Constructing a New Polish Architecture: Critical Regionalism and Resistance to Globalization after 1989

Krystyna Januszkiewicz

Department of Architecture and Spatial Planning, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, West Pomeranian University of Technology Szczecin, Szczecin 70-311, Poland

Abstract: This paper explores the critical regionalism which could play a role in the continued development of global era Polish architecture, and the advancements achieved by those few contemporary Polish architects who have sought to combine modern tastes and techniques with culturally meaningful designs. The new culture of Poland is very much reflected in the design of many of its new buildings that have been completed since the political and economic changes in 1989. The architecture of Poland appears to have lurched from an inappropriate socialist modernism that was so horridly imposed during the communist era to an equally inappropriate post modernist hegemony in the new enterprise culture. In accordance with Poland, now is rejection of the centrally imposed system of building and architecture, and with the greater emphasis on individual initiative in the new culture, it seems a pity that the country should automatically adopt western modes of architectural expression. This paper suggests that with its newly founded freedom, Poland should be careful that it does not suffer a loss of identity and that, in its architecture, it should seek a way forward through a critical regionalism.

Key words: Architecture, culture, critical regionalism, globalization, resistance, Poland.

1. Introduction

Since 1989, Polish architecture has lurched from an inappropriate socialist modernism imposed during the communist era to an equally inappropriate post-modernist style, making parts of Warsaw indistinguishable from other world cities. The prevalence of glass and steel skyscrapers is no coincidence, owing to deliberate choices to harmonize with the West rather than spontaneous adherence to elementary architectural ideas. The forces of globalization—common trade, communication and education continue to eradicate traditional boundaries separating architectural styles and techniques, prompting those who believe Polish architecture should reflect local culture to question whether the country should adopt western modes of architectural

expression so uncritically.

In the last two decades, a number of Polish architectural practices have gained prominence in their field and their work has been featured regularly in professional journals. However, as noteworthy as their work has become, very little of it upholds the architectural features unique to Poland.

Those who believe this architectural homogenization does not reflect Polish identity adequately and that it stalls advances in the state of Polish architectural art aligning themselves with the theory of critical regionalism. Pioneered in 1983 by architectural critic Kenneth Frampton, critical regionalism incorporates modern architectural techniques and technologies to construct buildings that reflect the history and culture of whatever region is to be sited.

It guides the architect to borrow materials, textures, lighting techniques, shapes and layouts from vernacular buildings so that new construction reflects local culture and history.

Corresponding author: Krystyna Januszkiewicz, assistant professor, architect engineer, research fields: theory and history of contemporary architecture, digital technology in design and environmentally sensitive architecture. E-mail: krystyna_januszkiewicz@wp.pl.

2. Polish Architecture after 1989

The end of the communist era provided enormous new opportunities for the development of Polish architecture [1]. Following independence, Poland had a great demand for new buildings and interiors as, virtually, all past building works had been financed by the state to serve certain social purposes such as housing, education, health services and employment.

Contrasting that with conditions today, nearly all buildings are financed by private companies and investors such as house offices, banks, shops, showrooms, hotels, bars and restaurants. Because bank interest rates are high, the number of buildings under construction are few, which is one reason that Poland managed to avoid the worst effects of the recent global recession. Warsaw is one exception, where construction levels resemble those in other eastern European cities (Fig. 1).

The current level of privately financed construction took time to achieve and is still changing. The Adam Mickiewicz Institute has identified three stages in the history of Polish architecture after 1989 [2]. During the first period, designs from several years earlier were completed. Buildings erected during the first period were the first in decades that could be compared to western standards of finish.

During the second period, an increasing number of companies entering Poland began construction of elegant offices. Their aspirations gave rise to

commissions for the most talented designers and competitions for the best designs. Numerous design studios appeared, employing young and vibrant architects ready to work in the market economy.

Since the late nineties, the third period has seen the appearance of large developers for whom success in the market was as important as the need for attractive environments and appropriate quality of architecture. These firms would often commission the most famous architects in the world to design. Examples include: the opera located on Saski Square (Plac Saski) in Warsaw, where large developers commissioned Sir Norman Foster to do the project; the Praski Port in Warsaw, led by Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill; and the construction of the acclaimed Warsaw Financial Center skyscraper, designed by the renowned New York-based firm Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates.

Unfortunately, many of these buildings were designed by western firms who lacked interest in Polish culture. They used in-house architects in development, financing and construction.

Vestiges of the old regime—widespread corruption and bribery—prevented decent buildings from being constructed. Some intolerable construction and safety failures have also come to light in some of the new tower blocks, including inadequate fire escapes, lifts and proper floor space.

There are some exceptions. In Warsaw, Orco Property Group realized numerous developments in their prestigious Small Luxury Hotels of the World

Fig. 1 New skyline of Warsaw with Daniel Libeskind's first project in Poland, now under construction (Studio Libeskind—Orco).

collection and is now engaged in Polish-born Daniel Libeskind's first project in Poland. In addition to 251 luxury apartments, it accommodates a retail area, an amenity floor and an attended car park. Its unique form relates perfectly to the environment. Advanced ecological solutions generate high levels of energy and water savings and, as one would expect from a glass structure, provide an unlimited source of sunlight.

3. Present Trends

There are four distinct architectural tendencies at work today in Poland. Three have great affinity with the same movements in western Europe: neo-rationalism, deconstructivism and late-modernism. The fourth, regionalism, necessarily differs from styles elsewhere.

The leading movement in Poland at the moment is neo-rationalism, a prime achievement of which may be the Warsaw University Library. Inspired by Italian neo-rationalism, Marek Budzynski and Zbigniew Badowski created a brilliant experience. A low, spacious concrete building is penetrated by the greenery of a botanical garden on the roof. The structure, like the temples of art of the last century, contains complex iconographic decorations. It possesses a green steel construction and cathedral-like proportions, and the facade depicts a series of open books (Fig. 2).

Another movement in Poland is deconstructivism, practiced particularly well by two architectural studios. In Silesia, Mirosław Polak and Marek Skwara have executed a series of extraordinary interiors, which are distinguished in their exploration of steel, the indigenous material of the region. Each of their projects responds intuitively to the essence of their clients and can vary from highly sophisticated to the crude in the example of the rusting steel and suspended glass floor at the Bar Złom located in Bytom (Fig. 3).

The most common design movement in

contemporary Poland is late-modernism, which is represented in most of the new private banks, supermarkets, showrooms, offices and housing estates.

While many will find the new pluralism of architectural ideas in Poland exciting, these styles are still based on western practices. Naturally, some may feel that Poland's soul has always been rooted in western culture and that new architecture must demonstrate a clear break with the communist past. However, virtually all new Polish architecture follows what has become an international language, examples

(a)

(b)

Fig. 2 University Library (facade, vestibule, catalog room) Warsaw (photo by M. Budzynski): (a) view of the entrance; (b) hall of the library, in Warsaw, designed by Marek Budzyński and Zbigniew Badowski, 1993-1999.

Fig. 3 Atelier 12, Bar Zlom, Bytom by Marek Skawara, 1993 (photo by M. Skawara).

of which can be found as much in the Middle and Far East as in the west.

If western architecture is now the global style, one question must be asked: how does this new architecture relate to the culture and traditions of Poland?

4. Towards a Critical Regionalism

Over the course of the 20th century, architecture in Poland, like most aspects of western culture, has been characterized by increasing homogeneity beyond national lines. There is a tension between local culture and this universalizing trend that cannot be resolved fully in favor of one side or the other, and the tendency of styles to spread quickly will only increase.

With some exceptions, regionalism did not come into the architectural vocabulary again until the late 1950s. And it was not until 1981 when Alexander Tzonis and Leane Lefaivre introduced the term critical regionalism as an alternative to modernism and post-modernism.

In “The Grid and the Pathway”, Tzonis and Lefaivre defined critical regionalism, “by way of a general definition, we can say that it upholds the individual and local architectonic features as against more universal ones. Critical regionalism is a bridge over which any humanistic architecture of the future must pass” [3].

From Lefaivre and Tzonis’s discussion about the idea of critical regionalism in 1981 and in the leading essay of their 2003 book, two changes are noteworthy [4]. In their recent book, the word “critical” is not used to denote an opposition or resistance to anything internal or external in architecture. They emphasize a particular region in terms of the value of an individual project within the physical, social and cultural constraints of that region, aiming at sustaining diversity while benefiting from universality. Lefaivre Tzonis’s rapprochement to critical regionalism intends to “design” an identity mapped within the prevailing order of globalization. The authors trace the genesis of critical regionalism to its ancient historical and political roots, and focus on its modern expression. They point to the increasing use of the theory in the recent works of a truly global selection of visionary architects, including Santiago Calatrava in Spain, Renzo Piano in the South Pacific, and Berger and Parkkinen in Germany. Discussions of tropical architecture and contemporary works in Asia round out this important contribution to a topical debate about the role of architecture in the world.

In 1983, the distinguished architectural critic Kenneth Frampton published a notable paper entitled “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”, which expressed grave concern about the global adoption of western architecture [5]. In his paper, Frampton advanced the case for a more responsive architecture that not only incorporates modern technologies, but also belongs to its region. The text begins with a quotation from Paul Ricoeur, describing the current state of traditional culture and the effects of universalization, which, he argues, leads to mediocre civilization. Ricoeur questions “how to become modern and to return to sources, how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization” [6].

Ricoeur says there often exists a pressure to abandon a whole cultural past in order to take part in modern civilization. Instead of wiping the slate clean,

he advocates a model that incorporates historical themes as the basis for future development.

Ten years into Poland's free market era, architects began to question their role in advancing Polish culture again, and sought to use their art to assert Poland's cultural uniqueness. The promotion of a regional architectural movement is not a recent phenomenon in Poland, as preserving native culture is something of a national pastime, Poland having been controlled throughout modern history by Russia, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By borrowing popular motifs from traditional wooden buildings in places such as the Tatra Mountains, architects discovered a surreptitious way to preserve the national Polish character [7].

The architectural critic who has done more to raise and spread the issue of critical regionalism than anyone else is Kenneth Frampton who created a list of seven essential characteristics that constitute critical regionalism:

(1) First, he recognized that critical regionalism is only ever likely to be a "marginal practice," and that it favors small-scale developments rather than grand plans. He also suggests that although it may be critical of modernization, it should never ignore the liberating features of the modern movement;

(2) Second, Frampton highlighted one of critical regionalism's most distinctive features, which he calls the "place-form," and in which he sees the designs of buildings grounded inextricably to their territory and site rather than being seen as alien objects;

(3) Third, he suggested an emphasis on the "tectonic" qualities of architecture rather than reducing it to scenography;

(4) As the fourth feature, Frampton emphasized a response to essentially local characteristics such as the topography of the site, the play of light and climatic conditions. There is an emphasis on harmonious openings to the outside and a rejection of a universal adoption of air conditioning;

(5) The fifth feature is an emphasis on unique

tactile features, which are equally as important as a building's visual qualities;

(6) The sixth characteristic is that, while critical regionalism opposes replication of vernacular buildings, it may permit a reinterpretation of vernacular elements if they help to place a building within its region;

(7) Finally, Frampton observed that critical regionalism is only likely to be successful in those cultures that are able to escape the pressure of the universal civilization.

To illustrate his argument, Frampton selected regionalist buildings created by modernist architects, including Alvar Aalto's Saynatsalo Town Hall, Jorn Utzon's Bagsvaad Church near Copenhagen and Tadao Ando's Church at Hokkaido. There are, of course, many outstanding contemporary regionalist architects practicing in their own locally inflected manners, such as Imre Makovecz in Hungary, Glenn Murcott in Australia Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka, Lucien Kroll in Belgium and El-Wakil in Egypt.

Although they are less well known outside the country, Poland has a small number of regionalist architects, and the most notable of whom are Andrzej Skoczek, Adam M. Szymiski, Stanislaw Niemczyk and Szczepan Baum [8]. Interestingly, their approaches to architecture did not arrive with the adoption of capitalism in Poland. Rather, their architecture developed in reaction to the universal language of socialist modernism imposed during the communist era.

Their buildings reflect the regions of Poland within which they practice. Niemczyk's and Skoczek's works clearly belong to the Silesian and Cracovian south, while Baum's buildings are indigenous to the Baltic north, and Szymiski's works belong to West Pomerania. These works are idiosyncratic and adopt all those qualities that Frampton attaches to the best critical regionalism, such as the place-form, the tectonic and the tactile.

Of all the architects practicing in Poland today, the

one whose work reflects Frampton's definition of critical regionalism best is Stanisław Niemczyk. Based on Tychy in Silesia, Niemczyk first came to prominence with the design for an extraordinary church—the Church of the Holy Spirit (Kosciol Swietego Ducha) at Tychy Zwalcowe, which was built between 1979 and 1983. It stands out as uniquely modern, yet quintessentially Polish in character.

Niemczyk's Church of the Holy Spirit positions the congregation as close to the altar as possible, with most people in front of the altar, a smaller number at the sides, and even fewer behind. An emphasis on the tactile is evident in the choice of materials: all the walls are in brickwork and exposed timber is used for all the windows and doors. Natural timber is also used to line the inside of the great roof, resembling the traditional timber churches of the region. Simple and geometric motifs, notably arches and crosses, break up monotonous surfaces on the main doors, windows, brick walls and even the roof.

Lastly, a particularly striking feature of the interior is the paintings on the sloping timber ceilings around the sanctuary, a traditional feature found in old wooden churches of the region. These impressive paintings by Jerzy Nowosielski are not only derived from folk art, but also painted like the icons that

adorned 18th and 19th century Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Niemczyk's Church of the Holy Spirit is undoubtedly one of the finest contemporary buildings in Poland to evoke the spirit of critical regionalism (Fig. 4).

Niemczyk's individual style can be seen on more utilitarian buildings in Silesia, such as his terraced housing at Tychy-Glinka and his housing at Mikolow. The housing estate at Mikolow is on the outskirts of a small industrial town, adjacent to some busy roads. It was designed and built during the latter stages of the communist era (1983-1989), when most new Polish housing was based on the heavy concrete and system-built, high-rise model in most communist countries at that time (Fig. 5).

A more recent example of Niemczyk's work is his primary school at Katowice-Giszowiec, the first stage of which was designed and built between 1991 and 1995. Giszowiec is a unique industrial village built for coal miners and their families between 1908 and 1911. It was planned on English garden suburb lines with winding tree-lined streets, semi-detached two-story cottages and gardens. The center of the village contained all the necessary social and commercial facilities. This idyllic settlement remained unchanged

Fig. 4 Church of The Holy Spirit (Kosciol Swietego Ducha), Tychy Zwalcowe: (a) high altar of the church with paintings; (b) traditional semi-public space around the church (photo: K. Januszkiewicz) by Stanisław Niemczyk, 1972-1989.

Fig. 5 Terraced housing, Tychy-Glinka by Stanisław Niemczyk, 1983-1989 (photo by K. Januszkiewicz).

Fig. 6 Primary school, Katowice-Giszowiec by Stanisław Niemczyk, 1991-1995 (photo by K. Januszkiewicz).

until the 1970s when one of the communist state offices started to demolish some of the existing houses. Fortunately, by the mid-1980s, this destruction was finally brought to an end and the only new building which has been completed since then is the school.

The school site is at an awkward juncture, surrounded on three sides by the detached and semi-detached homes of the village and concrete slab blocks facing its fourth side. The architects responded by arranging a series of small, detached blocks for classrooms and other facilities. These blocks run parallel to the surrounding streets, which are one- or two-story high, and have tiled roofs, just like the surrounding cottages. Bulkier and taller elements of the school are contained in a block located along the fourth side of the site, directly opposite to and aligned with a concrete slab block of flats. The layout form and architecture of this school demonstrate the

architect's extraordinary sensitivity to the configuration of the existing buildings and the landscape-dominated environment. It is a masterpiece in the art of contextualism (Fig. 6).

Another notable critical regionalist architect whose work evokes the spirit of northern Poland is Szczepan Baum. Baum's work is conscious of the intrinsic character of northern Poland and reveals a deep appreciation for the regional building style, place-form and quality of light. Baum's development can be traced through three church projects designed between 1977 and 1983 at Zdunska Wola, Lodz and Straszyn. Showing a progression to his style, the last church at Straszyn, executed between 1985 and 1988, is far more regionalist in approach.

The church at Straszyn is set in a beautiful countryside in a coastal area near Gdansk. Passing through the archway brings a visitor into a wonderful intimate forecourt, which, with its arcades and semi-circular arches, derives from the atriums of the Roman churches. It is undoubtedly one of the most enchanting compositions to have been built in Poland in the last twenty years. Baum used a simple palette of tactile materials, composing the finish to all the pitched roofs in traditional orange clay tiles. Apart from random stones used in the external walling, all the materials in the church building are plainly finished and relieved of applied decoration (Fig. 7).

One of Baum's more recent works is his contribution to the reconstruction of Elblag City Center. Situated close to the Baltic Sea, east of Gdansk, Elblag dates to the 13th century. By the time Elblag's reconstruction had been considered in the early 1980s, public opinion about modern architecture forced local authorities to rethink their approach to the design.

Baum and the rest of the design team devised a master plan that established a set of urban design principles to be applied to the entire redevelopment area. The goal was not only for the reconstruction to have some reference to the past, but also to allow for

Fig. 7 (a) View of the main entrance to the courtyard; (b) Catholic Church, Straszyn, 1985-1988 (photos by Sz. Baum).

Fig. 8 Reconstruction of the central area of Elblag: (a) aerial view; (b) view of interior of the church, by Wieslaw Anders, Ryszard Semka, Szczepan Baum, 1985-2000 (photos by S. Baum).

flexibility throughout the reconstruction process (Fig. 8).

The fourth stage of Elblag's reconstruction stands out as the most interesting and comes directly from Baum. Although the development site was flat, Baum varied the internal ground floor levels in adjoining units and adjusted the levels of the first floors to provide differently sized spaces. A variety and

mixture of window openings appear both at the ground floor level, as well as in tiled facades above. Lastly, each gable end is totally different from any others and includes some lively Art Deco or Art Nouveau inspired flourishes.

5. Conclusions

The Elblag project reveals the central predicament

of architecture as a collaborative art. Today's Polish architecture is a hybrid not only of current global trends, but also of the groundwork laid previously. The ideas that identify a region's architectural character may either be long-standing or evolutions of notions imported when foreign ideas were deemed superior to native ones. Those values are not necessarily unique to a place, but come to be considered so after a short time.

Architecture, like language or mysticism, is both universal and unique. Architects participate actively in the development, dissemination and redevelopment of ideas. This is why the opening of the Polish economy was so crucial to progress and why Polish architects today have the liberty to put their own spin on the architectural world around them.

Although the changeover to a market economy was a necessary reform and was appropriate for the culture of Poland, it presented architectural predicament. International consumerist architecture swept through the country, resulting in the construction of inappropriate buildings, particularly in Warsaw. If this form of building is allowed to develop unchallenged, the cumulative effect may become equally inappropriate as socialist modernism.

Poland and Eastern Europe need research to examine traditional architecture and urbanism. The study should contain methods of typological and morphological analysis according to the comparative criteria, such as by Banister Fletcher at the Oxford University, Saverio Muratori at the University, La Sapienza in Rome or Adam M. Szymiski at the West Pomerania Technological University in Szczecin. This would allow the establishment of an organic link between the internal characteristics of the architectural organism such as the structures of load bearing walls and columns, facades, roofs, together with distributional schemes, and the external conditions of the studied edifice as part of a particular urban

environment. The experience should be developed by research group in collaboration with other research teams in Europe and the US, leading to the publication of a series of books related to the analysis of regional architecture and traditional urban fabric. It is expected that, at the end of the research program, the scientific unit will produce a systematic classification of the fundamental features of regional buildings and urban spaces, together with the clear understanding of their crucial role in the process of construction of Polish and European cities.

Acknowledgments

This paper has been edited by Richard Lorenc. The author sincerely thank him for the help he offered.

References

- [1] J. Królikowski, *L'architettura polacca dopo il 1989* (Polish architecture after 1989), *Domus* 804 (May) 1998 64-69. (in Italian and English)
- [2] S. Jerzy, Majewski in *Polish Architecture in the Nineties*, in *Polish Culture*, No. 3190/Sep. 2010 [Online], Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Warsaw, <http://culture.pl/en/article/polish-architecture-in-the-nineties> (accessed Dec. 18, 2011).
- [3] A. Tzonis, L. Lefaivre, *The grid and the pathway: An introduction to the work of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis*, *Architecture in Greece* 15 (1981) 164-178.
- [4] A. Tzonis, L. Lefaivre, *Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World*, Prestel, New York, 2003.
- [5] K. Frampton, *Towards a critical regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance*, in: H. Foster (Ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, 1983, pp. 16-30.
- [6] P. Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1965.
- [7] A. Milobedzki, *The Architecture in Poland: A Chapter of the European Heritage*, International Cultural Center, Krakow, 1994.
- [8] P.G. Fauset, *Krytyczny regionalizm—Stanisław Niemczyk* (Stanisław Niemczyk's Critical Regionalism), *Archivolta Quarterly* 3 (1999) 16-20. (in Polish)