

Avant-garde Public Buildings Erected in Upper Silesia in 1922-1939

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It is a well-known fact that the Modern Movement appeared in Europe as an artistic phenomenon at the beginning of the 20th century and quickly spread all over the continent, leaving its trails in the architecture of even provincial towns. Great changes in architecture reverberated also throughout Upper Silesia, a fast-growing industrial region of the Prussian state, despite its location far away from European cities where new building and planning techniques developed. From the early 19th century on, Upper-Silesian industry was developing rapidly, and this resulted in a building boom. The first signs of the expansion of building culture could be seen in Berlin and Warsaw. It was where proto-modernistic ideas started, followed by early Modernist trends, like *Jugendstil* and Expressionism.

After WWI, under Article 88 of the Versailles Treaty of 28 June 1919, the national status of Upper Silesia was determined by the Plebiscite, held on 20 March 1921. As a result, the region was artificially divided into two parts: German and Polish. The turbulent history of those days resulted in numerous superb structures, designed by well-known and prominent German architects: Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Friedrich August Stüler, August Soller, Georg and Emil Zillmann, Hans Poelzig, Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn and Böhm, as well as by far less known but equally talented Polish architects, like Tadeusz Michejda, Tadeusz Kozłowski, Karol Schayer, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz, Jadwiga Dobrzyńska, Zygmunt Łoboda, Stanisław Tabeński, Witold Kłębowski, Zbigniew Rzepecki

and Kazimierz Sołtykowski, who shaped a new face of Katowice, Chorzów, Bielsko, Cieszyn, and many more smaller towns.

A turning point was 20 June 1922, when the actual division of Upper Silesia took place. Katowice became capital of the Polish part, i.e. the autonomous Silesian Region, and was one of the few cities to play a pioneering role in the development of Modern Architecture. The first examples of avant-garde residential architecture were built (high-rises¹, white-collar settlements²), but above all - churches³ and museum⁴ buildings. In the 1930s in particular, numerous buildings of high formal and spatial values were erected; they were equal to those built in Warsaw at the time, and the solutions applied were no worse than elsewhere in Europe. In Greater Katowice and Chorzów, pioneering experiments were made in constructing high-rise, residential-commercial buildings on a structural-steel skeleton, and they were the pride of the region.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the development of architecture in Polish Upper Silesia followed a dual course: one trend was avant-garde (often

1. The so-called „Silesian Skyscrapers“: 1) an eight-storey residential and commercial building at 23 Wojewódzka, designed in 1929 by Eustachy Chmielewski for professors at the Silesian Technical Research Institution; 2) a fourteen-storey residential and commercial building at 15 Żwirki i Wigury, designed by Tadeusz Kozłowski in 1929 or 1930 for the Silesian Regional Office staff.

2. A white-collar settlement at 34a-c and 35a-c Raciborska Street, designed by Lucjan Sikorski in 1928.

3. St Casimir's Garrison Church in street M. Skłodowskiej-Curie, designed by Leon Dietz d'Arma and Jerzy Zarzycki in 1930.

4. The non-existent Silesian Museum, designed by Karol Schayer in 1934-36.

experimental, searching for new solutions), rejecting the existing aesthetic, technological and spatial principles, which included an extreme variant of Modernism, i.e. Functionalism, also called the International Style⁵; the other was conservative, based on the traditional concept of form, function and technology. In practice, there was one more, strongly represented, trend – transitional; a combination of new, trendy solutions and a traditional form by adding a new repertoire of modern means of expression, i.e. modernistic garb⁶. Four basic styles can be identified within this trend: Polish decorative art, Manorial, Academic Classicism and Modernised Classicism⁷.

Katowice, as the capital of the region with the strongest economy in Poland at the time, had the biggest concentration of innovative buildings, in this respect competing with the combined forces of German cities on the other

side of the border: Gliwice (Gleiwitz), Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) and Zabrze (Hindenburg).⁸ In these cities, architecture developed in a different way, basing on the pluralist co-existence of two basic Modernist trends: Expressionism and Functionalism⁹. These trends reflected two paradigms of the attitudes of the Weimar Republic citizens, namely a romantic-national attitude, referring to native art patterns, and a republican-enlightenment attitude which propagated cosmopolitan and abstract patterns¹⁰. In the times of the Third Reich, i.e. from 1933 on, the Nazi politics was reflected in architecture by the so-called *Heimatstil*, which transformed expressionist motifs into native, vernacular craft elements remaining within the national tradition and rejecting abstract motifs of the *Neues Bauen* style. Functionalist elements, however, were still present, e.g. as the so-called "Semi-Modernism". All this referred mainly to residential architecture, because public architecture adopted a different pattern – monumental classicism¹¹, glorifying the totalitarian system of power.

The first Upper-Silesian public building

5. The term „International Style” was first used in 1932 by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson to define the architecture created in America and Europe after 1922, which they presented at the Exhibition of Modern Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, and in the book written to record the Exhibition: *The International Style*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company 1932.

6. The term „garb”, e.g. Gothic or Baroque garb, is commonly used by art historians to define phenomena in the 19th-century European architecture.

7. See: Olszewski Andrzej K., *Dzieje sztuki polskiej 1890-1980*, Warsaw, Interpress, 1988, and Niezabitowski Andrzej, *Polish Avant-garde Architecture of 1918-39 in Relation to Contemporary Trends in Europe*, „Temes de Disseny”, 1995/12, Elisava Edition, Barcelona, pp. 115-120.

8 A German Upper-Silesian counterpart of Katowice was the city of OppeIn (Opole), a regional capital and *Regierungsbezirk* city.

9. Żukowsky John (ed.), *The Many Faces of Modern Architecture. Building in Germany between the World Wars*, Munich-New York, Prestel 1994.

10. Krzemiński Adam, *To ja jestem naprawdę niemiecki*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 29/30.01.2000, p. 16 – an essay on German culture based on the 1897-1960 Diary of Victor Klemperer.

11. Krakowski Piotr, *Sztuka III Rzeszy*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 1994, p. 56.

1. Seidenhaus Weichmann Textile House in Gliwice (Gleiwitz) (Erich Mendelsohn, 1921-22). Photo by the author



of outstanding avant-garde value was erected by the Richard Koban construction company in Gliwice (Gleiwitz) in 1921-22, in Wilhelmstrasse (at 37, Zwycięstwa) as the Textile House *Seidenhaus Weichmann* (Fig. 1). The building was designed by Erich Mendelsohn, with Richard Neutra as project supervisor.¹² The building has a compact spatial form, composed of three cuboid volumes, not lined up (the two lower ones with an acute corner). The first element corresponds to the ground floor. The second one, including the first and the second floors, projects into Zwycięstwa street. The third one, the smallest and the lowest, forms the third floor over the staircase. It also has a basement. The back elevation is built vertically to form the tower bulk of the staircase. A very important element of the façade articulation is characteristic horizontal strip cornices in bands of two or three, which gives the building a dynamic spatial look. Unfortunately, not all of the individual strips of the top floor were reconstructed during the latest conversion to a banking function. The windows are also divided horizontally. These features, so very typical of Mendelsohn, were also applied in nearby public buildings, thus dictating an easily recognizable fashion. They were later widely used in Gliwice (Gleiwitz) by the Richard Koban constructing company¹³. Distinctly overhanging panel cornices were later applied in both Expressionist structures and Functionalist *Neues Bauen* buildings. *Seidenhaus Weichmann*, Mendelsohn's first department store, signifies his shift from expressive, irrational forms – like the Einstein Tower and Luckenwalde factory – to forms more rational and purely functional, yet showing some individual dynamism. At that time, two more department stores were built in Gliwice (Gleiwitz): *Geschäftshaus Fedor Karpe* (at 2, Zwycięstwa), remodelled in 1927/28 by Richard Koban, and *Kaufhaus "Defaka"* ("Ikar" store in Zwycięstwa street) designed by architect Justus Fiegler in 1929.

In Polish Upper Silesia four retail buildings were constructed, three of which in Katowice: a shop building in Kościuszki street, designed by Tadeusz Łobos before 1932 (nonexistent), another one in Dworcowa street, across the railway tracks (nonexistent), and a huge open-plan market hall



2. Market Hall in Świętochłowice (Witold Kłębkowski, 1938). Photo by the author

with parabolic, welded steel trusses, constructed in 1935 by Lucjan Sikorski and Stefan Bryła (Skargi street). Inside the market (40 x 130 x 16 m in size), one can admire the dynamics of its steel structure. In Świętochłowice, a complex of two covered markets (Fig. 2) was built to Witold Kłębkowski's design made in 1938; the complex had a reinforced-concrete frames.

Other avant-garde Modernist public buildings in Gliwice (Gleiwitz) include: a Functionalist youth house Carl Legien Heim designed by Peter Birkmann in 1929 (now a kindergarten in Brzozowa street), *Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse* (Municipal Outpatient Clinic in Ziemowita street) and *Landes-Frauenklinik* hospital designed by an Opole (Oppeln) architect, Oskar Goltz, in 1929 (Oncological Hospital in Wybrzeże Armii Krajowej street). Despite their abstract, restrained forms, the buildings, except the first one, are impressive because of their individualised, dynamic motifs of ceramic brick bonds. Therefore, they are transitional links between Rationalism and Expressionism.

Polish hospital and sanatorium buildings include the Children's TB Sanatorium in Istebna (Fig. 3), designed by Jadwiga Dobrzyńska and Zygmunt Łoboda in 1937, a health-care complex in the International Style, a counterpart to the Finnish sanatorium in Paimio designed by Alvar Aalto; its white, box-like, abstract architecture contrasts with the surrounding landscape of

12. Jodliński Leszek, *Dom tekstylny Weichmanna w Gliwicach – nieznanie dzieło Ericha Mendelsohna*, Gliwice Museum, Gliwice 1994, p. 15.

13. For example, *Geschäftshaus Fedor Karpe* in Wilhelmstrasse (2 Zwycięstwa Street), remodelled in 1927/28 to Richard Koban's design.

mountains and green forests. Simplified forms, bearing resemblance to the Domino system of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, can be found in the café building at the swimming pool in Wisła designed by Stefan Tworkowski (1934), a later alteration of which proved a failure. The pilotis-supported building is located between the outdoor swimming pool and tennis courts. The municipal swimming-pool complex in Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) (Fig. 4) designed by C. Schmidt and erected in 1930-31, has excellent, dynamic forms; the box-like conciseness is toned down by brickwork elevation, enriched with yellowish glazed ceramic tiles applied in the entrance segment.

In Gliwice (Gleiwitz), there is also architecture of purely expressionist origin, derived from decorative elevations that can be found in Michel de Klerk's or Fritz Höger's works. Such buildings include: Albert Kucharz's Marien-Lyzeum built in 1927-29 (now the Teacher Training College in Królowej Bony street), Karl Schabik's Eichendorf-Schule built in 1927-30 (the Silesian University of Technology, Faculty of Energy and Environmental Engineering in Konarskiego street), Städtische Spar-und Girokasse (PKO BP Bank in Dolnych Wałów street) or the airport building (nonexistent). An interesting example of functionalist architecture

is the aero club buildings on the airfield in Bielsko Aleksandrowice, designed by Karol Schayer in 1934-36.

The most significant indications of architectural modernity of Polish Upper-Silesian public buildings became high-rises. They were built with state-of-the-art technologies, like steel welded and riveted skeleton, never used on such a scale anywhere else in Poland or Prussian Silesia. This pioneering contribution to the development of 20th-century architecture was summed up in 1932 by Witold Kłębowski, who says: "Silesia, the most American-like region of Poland, has outstripped other regions on its way up. The first high-rise, one of the highest in Europe, is being built here. Steel is the skeleton of the high-rise building, no wonder, then, that Silesia – the cradle of Polish steel – is the first to construct steel-skeleton skyscrapers"¹⁴. The first high-rise (8 floors) to be built was a residential and commercial building at 23, Wojewódzka street for the Silesian Technical Research Institution professors; not only was its structure innovative, but its exterior was modern as well. Designed by Eustachy Chmielewski in 1929, the building was completed in 1931. Another skyscraper was a 14-floor high-rise at 15,

14. Kłębowski Witold, *Pierwsze drapacze śląskie* [in:] *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 6/1932, p. 169.

3. *Sanatorium in Istebna (Jadwiga Dobrzyńska and Zygmunt Łoboda, 1937). Photo by the author*





4. Municipal swimming pool in Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) (C. Schmidt, 1930-31). Photo by the author

Żwirki i Wigury (designed in 1929, its tenants moved in 1931), housing the Treasury Office and flats for the Silesian Regional Office staff. The architect designer was Tadeusz Kozłowski, while steel structure was designed by Stefan Bryła¹⁵. Another building worth mentioning is the Chorzów skyscraper of Municipal Savings Bank (Fig. 5) in Wolności street, composed of 10 residential floors and a side body housing the bank and offices. It was designed by Stanisław Tabeński in 1936 as a steel-skeleton building of an elaborate, asymmetric shape composed of plain, cuboid blocks with simple pilasters on the façades. Another steel-framed building is the Hindenburg/Zabrze functionalist building of the municipal savings bank Sparkasse und Provinzialbank (1929) designed by Dominikus Böhm, in Wolności street, even though not a high-rise. In German Upper Silesia, three quasi-high-rises were built, one in Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) and two in Gliwice (Gleiwitz), i.e. an Expressionist, six-storey corner tenement house, completed in 1930 (?), possibly designed by Schabik and Sattler¹⁶, at the corner of Bohaterów Getta Warszawskiego street and Piastów square,¹⁷ and a six-storey residential building – of functionalistic stylistics – at the corner of streets Powstańców Warszawy and Orlickiego¹⁸. The building has a

simple, cuboid form with a concave cylindrical surface of the corner and a flat roof. Its façade is articulated by horizontal bands of windows and vertical lesenes. There is also a characteristic flagpole. The Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) quasi-skyscraper standing in the Market is a building once housing the "Capitol" cinema (now "Gloria"

tenement house on the corner of 1 Maja (*Bahnhofstrasse*) and Oberwallstrasse (Górnych Wałów).

5. Skyscraper of the Municipal Savings Bank, Chorzów (Stanisław Tabeński, 1936). Photo by the author



15. Ibid., pp. 175-183.

16. Schabik Karl, *Die Stadt Gleiwitz in der Zukunft*, [in:] Deutschlands Stadtbau Gleiwitz, Berlin-Halensee: Dari-Verlag, 1928, pp. 63-64.

17. Other residential buildings of expressionist form can be found in the following places: the corner of Kuczewskiego (*Markgrafenstrasse*) and 1 Maja (*Bahnhofstrasse*), Zimnej Wody (*Kaltbadstrasse*), and the corner of Styczyńskiego (*Katzlerstrasse*) and Daszyńskiego (*Reudenerstrasse*).

18. An example of Semi-Modernist stylistics can be a



6. St Casimir's Church, Katowice (Leon Dietz d'Arma, Jerzy Zarzycki, 1930). Photo by the author

cinema); it has functionalist features and partly streamlined corners which dynamize a narrow street.

Avant-garde features of Modern Architecture based on Le Corbusier's Five Points can be found in the Squeder residential/commercial building at 13, Dworcowa in Katowice¹⁹ (1932, designer unknown), with mushroom-slab reinforced-concrete skeleton in the ground floor. Its fine cube-like body hangs over the openwork ground floor as a bay entwining both corners. The Św. Jana façade is of dynamic character because of fine, soft curve. All the windows form horizontal stripes. The volume of the building is embellished with a horizontal canopy slab over the ground floor, three recessed balconies, and a corner, top-floor roofed terrace supported by delicate pillars; until recently, there was a flagpole at one of the pillars, an intrinsic element of buildings at that time. Unfortunately, the building lost many of its original features after it was heat-insulated. Even so, the whole structure shows outstanding skills of its designer, well-acquainted with works

19. Odorowski Waldemar, *Architektura Katowic w latach międzywojennych*, Muzeum Śląskie, Katowice 1994, pp. 135-136.

of the European avant-garde.

A real personality in the field of architecture was Karol Schayer²⁰, who designed and constructed buildings in Katowice and the Silesian Region, as well as in Warsaw. His works, in the spirit of avant-garde trends, manifest the highest standard of professional skills, and include many luxury residential buildings, erected between 1936 and 1938. His most prominent buildings of residential/commercial function are the ones for the International Commercial Bank at 10, Mielęckiego and for Dr Radowski at 60, Korfantego. They were designed in the spirit of radical Functionalism, where rational, geometric shape is close to the cube. Schayer's characteristic sculptural motifs are roof terraces and curvilinear walls in shapes of a flattened S, semicircle or a quarter of a circle.

St Casimir's Church (Fig. 6) in Skłodowskiej-Curie street (1930), designed by Leon Dietz d'Arma and Jerzy Zarzycki, is one of the first sacred public buildings. The church is an abstract composition made up of sculpturally shaped plain geometric volumes placed at the corner of streets, in its general concept close to the Dr Bevinck School in Hilversum designed by Wilhelm Marinus Dudok. Waldemar Odorowski says that it was the first church in Poland constructed according to the patterns of European avant-garde architecture²¹. Another sacred building of novel form is the Providence Church (1930-1937) in the Katowice district of Zawodzie, designed by Tadeusz Łobos. In German Upper Silesia, religious architecture was a combination of simplicity of forms and perceptible element of reduced tradition of Early Christian basilicas or central spatial layout of *circumstantes* type. A leading light here appeared to be Dominikus Böhm, who built (1931) St Joseph's Church in Zabrze (Hindenburg); the church has unusual form of three nave, and a campanile. In front of the church there is a courtyard, "Paradisus", featuring a screen wall with rows of arches piling up.

In Upper Silesia, two functionalist museum buildings were erected: the Upper-Silesian Museum (Oberschlesisches Landesmuseum) in

20. After WW2, Karol Schayer continued his work in Beirut, where he built over 80 buildings in the so-called Late-Modernist trend (after: Kawka Stanisław, *Korespondencja z Libanu*, "Architektura" 1961, p. 477, and the account of George Arbid, an academic teacher at the Faculty of the Design and History of Contemporary Architecture at the Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, Beirut, then at the Faculty of Architecture and Design of the American University of Beirut).

21. Odorowski Waldemar, *Architektura Katowic...*, op. cit., pp. 143-144.



7. Upper-Silesian Museum (Oberschlesisches Landesmuseum), Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) (Albert Stütz, 1928-30). Photo by the author

Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) (Fig. 7) and the Silesian Museum²² in Katowice. The Upper-Silesian Museum (1928-1930) was built by Albert Stütz and featured a reinforced-concrete staircase, very dynamic in form, with goblet-like posts. The Silesian Museum, designed by Karol Schayer as a complement to the building of the Silesian Sejm, was completed at the end of 1939; unfortunately, in 1941 it was demolished by the Germans, probably for ideological reasons and so that it would not rival the Bytom (Beuthen O. S.) building of the same function. The residential wing (at 5, Kobylińskiego) was the only part of the Katowice building that survived. The Upper-Silesian Museum building was also a dynamic steel structure, on an aircraft-like plan. Its main body, containing exhibition space, was an elevated cuboidal high-rise supported by pilotis, thus making its ground floor level free for the traffic (there was a street beneath the building). The building had all the high-tech facilities like an escalator, ventilation and air-conditioning systems.

Another novel structure was the Silesian Technical School in Krasińskiego street (1928-32)²³, one of the biggest school buildings in Poland, created by Warsaw architects Jadwiga Dobrzyńska and Zygmunt Łoboda. While its exterior was an example of Modernised Classicism, its interior was entirely dominated by Functionalism. Its two lecture theatres are particularly prominent with innovative top- and side-daylight illumination. Many other avant-

garde school buildings were built in Silesian Region, e.g. the Business Training Institute in Raciborska street (Fig. 8), designed by Zbigniew Rzepecki in 1937, with a portico supported by light columns, a large roof terrace and a stairwell with a large glazed corner. A year earlier, the same architect created the Silesian Insurgent House at 3, Matejki – a steel-skeleton building, which housed the “Zorza” cinema. A novel form can be found in the Food Hygiene

8. Business Training Institute, Katowice (Zbigniew Rzepecki, 1937). Photo by the author



22. Dietz d'Arma Leon, *Muzeum Śląskie w Katowicach architektura Karola Schayera*, "Architektura i Budownictwo", 1936, pp. 66-69.

23. "Architektura i Budownictwo", 1935, p. 27 and 1937, p. 163.



9. Non-consolidated Offices, Katowice (Witold Kłębkowski, 1935). Photo by the author

Institute at 41, Raciborska²⁴ (1931), designed by Tadeusz Kozłowski, with its abundantly glazed, semicircular stairwells, or in the Health Insurance Fund building at 8/10, Reymonta (1938) by Stanisław Gruszka. Other interesting structures erected in 1930 were the pavilion of Tychy Prince's Brewery (nonexistent) and the Exhibition Hall at Park Kościuszki²⁵. Both buildings were designed by Władysław Szwarzenberg-Czerny and built on the Katowice Exhibition Grounds.

Unpretentious architecture of Functionalist forms is represented by office buildings in Katowice designed by Witold Kłębkowski and completed in the late 1930s as the so-called Non-consolidated Offices (Fig. 9) and a massive edifice of the Opole (Oppeln) Upper Silesian Regierungsbezirk Office, designed by Friedrich Lehmann.

Public buildings, to an extent, are industrial buildings, the form of which evolved from the Peter Behrens aesthetics with some classical hallmarks, through Hans Poelzig's expressionist motifs to a final functionalist form, similar on both sides of the Polish-German border. The third stage of attempts to find a new model of "factory" can be illustrated by the buildings of old Hohenzollernen (now Szombierki) coal mine

(Fig. 10) in Bytom (Beuthen O. S.), or by the tram depot complex in Chorzów-Batory (Fig. 11). Brick wall faces and flat, plain elevations are dominant features in both buildings.

Conclusions

The Modern Movement of the 1920s and 1930s in the architecture of Upper Silesian public buildings started as a mere yet unprecedented episode. It was as early as in 1921-22 that first avant-garde forms were introduced while constructing Erich Mendelsohn's Seidenhaus Weichmann Textile House. This incident triggered off the new vogue for modernity in German Silesia, which was manifested in the remodelling of several buildings in Gliwice (Gleitwitz) and Bytom (Beuthen O.S.) with the use of some elements of new architecture, such as overhanging slab cornices emphasising horizontal articulation. In no time, however, Modernism became popular, mainly bearing fruit which combined elements of *Neues Bauen* and Expressionism. Most of the buildings created here had simple, cuboidal forms with ceramic tiling, yet covered with sloped roofs which dominated cityscape all over Opole Regierungsbezirk. So many conservative elements in the repertoire of public buildings occurring German periphery may reflect the genetic attachment to romantic tradition.

The situation was different in Polish Upper Silesia. First attempts to find regional identity

24. Niezabitowski Andrzej, *Nowa forma w architekturze Katowic...*, op. cit. p. 110.

25. *Ze związku architektów na Śląsku*, "Architektura i Budownictwo", 1930, pp. 10-13.



10. Bytom (Beuthen O.S.), old Hohenzollern coal mine buildings – boiler house. Photo by the author

the building movement in autonomous Silesian Region until the outbreak of WWII. The architecture of public buildings in border towns and cities reflected Polish-German political and economic rivalry within an artificially divided territorial organism that Silesia was at that time.

Paradoxically, this dichotomy created a favourable climate for breaking free of provincialism in art, which – thanks to a widespread investment campaign in both areas - resulted in creating novel ideas in technologies and functional and aesthetic solutions in the building sector. In the period between the world wars, Silesian architecture of public buildings often gained an avant-garde status, thus becoming a symbol of political, social, economic and cultural prestige of Silesia, which became a leading region not only in Poland and Germany, but in Europe as well.

11. Tram depot complex, Chorzów-Batory. Photo by the author



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