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SELECTED PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY POLISH SACRAL ARCHITECTURE

Abstract

There is no other country in the World that manages to complete 2000 churches in the past 30 years. They were constructed in new housing estates – where the communist authorities had thought that they were not needed. The following eruption of such constructions resulted from the need of the Catholic society – one that was unsatisfied for many years. On the other hand, the haste in construction was explained by the fear that “the thaw” as it was called, in the decisions of the communist regime, may be short and that the day must be seized. The highest intensity of construction of new temples occurred in the Eighties. Many Polish churches built during this time show Post-modern solutions, which appeared in Poland quite late, just in the 1980s, after the political changes. Post-modernism hinted at history, it quoted details, interpreted them freely, and transformed them. In Poland, this sentimentalism and nostalgia, turning towards the broadly understood tradition, lasted slightly longer than elsewhere. In the churches that were built in the 1980s, there prevails the traditional material, brick or concrete. In those times, glass and steel technologies and high-tech details had not reached Poland yet. However, the great involvement of designers, builders, and of thousand of parishioners was essential. The latter were devoted to this work for free, building a church for themselves, their neighbors, and for the glory of God.

Keywords: Polish contemporary church architecture, trend in contemporary architecture in Poland

1. Contemporary Trends in Polish Sacral Architecture

The silhouettes of historic European cities have their dominating elements – in many cases they are churches. Coming from various epochs, constructed in various styles, reshaped, and converted to new needs, they could be implemented for tens or hundreds of years as special structures. In urban layouts, they were always strong forms. The architecture of sacral buildings played an important role in historical cities.¹ It created new canons of style, producing new artistic trends, and progress in technical and building solutions, both in external forms and in the shaping of interiors. Churches themselves reshaped the artistic images of the cities.² The churches generally stemmed from the tradition of a sacral form that culminated in a tower. Such a tower was usually individually transformed and adjusted to contemporary styles. Sometimes the designed towers were left incomplete due to a lack of funds. While residential or office buildings rise high, churches do not need to dominate. Their significance and distinct character can be reached by means of diverse materials, shapes, or details. The silhouettes of contemporary cities will not be surmounted by steeples of churches anymore.

A church has a symbolic meaning in human awareness. It is not merely a question of the religious role of a church building itself. Historical analysis confirms the church's socially significant role as an object conveying

material culture and also the philosophical content. It is essential for large conurbations to possess unique values. One such functional element associated with the fulfilling of higher needs (and capable of creating a community in a residential environment for the majority of the local inhabitants) is the place of worship – the local church. There is no other country in the world that managed to complete 2,000 churches in the past 30 years. They were constructed in new housing estates – where the Communist authorities thought that they were not needed. The following eruption of such constructions resulted from the need of the Catholic society – one that was unsatisfied for many years. The great extent of this development in Polish religious architecture was a unique phenomenon on a world scale – perhaps even comparable with that of early Christianity.³ The mass social involvement in church building projects was equivalent to a gesture of political contestation, for many of the participants. The element of social protest in these activities is thoroughly understandable in societies which bore the yoke of Communism. On the other hand, the haste in construction was explained by the fear that “the thaw” (as it was called) in the decisions of the Communist regime may be short, thus the day must be seized. In many instances, especially at the beginning of the period in question, the aesthetic aspects of the new churches were not always given the prominence they deserved. What mattered then was the emotional act of creating “forbidden structures”. The passage of time has permitted a preliminary aesthetic critique to be conducted now – of these new churches, many of which are being criticised for not coming up to the

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¹ Compare with: H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Miejsca, Strony, Okolice. Przyczynek do fenomenologii przestrzeni*, Universitas, Kraków 2006. p. 13.

² E. Norman, *The House of God*, Thames&Hudson, London 1990.

³ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Polska architektura sakralna. Tradycja a współczesność. Kierunki poszukiwań twórczych w najnowszej architekturze*, Nasza Przyszłość, Kraków 1992, p. 329-372.

standards one should expect of a culture's unique constructions. The highest intensity of construction of new temples occurred at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s.⁴

Geometry and minimalism⁵ make their way with difficulty in Polish sacral architecture, and the situation differs here from that in Western Europe. We can boast a number of new sacral objects rather than their aesthetic quality. The blame for such a state of affairs should be attributed to the architects as well as to the patrons – sacral investors (diocesan commissions), their advisors, and to the recipients of this kind of art. Most Polish architects choose the language of *modern Eclecticism* accepted by the recipients and suggest some quotations from the past: “It is probably more difficult to promote the effects in the world but perhaps they will be closer to the believers”.⁶ The people then chose Postmodern forms, which were easier to understand and to accept.⁷

Many Polish churches built in that time show Postmodern solutions. Postmodernism hinted at history, it quoted details, interpreting them freely and transforming them.⁸ In Poland, this sentimentalism and nostalgia, turning towards the broadly understood tradition, lasted slightly longer than elsewhere. Notwithstanding the fact Polish Postmodernism has been developing under different conditions and in rather different forms than the main Postmodern trends in the West, there has been a marked change in the aesthetic and intellectual climate in Poland with respect to former years.⁹ There is no question, however, of such phenomena on any mass or comprehensive scale, but rather it is a matter of intensity of intellectual impact. Postmodernism appeared in our country with great delay at the beginning of the 1980s, following the political and social turn.¹⁰ Postmodernism means above all a freedom of choice: the simultaneous application in the same object of diverse traditions, ranging from antiquity to Modernism. The introduction of references and distorted interpretations of various traditions, rather than the creation of new ready-made patterns, is allowed.¹¹ The human and humanistic values are stressed, in a trend

that does not dictate or impose an official aesthetics on the artist, instead admitting almost any form and recognising the preferences and tastes of its users.

In architecture, Postmodernism is primarily a fantasy and narrative quality; the application of small extracts, not even of the motifs of style; the deliberate use of historical detail; and incorporation of the archetypes of simple geometrical forms. A composition, which superficially produces the effect of having no underlying basic concept in the structure, is the overall impression. An especially important feature is the use of the intentional compilation of many elements of mutually superimposed and interacting forms and spaces, and the simultaneous application of the principles of complication, contradiction, contrast, and irony with references and hints.

Sometimes churches were built as monuments, looking like fortresses, not only separated by the wall protecting their *sacrum* from *profanum*, but also to accentuate the symbolic stronghold of freedom and truth standing against the surrounding sea of the Communist state.

In Postmodern buildings, there are hints to and quotations from the past, from the old towers and spires, chapels and traditional altars, which were remembered from the interiors of historic temples. One sees many examples of the quest for the new interpretation of the vernacular and the local traditions.¹²

The social changes initiated in 1970 (and escalating rapidly after 1980) established favourable conditions – as has frequently happened in the history of architecture – for



Fig. 1. Church of Christ the Redeemer of Man – Redeptor Hominis, 2006–2010, Kraków, arch T. Konior. Photo by author

⁴ K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Nowe kościoły w Polsce*, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1991.

⁵ For example: Church of Christ the Redeemer of Man Redeptor Hominis in Kraków–Tonie, designed by T. Konior 2006–2010; Chapel in Tarnów in Mazovia, designed by Beton Architekci M. Rowińska, L. Rowiński, p. 2007-2011.

⁶ K. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Architektura sakralna przed końcem wieku*, *Architektura* 2/1998, p. 46.

⁷ K. Kucza Kuczyński, *O tożsamości*, *Architekt* 4/2000.

⁸ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Post-modernizm w architekturze*, [in:] G. Dziamski (Ed.) *Encyklopedia Kultury Polskiej XX wieku. Od Awangardy do Post-modernizmu*, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1996, s. 467-482.

⁹ J.S. Wojciechowski, *Post-modernistyczna kultura sztuk pięknych*, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1995.

¹⁰ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Post-modernizm w polskiej architekturze*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 1998.

¹¹ R. Morris, *Words and Images in Modernism and Post-modernism*, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, Winter 1989; B. Baran, *Post-modernizm*, Inter Esse, Kraków 1992.

¹² For example Polish Post-modern churches are: church in Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki (unbuild), designed by M. Budzyński, 1984; church of Ascension of the Lord in Warszawa–Ursynów, designed by M. Budzyński, Z. Badowski, 1981–2003; church of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Queen of Poland in Głogów, designed by J. Gurawski, M. Fikus, 1981–1986; church of Saint Peter in Wadowice, designed by J. Gyurkovich, E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, T.P. Szafer, 1983–1991; church of God's Mercy in Kraków at Raczyński Sq. designed by St. Niemczyk, M. Kuszewski, 1988–1994; church of Jesus Christ the Redeemer in Czechowice-Dziedzice, designed by St. Niemczyk 1995–1998; church of Saint Adalbert in Kraków–Bronowice, designed by W. Seruga, M. Buratyńska Seruga, 1994–1999.

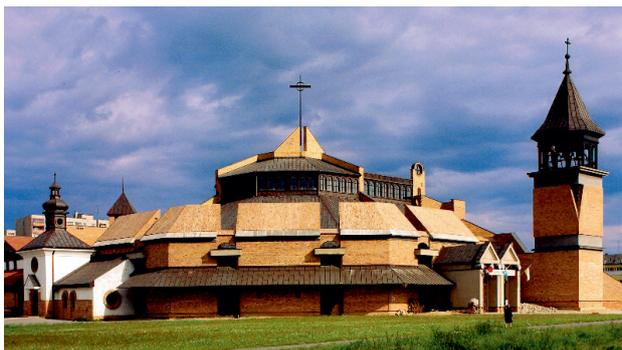


Fig. 2. Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Queen of Poland, 1981–1986, Głogów, arch. J. Gurawski and M. Fikus.
Photo by author



Fig. 3. Church of God's Mercy, 1988–1994, Kraków, arch. S. Niemczycki and M. Kuszewski. Photo by author

the reception of new aesthetic models from the West, opening up the potential for their assimilation in Polish architecture. They impinged on an absorptive and impressionable environment; as a result of the greyness and nondescript nature of Polish mass architecture in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a growing need in society for an endowment of new content, expression, and embellishment in the creative building. The psychological needs of modern man, his return to nature and turning away from the uniformised architecture of box-like, characterless structures meant, in the aesthetic dimension, a return to the past, to a rediscovery of the supra-functional values of architecture, such as symbolism and emotional content. The *genius loci*, the specific tradition of place, its origin and its links with nature and the environment, acquired a special meaning in many of the new architectural creations.

The following preliminary sub-division into two basic systematic groups may be applied for the analysis of Postmodernism as presented by selected items in Polish religious architecture: 1. Structures clearly inspired by history and tradition in a broad sense of the terms; and 2. Structures with a decidedly geometrical architecture and using a high degree of transformation on the model originals.

In a certain sense, the situation in Polish architecture in the 1980s was comparable with that of the 1920s, when,

after many decades of political subjugation, endeavours were being made to find a language of form that would be appropriate for a country with a long tradition of its own. Then the range of possibilities was very wide. The position in the 1980s was similar, when the convention of style accepted virtually anything and everything. In many instances the dominant feature was picturesque freedom, a solid compositional mode that comes close to the established old patterns at the close of the nineteenth century. Columns, porticoes, arcades, turrets, tympanums and mouldings reappeared on the then new churches; sometimes the purpose of the over-scaled historicising detail was to intensify the impact, to bring about surprise, and to entice emotion. Nostalgia and revision to the past have often appeared in the history of architecture at special times – usually those marking the demise of one age and heralding the approach of a politically, socially, and artistically new one. It was at such a period that the Zakopane style of Stanisław Witkiewicz emerged, and the nationally and historically oriented ventures of Stefan Szyller and Jan Sas-Zubrzycki, or the *Polish dworek* – country house style (in the period between the two World Wars, which aspired to become the national style of the revived Polish Republic).¹³

The quest for native features in historic architecture, a sentimental creative approach, the formal lack of restriction, and the openness of Postmodernism became a good opportunity for experiments in Poland in the 1980s, the results of which were reminiscent of earlier, similar attempts described above. Approaches in which the sole reference was to the general atmosphere of historical architecture may be observed, but where there was no rigorous definition of any particular style, through the use of traditional features in the composition of masses. Yet different degrees of adaptation of individual elements, sometimes not without irony, were seen. Occasionally, a congeneric object might be structured in such a way as to suggest that it has undergone several rearrangements and that it was being built over a considerable period of time. The appended features were to give rise to a heterogeneous and deliberately complex structure.

The objective of re-creating the atmosphere of the architecture of the past was successfully achieved in these buildings. In many cases diverse motifs from various periods may be identified alongside each other in the architectural decoration of these churches. The historicising elements are intermingled with the modern ones. The symbol rediscovered by means of architecture plays a significant part. The very act of referring back to tradition may be a symbol in itself, but we also discover symbols drawn from events, from the world of the surrounding reality, from the liturgy of the Church.¹⁴

There are also examples of forms that have been given a strongly, and moreover, not always logically

¹³ C.f.: E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Kierunki poszukiwań twórczych w najnowszej polskiej architekturze sakralnej*, [in:] *Sztuka miejscem odnalezienia się*, SIAC, Kraków 1993, p. 226-229.

¹⁴ J. Woźniakowski, *Kilka uwag o symbolu i alegorii*, [in:] *Ikono-grafia romantyczna*, Warszawa 1977, p. 33-65.

geometricised character. They are pastiches of the geometrical uniformity of the current design convention, and at the same time they run parallel to the world trends in contemporary abstraction (while also referring back to the beginnings of Modernism). The general principle is that regular geometrical solids should be applied, but in different proportions to the usages of the previous periods. They are no longer just allusions to the paintings of Mondrian; they are much less restricted, since it seems that everything was allowed.

The hexagonal forms appear to be the most popular choice, while the achievement of dynamics, and a confusion of the forms, is a result of deliberately setting in a scrambled disorder.¹⁵ The element of motion brought into the compositions seems to be of crucial significance, intensifying the sense of unrest and agitation. Very often squares or hexagons are to be found dislocated around a diagonal axis, or arranged along the edge. The not very numerous Polish versions of the “rational and geometric”¹⁶ form differ from their Western counterparts by a certain softness in their shapes that is difficult to define.

There is no basis for seeking analogies between Postmodernism and the historicism of the second half of the nineteenth century. It is more a question of hints or references rather than of a consistent projection of the principle of unity of style. Likewise, the symbolism of *l'architecture parlante*, used to obtain appropriate meanings, is not applicable to this case. The formal enquiries of Postmodernism may hardly be qualified as an unambiguous return to tradition, for all the elements of tradition are given a dynamic interpretation by it, in a totally untraditional setting. The store of literary associations and the formal language of Postmodernist architecture are far richer. The creative methods are untraditional, too. The background to all these formal quests and the ideological ones, too, is complex and multi-layered. In the first layer of reception, it seems that the acceptance of some of the art games is conditioned by nostalgia and feeling. At the deeper level, however, historical reflection within a field of twentieth-century art permits a search for analogies with an attitude reassembling the Surrealists.¹⁷ We are confirmed here precisely by the extremely rich Surrealist and literary contexts of all forms, and a slight hint of revelry about the nature of this art (so different from the intellectual gravity of the post-Corbusian architecture of the International Style). It was as though the theoreticians of Postmodernism in the West and its Polish promoters exhibit a typically avant-garde militancy in their various manifestoes and critical essays. A Surrealist interpretation allows for a mutual assessment both of the symbolic and the historical artistic motifs, and

¹⁵ For example: Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen in Kraków-Krowodrza, designed by R. Loegler, J. Czekaj, M. Nester-Piotrowski, p. 1979-1981.

¹⁶ M. Giżycki, *Słownik kierunków, ruchów i kluczowych pojęć sztuki drugiej połowy XX wieku*, Gdańsk 2002.

¹⁷ E. Węclawowicz-Gyurkovich, *Post-modernizm w polskiej architekturze...*, op. cit.

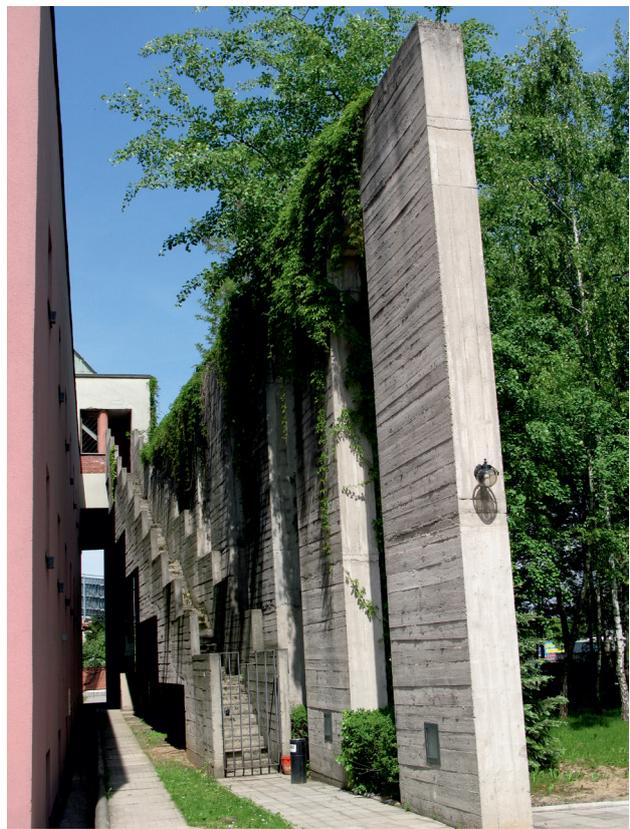


Fig. 4–5. Higher Seminar of the Congregation of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 1984–1993–2003, Kraków, arch. D. Kozłowski, W. Stefański, M. Misiągiewicz. Photo by author

of the above-described sophisticated geometric intermissions, with the unusual illusory spaces that they conjure up.

The distant origins of all these complex phenomena transferred onto the Polish territory should be sought as far back as in the Dadaist Revolution, and especially in its symptomatic continuation in Surrealism, which has enjoyed a permanent presence in art for [at least] two generations now. Just as with the Surrealists, the Postmodernists have tended to be under the predominant influence of a sentimental and Romantic *Weltanschauung*, with its fascination for horror, enigma, daydreams – and its desire to satisfy even the most hidden of its recipients land users'

psychological needs, by addressing their sub-conscious by means of the archetype forms in elaborated contexts of meaning. At the same time, there are frequent attitudes of entertainment and play, games of making architectural projects which would be impossible to implement in practice, reliance on random choice by both designer and recipient, and references to historical forms reminiscent of the collage of ready-made constituents. Just like the Surrealists, the Postmodernists stress the universal links between all forms of life and between all aesthetic and extra-aesthetic manifestations that are admitted on equal rights.

Many Polish churches were built of concrete and brick, as in the 1980s, certain high-tech materials, like glass and steel, were unattainable in Poland. Brick walls and towers were erected meticulously, with great care to every detail – we could observe the return of true building craftsmanship which fell under the Communist regime, or at best, was neglected.

The largest sacral building that was completed in that time is the Higher Seminar of the Congregation of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ at Zakrzówek in Kraków.¹⁸ It oscillates between the conventions of Postmodernism, Deconstruction, and Surrealism, containing many elements of poetry and magic, surprise and contradiction, symbolism and philosophy.¹⁹ The programme combines the function of the academic school with lecture halls, library, and an auditorium for several hundred persons with the convent, housing for the 100 alumni, refectory, and church. Designed with grand geste, its architecture is compelling, with a dose of mystery and emotions. According to the architects, they built a specific atmosphere to transport us through the “Way of Four Gates” into the unreal imagined world.

It is not often that poems are written about a work of architecture. A small part of a poem by Krystyna Trautsołt, an architect from Warsaw – *Beauty and Adequacy*, 1989, resonates here:²⁰

*....I enter the depth of time and I hear:
Do not believe in the laws of nature
as they are the greatest lie in the Universe
The truth is imagination and mystification
The truth is play and just an appearance
amazement and selfless curiosity are born of all of them
Laws of nature are an illusion a column bears nothing
and grows out of nowhere
the stairs float of their own accord...
and the air divides itself into two parts embracing every fold
of a plane...*

¹⁸ Designed by D. Kozłowski, W. Stefański, M. Misiągiewicz 1984–1993–2003.

¹⁹ D. Kozłowski, *Projekty i budynki 1980–1992. Figurytwność i rozpad formy w architekturze doby postfunkcjonalnej*, IPA Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 1992.

²⁰ K. Trautsołt, *Piękno a stosowność*, Materiały z X Ogólnopolskiego Konwersatorium Polskiej Architektury Współczesnej Mogilany 15–18.XI.1989, Komisja Urbanistyki i Architektury PAN, Kraków 1990.

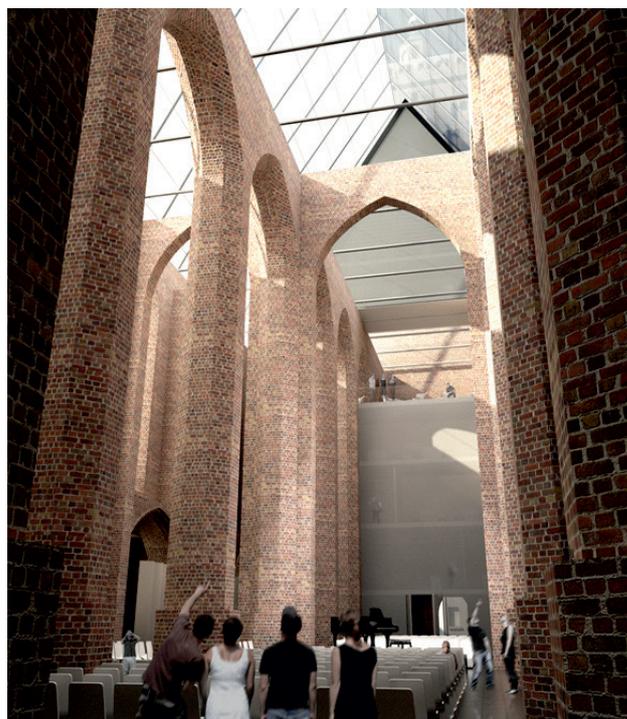


Fig. 6–7. Architectural Competition for the Revitalization of the Gothic Parish Church in Gubin, 2013: I Prize – Heinle, Wischer und Partner Architekci Sp.zo.o., Wrocław. Source (online): www.architektura.info/index.php/architektura/polska_i_swiat/fara_gubinska_laureat_konkursu, (date of access: 2014-11)

*And the walls do not touch each other so as not to infringe upon the Author's imagination
And they say a stone may hang a wall may hang too
A column may hang its capital in the void like a punch line
It is unforgivable that inclined walls shall never meet the cuboids
And other inclined walls do avoid cylinders forever
Riddles are multiplying incorrigibly and the matter is getting tangled
So why do I suddenly understand that nothing can ever touch anything else
Nor meet nor unify nor infiltrate because
Everything that is matter can exist only separately.
Unity is a spiritual category. ...*



Fig. 8–9. Architectural Competition for the Revitalization of the Gothic Parish Church in Gubin, 2013 – ARCHECON – prof. Andrzej Kadłuczka. Source: ARCHECON archives

2. Architectural Competition for the Revitalisation of the Parish Church in Gubin

In Poland, churches change their function extremely rarely, but such was the fate of the Parish Church in Gubin. The competition for the revitalisation of the Parish Church and the change of its use for a new Centre of Culture was adjudicated in September of last year. Gubin is a town at the post-war, current Polish-German border. So one part of the town belongs to Germany and another one on the eastern border of the Nysa Łużycka River belongs to Poland. In 1945, during the war, the town was destroyed by 90%. The parish church of Gubin, standing in the centre of town on the market square, one of the largest Late Gothic hall churches of that region was also destroyed. Its brick walls remained for nearly 70 years as a durable ruin, the commemoration of war.

The awarded entry retains one of the fundamental principles of the conservation of monuments – the reversibility of actions.²¹ The flexibility of the solution is an important

²¹ Architectural Competition for the Revitalisation of the Gothic Parish Church in Gubin into the Cultural Centre: I PRIZE –Heinle, Wischer und Partner Architekci sp.zoo from Wrocław; II PRIZE – Domino Group – Wojciech Dunaj from Szczecin; III PRIZE Architectur-

factor which discerns this work – there is the possibility of enlarging the usable space for the newly introduced functions by modular elements. The most important competition task was the covering of the volume with a new roof. All the entries repeated the shape of the roof that existed before the destruction. But the material was important. The solution chosen for completion does not put load on the historic structure of the walls. A roof made of a light, half-transparent membrane of one of the recent materials, EFTE, was proposed.

Another work from Cracow is also interesting.²² Here the roof was covered with tin, and inside glass bridges or platforms were proposed at various levels, where one may admire well-preserved details of historical walls and pillars.

3. Summary

The designing of a church is an extraordinarily difficult task, as the aim is to represent the immaterial values that are experienced in the sphere of emotions, feelings and impressions. The aim of an architect is to represent the matters that are unspeakable – the mystery of that which cannot be defined. However, the great involvement of designers, builders and of thousands of parishioners was essential. The latter were devoted to this work for free, building a church for themselves, their neighbours, and for the glory of God.

However, the original form that is designed by an architect has to take into consideration many things: not only genius loci, but also proportion, scale, a certain moderation, and the nobility of form. It is through this nobility that the designed form becomes a sacral sign.

The quest aims at finding semantic signs that would be able to utter the contents linked with the essence of God, Absolute, infinity. According to philosophers this is actually impossible. Józef M. Bocheński in his *Contemporary Methods of Thinking*²³ writes that there are three groups of attitudes in this respect:

1. The one presented by H. Bergson and K. Jaspers that the unspoken cannot be represented by means of signs which have an objective reference.
2. Another group of thinkers presents an opposite attitude, according to L. Wittgenstein's thesis 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.
3. Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann presents another theory claiming: that what is beyond cognition exists as the irrational.

Thus the entire mystery of a church is situated in the sphere of intuitions and emotions which play the first fiddle for an artist.²⁴

al Studio – Jerzy Wowczak from Kraków, (online): www.bryla.pl/bryla/1,85301,14761854,Desakralizacja_po_polsku_Kosciol_w_Gubinie_czeka.html (date of access: 2014-11).

²² The Archecon Studio – the designers are: A. Kadłuczka, J. Sroczyńska, D. Przygodzki from Kraków

²³ J.M. Bocheński, *Współczesne metody myślenia*, W drodze, Poznań 1992, p. 52-60.

²⁴ Translated by Ph.D. Arch. Marta Urbańska.

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