The Modernist Residential Buildings of Lodz - Tenement Houses

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Abstract. In the history of city construction, the process of previously existing buildings has always taken place. Buildings were always adjusted to the changing utility, as well as technical needs. Inner-city tenement houses erected in the years 1918-1938 became the topic of this article. The residential buildings of Lodz which appeared during the interwar period are still relatively well preserved. These objects are strongly rooted in the city’s current landscape. The images of these buildings are dependent on the awareness and aesthetic sense of their current owners and residents. The discussed structures crystallize the city’s space and builds its identity. The author attempts to show, through particular examples, the changes which are taking place, as well as their influence on their surroundings; she tries to zoom in on their current function and appearance. This paper constitutes a type of a report from own research, based on information collected during filed studies and analyzing available literature.

1. Introduction

The uniqueness of nearly every city is largely determined by its architecture, which often defines its atmosphere. A trait typical of cities is an abundance of architectural forms, layered one after another, created during various times and stylistic periods. This article is an attempt at presenting the heritage of the interwar period architecture shown through chosen projects which were, and still are, tenement houses. Tenement houses play an important role in creating the image and identity of a city. At the beginning of the 20th century the dominant eclectic architecture of the city of Lodz began to give way to a new style, which stepped away from any decorative and embellishing elements.

The First World War ended the period of the city’s most intense development, and caused the fall of the industry, as well as a decrease in the city’s population. Houses and tenement buildings were devoid of sewage systems and running water, which caused the city to be one of the worst in Europe in terms of sanitation and health conditions. For Lodz, the interwar period became a time of catching up with the arrears of the past epoch, stern attempts by the city’s government to make the city more modern and healthier. The city’s authorities began a series of investments which were supposed to meet the most pressing needs of the residents. Among these initiatives was the initiation of the city’s sewage system in 1925, and hospitals and schools began to appear [9]. During this time, the construction of new housing projects began necessary, as well as supplementary construction on previously existent inner-city residential areas. In the 1920’s and 1930’s, modernist forms enter the city, in connection with the functionalist trend.

The term “modernism” has various interpretation and is defined in different ways in reference to literature and artistic disciplines, as well as architecture. Throughout the history and architectural theory of the 20th century, we see terms such as modernism, functionalism, constructivism, new
architecture, and international style appearing. When it comes to architecture, according to professor Justyna Wojtas Swoszowska, “The term modernism is used colloquially to describe a style which tends to go against historicism, aiming to create a new style which propagates simplicity and functionality” [5]. In Lodz newly appearing buildings radically disconnected from any historical references, they preferred functional solutions and simple forms. New technologies were used in their construction. Glass, concrete and iron were the main materials of modernist architecture. The buildings represented simple, cubical forms with large multipartite windows devoid of decorative frames. Ornaments were no longer strived towards. A time of modern design had begun, free from the bonds of historical forms, rigorous rules regarding the creation of a plan. This way of designing strived towards composition and functionality. However, an economic crisis in the years 1929-1933 stalled the development of building construction in the city. It was not until 1935 that Lodz once again went into a new period of positive development. During this time, many luxurious high-standard tenement houses with calm forms were created [9]. At the same time, streamline-style residential buildings were being designed and constructed. According to this style, the corners of buildings or their elements, such as balconies or oriel, had rounded shapes. A soft, wavy line was introduced as a reaction to the edginess of the first phase of modernism. Poland’s independence in 1918 signaled a new phase of development for Lodz. Modernization, as well as improvement of the industry and economy, became the main goals.

The reform program was mainly subject to the rules of building a modern country, equal to other European cities, meeting the needs of the modern man [1]. Modernist architecture which came into being in the first half of the 20th century was based on a new creative rule, which underlined the form, function and construction of a building. Besides the impressive buildings of public use, and residential housing projects, numerous tenement houses began appearing, which still stand out in the architectural landscape of Lodz. They are the ones establishing the city’s architecture, of which chosen examples are the subject of the presented analyses, though it is important to keep in mind that similar buildings in Lodz are far more numerous.

2. Research method
The residential buildings situated in the city center which were erected in the years 1918 – 1938 became the subject of this essay. They constitute an ambiguously classified heritage. On the one hand, they are spoken of as still non-historical buildings, so modern ones. On the other, they are considered – in the opinion of conservators and art historians – to be the legacy of the past generation, and are more often included in conservation efforts.

The goal of this article is to show characteristic traits of the tenement houses which came into being during the discussed period in Lodz. The essay presents only chosen projects which, according to the author, can constitute the most representative elements for the given period, which give evidence of a new stage of the architectural development in inner-city Lodz. The main positive aspect of this architecture is its simplicity, and at the same time, functionality. The article is based in the disciplines of architecture and urban planning, and is a type of report on the topic of chosen tenement houses with a modernizing style, situated in the city center. The research, preceded by an investigation of archival photography as well as literature on the subject, was conducted through the method of observations made during field research, and also based on photographic documentation made by the author of this work.

3. Tenement houses – modernist residential architecture of Lodz
In the 1920’s and 1930’s in Lodz, residential architecture presenting fully modernist characteristics began to appear. Style ordination is one of the superior research goals. An attempt to classify the objects in terms of artistic values is based mostly on the key concepts of “style”, “creativity” and “form”, defined by Władysław Tatarkiewicz: Style (…) is sometimes understood as a group name in the sense of all works (…), but also – and possibly more often – as a name for the characteristics which make these works unique. In aesthetics, creativity is simply the term for creative talent,
therefore a certain property of the mind, while it also means an activity of the mind. Form usually refers not to things themselves, but an arrangement of their parts and their relationship [11].

According to Andrzej Olszewski, modernist architecture – called functionalism by some and constructivism by others, “constitutes a certain percentage of the whole architectural production which fits in the range which is the concept of modern architecture [8]. The expression “historical modernist architecture” may become a point of exit for ample contemplation. The properties of this type of architecture are decided on by traits which are legible at first glance, such as: architectural form, especially including elevation decoration, as well as those which are less visible, but no less significant, such as construction, functionality and technical solutions [3].

The new functions of the city caused Lodz to become a center of economic, social and cultural life of one of Poland’s most industrialized areas. The modernists who worked on Lodz’s architecture considered adequate living conditions a priority. While designing new residential architecture, functional challenges stemming from the needs of an increasing population and a need for life quality improvement were attempted to be met. The villas and tenement houses which were built at the time are enhancing links to the blocks and plazas; they dominate in the spatial arrangement of the city. In order to categorize the discussed buildings with respect to their style as observed in 1918 – 1937, the author considered the following: their erection date, location, the tectonics of their form and the way the elevation was created shaped.

The majority of modernist tenement houses came into being in the inner city, by Piotrkowska street and its surroundings. They were supplemented by the frontages of city architecture. These tenement houses had many common traits. Among them was their four-story height, residential attics, and ground floors which were usually occupied by stores. Most of the modernist tenement houses of Lodz came into being in the 1930’s in the so-called “1937 style”, which appeared as effect of economic growth in Poland which began in the year 1935. In terms of their placement, one can differentiate between two types of tenement houses: some of them are a consistent part of the city’s tissue and fill the street’s facade, while others constitute corner buildings which close off the street. Among them we can find tenement houses with symmetrical facades, as well as ones with asymmetrical facades usually due a rearrangement at ground level, or a shifted gate in reference to the building’s axis. Some of the more interesting examples of tenement houses with symmetrical fronts include buildings such as those at: Piotrkowska 203-205 (figure1, figure 2), Piotrkowska 134 (figure 3, figure 4, figure 5), Kilińskiego 112, Kościuszki 56 or Więckowskiego 17 (figure 6).

Figure 1. Tenement House- Piotrkowska St. 202-205, Lodz

Figure 2. The back elevation of a tenement building - Piotrkowska St. 202-205, Lodz
In the 1880’s, there were two properties at Piotrkowska St. 203-205 which belonged to August Kerpert. In the 1930’s the property was sold, and buildings for the Tomaszow factory of artificial silk. In the front, an impressive tenement house designed by Ignacy Gutman and Ludwik Oli was erected. It consisted of sixteen comfortable apartments. In the courtyard, a second building designed for offices and stockrooms was built. The tenement house was built upon a rectangular base, with a strong avant-corps in the courtyard. The building has a three bay interior and each flat can be accessed through staircases accessible from the gateway. The flats were meant to be inhabited by the company’s shareholders and suppliers [7]. The house is a three-story building with a symmetrical facade and its entrance gate set in the building’s axis, clad with a layer of polished granite, which was meant to underline the high standard of the building’s modernist architecture. The end axes of the front facade we find two rectangular orielis with quadripartite windows divided by black granite pilaster strips. The middle part of the facade has large windows with stone bands. The entire facade has white sandstone cladding. The back elevation was layered with white clinker brick. Above the ground floor, it has prominent projections, which have two balconies each with rounded panels and solid balustrades. In the courtyard, parallel to the front tenement house, based on a rectangle with rounded edges, an annex is situated. This is a one-story building with a flat roof, an entrance in the building’s axis, preceded by a staircase. The facade of the annex is modest, clad with light-colored sandstone panels. It has two rows of single rectangular windows, as well as a high plinth covered with dark granite panels. On the southern wall of the annex building, which is connected to the front buildings, an interesting relief of a grazing Pegasus with lowered wings is present. After the war, this place was the center of education for the Ideological Education for the Polish United Worker’s Party in Lodz. Currently the building is
occupied by “Charlie” - a cinema established in 1994 by Sławomir Fijalkowski [4]. The second tenement house which is worth mentioning is Helmut Schwaltz’s tenement house which was built in 1035, and is situated at Piotrkowska 134. Despite a lack of decorative elements, it maintains basic classical rules. A three-part division is visible: a low part, a developed middle part consisting of four floors, and a crown [2]. This is a five-story tenement house with two four-floor oriel on either end of the building. The facade has five axes, it is symmetrical, topped with an attic which contains the three middle axes. On a plane, the building nears a rectangle with a prominent avant-corps. The interior of the building has a three-bay arrangement, with stores on the ground level and two multi-room living apartments on each of the floors [7]. The back elevation of the tenement house has been connected with two annexes, which have symmetrically spaced balconies of rounded form with metal balustrades. A symmetrical facade may also be seen at the modernist tenement house situated at Więckowskiego 17. This building was erected in the 1930’s, and is a four-story building with a usable attic. It has a five-axis front elevation, with two lateral avant-corps, and balconies of rounded form which come out of them. The windows of the three middle storeys are large, quadripartite, and have no decorative framing. The spaces on ground floor level were designed for services, while residential apartments are placed on the subsequent levels. The second group of tenement buildings showing up in Lodz in the 1920’s and 1930’s are tenement houses with asymmetrical facades. These types of buildings include, among others, buildings at Gdańska 21 (fig.7, fig.8, fig.9), Gdańska 115, Piotrkowska 222 (fig.10) and Piotrkowska 224-226 or Jaracza 82.

Figure 7. Tenement House- Gdańska St. 21, Lodz (City Archives, National Development Bank, archive no 2780 Lodz)

Figure 8. Tenement House- Gdańska St. 21, Lodz

Figure 9. Townhouse plans- Gdańska St. 21, Lodz (Lodz City Archives, National Development Bank, archive no 2780)

Figure 10. Tenement House- Piotrkowska St. 222, Lodz
The tenement building by Gdańska 21 was erected in the 1930’s, and is an example of a tenement house with an asymmetrical, seven-axis facade. It is a building which is in part a five-story building, and in part a three-story building, topped with a flat roof. The ground floor has stores and three small residential apartments which are accessible from the hall and staircase. However, on the remaining levels, three luxurious apartments are present on each level, which are accessible through the staircase which can be found in the central part of the tenement house. The front elevation contains large, multipartite windows and balconies. In the upper part of the building, the balconies are simple and the windows are multipartite; in the lower part the balconies have rounded shapes, and the windows are tripartite. The front facade has been clad with sandstone panels. Another example is the luxurious tenement house by Piotrkowska 222, built in 1936-1937 according to the project by Izydor Feinber. It is a four storey building with a usable attic, with a four-axis facade, the symmetry of which is broken by an entrance gate which is shifted from the building’s axis. Blueprints show a building which is nearly rectangular, has three bays and fits eight apartments [7]. On the building’s ground level, there are three quadripartite windows, and on the side an entrance gate is present, which leads to staircases and halls. The extreme axes of the facade contain two multilateral oriel windows with large rectangular windows. However, in the remaining axes, in the center part of the facade, the windows are rectangular, quadripartite, with vertical grooves in the stone. All the windows have been captured in profiled stone bands. The cornice area has been covered with a concrete attic, which contain six small bipartite windows of the garret. The tenement house’s entire facade has been clad in polished sandstone panels. In Lodz, a large group of tenement houses is made up by the those maintained in the so-called “1937 style”. Usually they are corner houses with a straight, yet rounded, corner. The more interesting examples of tenement houses with straight corners include those situated at: pl. Komuny Paryskiej 1, Pl. Komuny Paryskiej 4 (figure 11), at the corner of Piotrkowska 196 and Wigury, as well as Brzeźna 18 (figure 12). These types of objects include the tenement houses at the corner of Narutowicza 94 and Gdańska 116 and Zamenhofa, and Jaracza 82. All of these properties appeared in the 1930’s, and are multi-story buildings with flat roofs and elevations divided into storeys with rhythmically spaced, large windows with no decorative framing. The blueprints of these buildings show rectangle or L-shaped projections, and the corners are straight walls, sometimes with balconies or multi-story oriel windows. Their facade from the side of the courtyards often have a strong avant-corps, and have balconies with rounded panels.

![Figure 11. Tenement House - Plac Komuny Paryskiej 4, Lodz](image11)

![Figure 12. Tenement House - Brzeźna St. 18, Lodz](image12)

Many tenement houses with a rounded corner were built in Lodz. Some interesting examples of this type are tenements situated at: Mickiewicza 15 and Kościuszki, pl. Komuny Paryskiej 3, at the corner of Piotrkowska 278 and Czerwona (figure13), as well as the tenements by Brzeźna 12 (figure 14), at the corner of Kilifiskiego 82 and Tuwima (figure15), at the corner of Gdańska 44 and Zielona, And the tenement by Narutowicza 67 and Lindleya (figure16, figure17), and at Żeromskiego 21 (figure18).
These are four and five-story buildings with flat roofs with an accentuated ground level, which stands out because of its prominent cornice, or due to the use of different material than the rest of the facade. The corners are usually rounded multi-story oriels with multipartite windows or symmetrically spaced balconies with semicircular panels with iron balustrades. In their elevations, these tenement houses have belts of rhythmically spaced large windows devoid of decorative framing.

Figure 13. Tenement House- Piotrkowska St. 278, Lodz

Figure 14. Tenement House- Brzeźna St. 12, Lodz

Figure 15. Tenement House- Kilińskiego St. 82, Lodz

Figure 16. Tenement House- Narutowicza St. 67, Lodz

Figure 17. The back elevation of a Tenement House- Narutowicza St. 67, Lodz

Figure 18. Tenement House- Żeromskiego St. 21, Lodz
Conclusions
The above mentioned buildings are only a small part of the buildings which came into being in Lodz in the 1920’s and 1930’s. All of them are characterized by modernist traits. One can say that their beauty is in their simplicity. They show certain rules, which can be considered the base for the design and building processes. This would be for example the shaping of the form of the building, or the repetitiveness of certain forms of architectural and construction detail, which would result in a certain formal similarity. However, differences are also visible, ones which may be observed in the facade or the building’s plane. These buildings usually held a simple, geometric form, large windows with no frames, and a flat roof. They were characterized by large, solid surfaces of the facades, mostly maintained in light, pastel colors. In the 1920’s, these buildings received a cubic, simple form, with very modest embellishment, or completely devoid of it. This was the so-called box architecture, surrounded to the function it was supposed to have.

In the 1930’s, oriel and balconies often diversified the facades, along with avant-corps and inter-window surfaces finished with clinker brick. All the parts of the building were equally important, and not just their front facade. These buildings were characterized by harmony and consistency between the composition of the interior of the building, and its exterior form. In the second half of the 1930’s, mainly in the city center, many so-called “luxury tenement houses” are built, which are high-standard buildings which combined high-quality with modernity. These were built with the more affluent members of society, which is why they were better-equipped, and their design, though modest, was usually elegant and used the best materials, such as sandstone or marble cladding, as well as ceramic glaze. In most of the buildings which were built in the discussed period, a clear division into their parts was visible: a lower part, a development in the form of several levels, and a crown.

Tenements usually received symmetrical facades, in which the dominant factor consisting of oriel, avant-corps and balconies, was focused in the center of the building, or the extreme axes of the elevation. The most numerous tenement houses were ones with asymmetrical facades, the symmetry of which was broken by an entrance gate or portal which was shifted from the axis. Tenement house elevations were often clad with sandstone or high-quality plaster, and the surfaces between windows were often finished with clinker brick. These materials were often covered with a dividing mesh meant to imitate a more expensive cladding. At the same time, next to the calm forms of luxurious tenement houses, dynamic forms were being created in buildings which had an appearance that was referred to as the “streamline style”, also called the “1937 style”.

Tenement houses which were built in this style received forms which were enriched with vertical staircase windows and balconies with semi-circular panels and iron balustrades, as well as rounded corners often being multi-story oriel. This style can be deemed elegant, which was characterized by smooth planes, subtle rounding and carefully chosen finishing materials. The architectural details in the residential buildings of this period are limited to a minimum. They harmoniously fill the city’s tissue and constitute interesting links in the frontages of streets. These buildings represent a trend which gives the city a more modern character. The excellent standard of the construction finish and high quality materials used in the making of the mentioned architectural projects add up to buildings that have not lost their value until today. Thanks to the many tenement houses which were built in the 1930’s, downtown Lodz gained a fresh architectural image. Unfortunately, at this moment many tenement buildings are neglected, in need of restoration and renovation, which causes us to not see this architecture as interesting and worth attention. Success will surely be possible by combining the actions of local authorities, and the local community. Because it would be great if the expression of our modernity would be the conservation of urban achievements, and caring for that which the past leaves us.

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