From Socialist Realism to Modernism: Józef Zbigniew Polak - a Forgotten Champion on Poland's Architectural Post-War Map

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Abstract. The article concerns work by architect Józef Zbigniew Polak, who was the first Pole to win an international architectural competition in the Polish post-war era. As a lecturer, and graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology, he continued the design school of Prof. Bohdan Pniewski. Polak’s architectural creativity can be divided into several phases, which are in turn closely connected to various developmental periods of architecture in post-war Poland. His designs and architectural realizations are often overlooked by researchers, which is among others the result of his later long-term activity in other countries.

1. Introduction

When Richard Neutra arrived in Warsaw at the beginning of the 1960s to collect the SARP award and give a lecture at the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology, he also had another important goal. He wanted to get to know the young architect to whom he awarded the top prize as the head of the jury in a competition to design a cultural centre in Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo [1]. This young architect was Józef Zbigniew Polak, who was employed to guide Neutra and his wife, who was in love with Chopin’s music, around Żelazowa Wola and a recently re-built Warsaw.

The victory of Polak’s team in the international competition in 1959 broke a barrier behind which Polish architects had been designing, and heralded a return to the presiding mature modernist style. This happened just three years after the National Architects Conference, after which socialist realism ceased to be the incumbent style. The Leopoldville[2] victory was the start of a series of later successes by a wider group of architects. According to Tadeusz Barucki, “...out of 34 competitions organised at this time by the International Union of Architects, Polish architects gained a total of 31 prizes and distinctions, sometimes getting a few awards in a single competition.” [3]

During his career Polak won awards in more than 30 national and international competitions, as well as realizing many interesting buildings. However, he remains little known to modern historians and architectural theorists. Current literature is typically terse when referring to Polak’s work and this is...
despite the fact that in the 1950s and 1960s he was well known in architectural circles and his projects often found their way into architectural publications. The presentation of a full and factual account of Poland’s architecture in the second half of the 20th century necessitates a closer look at his work. His architectural output can be analyzed by visiting realized projects, architectural publications from the 1950s and 1960s, archive material, as well as valuable information from interviews carried out with Polak between 2016 and 2018.

![Figure 1](image.jpg)

**Figure 1.** A model of the cultural centre in Leopoldville. Competition piece from 1959. Authors: Józef Zbigniew Polak, Jacek Chyrosz, Krzysztof Łukasiewicz, construction: Adam Zbigniew Pawłowski, Stanisław Wiland, source: J. Z. Polak’s archive.

### 2. A historical game

The generation of young architects who fought for success from behind the Iron Curtain had already experienced the difficulties of socialist realism. Most of them started their careers with designs in this extremely specific style. Polak had similar experiences. In 1949, during the National Party Architects Conference [4], socialist realism was officially announced as the obligatory style in architecture. That was the year that Polak graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology. He had been fascinated by architecture since he was a child. As a 13-year old he repeatedly visited an exhibition entitled “Warsaw of the Future” at the National Museum, which presented plans for the development of Poland’s capital city. He came from a family with a history in the construction sector, which was to heavily influence him in his later career as an architect. Polak was born in Łomża in 1923 and moved to Warsaw with his family when he was still a child. The outbreak of World War Two put a stop to his education. He fought in the Warsaw Uprising as head of the Eaglet’s Riflemen Association and later enrolled in the 1st Tadeusz Kościuszko Infantry Division
where he led sapper reconnaissance. When the Architecture Faculty was opened in 1945 he immediately found himself within its halls.

During his studies he worked in the Bureau for the Redevelopment of the Capital run by Maciej Nowicki. Having such a brilliant mentor influenced Polak’s later life immensely, however, it was Bohdan Pniewski who paved the way for Polak’s first steps as an architect after he completed his studies. Polak became his assistant after finishing university. He ran the scientific section that dealt with research into the proportions of the most important buildings in the history of modern architecture. He learnt how to attain the highest quality in designing buildings in the socialist realist style. His knowledge about the classical composition of solutions allowed him to create architecture, which made a historical statement and differed from the often over scaled Soviet designs.

In 1949 Polak started work in the design studio of the Workers Housing Unit (ZOR), which put together projects for investments all over Poland. His first job was to design a fragment of the Bałuty residential complex in Łódź. Together with the youth section he also designed a concept for its residential cultural centre. The design was noticed by the authorities of an aviation plant in Rzeszów and it was proposed that the centre be built at the plant’s residential complex. For Polak, who had not yet turned 30, this was an opportunity to try his hand at being the lead architect on a project. His concept appeared in an album entitled “Polish Architecture 1950-1951” [5] by Bohdan Garliński, who selected the most interesting projects designed in the socialist realist style. In 1953 the project of the cultural center was displayed at a national exhibition in Zachęta where it was heralded as the third most interesting building in the exhibition. Jan Minorski also mentioned the good spatial composition of the project in the Architecture Magazine. He also compared the hall to the entrance of the Lower House of Parliament (Sejm) designed by Pniewski[6]. Many years later when he was asked about what inspired him, Polak stressed the similarity of his project to the Palace on the Water in Łazienki Park in Warsaw. He was also inspired by the proportions of the Palace of Versailles when designing the residential and retail buildings surrounding the newly created square. The headquarters of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party, also designed in Rzeszów, was inspired by the Parisian Théâtre des Champs Élysées by Auguste Perret [7]. Playing games with the history of architecture taught him a lot, and at the same time allowed him to survive social realism, a period so difficult for architects.

Figure 2. Cultural Centre WSK in Rzeszów, project: J. Z. Polak with team, source: postcard from the 1950s.
3. Design studio A-9

Polak’s successful realizations meant that after a few years he became the head of an architectural workshop for the Bureau of Typical Projects and Urban Development Study, called A-9. This was the daughter studio of the former studio ‘number XII’, which existed as part of the ZOR design bureau [8]. The old bureau ran many large investments into various areas of architecture. The end of socialist realism in architecture brought about projects of a distinctly mature modernist style, where functionality was brought together with artistic motifs. Polak’s interest in the arts also led him to create an architects and visual artists club called “Kozia 3”, which became active in 1949. A typical example of Polak’s work from this period was the cultural centre in Oświęcim, designed in 1958 and realized at the beginning of the 1960s. In an article on the most interesting achievements in architecture in the Kraków area, Stanisław Ciechanowski wrote that it was “...modern architecture, unpretentious, with a simple and interesting use of space for artistic use, paintings, sculpture and mosaic in harmony with architecture.” [9]. The cultural center was so unique that it was opened by Józef Cyrankiewicz, Polish Prime Minister at the time. The building became a model for other cultural centers, which were being built en masse in all Polish cities. Many of these were designed by the A-9 studio.

![Figure 3. Cultural Centre in Oświęcim, project J.Z. Polak with team, source: “Architektura” 9/1963.](image)

Polak’s team put together many popular projects, which were in high demand in the 1950s and 1960s. The lack of architects in post-war Poland was the main reason for the creation of universal projects, which could be used in different locations. It is worth mentioning here what a large role projects designed in the Bureau of Typical Projects and Urban Development Study played in the landscape. The A-9 studio was among others responsible for typical projects for nurseries, pre-schools, schools, urban and rural cultural centres, cinemas, shopping pavilions, as well as residential buildings. The architects even created a project for a typical headquarters for a local council building [8].

Despite the economic hardships of the time, the projects created in Polak’s studio contained daring solutions such a bilateral lighting in classrooms, complicated reinforced concrete forms, which demanded specialist teams of builders, or expensive finishing elements, which constituted works of art installed by artists at the building site. Having been freed from the limitations of socialist realism, the young team of architects tried to create the projects of their dreams. Many of them were later realized.
4. Competitions

Work carried out by A-9 was not limited to commissions from the bureau directorate. A team was put together to work on competition designs often out of hours. Depending on the needs and possibilities of the studio’s employees Polak also worked with architects and constructors outside the studio. They started with competitions organized by SARP, which brought them a lot of success. It is worth mentioning that in 1958 Polak took second place ex æquo with Marek Leykam in a very prestigious competition for the development of the east end of Marszałkowska street near the Central Square. Despite bringing the architects fame and restoring their faith in their abilities, the cultural centre in Leopoldville was not built. Polak continued to take part in competitions and had further success. In 1962 he won two thirds of the prize in international competitions for 250 and 800 seat summer cinemas in tourist towns in Czechoslovakia[ 10]. The competing team proposed a structure, which could be partly dismantled in the winter season, which made it functional.

Polak’s high level of expertise was confirmed when he was awarded a distinction in the competition for the centre of Tel Aviv in 1963. The project divided the development of the city into two zones. The first included the existing low buildings, which would be replaced in the future by recreational and entertainment areas. The second zone was a high-rise city development, connected with traffic highways and neighbouring residential complexes. One of the strengths of the project was the independence of both zones, which would allow it to be realized in phases. The realization of the attractive high-rise second zone did not disturb existing development in the first zone. This could be developed at a later time. The authors noticed that “a two tier system that would sprout from the existing city but was integral to it, is liberated from all the existing burdens and disability.” [11]. Perspective planning, which does not assume tearing down existing structures in order to create a new urban landscape seems innovative against the background of modernist theories and urban practices; starting from Le Corbusier’s concept, which envisaged the demolition of Paris city centre, and ending with the dramatic decision to demolish the remaining fragments of Warsaw’s city centre to build the Palace of Culture and Science.

![Figure 4. A model of Tel Aviv city center. Competition entry from 1963. Authors: Józef Zbigniew Polak, Jerzy Skrzypczak, Henryk Frey, construction: Adam Zbigniew Pawłowski, source: J. Z. Polak’s archive.](image-url)
5. Travel
Polak’s professional success allowed him to travel abroad. This was a source of inspiration for him and allowed a few years of better work conditions and a better life at a time when architects had a hard time in Poland. Authors of the book entitled “Postmodernism jest prawie w porządku. Polska architektura po socjalistycznej globalizacji”[12] [ed. Postmodernism is nearly ok. Polish architecture after the global spread of socialism] mentioned what a disappointment it was to be an architect in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. “This mainly concerned bureaucratic control over urban development and the dominant role of an increasingly backward building industry.”[13] In 1967 Polak went to work in Afghanistan for three years. In 1970 he won a competition for the development of central Kabul. He then moved to the United States, between 1971-1974 he worked as an architect for the city of Chicago. During this time, he worked on a project for the Central Plaza XX, which concerned the redevelopment of the city centre. The goal was to introduce a multilevel transport infrastructure to the city. Thereby adapting it to the skyward, intensive development, found in the centre of an American metropolis.

![Figure 5. Drawing of Kabul city centre. Competition entry from 1970. Authors: Józef Zbigniew Polak with team, source: J. Z. Polak’s archive.](image)

Polak returned to the United States many times. In the second half of the 1970s he signed a contract to work for a couple of years in Dubai, where he designed the Arab Cultural Centre and a hotel in Khor Fakhan. He spent the next few years in Libya and Pakistan. He returned to Warsaw at the beginning of the 1980s and apart from working as an architect he also returned to didactic work, which he did between 1981 and 1986 at the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology.

During his travels he often drew and painted, something which became his second passion and his main occupation since the end of the 1990s. He organized art exhibitions with his own work all over the world and especially in the United States. He also published a series of albums with his drawings, which included architectural, historic and sacral themes.
6. Unfulfilled dream

In 1954 Polak’s team took part in a competition to design a church in Nowa Huta. It saw 400 entries. The competition, which was organized by SARP, was an exceptional event in terms of the realities of People’s Republic of Poland. Consent by the authorities to build a church hinted at a temporary potential thaw in church-state relations. Polak’s work received a first class distinction. His concept was based on a very clear layout. The nave was depicted in a trapezoid projection, which widened toward the altar and merged with it and with the vestry. Both were designed in a triangular projection. The exterior form of the building was dominated by a tower and an undulating roof.

Polak’s next attempt at getting a sacral project realized was a proposition to design a church on land belonging to the Missionaries of La Salette on the outskirts of the Piastów residential complex, which had been designed by A-9 in Rzeszów. The form of the church constituted a 3D game of triangles, of which some were glazed. It was reminiscent of Japanese origami, and despite its dominating scale the church gave an impression of lightness. The project created a new modernist form, but at the same time immediately revealed its function without the use of historic quotes from sacral architecture. Many architects who designed churches in the following decades were not able to attain this effect. One may assume that if the church was realized it would have become an important object in the history of Polish sacral architecture. Despite the fact that the project made it to the conception stage and was published in the official brochure of the Bureau of Typical Projects and Urban Development Studies [8], the aforementioned thaw ended after a few years and the authorities started prohibiting the construction of churches.

Figure 6. Model of church in Osny based on a competition entry for the Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw in 1999. Authors: Józef Zbigniew Polak and team, construction: Adam Zbigniew Pawłowski, source: J. Z. Polak’s archive.
Polak dreamt that one of his designs would one day be made into an actual church. He created a lot of designs. He drew existing churches. In the meantime, he designed a small nunnery for the Barefoot Carmelites in Nowe Osiny, near Mińsk Mazowiecki. Then, 50 years after the Nowa Huta competition, he decided to try his hand in another important competition for sacral architecture. This time it was for the Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw. The form of the church would pay homage to the gothic style. A very carefully thought through arrangement of the proportions corresponded with refined detail akin to a crystal. This was, however, the central form on an octagonal plan with a 75m tower. “I was silent for 30 years. Now it's time to remind [ed: people].” [14] - he said in a press interview.

Polak also said that he had been thinking about this project throughout his whole life. He underlined the fact that apart from the gothic style the church was reminiscent of art deco, which is what connected his idea with Pniewski’s pre-war project. In the end the project was rejected by the jury due to formal issues. However, the Pallottines from Osny near Paris became interested in it at the post-competition exhibition. They commissioned further work on the project and its adaptation to their needs. A team created by Polak worked on the concept for the next few years, however, the monks developed financial problems, as well as resistance from the local authorities to such a large investment. The church was never built.

7. Conclusions
Józef Zbigniew Polak’s architectural history is also an abbreviated illustration of Poland’s architectural history in the second half of the 20th century. Its main phases are respectively: post-war reconstruction of the country under the dictation of the ruling party, a thaw with the explosion of new forms, and economic stagnation which limited architecture and forced Polak to carry his artistic search abroad. He also co-created a new form for the Church, a search for which became the goal for three generations of Polish architects. Polak’s professional career was steeped in many interesting projects for every one of these phases.

Socialist realism, which is currently looked upon graciously by critics of architecture, was for Polak a testing ground in which he managed to create a form that is currently regarded as a historical treasure. The cultural centre and its surroundings, located in Rzeszów, are one of the more interesting socialist realist realizations in Poland. Projects which were created in the spirit of mature modernism were also a huge success for Polak. The best example of this is the centre of culture in Oświęcim.

These are but a few of many projects and this period was the most prolific in his career. Competitions and trips abroad became a testing ground for his talent on the international stage, which was confirmed by his wins in Leopoldville, Prague, Tel Aviv and Kabul. The church designs evolved at the same pace as the quickly changing style of the 20th century in order to create a project with a very evident symbolism, which complimented the history of architecture. Mathematical dependencies in the form of the temple are reminiscent of the ordered geometrical principles of gothic cathedrals.

Polak’s many long-term trips abroad meant that the memory of his work was overshadowed by the realizations of architects who were active in Poland. It seems, however, that his design work deserves an important place in Poland’s post-war architectural history.

References
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[2] J. Z. Polak’s team won second place. There was no first place given in the competition.
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