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THE POLISH HOUSE AND WOMEN.  
ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURE, USERS  
AND DESIGNERS OF SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENCES

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DOM POLSKI I KOBIETY. O ARCHITEKTURZE,  
UŻYTKOWNICZKACH I PROJEKTANTKACH  
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**A b s t r a c t**

Contemporary research on the history and architecture of homes cannot be complete without the inclusion of women: women understood both as users and designers of homes. It is necessary to develop a new approach to the analysis of their role from an anthropological, cultural and historical perspective. It seems that in Poland, women did not begin playing a major role in the development of the concept of the home until the twentieth century. A new group of creative and increasingly better educated women embraced the new Modern architecture as they became not only the buyers and conscious users of homes, but also their innovative designers. The paper describes the shifts in the concepts and philosophy of the home. It also presents the achievements of Polish women architects during the Interbellum, the communist period and after the fall of communism.

*Keywords: women, architecture, home, history, gender*

**S t r e s z c z e n i e**

Współczesne badania dotyczące historii i architektury domu nie mogą się obyć bez udziału kobiet. Kobiet rozumianych jako użytkowniczki, ale także jako projektantki. Niezbędne jest nowe podejście do analizy tego zjawiska, odczytywanego zarówno z perspektywy antropologicznej, kulturowej jak i historycznej. Wydaje się, że dopiero wiek XX przyniósł w Polsce wyraźną zmianę roli i znaczenia kobiet w kształtowaniu się pojęcia domu. Nowoczesność architektonicznego modernizmu spotkała się z nową grupą twórczych kobiet. Coraz lepiej wykształconych, stających się nie tylko świadomymi swoich potrzeb klientkami i użytkowniczkami domów, ale także odważnymi projektantkami. W tekście opisano zagadnienia zmian idei i filozofii domu;

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przedstawiono również działalność polskich architektek w okresie dwudziestolecia międzywojennego, okresu PRL, a także po upadku komunizmu.

*Słowa kluczowe: kobiety, architektura, dom, historia, gender*

The history of contemporary homes in Poland takes into account the role of women only to a limited extent, whereas it cannot be disputed that women have also participated in the formation and development of new ideas and concepts on habitation<sup>1</sup>. Through the centuries, women have been important users of homes, and with time, their role has significantly transformed to take on the completely new tasks of developers and designers. In this context, it is important to ask about the actual contribution of women to the formation of new trends in the architecture of single-family residences.

Contemporary research on the architecture and history of homes rarely considers the importance of women. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a new approach to the analysis of their role, both from an anthropological and cultural, as well as a historical perspective. Current studies on women's history (and architecture) in the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, PRL, 1952–89) are obstructed by the division of past achievements into historical and social components, and by the marginalisation of modern research strategies and methods. In addition to the anthropological and cultural perspective, systematic architectural analyses should, however, also focus on gender<sup>2</sup>. Another methodological difficulty is the conducting of modern research in two parallel directions, i.e. an academic one, which takes into account the established historiography, and a feminist one, which considers gender status<sup>3</sup>.

In particular, this problem concerns modern architecture researchers (hailing from practising architects) who essentially refer to the traditional historiography. Nonetheless, as well as the academic historic literature that refers to well established principles, there are also subjective, insurrectionist writings that emphasise emotions, defy the cause-and-effect structure and treat the criterion of truth with suspicion<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, research on the contemporary home, on the terms used to describe it and on its history and significance must be based not only on conventional approaches, but should also embrace some completely new ones.

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The home is a place where the gender divide is clearly apparent, being the place where a community is built, but also the site of many rifts and conflicts. Even the very definition of

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<sup>1</sup> By contemporary homes in Poland, the author means the development of the concept and the material and theoretical history from 1918 (the Second Polish Republic), during the Polish People's Republic, until today.

<sup>2</sup> K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, P. Perkowski, *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce – stan i perspektywy badań*. [In:] *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy*. Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, Poznań 2014, p. 135

<sup>3</sup> D. Kałwa, *Historia kobiet – kilka uwag metodologicznych*. In: *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy*. Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, Poznań 2014, p. 14–15.

<sup>4</sup> E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*. Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2006, p. 54–55.

the concept of home is not an easy one. It can be understood in different ways, from different perspectives and in different terms. It can, according to Shelley Mallett, be an imaginary concept or involve a family unit (home); it can also be a building (house). It may be a haven and refuge, a private realm. Home is also associated with sexuality and gender, as it divides its space into specific functions<sup>5</sup>.

A classical description of the home and its associated concepts has been provided by David Morley in the fundamental work *Home territories. Media, mobility and identity*<sup>6</sup>. The subject matter outlined by Morley concerns many facets of the essence of “home” and departs from its basic sense as a building. As he describes the essence of the concept, Morley goes beyond the “sacred” spaces of the home associated with urbanity, permanence and the distribution of privacy and comfort. *Home Territories* display a diversity of perceptions stemming from geography, culture, identity and ethnicity. The book also describes the space of the home within the dimension of modernity, in relation to migration, mobility and exile, as well as the new media and the role of broadcasting in the building of the national family. Moreover, it introduces a virtual and cybernetic, postmodern geography, in addition to world politics and the limits of belonging, including the notion of strangers and foreigners<sup>7</sup>. Morley also makes reference to the category of gender in the home stating explicitly that the various scales of its space are gendered: the masculine is identified with the universal and conceptual, whereas the feminine is equated with the local<sup>8</sup>.

The actual understanding of the home as a space forms a specific paradox. While the space of a contemporary city is a plane of major gender divisions, the space of the home is seen as an obviously feminine domain<sup>9</sup>. Doreen Massey even wrote that “the identities of ‘woman’ and the ‘home-place’ are intimately tied up with each other.”<sup>10</sup> In traditional societies, the division of the home into women’s and men’s areas clearly defined its architectural constitution and content, and one could distinguish both the masculine and the feminine elements. It can even be argued that in modern times, men continue to focus their interests on the “hard” features of the home, which correspond to its structure and architectural form, while women focus on the “soft” areas, which include the functionality and organisation of the interior. However, the question of whether this stems from natural predispositions or is associated with gender and culturally conditioned social roles remains open to discussion.

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For centuries, the needs of women as users of homes were at an apparent disadvantage to those of men. The first architectural treatises disregarded the needs of women, and this was also true of the first Polish house construction “manual” of 1659, which “according to

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent examination of the literature on the subject has been published by: S. Mallett. *Understanding home: a critical review of the literature*. In: *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 52.1/2004, 62–89.

<sup>6</sup> D. Morley, *Home Territories. Media, Mobility and Identity*. Routledge 2002. Polish translation: D. Morley. *Przestrzeń domu. Media, mobilność i tożsamość*. Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2011.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20, 8–10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> J. Gądecki. *Gra w gender, gra w miasto*. *Kultura i Polityka*, Nr 4/2008, p. 73–74.

<sup>10</sup> D. Massey. *Space, Place and Gender*. Polity Press, Oxford 1994, p. 180.



- III.1. Home at 8 Niegolewskiego Street, Warsaw. Barbara Brukalska and Stanisław Brukalski Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Warszawa\\_Dom\\_Brukalskich\\_ul.\\_Niegolewskiego8\\_1927.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Warszawa_Dom_Brukalskich_ul._Niegolewskiego8_1927.JPG)
- III.2. Home in Szumin near Warsaw. Zofia Garlińska-Hansen and Oskar Hansen. Source: <https://nishapoland.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/77.jpg>
- III.3. Home at Kochanowskiego Street, Wrocław. Jadwiga Grabowska-Hawrylak. Source: [http://culture.pl/sites/default/files/images/culture.pl/jadwiga\\_grabowska-hawrylakowa\\_dom\\_katowice.jpg](http://culture.pl/sites/default/files/images/culture.pl/jadwiga_grabowska-hawrylakowa_dom_katowice.jpg)
- III.4. Home in Kazimierz nad Wisłą. Ewa and Stefan Kuryłowicz. Source: [http://static.apaka.com.pl/static/repository/work/img/235\\_1\\_PUBLISHED\\_FULLL.jpg](http://static.apaka.com.pl/static/repository/work/img/235_1_PUBLISHED_FULLL.jpg)

heaven and the Polish tradition,” entirely ignored the needs and expectations of women, not to mention their influence on the designing of the home interior<sup>11</sup>. As indicated by Marta Leśniakowska, four rooms were assigned to the male area in a typical home, whilst women had only two at their disposal. This proportion of 2:1 between the male and female zone was later reinforced in the design and planning solutions of subsequent centuries<sup>12</sup>.

According to Canadian researcher Annmarie Adams, many important changes in the concept of the home which came forward in the late nineteenth century were brought about by the efforts of feminists and health reformers rather than architects<sup>13</sup>. Nonetheless, the emergence of the modern home notion in the United States was connected to the contemporary industrial potential and to the American lifestyle, which also determined the role of women and their position in the family<sup>14</sup>. The development of this notion in Europe grew from a completely different experience and cultural model, and women eventually also took on the roles of developers and contracting parties. However, a major breakthrough did not occur until the twentieth century and the advancement of the Modernist movement in architecture. Women found themselves not only in the position of users, but were also involved in the construction of homes as architects and designers.

According to Michelle Perrot, the home in the nineteenth century still constituted the physical foundation of the family and the mainstay of social order. As the realm of the household, it embodied the shared aspirations of matrimony, without distinguishing between the needs of women and men. The home was an element of stability, which also gave rise to the concept of housing projects for workers. It also fulfilled a moral and political role as a symbol of discipline and permanence<sup>15</sup>. It was, nonetheless, a derivative of the social divisions and structure, and its form was determined by social relations and class affiliation to a far greater extent than by gender. The ambitions of the higher social strata manifested in mansions, palaces and villas, or at least in smaller but still impressive country homes. It is worth noting that small houses were a later concept that was invented for the use of white and blue-collar workers of higher material standing. All this, however, was a direct reference to Talleyrand’s and Stendhal’s “wall of private life” which people had not attached such great importance to in the past<sup>16</sup>.

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In Poland, it seems that women began playing a visible role in the development of the concept of the home in the early twentieth century. A new group of creative and increasingly better educated women embraced the new Modern architecture as they became not only the

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<sup>11</sup> A. Miłobędzki (ed.). *Krótką nauka budownicza dworów, pałaców, zamków podług nieba i zwyczaju polskiego*. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1957, p. 21; quoted from: M. Leśniakowska. *Dom Adama, Dom Ewy: dyskurs różnicy w (pod) tekstach historii architektury*. Rocznik Historii Sztuki Vol. 30/2005, p. 34–35.

<sup>12</sup> M. Leśniakowska, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> A. Adams. *Architecture in the family way: doctors, houses, and women, 1870–1900*. Vol. 4. McGill-Queen’s Press-MQUP 1996.

<sup>14</sup> A. T. Friedman, *Women and the making of the modern house: A social and architectural history*, Yale University Press 2006.

<sup>15</sup> M. Perrot. *Sposoby zamieszkiwania*. In: *Historia życia prywatnego*, t. 4, Wydawnictwo Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 2006, p. 313–315.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 313.

buyers and conscious users of homes, but also their innovative designers. In the 1920s, the architectural sector witnessed a wave of bold young architects which included women. One of the major focuses of these women architects was residential architecture. The most prominent among them were the pioneers of Polish avant-garde architecture: Barbara Brukalska, Helena Syrkus and Teresa Żarnower.

Residential architecture was one of the main interests of Barbara Brukalska, who collaborated with her husband, Stanisław Brukalski. A member of the Preasens Group, Brukalska was a graduate of the Warsaw University of Technology (where she later became a professor), and before 1939, she designed simple and functional housing with interesting artistic features, such as the Warsaw Housing Association (WSM) Colony in Żoliborz, Warsaw. One of Brukalska's and her husband's most important projects, and also an example of the first Polish avant-garde house, was their three-storey private home with a characteristic roof garden at 8 Niegolewskiego Street, Warsaw (1928).

A deep understanding of the housing environment was also extremely important to Helena Syrkus, who considered architecture not only her profession but also a vital part of her life. With her husband, Szymon Syrkus, she conducted thorough studies on residential construction regarding its organisation, needs and functions, which she later applied in the detached houses she designed before World War II in Milanówek, Skolimów and Warsaw. All these projects were characterised by a quest for new form, function and design solutions<sup>17</sup>.

Another woman architect who sought new solutions was Teresa Żarnower, who collaborated with Mieczysław Szczuka. Between 1924 and 1926, she designed a series of theoretical housing projects. Some of them, for example the so-called "garden homes in garden towns", were a reference to Le Corbusier's idea of merging architecture with its surroundings, and were presented at the First International Exhibition of Modern Architecture, held in 1926 in Warsaw<sup>18</sup>. Żarnower's other projects, intended for wealthy childless clients, focused not on the buildings as such, but on "a method of artistic composition (construction) in three dimensions, based on a specific geometrical abstraction."<sup>19</sup>

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The shift from private property to state-owned and cooperative forms in post-war Poland limited the development of individual housing construction. The main focus of the state's housing policy was on the mass production of flats. However, people still desired single-family residences, and this was even taken into account in the socialist economic plans which looked to build 1.1 million such homes in the years 1976–1985, and a further 700,000 between 1986 and 1990<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, the structures of individual buildings were not so much a priority but rather the various forms of collective (usually cooperative) ownership.

In the PRL, a considerable number of women were professionally involved in architectural work<sup>21</sup>, but despite the officially propagated equality, few attained relative independ-

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<sup>17</sup> I. Wisłocka. *Awangardowa architektura polska: 1918–1939*. Arkady, Warszawa 1968, 131–132, 136.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109–110.

<sup>19</sup> E. Gorządek. <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/teresa-zarnower-zarnowerowna> (20.05.2016).

<sup>20</sup> T. P. Szafer. *Nowa architektura polska. Diariusz lat 1971–1975*. Arkady, Warszawa 1979, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> See: P. Marciniak. *Famous or Forgotten: Women Architects in Communist Poland*. In: Rosso M. (ed.). *Investigating and Writing Architectural History: Subjects, Methodologies and Frontiers*, Papers from the Third EAHN International Meeting, Torino 2014, p. 855–864.

ence. The seemingly equal gender roles did not reflect the actual position of women in the professional sphere. This was further obstructed by the organization of the design work concentrated within large state-run planning studios, where women played background roles. Most of the women architects who did work on single-family residences usually collaborated with their husbands who were also architects. It seems that this strategy made it possible to successfully combine professional work and family life, whilst providing an opportunity to reconcile professional ambitions and creative visions with the dull communist reality<sup>22</sup>.

One of the few women who achieved independent success at the time was Wrocław-based Jadwiga Grabowska-Hawrylak. Working on the realisation of large projects, she did not ignore the issues of residential architecture regarding which, as she believed, “one should not spare ... any effort to explore an individual, diverse and distinctive form for architecture – the dwelling-place for human beings, closer to the earth and to nature – for the city which one nostalgically yearns for, and which in its pursuit of modernity has been lost somewhere.”<sup>23</sup> Grabowska-Hawrylak managed to fulfil this dream in her private red brick home at Kochanowskiego Street in Wrocław, for which she received the Honorary Award of the Association of Polish Architects in 1984.

Under socialist rule, gender differences within the space of a home proved to be far less crucial than the fundamental need for shelter. The horrendously long waiting periods before people were able to move into their own homes overshadowed their form, and even the organisation of their interiors. In the PRL, a single-family residence became synonymous of a luxury which few could afford. Low-rise housing was, nonetheless, an area of interest for some women architects, including Krakow’s Małgorzata Buratyńska-Seruga. With her husband, Waław Seruga, she designed many detached houses in the Dąbrowa Estate in Kielce, and also in Niepołomice, Bielsko and Krakow<sup>24</sup>. Another interesting woman architect of the time was Maria Piechotka of Warsaw, who with her husband, Kazimierz Piechotka, combined design work with architectural research. Maria Piechotka contributed to the development of prefabricated mass housing systems, whilst also designing small-scale projects, for instance a complex of terraced houses in Bielany, Warsaw<sup>25</sup>.

One of the few women architects who regarded the home not only as a dwelling-place but also as the site of experiments was Zofia Garlińska-Hansen. A painter and architect, she sought new spatial solutions and developed theories, albeit she is usually mentioned in the context of her husband, Oskar Hansen, also an architect, painter and architectural theorist, the author of the Open Form and the Linear Continuous System concepts. Oskar Hansen did, nonetheless, insist that without his wife he would not have been able to fulfil his creative visions. These are exemplified by their home in Szumin near Warsaw, which constitutes the practical realisation of the Open Form concept. Another house designed by Zofia Hansen

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<sup>22</sup> The author has described the subject in detail in a chapter of a book depicting the work of women architects in communist countries. See: P. Marciniak. *Spousal Collaboration as a professional strategy for women architects in the Polish People’s Republic*. In: M. Pepchinski, M. Simon (eds.). *Ideological Equality: Women Architects in Socialist Europe, 1945–1989*. Routledge 2016.

<sup>23</sup> T. P. Szafer. *Współczesna architektura polska*. Arkady, Warszawa 1988, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217, 225.

<sup>25</sup> T. Barucki. *Architektura Polski*. Arkady, Warszawa 1985, p. 186.

in Szumin for her friend, Katarzyna Nowosad, throws an interesting light on her innovative approach. According to Nowosad, “She designed a glass house, almost like in Żeromski<sup>26</sup>. Maybe not entirely of glass, but with lots of glazing ... This project was designed twenty years too early. It was impossible to buy such glazing at time”<sup>27</sup>.

Several women architects were involved in the dissemination of the then scarcely known architectural accomplishments in the West. One of them was Hanna Adamczewska-Wejchert, a prominent architect and town planner, and a professor at the Warsaw University of Technology. Strongly involved in the construction of the new industrial town, Nowe Tychy, she was also interested in the theoretical and practical aspects of small-scale residential environments. This resulted in a collaboration which produced a complex of twelve atrium houses in Sadyba, Warsaw<sup>28</sup>. Atrium houses were a new type of development in Poland, which was reviewed and popularised by Adamczewska-Wejchert in her book *Domy Atrialne* (Atrium Houses)<sup>29</sup>.

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The fall of communism provided Polish contemporary architecture with a new momentum. A new generation of designers emerged, and women achieved independence in individual design practice. A vast majority of them have dedicated their efforts to fields that have always been the domain of women, i.e. home interiors, and their organisation, design and decoration. Among those who have focused on the housing environment is Małgorzata Sadowska-Sobczyk whose private home and art studio in Józefów near Warsaw creates a space from which one can only see tree trunks and crowns. In 2013, the home, a clear reference to contextualism and symbiosis with nature, won the fifth Polish XXL Architecture vote<sup>30</sup>.

Architects' private homes have for a long time given them the possibility of realising projects in accordance with their philosophies. An example of a thus designed space is the home of Ewa Kuryłowicz and her late husband, Stefan Kuryłowicz, the cofounders of one of Poland's largest architectural firms. Built in 2006 in Kazimierz nad Wisłą, the house uses its architecture to merge the feminine and the masculine, whilst observing the longstanding custom of reflection on the Polish home<sup>31</sup>. It also contributes to the discussion on the relationship between contemporary architecture and respect for local traditions.

The last example in the discussion on the role of women architects in the creation of a contemporary vision of the home is the private home and studio of architects Anna Misiura and Łukasz Kabarowski, situated in a village near Wrocław. Its “masculine” and minimalist expression clearly separates it from the environment with a clear intention to isolate the particular areas of habitation<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> A reference to the novel *Coming Spring* (Polish title *Przedwiośnie*, 1925) by Polish author Stefan Żeromski.

<sup>27</sup> F. Springer, Zaczyn. *O Zofii i Oskarze Hansenach*. Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków-Warszawa 2013, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> Szafer 1979, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> H. Adamczewska-Wejchert. *Domy atrialne*. Arkady, Warszawa 1978.

<sup>30</sup> A. Sural. <http://culture.pl/pl/artykul/domy-wlasne-architektow#second-menu-11> (20.05.2016).

<sup>31</sup> A. Cymer. *Dom w Kazimierzu Dolnym*. Architektura-murator, Nr 2/2007, p. 58–60.

<sup>32</sup> Sural, *op.cit.*

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The space of a home contains contradictory and difficult elements, albeit it is most certainly marked by femininity. In many cultures, it is women who have always “written” the story of homes<sup>33</sup>. The home-place and the woman are also a plane of a creative symbiosis. Therefore, the analysis of the contemporary home and its evolution cannot be conducted without a discussion on the role played in this field by women: women understood not only as the residents and users of homes, but also their cofounders and creators.

The interwar avant-garde movement, the difficult times of communism, and the period of creative freedom in a democratic country have all given women architects opportunities to participate in the creation of homes<sup>34</sup>. Their impact on the history of the home is indisputable, and for this reason, the involvement of women in this history must be acknowledged to a greater extent. Women have made their presence known on the various pages of the modern history of Poland with the realisation of new architectural visions. Despite their relatively modest representation, they have been contributing to the debate on the shape of the contemporary single-family residence for a long time, a contribution that deserves greater merit and appreciation.

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<sup>33</sup> For example, this relates to the culture of the Far East. See: A. M. Burton. *Dwelling in the archive: women writing house, home, and history in late colonial India*. Oxford University Press on Demand 2003.

<sup>34</sup> It would be impossible to describe in this paper the works of all women architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The text contains only selected projects and realisations, which aim to outline the subject matter and contribute to the discussion on the role of women in contemporary Polish architecture.

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