

# Current Needs versus Selected Problems of Conservation Work in Modernist Buildings

**Andrzej Białkiewicz**  
*Cracow, Poland*

Modernist buildings play a significant part in the history, the visual mood and atmosphere of our cities. They have often maintained their original function. Objective evaluation criteria of Modern Architecture seem to have been developed, and we perceive it through both the history and our individual tastes. This makes rescue efforts a complex task. A historical analysis of selected examples and the present condition seen through current needs; the author's experience in designing and conducting revalorisation of Modernist buildings encourage us to attempt to give an overview of major problems and to formulate conclusions.

In the early 1990s, it became easier for former owners to recover their property. However, the physical condition of the property thus regained and the need of conversion to new or modified functions pose many problems. Furthermore, as the buildings were used, they usually underwent significant alterations to meet current needs, and this presents additional problems.

Before design work begins, economic aspects must be considered. It is obvious that the cubature meeting current standards could be achieved at a lesser expense through new construction. It is, however, the unique architectural value, the historical tradition and the attractive location in the spatial tissue of the city that are crucial when the decision to restore or to revalorise is taken. To present specific issues and activities involved, let me describe two projects, which have actually been completed.

The first of the buildings is an impressive tenement at the crossroads of streets Smoleńsk and Retoryka in Cracow. Designed by Waclaw



**1.** Tenement at the corner of streets Retoryka and Smoleńsk in Cracow, Waclaw Krzyżanowski 1922, eastern elevation. Photo by the author

Krzyżanowski<sup>1</sup> in 1922, it was completed in the same decade. This is a three-storey building on a practically square plan, with a semi-circular protruded bay window in the façade, all covered with a hip roof that cannot be seen from street level. The building has a classical form, yet with clearly seen modernistic elements. The details – columns and pilasters – have been reduced to the minimum; they are but a delicate feature in the elevation. Indigenous elements should be noted, especially Neo-Empire and Neo-Baroque decoration. The horizontal layout is stressed by

1. Lepiarczyk J., Krzyżanowski Waclaw, [in] *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, Wrocław – Warsaw – Cracow, vol. XV, 1970, pp. 621-623.



**2.** Tenement at the corner of streets Retoryka and Smoleńsk in Cracow, Wacław Krzyżanowski 1922, eastern elevation – the bay window. Photo by the author

stringer course at the ground-floor level and the overhanging cornice of the elevation.

The building was designed and originally used as a two-family house. After WWII, it was converted to a multi-family function. No refurbishment took place for decades, only emergency repairs or adjustments driven by current needs, often done by people without the necessary skills.

In the 1990s, the building found a new user – and soon owner – the Cracow School of Business and Commerce (*Wyższa Szkoła Handlowa*). Redesign work for the new function started in 2001. After a thorough study of the new functional program, it turned out that the

**3.** Tenement at the corner of streets Retoryka and Smoleńsk in Cracow, Wacław Krzyżanowski 1922, northern façade – the portal entrance. Photo by the author



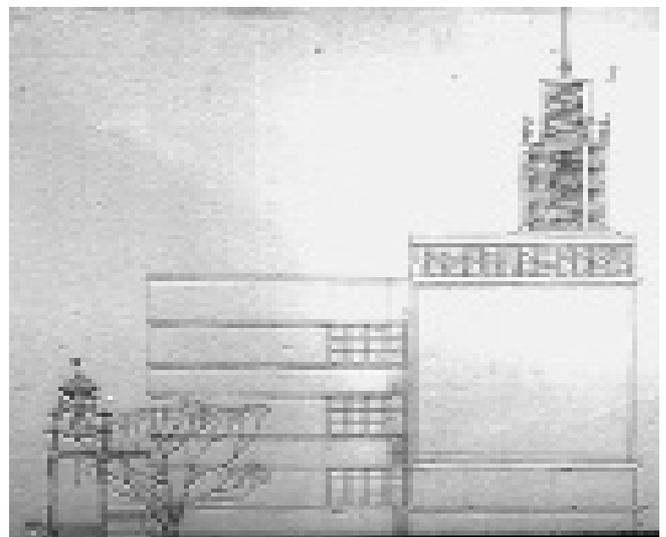
building could perform its educational function after the original interior layout was restored. Attic space was redesigned to meet teaching needs, and historical details have been reconstructed. New interior decoration is reminiscent of the time when the building was erected, and so is the reconstructed exterior.

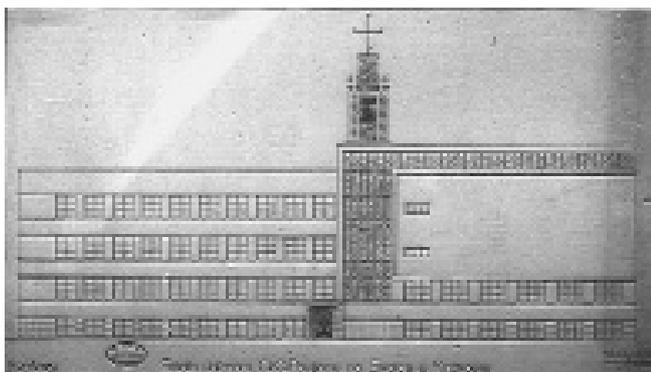
The new function of the building as well as the needs and requirements that have to be met today seem to have helped the architectural value of the building to be better seen and duly exposed.

The other building is the Pauline Fathers' seminary at Skalka in Cracow. It is situated in a unique place, in terms of history and tradition – in the vicinity of the Pauline church and monastery, which is one of the most distinguished Polish necropoleis. The building is in muted Modernist style of Cracow. The architect had prepared two versions of the design. The first one was marked by expressive, soaring decorative forms, to a certain degree reminiscent of the avant-garde of the 20th-century Modern Movement. The client, however, with their conservative aesthetic tastes, rejected it for fear it would dominate the existing historical context. The second version of the design, actually approved, showed the building without the original visual detail and the expressive ornament. It was modest and toned down.

Originally, the building was designed for the purpose of secondary-level seminary education. In 1949, the authorities expropriated the Pauline order and the building became a state-run school. While the building was used for the function, changes were made to it as needs arose. When the Pauline Fathers were repossessed in 1991, it was decided that the building return to the

**4.** Pauline Fathers' Seminary in Skalczna street in Cracow, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz 1931, the first design (not approved for construction), western elevation. Source: Pauline monastic archives at Skalka in Cracow.





**5.** Pauline Fathers' Seminary in Skaleczna street in Cracow, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz 1931, the first design (not approved for construction), northern elevation. Source: Pauline monasterial archives at Skalka in Cracow.

seminary function, yet at academic level. This meant significant differences between the original design and the new function.

The designer had to address two basic issues: bringing back the original spatial layout with historical details, in the first place, and accommodating the modern function of a seminary in the interiors so restored. Respect for historical values while meeting present-day needs and requirements was a priority. It has to be stressed that the current function of the building is not only a significant modification of the original one, but is also subject to the building code of today. When it came to plumbing, for example, or the stairways, the two were difficult to reconcile, sometimes excluding each other altogether. This is why attic conversion became necessary, giving the building extra cubature without extending its external volume. Interior details were restored, as well as the polychrome of the chapel. Re-plumbing and re-wiring of the building were necessary to meet modern needs. The gymnasium, to be built at a later stage, is to be partly deepened in the ground.

After extensive conservation work, the

**6.** Pauline church and seminary in Skaleczna street in Cracow, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz 1931, western elevation. Photo by the author



**7.** Pauline Fathers' Seminary in Skaleczna street in Cracow, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz 1931, northern façade with entrance and chapel. Photo by the author

building meets current requirements – both functionally and technically. At the same time it has recovered its original character and is used for the same, albeit considerably modified, function<sup>2</sup>.

It may be said, in conclusion, that problems of conservation of Modern Architecture have to be addressed in the context of current needs and requirements. Conservation of a Modernist building largely involves current technical and functional prerequisites. Many solutions are determined by the need to introduce new

<sup>2</sup> Białkiewicz Andrzej, *Rewitalizacja modernistycznej budowli w jej historycznym kontekście*, in proceedings of an international symposium „Theory and Practice of Conservation of Historical Buildings and Sites”, Cracow 1998

**8.** Pauline Fathers' Seminary in Skaleczna street in Cracow, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz 1931, northern façade. Photo by the author





**9.** *Pauline Fathers' Seminary in Skąpczna street in Cracow, Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz 1931, part of western elevation. Photo by the author*

elements that raise the standard of living. We must not treat Modern Movement architectural heritage as inaccessible to conversion. We supplement it with new values so that it can meet the requirements of the present. Giving priority to historical values should coexist with the present function of the building, which means using modern technologies and architectural forms<sup>3</sup>. However, historical values should not be eroded by today's technologies – they are part of the heritage that is vital to the society.

---

3. A. Białkiewicz, Wybrane zagadnienia realizacji konserwatorskich w aspekcie współczesnych wymogów i potrzeb, [in:] Dziełnictwo kulturowe fundamentem rozwoju cywilizacji, post-conference publication of the International Conservation Conference Cracow 2000.

**Andrzej Białkiewicz**, professor of architecture  
Cracow University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture  
research interests: drawing and history of architecture  
e-mail: [abialk@poczta.fm](mailto:abialk@poczta.fm)