Brutalism in the Architecture of Polish Churches

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Abstract. The main research problem presented in the article is the impact of brutalism on sacral architecture in Poland. The author analyses six churches built in the second half of the 20th century. In addition, he compares their features with the global brutalist trend of this period. The following churches were examined in the article: Church of St. Michael in Sopot, Church of Our Lady the Queen of Poland in Kraków–Nowa Huta, Church of St. Jan Kanty in Poznań, Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Łódź, Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen in Kraków, Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Kielce. The brutalist style in architecture was initiated in the 1950s. It was based on Le Corbusier’s post-war buildings and the architectural program developed by Alison and Peter Smithson called the New Brutalism. The brutalist style quickly spread throughout the world, reaching its apogee in the 1960s. In Poland, however, it was introduced relatively late and to a limited extent. Its influence is particularly visible in the architecture of Polish universities, apartment buildings, but most of all churches. The search for original, monumental forms of contemporary religious buildings coincided with such features of brutalism as individualism, strong expression and the use of raw materials. The new churches had to be different from the clichéd, standard and often repeatable buildings of socialist modernism. Brutalist architects in other countries followed similar assumptions. They rejected machine aesthetics of functionalism and preferred dramatized, complex forms. Based on the analysis of the presented churches, brutalist features and elements characteristic of Polish sacral architecture were indicated, including: monumentality, massive plasticity, complexity, strong chiaroscuro effects, expressive and sculptural forms, exposure of internal functions in building facades, emphasizing the importance of movement and articulating elements of pedestrian circulation, preferring craftmanship over industrial methods. Architects often created rhythms on facades by repeating structural elements, and also introduced reinforced concrete details such as: roofs, gargoyles, window frames, brise soleil and ondulatoires. They favored rough and picturesque textures of concrete, brick and stone.

1. Introduction
The article concerns the brutalist architecture – the global style that was developing in the world in the years 1950-1980. Brutalism reached Poland with some delay and was introduced only to limited extent. Here it came into contact with other contemporary trends in architecture, as well as the completely different conditions than in Western Europe or the United States of America. These specific interactions gave original results in buildings of universities, schools, houses and above all churches.

The author of this research paper presents the impact of brutalism on the architecture of Polish religious buildings. He thoroughly examined six church buildings, built in the years 1966-1988, comparing them with the tendencies and ideas noticeable in the mainstream of brutalism. First of all, he analysed the morphology and spatial arrangements of the buildings. Based on the analysis the most
important brutalist features, solutions and elements characteristic of Polish sacral architecture were identified.

In order to provide an adequate background to the research presented in this work, the genesis of the brutalist movement should be briefly discussed. Its first symptoms appeared already in the period between the First and the Second World War, however, brutalism began to develop intensively in the 1950s. Its origins are related to the New Brutalism, that is an architectural theory created in the United Kingdom by Alison and Peter Smithson and supported by Reyner Banham. An important role was also played by the turn in Le Corbusier's architecture.

In severe post-war conditions, referred to as "British austerity" [1], young English artists decided to look for architecture suited to the real situation. Their main assumption became objective perception of reality, and the main aim was to reflect this reality in projects. They thought that ordinary people would be more convinced by the architecture resulting from everyday life of English society than by sterile, abstract modernist forms. They drew inspiration from new trends in art, such as art autre, art brut, or musique concrète [2]. At the core of these trends was the use of materials, objects or sounds “as found”, that is in raw form and without transformation, and rejection of previous compositional rules. This idea was taken over by the originators of the New Brutalism and then applied in architecture. The first buildings that were examples of the new architectural trend had simplified forms constructed from ordinary, easily available materials left untreated and not covered by plaster or cladding [3]. The structure and materials were displayed in a sincere, direct way as in the building of Hunstanton Secondary School designed by Alison and Peter Smithson (built in the years 1949-1954). The New Brutalism was to become a kind of architectural ethics, based primarily on the apotheosis of ordinariness and objectivity to reality. Each building was to be, as Reyner Banham wrote: “the unique solution to an unique situation” [4]. Therefore, the New Brutalists did not strive to develop an uniform style. The domination of any aesthetics would be a denial of their anti-formal assumptions. However, these aspirations were not reflected in practice and as Banham himself regretfully stated, the New Brutalism ceased to be ethics at some point and became an aesthetics – the brutalist style [4].

Le Corbusier's projects that inspired subsequent architects played a large role in shaping the brutalist style. Already in the 1930s, Le Corbusier turned to vernacular architecture with its simple forms and natural materials. He rejected the machine aesthetics and began to emphasize that the role of a building is to evoke emotions. In the post-war years, he erected buildings as iconic for brutalist movement as the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, the government buildings in Chandigarh, and the Monastery of Sainte Marie de la Tourette in Éveux-sur-Arbrésle. These works presented the most important features of the style, including: massiveness, heaviness, articulation of internal functions on facades, béton brut texture, exposed defects of concrete surfaces, three-dimensional facades with varied rhythms of solids and voids, brise soleils and ondulatoires.

Brutalist architecture became expressive, sensual and sculptural, reaching its apogee in the 1960s. The 1970s were the end of brutalism in the world. It should be emphasized that among the assumptions that guided brutalist architects was not the search for beauty. They did not actually strive for any particular aesthetic value. Their priority was to make the buildings move people and evoke their emotions. To this end, they did not hesitate to abandon the classical principles of composition, proportions and scale. The forms of buildings were intemperate, dramatic and sometimes even bombastic. This also applied to religious buildings, examples of which were: Church Our Lady Help of Christians in Tile Cross (Richard Gilbert Scott), Saint John's Abbey Church in Collegeville (Marcel Breuer), Church of San Giovanni Battista in Campi Bisenzio (Giovanni Michelucci), Church of the Most Holy Trinity in Vienna (Fritz Wotruba, Fritz G. Mayr).

2. Brutalist style in Polish sacral architecture

After the Second World War, Poland became a country dependent on the Soviet Union. For architects, the period of Stalinism meant a lack of creative freedom and an obligation to design in the style imposed by the authorities. The doctrine of socialist realism was officially adopted in 1949 at the National Party Council of Architects in Warsaw. The breakthrough came in 1956, when the 20th Congress of the
Communist Party of the Soviet Union ended Stalinism and the Polish communist president Bolesław Bierut died. The following years brought the so-called "little stabilisation" and partial opening to Western culture and art. Polish architects eagerly returned to the pre-war ideas of modernist architecture, banned so far. They also began to receive from abroad information on recent trends in world architecture, including brutalism. This was reflected in their new projects and buildings.

Thus, brutalism did not reach Poland until the turn of 1950 and 1960. In addition, it often interacted here with other styles. Its impact is visible in various types of Polish buildings, including residential, educational, shopping and assembly buildings. Particularly important examples of brutalist architecture in Poland are: Housing and Service Complex at Grunwaldzki Square in Wrocław (Jadwiga Grabowska-Hawrylak, Zdzisława Kowalski, Włodzimierz Wasilewski), Central Department Store “House of Books – Universus” in Warsaw (Leszek Sołonowicz, Ryszard Lisiewicz, Arkadiusz Sitarski), Forum Hotel in Kraków (Janusz Ingarden), Polonia College Building of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Tomasz Mańkowski, Dariusz Kozłowski).

However, brutalist style was most noticeable in Polish sacral architecture. New churches, according to architects and investors, were to depart from the clichéd buildings of socialist modernism. Brutalist aesthetics provided the opportunity to individualise forms and give them a strong visual expression. Architects of religious buildings took advantage of this. They sought monumental, sculptural forms causing a lot of emotions to create a sense of identity and community among believers. The effects they achieved are presented in the next parts of the article.

2.1. Church of Our Lady the Queen of Poland in Kraków – Nowa Huta
Kraków was a particularly important place for the introduction and development of brutalism in Poland. This city was the former capital of Poland and strong cultural centre in the southern part of the country. After the Second World War, Kraków became also the centre of the avant-garde of Polish architecture. In 1949, the construction of the district called Nowa Huta began in the north-eastern part of the city. The district was designed strictly according to the principles of socialist realism, which of course did not include planning of religious buildings. Nowa Huta was built for employees of a large metallurgical plant and these people felt the lack of a new church for many years. Finally, under pressure from the local community, the authorities issued a building permit for such a facility.

![Figure 1](image-url)  
Figure 1. Wojciech Pietrzyk, Church of Our Lady the Queen of Poland in Kraków – Nowa Huta, 1968-1977.

The Church of Our Lady the Queen of Poland was designed by Wojciech Pietrzyk (figure 1). The construction of the building, commonly known as “Lord's Ark”, was carried out in the years 1968-1977.
The walls of the church are covered with thousands of pebbles embedded in concrete. They were found by children and young people in the nearby fields [5], which perfectly reflects the brutalist idea of “as found”. The bottom of the shell roof was also finished with natural material – pine boards. T. Przemyslaw Szafer wrote about the expressive form of the building: "Oval, liquid, soft, sculptural shapes dominate here. The walls slope inwards..." [6]. Anna Buszko in turn noticed: "This church combines expressionism and symbolism with elements of brutalism and at the same time strongly emphasized patriotism" [7]. Other solutions specific to brutalism are undoubtedly the exposure of structural elements, including the 70-meter high cross, as well as emphasizing the importance of movement by designing, both inside and outside, many levels connected by stairs and ramps. In parish buildings, overscaled reinforced concrete beams stand out. They intersect with each other in a way reminiscent of Japanese brutalist buildings in which the traditional wooden structure has been transposed into a reinforced concrete structure.

2.2. Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen in Kraków

As in communist times it was very difficult to obtain a building permit, architects tried to use it to the maximum. They designed very large, usually two-level churches – divided into lower church (in the basement) and upper church (the bigger one). Next to them they placed another buildings with various accompanying functions – educational, cultural, sports. In this way, entire parish centres were completed "serving the activities of local communities, which soon became an alternative for these communities as well as for artistic and intellectual elites" [8]. Such multifunctional parish centre was built in Kraków in the years 1978-1988. Its main building was the Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen designed by Romuald Loegler and Jacek Czekaj (figure 2). The style of the church is an example of late modernism in which brutalist aesthetics were combined with high-tech elements. Such eclecticism was characteristic of the final phase of brutalism in other countries as well.

![Figure 2. Romuald Loegler, Jacek Czekaj, Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen in Kraków, 1978-1988.](image-url)

The form of the church can be described as a deconstructed concrete cube – broken into smaller fragments. These concrete pieces were bonded together by the long glazing that stretched throughout the building. This deconstruction makes the building dynamic, while the large surfaces of concrete walls give it both rawness and heaviness. Despite the fact that the main axis of the church runs diagonally across the square plan, the main entrance is located in the side facade. This causes the effect of surprise and confusion among users, which was the intention of the architects. The entrance facade was designed differently than the others. The concrete wall undulates here in a very expressive way and the slender
bell tower in the form of a cylinder emerges from it. Basic solids such as cubes and cylinders were elements that many brutalist architects liked to use, for example Louis I. Kahn and Denys Lasdun. Another aspect characteristic of brutalism was recognizing the building as a concrete sculpture and emphasizing elements of pedestrian circulation. The Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen stands on the platform like an exhibit on a pedestal in a museum and also monumental stairs lead to it. The fragmented form of the building is united by the same texture of all facades – béton brut. Two wings of low-rise buildings housing the presbytery, catechetical rooms, cultural center, sports club and rooms of the Nazareth Sisters are connected with the main solid of the church. Between the church and the wings, the architects arranged the courtyard, which is an important place for integration of people.

2.3. Church of St. Michael in Sopot
Leopold Taraszkiewicz was a well-known Polish architect specializing in sacral architecture. He used brutalist style in many churches, sometimes mixing it with other trends. One of them is the Church of St. Michael in Sopot designed together with Waclaw Rembiszewski and built in in the years 1966-1975 (figure 3).

The spatial composition of the form was based on the contrast between the openwork body of the church and the massive belfry tower. This contrast between horizontal and vertical as well as between light and heavy was slightly softened by the uniform colour and texture of the walls. The principle of contrast in juxtaposing solids and elements was often used in brutalist architecture and originated in the works of Le Corbusier, who wrote: “I have decided to make beauty by contrast. I will find its complement and establish a play between crudity and finesse, between the dull and the intense, between precision and accident” [9]. The contrast between light and shadow is also significant. In the Church of St. Michael, it is provided not only by tectonics of façades, but also by a reinforced concrete openwork screen, which is the leitmotif of the entire form. This screen can be compared to the brutalist brise soleils. It covers the front and rear façades and upper parts of the side façades, giving expressive chiaroscuro effects also in the interior. In the side façades, the horizontal strip of the screen forms an oversized quasi-cornice. It is supported by pillars creating different rhythms. It is a reference to the classical architecture, which was invoked by designers of brutalist buildings, especially in the initial phase of the style. From the tradition of classicism, and especially from the works of Andrea Palladio

Figure 3. Leopold Taraszkiewicz, Waclaw Rembiszewski, Church of St. Michael in Sopot, 1966-1975.
[4], they took not only a set of elements that they transformed, but also sensitivity to the texture and “the idea that the building should be virtuous […] and that the building’s meaning should be in itself” [10]. Another brutalist element visible in the church in Sopot is cantilevered, overhanging corner of the building. This kind of solution was peculiar to brutalism in the USA, as exemplified by the corners of the Boston City Hall (Gerhard Kallmann and Michael McKinnell).

2.4. Church of St. Jan Kanty in Poznań
It should be emphasized that the Church of St. Jan Kanty, built in the years 1976-1980, is one of the most representative buildings for brutalism in Poland (figure 4). Its form is very plastic and consists of many highly articulated, sculptural elements. Architect Jan Węclawski used clinker bricks of many shades to obtain the effect of a picturesque texture of walls. In the facades there are also reinforced concrete elements, such as: beams, lintels, balconies, cantilevers supporting bay windows, roofs above the entrances. Particularly characteristic of brutalism is overhanging roof in the shape of an inverted "U". In one of the side facades, the rhythm of bay windows housing confessionals was articulated. This is a clear example of the rule of displaying internal functions in the form of a building.

![Figure 4](image_url)

Figure 4. Jan Węclawski, Church of St. Jan Kanty in Poznań, 1976-1980.

The church and parish buildings were arranged around the half-open courtyard. In this way, creating a central space for social contacts, brutalist building complexes were often organized. The role of a courtyard was even compared to a Greek agora or other ancient plazas [11]. Architects usually emphasized its importance, raising the level of a courtyard above surrounding area, and leading an entrance to it through glamorous stairs. Banham wrote about such arrangements with pathos: “… one riches the court by mounting a broad flight of ceremonial steps (as if to the terraces at Chichen-Itza, for example) and is then confronted with the altar-skylight in a raised court that does not shelter one from the elements so much as offer one to the sky” [4]. The interior of the Church of St. Jan Kanty was also kept in raw aesthetics. It was dominated by structural elements and rough textures. Unfortunately, the original béton brut surfaces were later plastered and painted green.
2.5. Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Łódź

The Church of Our Lady of Sorrows was located in the middle of a housing estate built up with anonymous, repetitive residential buildings constructed in the so-called “large slab technology”. The church designed by Leszek Łukoś and Ludwik Mackiewicz, built in the years 1973-1980, became the spatial and aesthetic dominant of the entire estate (figure 5). Its original sculptural form is a kind of a hallmark that strengthens the sense of community of residents.

![Figure 5. Leszek Łukoś, Ludwik Mackiewicz, Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Łódź, 1973-1980.](image)

The main body of the church, founded on a hexagon, is almost a windowless brick block surrounded by reinforced concrete buttresses. The free-standing belfry tower is expressively shaped and with its form evokes associations with the historic industrial architecture of Łódź. Ordinary, raw materials left unfinished, such as low-quality red brick, concrete with a coarse formwork imprint and patinated copper sheet indicate architects’ inspiration with English brutalism. The use of the most readily available, cheap materials and admiration for craftsmanship confirms that Łukoś and Nowicki were guided by the New Brutalism and its principle of being objective about reality. John Voelcker (one of proponents of the New Brutalism) wrote that this principle leads to a new design method: “It can only be understood as a re-orientation of spirit in which the specialist-architect who aimed at putting the built world into a pre-determined and pre-planned order has been replaced by the man-architect, who is almost passively receptive to the sequence of situations in which he finds himself, and who relies on the social validity of his plastic responses to those situations. A kind of resonator that builds in response to a complicated poly-incidence of conditions. I believe that is what the Smithsons mean when they say it is necessary to create an architecture of reality or that Brutalism attempts to be objective about reality” [12].

2.6. Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Kielce

World-famous brutalist churches inspired many architects in various countries. In the Church of St. Jadwiga the Queen in Kraków (presented in chapter 2.1.) influences of the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp designed by Le Corbusier are quite clear. Władysław Pieńkowski, Marian Szymański and Kinga Pieńkowska-Owsianka – the architects of the Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Kielce (built in the years 1981-1986) – were probably impressed by the Church of San Giovanni Battista designed by Michelucci. In both buildings, the brutalist style was combined with neo-
expressionism, and reinforced concrete structural elements played an important role in both forms. In addition to béton brut texture, brick and stone surfaces were also exposed.

![Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Kielce](image)

**Figure 6.** Władysław Pieńkowski, Marian Szymanowski and Kinga Pieńkowska-Owsińska, Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Kielce, 1981-1986.

The church in Kielce was founded on a plan of a quarter of circle. Also in the architectural form of this building there is large number of circular details and rounded solids (figure 6). Reinforced concrete buttresses are very original and unusual elements with such shapes, designed also to drain water from roofs. The architects used many cantilevered blocks – the largest, almost 30 meters long, is located in the southern facade. Such an expressive solution was characteristic of buildings designed by Władysław Pieńkowski. His churches reflect the tendencies of the late phase of brutalism. Ordinariness and directness were replaced at this time by complexity, exaggeration and picturesque ness. Architects’ task was to evoke people’s emotions, not necessarily pleasant. It should be remembered that Banham, in his definition of brutalist architecture, used the concept of „memorability”, that is the intensive visual impact of the building on man [13]. To describe the features of the Church of St. Joseph the Worker and the late brutalism, one can quote words of Henry-Russell Hitchcock: “…broken silhouettes, uneven sky-lines, masses that were articulated rather than unified, and expressive exposure of individual structural elements, themselves often sculptural rather than mechanistic in character” [14].

3. Results and discussions
It should be emphasized that the impact of brutalism on Polish architecture is most noticeable in religious buildings erected in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Architectural ideas reaching socialist Poland from the Western world were usually not taken in pure form. They mingled with other doctrines, and local conditions left their mark on them. However, referring to the original definition of the brutalist architecture formulated by Banham, it can be stated that the analysed churches meet its three assumptions: “1. Memorability as an Image; 2. Clear exhibition of Structure; 3. Valuation of materials «as found»” [13].

The most significant brutalist features, i.e. those found in each of the examined churches, are presented in chapter 4 as general conclusions. Solutions and elements specific to the brutalist style in the world were further, more detailed research parameters. The results of the research showed that this
solutions and elements do not appear in all the analysed buildings and occur with varying degrees of intensity, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected solutions and attributes of brutalist architecture in the analysed churches.

| Solutions and attributes of brutalist architecture | Church (2.1.) in Nowa Huta | Church (2.2.) in Kraków | Church (2.3.) in Sopot | Church (2.4.) in Poznań | Church (2.5.) in Łódź | Church (2.6.) in Kielce |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Inspirations of vernacular architecture – reinterpretation of rules and forms | + | – | + | + | + | + |
| Inspirations of classical architecture – transformation of historical details and elements | – | + | ++ | – | + | + |
| Exposure of internal functions in the form of a building | – | + | – | ++ | – | ++ |
| Emphasizing the importance of movement and elements of pedestrian circulation | ++ | ++ | – | + | – | + |
| High complexity of architectural form | + | + | – | ++ | + | ++ |
| Surprise and mysteriousness as a factor stimulating users' cognitive curiosity | + | ++ | – | ++ | + | ++ |
| Cantilevered solids, corners and other elements of buildings | + | – | ++ | ++ | + | ++ |
| Creating rhythms on facades by repeating various elements | – | – | ++ | ++ | ++ | + |
| Overscaled and sculptural construction elements | ++ | – | – | + | ++ | ++ |
| Reinforced concrete details, incl. roofs, gargoyles, window frames, *brise soleils* and *ondulatoires* | – | – | ++ | ++ | + | ++ |
| Courtyard as a space for social contacts | + | ++ | – | ++ | – | – |

Intensity of a feature:
- none or minimal
- high
- ++ very high

* The order of the churches in the table according to the chapter numbers: 2.1, 2.2,..., 2.6.

4. Conclusions
Based on the analysis of the religious buildings presented in this paper, it is possible to indicate the main brutalist features characteristic of Polish sacral architecture.

- expressiveness,
- monumentality,
- plasticity,
- sensuality,
- articulation of solids and structural elements,
- strong contrasts,
• chiaroscuro effects,
• admiration for craftsmanship,
• roughness of textures,
• materials “as found”.

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