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A HOUSE IN THE CITY – IN THE CONTEXT OF SECESSION AESTHETICS

DOM MIESZKALNY W MIEŚCIE – W KONTEKŚCIE ESTETYKI SECESYJNEJ

Abstract

A new image of the house in the city is presented against the background of the Secession aesthetics as a manifestation of new attempts, concepts and modernist trends in early 20th-century architecture and denial of the stylistic principles of jaded historical forms of art. The search for a new expression of buildings and achievement of “architectural unity” indicate the dualistic challenge of creating a form oscillating between utility and aesthetics. The means of expression of the Secession aesthetics associated with the aspects of visual perception, as carriers of ideas, symbols and semantic connotations in the creation of new transformations of the architectural urban space are analysed on the bases of selected examples: houses in cities and towns of autonomous Galicia.

Keywords: house, Secession architecture, aesthetics

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono zagadnienia związane z kształtowaniem nowego oblicza domu mieszkalnego w mieście w kontekście estetyki secesyjnej jako przejaw wyrazu nowych dążeń, poglądów i modernistycznych tendencji w architekturze początku XX w. oraz negacji stylistycznego kanonu przeżytych form historycznych. Poszukiwania nowego wyrazu budowli i osiągnięcia „architektonicznej jedności” ukazują dualistyczną dążność kształtowania jej formy oscylującej pomiędzy jej użytecznością a estetyką. Środki wyrazu estetyki secesyjnej związane z aspektem percepcji wizualnej, jako nośniki idei, symboli i konotacji znaczeń w kreowaniu nowej transformacji przestrzeni architektonicznej miasta, zanalizowano na wybranych przykładach – domów mieszkalnych ośrodków i miast autonomicznej Galicji.

Słowa kluczowe: dom mieszkalny, architektura secesyjna, estetyka

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1. INTRODUCTION

The architecture of the towns and cities in autonomous Galicia in the early 20th century was not uniform and its general character was influenced by the aesthetics of Austrian cities, due to the long-term political domination of the capital city of Vienna and patterns implemented in construction by the authorities of the Austrian annexation. The concepts imported from Vienna determined the spatial expression of Galician towns and cities at that time, and in the rendition of the historical, Secession or modernist trends were legible not only in the architecture of public edifices, but also commonly used in housing in the biggest centres of Galicia, such as Lvov and Krakow. At the same time, the early 20th century was regarded as a forerunner of the formation of modernist architecture, the way to which was designated, in a certain sense, by the aesthetics and ideology of the Secession architecture. In the aspect of Secession aesthetics, the town house was also acquiring a new dimension as a token of modern attempts, concepts and social needs. Hence, the question should be posed: Was it really a modern house in its full meaning and which of its features anticipated *modern* architecture? ... and, what was the role of Secession at that time ?

2. A HOUSE IN THE SECESSION AESTHETICS – BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

– EXAMPLES OF THE MOST IMPORTANT URBAN CENTRES OF GALICIA: LVOV AND KRAKOW AND LESS IMPORTANT PROVINCES

Since the early 20th century Lvov – the capital city of Galicia, and Krakow – “the intellectual and spiritual capital of the Polish nation”, functioning as a substitute of the partitioned country¹, were the main centres of development of Secession architecture in Poland, where the new trends permeated through artistic and cultural contacts with Vienna, or indirectly, from other West European cities, such as Munich or Paris. The popularity and acceptance of the new style in Lvov converged with the big urban expansion of the city at the turn of the 19th century and was an outcome of considerable population growth. In accordance with the principles of ordering urban settlements, many public utility edifices were erected, but also sequences of tenement houses along newly demarcated streets, squares and city quarters. The construction activities were also spurred on by numerous national building and technical exhibitions, and a strong supply base of architects who graduated from the Technical University of Lvov and Lvov Industrial School. There were many commercial, industrial and construction enterprises, the most prolific of which was Jan Lewiński’s company, the main representative of the Secession trend in Lvov². Hence, at that time Lvov was considered the most Secession-pervaded city in Galicia, with the number of *Art Nouveau* houses greater than in Krakow, which, after all, was the birthplace of Secession art on Polish soil. The new image of the architecture of Lvov and Krakow was shaped by pluralistic syncretism, with a coherent expression and the predominance of the

¹ J. Purchla, *Kraków i jego architektura na przełomie wieków*, [in:] *Sztuka około 1900 w Europie Środkowej*, Materials from the International Conference held on 24–24 October 1994, edited by P. Krakowski and J. Purchla, Krakow, 1997, p. 63.

² J. Lewicki, *Między tradycją a nowoczesnością. Architektura Lwowa lat 1893–1918*, Warsaw 2005, p. 503–510.

decorative form of facades of city houses. Against such background, the exteriors of Galician Secession houses were endowed with the ornamentation of a new stylistic attire resembling the traditional decorativeness of eclectic and historical trends. A specific feature of Secession housing in Lvov was a symbiosis of the new tendencies with historical, eclectic, modernist and national elements (such as the Zakopane style or the Hutsul style)³.

Similar pluralistic tendencies in architectural styles combined with national trends were also observed in other countries subordinated to the Hapsburg monarchy, yet always focused on the restoration of independence: the Czech Republic, where even more progressive concepts appeared. Jan Kotěra, Czech architect and disciple of Otto Wagner, formulated the principles of architectural modernity following Wagner's ideas, by declaring, in 1900: "Architecture considers space and structures, not shape and decoration. The former is the real truth of architecture, whereas the latter may only express this truth. A new form does not emerge from aesthetic speculations, but from new functions and structures. Any trend that is not derived from the function and construction, but from the form, is only a romantic utopia"⁴.

By applying a similar principle to the Galician architecture of houses, it should be considered whether it fulfilled these assumed criteria of modernity. The first signals of the Secession style in houses in Lvov appeared earlier than in Krakow and other Galician towns and cities. A significant role in this matter was played by the newly designed quarter of Kastelówka, which was a certain kind of experimental training ground in housing architecture and, as emphasized by Żanna Komar and Julia Bohdanowicz: "The peripheries had become a field of pioneering experiments, where a practical attempt at implementing the latest theories was made, even before they were verified and commonly accepted worldwide"⁵. The authors were right to notice that, "The design of a modern housing estate implemented since 1885 was a daring attempt at bringing to life the emerging concept of healthy and comfortable place of occupancy surrounded by greenery (...). The Kastelówka estate was also a manifestation of another concept that preoccupied architects at that time: an alliance between fine arts and crafts, especially in the architecture of particular buildings, and, definitely, in Julian Zachariewicz's house"⁶. Thus, the estate was a site with explicit reference to two ground-breaking ideas that were tokens of *fin de siècle*, the propagated English concept of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, after 1898, and the *Arts and Crafts* artistic movement initiated in 1888 by William Morris, a forerunner of *Art Nouveau* in England. The example of the "Julietka" Villa (1891–1893) situated on the Kastelówka estate and designed by Julian Zachariewicz presented a new view of a house created as a work that was functional throughout from the interiors to the exteriors, considering, first and foremost, the needs of the interior layout, where the predominant importance was given to the stairs, stained glass, colours, materials and techniques. Its exterior form, resulting from the interiors and the asymmetric body of the building, with restrained historical details and modern differentiated windows, was an anticipation of changes in architecture, signifying the features that may be

³ J. Biriulow, *Secesja we Lwowie*, Warsaw 1996, p. 38.

⁴ J. Vybiral, *Moderna czy kierunek narodowy w Pradze*, [in:] *Sztuka okolo 1900 w Europie Środkowej*, Materials from the International Conference held on 24–24 October 1994, edited by P. Krakowski and J. Purchla, Krakow, 1997, p. 136.

⁵ Ż. Komar, J. Bohdanowa, *Secesja we Lwowie. Secession in Lvov*, Krakow 2014, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.



- III. 1. Lvov, Adolf Segal's tenement house, designed by T. Obmiński and M. Ulam and Z. Kędzierski Company (1904–1905). Photographed by the author
- III.2. Lvov. Exterior emergency stairs seen from the backyard of Adolf Segal's tenement house. Photographed by the author
- III.3. Biała (nowadays Bielsko-Biała), Walenty Jakubecki's house at Kościelny Square, designed by L. Bauer 1902–1903. Photographed by the author
- III.4. Biała, fragment of W. Jakubecki's house the façade with richly decorated frieze. Photographed by the author

labelled as proto-Secession or early modernist. The inspiration for the “Julietka” villa was William Morris’s Red House designed by Philip Webb on the outskirts of London, which marked the beginning of new artistic directions and the birth of the idea of Secession⁷. The proto-Secession trend in the architecture of Lvov, first revealed in the construction of individual housing, was Jan Daschk’s (1897–1898) *cottage* on the Kastelówka estate built by Jan Lewiński at 41 Nabelaka Street, and containing the first harbingers of Secession in the decorations of the metalwork of stucco containing the motif of the iris, which was a popular floral symbol of Secession⁸. The full bloom of Secession in Lvov took place in 1904–1907, when the most interesting buildings were erected in that style. These were mainly built by Lewiński’s company, following the design of the eminent architects Alfred Zachariewicz and Tadeusz Obmiński. In particular, Obmiński’s creative output was dominated by the Vienna Secession who, similarly to Lewiński, was a follower of Otto Wagner’s ideas. In his designs, he attempted to express the structure of buildings in their exterior forms, while not denying the “aesthetic” role of ornamentation used in moderation and subordinated to the tectonics of the buildings⁹. Among many of his designs following the concepts of Secession, the most prominent one was the tenement house owned by lawyer Adolf Segal and built by Zygmunt Kędzierski and Michał Ulam’s company in 1904–1905. The building combined different functions: housing, profit making, office and commercial facilities. The balanced composition of the architectural form, perfectly embedded in the perspective of closing down the view on Akademicka Street, resulted from the originally devised structure of a free outlay of the interiors space, and modern construction devoid of rigid partitions of the exterior and interior walls, as well as Secession decoration elements of the façade, framed windows and dominant avant-corps corner with a dome¹⁰. The interiors of Segal’s house, in accordance with the popular idea of the “synthesis of the arts” of complex decoration, were enriched by Secession paintings, stucco and furnishing. An original innovative technical and functional solution of the house was the use of the exterior spiral, fire-protection stairs placed in the interior courtyard^{11 12}.

The leading place in the architecture of Lvov was also held by Hausmann’s tenement house at the corner of Sykstuska and Szajnocha Streets, dating back to 1907, and justifiably regarded as one of the best Secession masterpieces in Lvov, designed by Obmiński, Ulam and Kędzierski’s enterprise. It was outstanding due to the plastically shaped body of the building and unrestrained arrangement of architectural decorations gradually increasing at each storey and reaching the top in the form of cylindrical loggia with the Secession glazed porch¹³. Hausmann’s house was instigated by the patterns of the Vienna Secession and directly inspired by Otto Wagner’s house at 38 Linke Wienzeile Street in Vienna¹⁴. Furthermore, Obmiński was the author of several remarkable housing complexes, among others: pattern settlements of early Secession tenement houses at Asnyka and Domagaliczów Street,

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁹ J. Biriulow, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

¹¹ J. Lewicki, *op.cit.*, p. 253.

¹² Ż. Komar, J. Bohdanova, *op.cit.*, p. 106–114.

¹³ J. Biriulow, *op.cit.*, p. 119.

¹⁴ Ż. Komar, J. Bohdanova, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

constructed by Lewiński's enterprise. The traditional layout included the elements of up-to-date technologies and the use of reinforced concrete trusses, enabling the differentiation of the facades, which visually expressed the Secession decoration, ornamental and linear, and, at the same time, the connecting motif was Wagner's majolica ceramic inserts, somehow the distinguishing mark of architect Tadeusz Obmiński.

The fundamental breakthrough in Secession architecture took place about 1908, when the tendencies of changes from biomorphic to geometric decoration appeared, combined with attempts at simplifying and making architecture more utilitarian. Buildings took a form definitely resembling early Modernism, rigorously exposing the tectonics of their body and frugal geometric decoration, emphasizing the main structure or even anti-decorative facades. The earliest houses in Lvov dating back to the border line between Secession and early Modernism were constructed by Alfred Zachariewicz's and Józef Sosnowski's companies, specializing in reinforced concrete construction and novel engineering solutions based on Maksymilian Thullie's solutions and following the pioneer patterns of the French architects: J. Monier and F. Hennebique. They included, among other buildings, the tenement house which was also the headquarters of their company at 18 Jabłonowskich Street (1906–1907), and another building at 1 Romanowicza Street¹⁵. Both buildings belonged to the so-called rational Secession style, and their priority feature was – “the dominance of engineering and construction forms and avoiding ornamentation in the facades” – as emphasized by Ż. Komar and J. Bohdanowa¹⁶.

Krakow, at the turn of the 20th century, apart from difficult and ambiguous social and economic conditions and profound transformation processes, did not relinquish its importance in comparison with the capital city of Galicia and still constituted an important hub of architectural ideas. New trends reached the city through the same contacts with Vienna, but the traditional Krakow environment due to its historical issues received the imported architectural trends of the partition monarchy with explicit resistance, giving more preference to specific local sarcasm. In the architecture of Krakow at those times the most interesting Secession accomplishments were initially public utility buildings, where the new trends came into life in the artistic output of architect Franciszek Mączyński. Soon, they permeated into standard housing, especially tenement houses and private homes. Teodor Talowski was one of the architects that indirectly influenced the Secession architecture of Krakow, although he was not a representative of this trend¹⁷, yet his unusual creative individuality, shaped by the patterns of historical aesthetics and carried over to his own renditions, paved the way for the acceptance of new ideas in art.

According to the statement of Jacek Purchla: “The greatest individuality of the architecture of Krakow at the end of the 19th century was, undoubtedly, Teodor Talowski (1857–1910). His talent and fantasy resulted in the creation of his own, original language of form, bordering on historicism and the emerging Secession and Modernism”¹⁸. In his artistic output, there were houses of special importance, for example a complex of tenement houses on Retoryka and Karmelicka Streets, anticipating some Secession ideas and forms, in which

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 182–185.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

¹⁷ The exception was the tenement house in Stanisławów designed by Talowski, in pure Secession geometrical forms, (1907–1908) for Zygmunt Marszałkiewicz at 18 Sapieżyńskiej Street.

¹⁸ J. Purchla, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

the architect embedded his artistic credo. These original buildings had complicated projections, asymmetrical and somehow disquieting shells, and facades with rigid brick parts of the walls, stone details, emblems with Latin quotations and sometimes naturally creeping greenery, which, altogether, intuitively referred the character of his buildings to *Art Nouveau*. Talowski's buildings exerted a big influence on the local architecture of the Krakow environment, becoming a source of inspiration for many post-Secession houses and the historical modernism of Krakow, for example the "Pod Sową" tenement house (1907) designed by R. Bandurski and "Zakłady Witraży Żeleńskiego" (1907) designed by L. Wojtyczki.

Another interesting reference to the direct Vienna Secession style in Galicia is the example of the town of Biała (Bielsko-Biała), where several Vienna architects conducted their activity at the end of the 19th century, including Leopold Bauer of Karniow, who was one of the most talented disciples of Otto Wagner. The stylistics of his artistic output is reflected in the comprehension of the space and shell of buildings, references to Josef Hoffmann's form and decorations with abstract and geometrical and greenery ornamentation. In the town of Biała, an exceptional example of his impact was the early-Secession tenement house owned by Walenty Jakubecki (1902–1903), at 1 Kościelny Square. Ewa Chojecka mentioned this house as the work of an unknown architect from the group of "Max Fabianie's followers" and, at the same time, emphasized its originality, "unusual due to the façade walls completely devoid of articulation and partitions"¹⁹. The house is commonly regarded to have been inspired by the Vienna Majolikahaus designed by O. Wagner in 1899 (40 Linke Wienzeile Street)²⁰. The simple cubic shell with exposed roof eaves broke away with the traditional partition walls by totally ignoring the articulation and the central axis, as well as by the unification of the rectangular windows with the same dimensions. The leading motif of the facade, derived from the Viennese prototype, was the decorative frieze of greenery with waving rhythm of the flat linear Secession ornament. The original design of the façade was an example which was often referred to in professional literature. The house may be certainly regarded as one of the earliest manifestations and harbingers of the post-Modernist housing architecture, chronologically preceding other examples of Secession and early-Modernist buildings in Galicia towns and cities.

In the majority of provincial Galicia towns, houses had typical traditional layouts of the interiors, and new stylistic tendencies were manifested only as additional motifs of greenery and geometric ornamentation, exemplifying the clash between the old and new architectural trends all over Europe. "The clash between the new and the old must bring up some transitory forms that oscillate between the simplified form and superficial modernity," according to Andrzej K. Olszewski²¹.

3. RECAPITULATION

The new form and image of houses in Galicia in the early 20th century was determined by many factors that led the way to modernity. As Peter Haiko accurately expressed: "What determines modernity is not, as one may suppose – a new building that does not refer to

¹⁹ E. Chojecka, *Architektura i urbanistyka Bielska-Białej 1855–1939*, Katowice 1987, p. 60.

²⁰ J. Dominikowski, *Z bielskiej secesji*, [in:] „Spotkania z Zabytkami”, No 12, 1993, p. 28–30.

²¹ A. K. Olszewski, *Nowa forma w architekturze polskiej 1900–1925. Teoria i Praktyka*, Wrocław 1967, p. 21.

historical patterns, or the Secession ornamentation, or, even, the absence of it, but only and solely breaking down with the rules of historical trends and intentions”²². Likewise, J. Wybirał stated that: “rather than the invention of a new architectural form, it is more about the expression of a new meaning, a manifestation of a qualitatively new approach to combining art and life”²³.

The way towards modern architecture, exemplified by Secession houses, led from traditional historical forms, through Secession, to the avant-garde modernism, and was a complex process, full of paradoxes and contradictions; however, ignoring the role of the Secession and its concepts as a link to the development of modern architecture would be inappropriate and would result in inaccurate conclusions, according to Andrzej K. Olszewski in his book: “*New form of the Polish architecture in 1900–1925*, who claims that, “the exposure of extreme functionalism without the understanding of the processes that occurred before it, could result in the myth of the extraordinary nature of the so-called modern Polish architecture”²⁴.

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²² P. Haiko, *Modernizm i tradycjonalizm w architekturze wiedeńskiej około roku 1900*, [in:] *Sztuka około 1900 w Europie Środkowej*, Materials from the International Conference held on 24–24 October 1994, edited by P. Krakowski and J. Purchla, Krakow, 1997, p. 17.

²³ J. Wybirał, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

²⁴ A. K. Olszewski, *op.cit.*, p. 17.