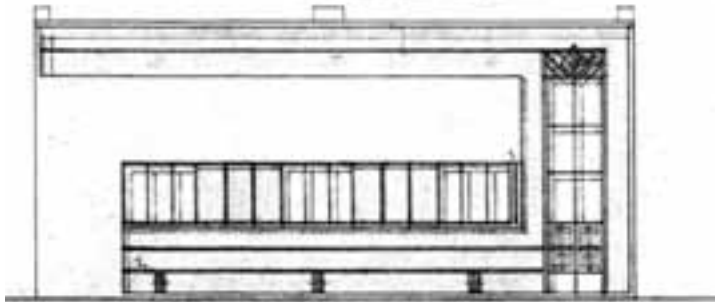
² W. Strzemiński, *Zasady nowej architektury*, [in:] *Wybór pism estetycznych*, Kraków 2006, p. 48.

³ J. Żórawski, *O budowie formy architektonicznej*, Warszawa 1973, p. 29.

⁴ A. K. Olszewski, *Nowa forma w architekturze polskiej 1900–1925*, Warszawa 1967.

⁵ A. Loos, *Ornament i zbrodnia*, [in:] A. Loos, *Eseje wybrane*, Warszawa 2013, p. 136.

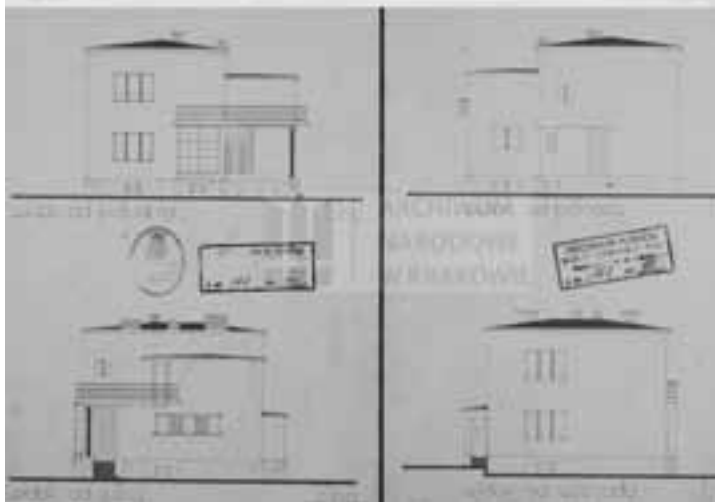
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of Cracow's Community Savings Bank separated from the centre. This modernist complex is the work of the architect Waclaw Nowakowski. However, the most famous are the two villas for directors at 1 and 2 Domeyko Street designed by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz. The whole complex is built on the axis formed by Domeyko Street (once Pększyc-Grudziński Street). The complex's modernism is visible more in the approach to design than style. Describing such architecture, Andrzej Kadłuczka stresses striving for "[...] a break from historicism, the search for simple synthetic form or the use of rational functional and spatial solutions"⁶. The architecture of Nowakowski and Szyszko-Bohusz is elegant and devoid of any unnecessary ornamentation. An unknowing recipient can pass by, but the educated audience will find a lot of details to remember and cannot be fooled by the apparent simplicity of the whole design. It is probably not just crudely useful architecture. After all, already Walter Gropius doubted functionalism, and inclined toward the unconditional beauty, claiming: "I want to affirm, therefore, that I believe the creation of beauty and the forming of values and standards to be the innermost desire of a human being and that this moves him more deeply and more lastingly than the satisfactions of comfort"⁷. This sentence may best describe Cichy Kącik without excessive details.

Let us now consider the layout of the whole complex. Wojciech Kosiński follows the words of the definition of architecture by Le Corbusier, placing even greater importance on geometry: "One of the most important aspects, especially from a professional point of view of the researcher architect, is a »pure form« that is geometry, composition, proportion, form, colour and their intentional analytical perception crowned with assessment and subconscious feeling, possibly realised later"⁸. Here, geometry satisfying the demands of modernism in its "pure form" is expressed not only in the designs of the houses, but also in the whole spatial arrangement. The axis of twelve detached houses constructed on small plots is compositionally closed with the directors' villas. Today, symmetrical composition leads us to new streets with terraced buildings. Carefully planned and unfortunately not preserved in its original state (some of the houses were rebuilt) and deprived of original fencing, the complex is slowly becoming a tourist attraction. The whole is enclosed with Beniowski Street (once Konieczny Street) from one side and with the areas around Błonia Park and balloon loop from the other side. The complex may be an illustration of the principles of composition by Maria Gołaszewska who defines it the following way: "[...] the most well-known principles included: symmetry, balance, consistency, unity in diversity, etc. The composition of the work in a broader sense (attentiveness to transparent structures) also included such principles as the unity of place, time and action (in the theatre), rhythm (in music: allegro

⁶ A. Kadłuczka, *Ochrona zabytków architektury*, Kraków 2001, p. 56.

⁷ W. Gropius, *CIAM 1928–1953*, [in:] *Pełnia architektury*, Kraków 2014, p. 137.

⁸ W. Kosiński, *Miasto i piękno miasta*, Kraków 2011, p. 155.

III. 1. J. Gołąb and E. Siwek, *Building at 15 Chocimska Street in Cracow*, front façade, 1933, source: The National Archives in Krakow

III. 2. A. Szyszko-Bohusz, *Director Kazimierz Jelonek's villa in Cracow*, eastern elevation, 1936, source: The National Archives in Krakow

III. 3. W. Nowakowski, *Józef Wolf's villa in Cracow*, 1936, source: The National Archives in Krakow

– largo – allegro), cyclicity (in poetry and music), succession of time in line with the natural chronology (in novel, theatre, film)⁹. Here, we see that the plan's author considered every element of space.

The tram was built in 1936 specifically for this housing estate. It is part of the old line number 4 leading from Szewska Street along Piłsudski Street as far as Jordan Park. At the same time, sports and recreational facilities were constructed here (designed by Jan Bukowski, 1934–39). One of the most beautiful Polish modernist sports complexes was the Municipal Sports Stadium. Today, the facility is devastated and destined for demolition. The estate is unadorned, it becomes an adornment to the entire city with its irregular cadastral quarter development. It seems something beautiful in the space of Cracow with its irregularity. No one who is in the area and sees the complex will pass indifferently, it is a matter of taste. And as Kant wrote: "(...) The judgement of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise, despite its diversity, we could not quarrel about it (we could not claim for our judgement the necessary assent of others)"¹⁰. Without wondering if someone agrees with us and trying not to estimate such architecture, its uniqueness in the city should be emphasised.

The most famous buildings of the whole complex are the houses located at 1 and 2 Domeyko Street, constructed for the directors of Cracow's Community Savings Bank – Stanisław Kochanowski and Kazimierz Jelonek. One can find the names in the preserved Szyszko-Bohusz's plans. These two luxury villas, towering in size over the rest of the development, front Cracow's Błonia Park. Cubic form with distinctive semi-circular elements hiding winter gardens, recessed terraces with access to the garden and large glazing in the living room from Igrcowie Street. A piano "drawn" in the design hides behind the glass. Inside, apart from ordinary rooms, there were two studies. After all, these were to be houses for directors who probably had a lot of work. The whole presents the climate of modernist architecture with its penchant for functionalism. Apart from conservatories, there are no ornaments in the house. Maria Misiągiewicz describes such architecture in the following way: "The architectural thing was to present itself in the most neutral way, leaving the viewer the freedom to choose a convenient point of view (...)"¹¹. The houses designed by Nowakowski are much more modest, but they also have a room for servants and a study. Utility and sustainability are no longer an objective in contemporary architecture. Here, looking at the building plans, we might suspect that the creator is deceiving us slightly, pretending not to be interested in the form, but in the game of forms in the light.

Maria Misiągiewicz detects the beginnings of Polish modernism in the influence of Russian Constructivism. She mentions the cover of the March issue of "Blok" from 1924: "(...) on the cover appeared Mieczysława Szczuka's drawing entitled *Architecture*. It is a composition of cuboidal blocks, two vertical and six horizontal ones, without any signs indicative of architecture, without holes, or windows. Later, in "Blok" No 8–9, Szczuka presented in axonometry *The static construction of horizontals and verticals on the plane*; another drawing, perspective, converts this geometric construction into an architectural object of unknown purpose. By means of a strange graphic kind of perspective with the line of horizon raised high, Teresa Żarnower presents conversion of an architectural thing to abstract

⁹ M. Gołaszewska, *Zarys estetyki. Problematyka, metody, teorie*, Warszawa 1984, p. 394–395.

¹⁰ I. Kant, *Krytyka władzy sądzienia*, Warszawa 1986, p. 279.

¹¹ M. Misiągiewicz, *O prezentacji idei architektonicznej*, Kraków 1999, p. 131.

space of a painting and its primacy as a painterly-graphical original space”¹². Mies van der Rohe’s demands concerning construction were presented in the same issue of the journal:

- “• We refuse to recognise problems of form, but only problems of building.
- Form is not the aim of our work, but only the result.
- Form, by itself, does not exist.
- The condition for achieving true perfection of form is expressing it in the most elementary way.
- Form as an aim is formalism; and that we reject.
- Likewise, we do not strive for creation of style.
- Creating style is also formalism.
- We have other concerns”¹³.

Although we do not know whether this was the original intention of the author, the plan of the whole composition with the balloon loop, Igrcowie, Domeyko and Beniowski Street creates a diagram of the human body. We are not certain whether it is a woman or a man, but it might be inspired by the proportions of ancient columns. A Romanian mathematician and philosopher could certainly have something to add here: “[...] in the great era of Greek architecture, the human body was considered the most perfect living pattern of symmetry and eurhythmics, which was to serve a builder as a source of inspiration, or even as a model when preparing plans. Vitruvius, whose work does not contain any personal innovation but only presents the tradition of Greek architecture already counting five centuries, dwells on this issue. Discussing columns, he compares the proportions of Doric columns (of 6/1 module as the ratio of height to average diameter) with proportions of the body of a man; Ionic column proportions (module 8/1) remind him of the graceful body of a woman, and Corinthian columns – the slender body of a girl”¹⁴. Perhaps this is just a coincidence, because the work is thoroughly modern and geometrically abstract, but we can hope that even in such an art there appears a thought about a metaphor.

Despite the passage of time, Cichy Kącik is not seen as a monument, but a collection of some of the most beautiful buildings in Cracow. The death of modernist architecture and the beginning of completely “contemporary” post-modernism dated at 15:32 July, 15 1972¹⁵. The death of Minoru Yamasaki’s housing estate in St. Louis created a new beginning for the art of construction. However, our view of the work Nowakowski and Szyszko-Bohusz is still favourable despite changing trends in design. Perhaps that is why we see the beauty of these simple compositions that cannot be created today in the era of omnipresent commercialism. The housing estate designed by Nowakowski became an inseparable part of the emerging district, adjacent to modernist facilities of the Municipal Sports Stadium. It created a vision of the urban expansion and breaking with its dense quarter development.

Cichy Kącik and the building at Chocimska Street may become an expression of longing for “ordinary” buildings, which everyone could call a house. The ones where we can recognise facades, walls are vertical and window suitable for placing flower boxes. This seems to be an unattainable dream in post-modern times. Today, everything has to be unique, showing the power and wealth of the investor, even in the once ordinary residential buildings.

¹² M. Misiągiewicz, *O prezentacji idei architektonicznej*, Kraków 1999, p. 161.

¹³ M. v. d. Rohe, “Blok”, March, 1924.

¹⁴ M. C. Ghyka, *Złota liczba*, Kraków 2014, p. 56.

¹⁵ Ch. Jenks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 1991.

The advertising function, as Charles Jencks put it¹⁶, is paramount and there is no place for prosaic ordinariness even in the construction of houses, not to mention that living in such a thing in artistic circles is a no-no. Fortunately, one can still find places that take us back in time when architecture was different – unordinary with its ordinariness. The contemporary audience who dreams of the buildings seen in Vienna and Bilbao may find the architecture of the second Republic of Poland outdated. Yet, this architecture carries nostalgia for rationalism in construction and for the art whose scale was adequate to function. Ewa Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich's words can perfectly serve as a conclusion: "History verifies the works of architecture – the buildings' technical and utilitarian sustainability, their artistic value and significance to local communities are often determinant factors [...]"¹⁷. As we can see, history treated both buildings favourably, unlike the Municipal Sports Stadium which will be destroyed.

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¹⁶ R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

¹⁷ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Architektura najnowsza w historycznym środowisku miast europejskich*, Kraków 2013, p. 5