

MODERNISM IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF STATE AND MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS IN WARSAW OF THE 1920s AND 1930s

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Received: 27.08.2009; Revised: 4.09.2009; Accepted: 4.12.2009

Abstract

Warsaw's recovery of its capital status after more than a hundred years, as well as the needs of a metropolis encouraged in the 1920s and 30s the construction of public utility buildings, including many offices of high state and municipal authorities. The new buildings represented many tones of modernism: modernized classicism, structural verticalism, moderate "grey brick" functionalism, puristic avant-garde functionalism, late "streamlined" functionalism, or the "International style". Important to Warsaw architecture was the mutual relationship and fusion of tendencies and streams. The article attempts to distinguish and characterize them, and show on the examples of a number of prominent Warsaw buildings, that the dominating shade of modernism of its public utility buildings of that time was influenced by: the general evolution of modernist forms and the date of construction, hierarchically understood rank and function of the building, the preferences of the commissioning party and the individual evolution of the architects-designers artistic workshops.

Streszczenie

Odzyskana po ponad stoletniej przerwie stołeczna rola Warszawy i potrzeby wielkiego miasta pobudziły intensywne wznoszenie w latach 20. i 30. XX wieku gmachów użyteczności publicznej, w tym liczne siedziby wysokich urzędów państwowych i miejskich. Nowopowstałe budynki tego rodzaju reprezentowały różne odcienie modernizmu: zmodernizowany klasycyzm, strukturalny wertykalizm, umiarkowany funkcjonalizm „szarej cegły”, purystyczny-awangardowy funkcjonalizm, późny funkcjonalizm „opływowy”, „styl międzynarodowy”. Dla architektury Warszawy charakterystyczne było wzajemne oddziaływanie i przenikanie tendencji i nurtów. W artykule podjęta została próba ich wyodrębnienia, scharakteryzowania i wykazania na kilkunastu przykładach wybitnych budowli w Warszawie, że na dominujący odcień modernizmu warszawskich budynków użyteczności publicznej tego czasu wpływ miały: ogólna ewolucja form modernizmu i data powstania, hierarchicznie pojmowana ranga i funkcja obiektów, preferencje zleceniodawcy i indywidualna ewolucja warsztatów twórczych architektów-projektantów.

Keywords: Warsaw; Architecture, Interwar years; Office buildings; Tones of modernism.

1. INTRODUCTION

As yet, there is no generally accepted and established definition of 20th-century modernism, there is an agreement that modernism was related to an attitude that was directed at innovation and distanced itself from the past. However, differences of opinion also concern such a fundamental issue as the time period of modernism [1]. In a wider approach, modernism pervaded various spheres of human thought and activity; in art and architecture being a formation that displayed development analogies to the great styles of

the past. It had a time of syncretic variety and growth, followed by maturity and fullness, with an academic phase of generating laws and rules, and lastly a final eclectic period, the time of rebellion against academician stagnation, ending in deconstruction of the new tradition. From this aspect, postmodernism would be the closing eclectic phase of modernism [2]. However, the very substance of 20th-century modernist approach had inherent distrust of the 19th-century instrument of systematization according to style and questioned its usefulness. Many perceive modernism through a prism of differences with what came later, the opposi-

tion modernism-postmodernism, understood as autonomous creative formations. Whichever option prevails in the future, or another yet, it is important to strive for a better knowledge of 20th century modernism and to organize its symptoms in some order.

The superlative level of reference for symptoms of modernism within the typological group of architectural objects under scrutiny is that of the evolution of creative tendencies within the examined period. Architecture that has been typologically systematized (according to function), either residential or public utility, can be found to bear evidence of most of the tendencies or creative strains/style variations present within the prescribed time period. The differences in intensity may be the result of differing investor's activity. Only to a degree does it depend on individual preferences, also pursuing changes in time. The evolution of the creative workshops of architects was likewise subject to the prevailing influence of the general tendencies.

2. THE STREAMS OF MODERNISM IN WARSAW IN THE LATER HALF OF THE 1920s AND IN THE 1930s. A HIERARCHY OF THE TONES OF MODERNISM AND CONFORMITY TO FUNCTION

In the second half of the 1920s, the ideas and forms of modernism were most coherently and innovatively manifested in the stream of modernist functionalism, which also transformed with the passage of time. It has been assumed that the turning point for its transformation is symbolically the year 1933, because of the striking condensation of changes, as well as events that became important for the modernist movement. 1933 is the year when the modernist constitution was codified in the Athens Charter (published 1943), setting forth the laws and rules of urban planning and modern architecture, and also closing one of the centres of modernist ideology, Bauhaus. It was also a time of political transformation in Germany and Russia that contributed to smothering the architectural avant-garde in these countries.

The phase of modernist functionalism from before 1933 was characterised – in the wake of such artistic trends as cubism and expressionism, among others – by a sculpted approach to architectural forms, chiaroscuro façades with projecting and retracted planes, a functional sectioning of plans from a summary arrangement of building parts to a functionalist synthesis – following the development of skeleton

constructions and building technology. In the sphere of approaches, early functionalism was characterised by a rational attitude to solving architectural problems, positive to application of new achievements in science and social-civilizational progress to architecture, a sense of mission in creating a new environment for humanity as well as education towards a new era. The functionalist avant-garde was negatively disposed to old traditions, national forms and architectural excess which did not have functional justification. The result of these principles and convictions was an architecture of ascetic outlines following the “geometry of a right angle”.

Simultaneously, in the second half of the 1920s and in the early 30s, there were moderately modernistic trends rooted in closer or more distant tradition, which did not discard regional, local and national conventions, but adapted and modernised them.

The moderate “grey brick” modernism, quite widespread in Warsaw, somewhat earlier and more traditional than pure functionalism, was characterised by shapes and brick walls that had clearly obvious references to the brick traditions of architecture in distant northern Europe and, closer to home, to expressionism; it also had an unsophisticated summary composition of views and figures, identified according to their function.

A strong position in the architecture of Warsaw in the later part of the 1920s and early 1930s was held by a moderate modernism that continued the classical tradition in its universal (international and local) national dimension. In this stream, the classical themes underwent simplifications and reductions to a level of modernistically interpreted archetypal forms and basic classic principles.

A variety of modernism with elements of classicism, combining features of classicism and expressionism was structural verticalism, applied often and long in Warsaw. Spectacular evidence of this was the regular rhythm of vertical stripwork bands on façades. They were an echo of the canon of classical harmony and at the same time highlighted in an expressive way the modern features of the building's interior pole frame construction [3].

There is a singular hierarchy of trends and forms in the architecture of Warsaw in the third decade of the 20th century. Modernist classicism was most useful for the representative and prestigious buildings of State authorities, verticalism appeared often in office buildings of higher rank than local, sometimes national, but not of the prestige of the central state

administration offices. Buildings ruled by utilitarianism and economic considerations also fall within the “grey brick” order (schools, hospitals, some residences, production halls etc). Avant-garde functionalism was a progressive trend, but at the time it was still rare in public utility constructions. It was best received in the buildings of central and municipal institutions concerned with modern social infrastructures (telecommunications, press offices, printing shops, laboratories, sport centres, cinemas, office and technology buildings). Modernism and a very narrowly understood modernist functionalism of the second part of the 1920s in Poland remained under the strong influence of German and Dutch architecture.

The later phase of functionalism, after 1933, was characterised by a general propagation of aesthetic solutions close to those elaborated by *Le Corbusier* and the principles which he had formulated as the “Five points towards a new architecture” (buildings lifted off the ground and resting on pilotis, “open plan”, “free façade”, strips of windows, a flat roof with a garden). This became possible due to the advancement of construction technology, popularisation of steel and reinforced concrete frame, curtain walls that were independent of the load-bearing structure, assembled of prefabricated elements. In the architectonic forms this translated into a deviation from “right-angle geometry” to options of flowing planes and curved forms, flat façade walls with horizontal ribbons of integrated windows, or windows arranged among prefabricated cladding slabs or, more often, “sketched” simulations of such slabs on walls faced with stone. This was a new method of expressing modern construction and technology in form and façade, different from the obvious vertical articulation. An important aspect of mature functionalism was to arrange more compact forms on pillars, depart from the purism of the previous phase and bring in play of textures of the cladding materials on façades. The withdrawal of advanced functionalism from the earlier principles of an ideology that had limited support resulted in universal acceptance of this aesthetic and its promotion to the rank of “international style”; and a compromise with severely modernised and monumentalized classic allowed it to assume the position of “universal style”. This was the phase of mature, “classical” fully-blown functionalism.

3. TONES OF MODERNISM ON THE CAPITAL'S LOCAL AND STATE ADMINISTRATION BUILDINGS

Selected Warsaw buildings which house the offices and public institutions of the city and State confirm the application of a majority of the mentioned tones of modernism in various ways and at various times, with exception of the “grey brick” variety, where the capabilities to demonstrate prestige were too modest.

In Warsaw, as the city recovered its capital status in 1918, the needs for architecture appropriate to the functions of the state apparatus were satisfied by adapting historic buildings. New-built, as a priority, from the mid-1920s, offices for the top state authorities, preferred forms of modernist classicism, most useful to express the solemnity and prestige of office, power and continuity of state, as well as other timeless values represented by state institutions.

Most strongly, the classical elements are seen in the buildings of the seats of the state's executive power: the Sejm – the Lower House of Parliament (*Sejm*) and *Ministries* of the Second Republic. Modernist classicist forms are applied in the building of the Sejm, erected in the years 1925-1930 at the address *Wiejska 2/4/6*, to a design by *Kazimierz Skórewicz*. It combined some distant references to the classical tradition in the formal concept that recalled a Roman theatre, and closer ones – to expressionism, to mention the glass tent-shaped roof (Fig. 1) which at night glows with electric light. At the *Ministry for Religious Denominations and Public Education (Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego)* raised in 1925-1930 at *aleja Szucha 25*, architect *Zdzisław Mączyński* achieved modernised classical forms by placing a great systematic arrangement of a pillared



Figure 1.
Arch. Kazimierz Skórewicz, Sejm building, Warsaw, *Wiejska 2/4/6*, 1925-1930. Photo: author, 2009

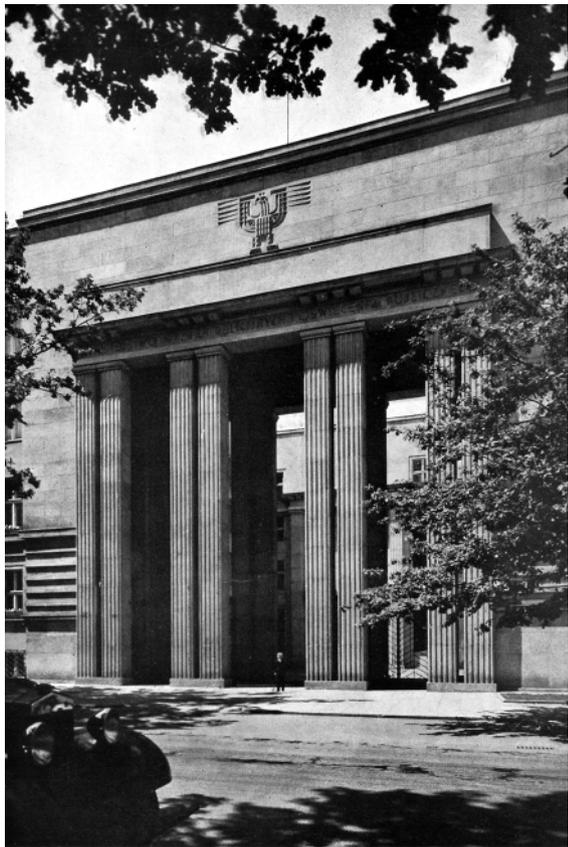


Figure 2.
Arch. Zdzisław Mączyński, building of the Ministry for Religious Denominations and Public Education, Warsaw, aleja Szucha 25, 1925-1930, main entrance portal. After *Architektura i Budownictwo* (thereon A i B), 4-5/1937, p.149. Photo: E. Koch

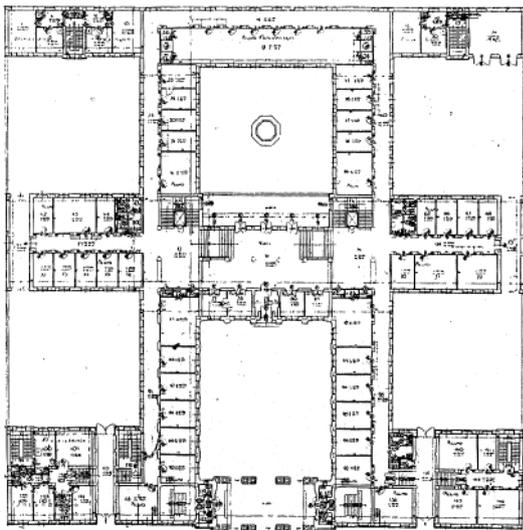


Figure 3.
Arch. Zdzisław Mączyński, building of the Ministry for Religious Denominations and Public Education, Warsaw, aleja Szucha 25, 1925-1930, ground floor layout. After A i B, 8-9/1931, p.283



Figure 4.
Arch. Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Ministry of Transport, Warsaw, Chalubińskiego 4, design 1928, realization 1929-1931. Photo: author

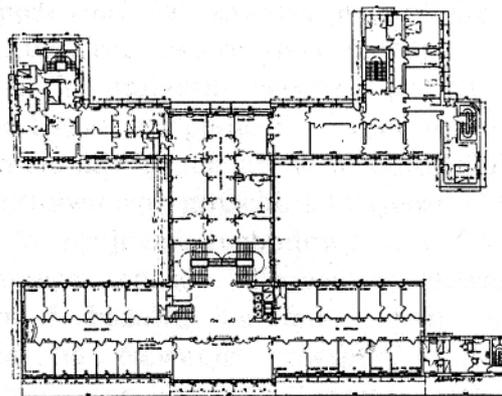


Figure 5.
Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Ministry of Transport, Warsaw, Chalubińskiego 4, ground floor plan design. After A i B, 8/1933, p.234

portico in the stone-clad façade – to a grand monumental effect (Fig. 2), that was compared to the later architecture of Nazi Germany. He designed a model for a Warsaw public office building, functionally developed around inner courtyards, with a demarcat-



Figure 6.
Arch. Tadeusz Leśniewski, building of the Supreme Auditing Chamber, Warsaw, aleja Szucha 23, design 1929, realization in the early 1930s. After A i B, 4-5/1937, p. 148. Photo: E. Koch

ed central axis (Fig. 3).

The classic-inspired “ministerial” façade was furthermore modernised by *Rudolf Świerczyński* in his design for the *Ministry of Transport (Ministerstwo Komunikacji)* at Chałubińskiego 4 (design 1928, built 1929-1931). The inner vertical part – a modernised grand blind portico, becoming a pillared portico on the ground floor – cuts horizontally through grouped windows in a symmetrical façade (Fig. 4). *R. Świerczyński* also modernised the functional plan of the interior, with the representative centrally situated vestibule acting as a hub for vertical and horizontal communication (Fig. 5).

Buildings of national institutions situated in the capital but not having the rank of ministries, placed lower in the hierarchy of prestige and built later, in the next instance, exemplify structural verticalism, more advanced in the modernization of classic concepts than modernist classicism. This interpretation was applied to the scheme of the stone “ministerial façade” of the building of the *Supreme Auditing*



Figure 7.
Arch. Tadeusz Tołwiński, National Museum, Warsaw, Aleje Jerozolimskie 3, partial view. Photo: author

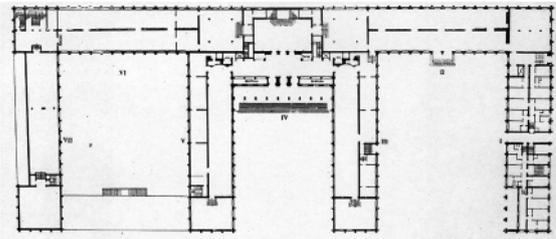


Figure 8.
Arch. Tadeusz Tołwiński, National Museum, Warsaw, Aleje Jerozolimskie 3, design 1929 – ground floor plan. After A i B, 9/1938, p. 272

Chamber (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli Państwa) at Szucha 23, designed by *Tadeusz Leśniewski* in 1929, realized at the beginning of the 30s (Fig. 6).

The pure geometry of form: the main building and perpendicular wings, the severely simplified classicism of shape and composition, the regular rhythm of stripwork on the stone façades, symbolising the novelty of the inner structure, all contributed to the impact and monumental character of the national temple of art: the *National Museum (Muzeum Narodowe)* in Warsaw at Aleje Jerozolimskie 3, built to a design by *Tadeusz Tołwiński* dated 1926, in the years 1927-32 and 1937-38 (Fig. 7, 8).

Vertical rhythms followed the forms of two buildings designed by *Antoni Dygat*, housing two institutions of national importance: the *Polish National Securities Print (Polska Wytwórnia Papierów Wartościowych)* at Sanguszki 1 (design 1925-26, realization 1927-29 – Fig. 9) and the *Military Geographic Institute (Wojskowy Instytut Geograficzny)* at Aleje Jerozolimskie 97 (1933-35, Fig. 10). The later realization date for the second building made its mark with textured effects on the stone cladding and French (Perretian) inspirations. The expression of structural verticalism went particularly well with free-standing



Figure 9.
Arch. Antoni Dygat, building of the National Securities Print, Warsaw, Sanguski 1, design 1925-26, realization 1927-29, original view. After A i B, 3/1931, p.85



Figure 10.
Arch. Antoni Dygat, building of the Military Geographic Institute, Warsaw, Aleje Jerozolimskie 97, 1933-1935. After A i B, 4-5/1937, p. 151. Photo: E. Koch

or corner buildings.

Elements of structural verticalism or modernist classicism found continuation after 1933. We can find them in a symbiosis with functionalism founded on forms and concepts drawn from the works of *Le Corbusier*. The features are present in the free-standing *Naval Command (Kierownictwo Marynarki*

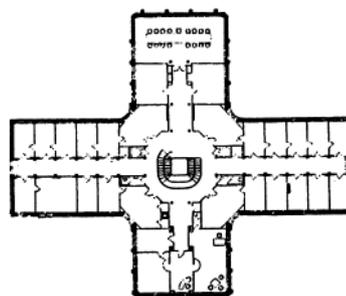


Figure 11.
Arch. Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Navy Command, Warsaw, aleja Żwirki i Wigury 105, 1934-35, design, floor plan. After A i B, 1/1936, p.7



Figure 12.
Arch. Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Navy Command, Warsaw, aleja Żwirki i Wigury 105. Photo: author

Wojennej) building at Żwirki i Wigury 105, erected in 1934-35 to plans by R. Świerczyński dated 1933, designed on the outline of an equal-sided cross with a soft-drawn line to join the wings (Fig. 11). Inspired by the image of Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* high rise blocks, the façade was lined with sandstone and decorated with vertical stripwork which highlighted the skeleton construction (Fig. 12). In the post-war years this aesthetic solution was continued and applied in an original interpretation for so-called "razor-blades" by Marek Leykam.



Figure 13.
Arch. Romuald Gutt, Warsaw Nursing School, Warsaw, Chałubińskiego 2, 1927-28, view of the corner at Koszykowa and Chałubińskiego streets. Photo: author

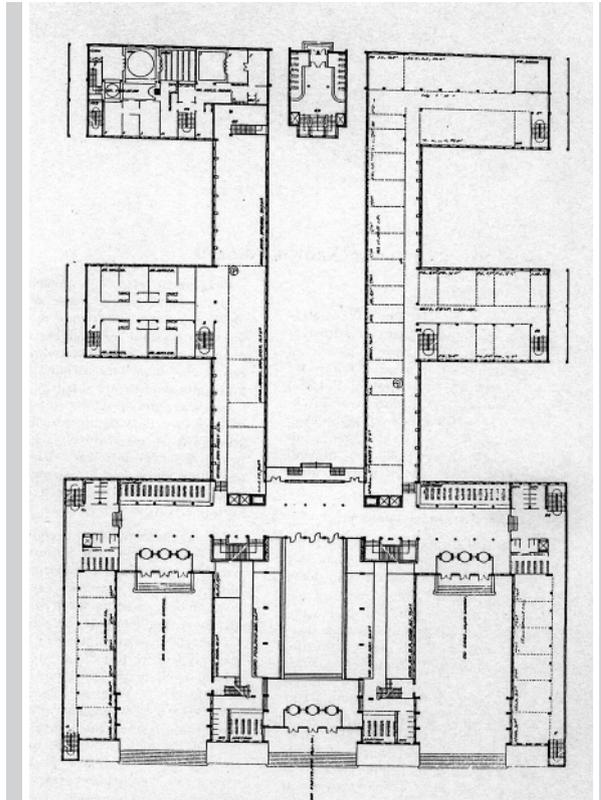


Figure 15.
Arch. Bogdan Pniewski, building of the Borough Courts, Warsaw, Leszno street, nowadays aleja Solidarności 137, 1935-1939, floor plan design. After A i B, 9/1935, p.10



Figure 14.
Arch. Julian Puterman, building of the Telecommunications Office in Warsaw, Nowogrodzka 45. Photo: author

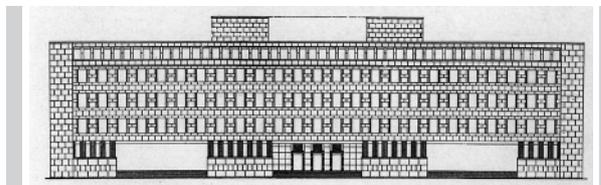


Figure 16.
Arch. Bogdan Pniewski, building of the Borough Courts, Warsaw, Leszno street, nowadays aleja Solidarności 137, 1935-1939, facade design. After A i B, 9/1935, p.12



Figure 17.
Arch. Bogdan Pniewski, building of the Borough Courts, Warsaw, aleja Solidarności 137, 1935-1939. Photo: author

Moderately “functionalism of grey brick” – still bearing the indications of an expressionistic “game” with material and form – was a trend that had small opportunity to express prestige. It found application

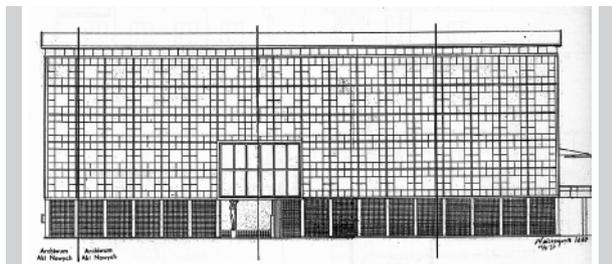


Figure 18.

Arch. Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Patents Office, Warsaw, Aleje Niepodległości 188/192, design 1938, front facade. Source: Central Archive of Modern Records, Ministry of Interior Affairs (thereon AAN, MSW), ref.no. 3622

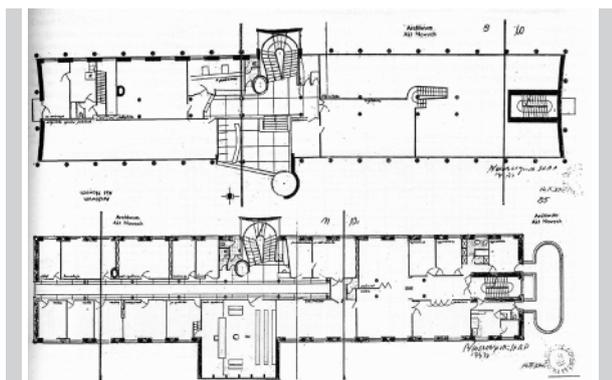


Figure 19.

Arch. Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Patents Office, Warsaw, Aleje Niepodległości 188/192, design 1938, realization 1939-1948, ground floor and 1st floor plans. Source: AAN, MSW, ref. 3622

in designs for public utility buildings and institutions of more general use, particularly schools and hospitals. It was very prominent in the work of *Romuald Gutt*, whose *Warsaw Nursing School (Warszawska Szkoła Pielęgniarek)* at Chałubińskiego 2 is considered to be a leading representative of this trend (Fig. 13).

Puristic, avant-garde functionalism of the early phase was not overly manifested in the architecture of Warsaw institutions. Absent from the architecture of representative state office buildings it emerged in the architecture of office blocks and urban technology. It found a niche in the architecture of post office buildings, when a follower of avant-garde architecture, architect *Julian Puterman* – later *Sadłowski* – took the senior position at the Central Office of Postal Construction (*Centralne Biuro Budownictwa Poczтового*) organized at the *Post and Telegraphs Ministry (Ministerstwo Poczty i Telegrafów)* in 1927. He is the author of the *Telecommunications Office (Urząd Telekomunikacyjny)* at Nowogrodzka 45,



Figure 20.

Arch. Rudolf Świerczyński, building of the Patents Office in Warsaw, (1938-49) front view – entrance with cariatid figure. Photo: author

built in 1928-1934 (Fig. 14). The designer of the steel construction was *Stefan Bryła*. The sculpture-like arrangement of interlocking forms with a corner treated negatively, contrasts of horizontal and vertical groups of windows, seems inspired by German and Dutch architecture of at period in time. The unit headed by *J. Puterman* produced many functionalist designs for post office buildings built all over Poland. An example of a later phase of functionalism in Warsaw postal architecture was the *Central Postal Station (Centralny Dworzec Pocztowy)* at Chmielna 75, built in 1936-1939 and designed by *Józef Szanajca* as a complex of buildings combining the functions of administration, transport and customs, partly erected on pillars, with free spaces, horizontal bands of windows and cylindrical ramps to “soften” the effect of the whole [4].

An eminent work of advanced functionalism combined with monumental expression drawing on classical sources is the building of the *Borough Courts (Sądy Grodzkie)* at Solidarności 137 (Fig. 15) built in 1935-1939 to a design by *Bohdan Pniowski*, a declared supporter of the idea that Polish culture has its roots in the Mediterranean classical tradition. The massive



Figure 21.
Arch. R. Świerczyński, building of the Patents Office (1938-49), back view, extension after a design by A. Fajans (1999-2000). Photo: author



Figure 22.
Arch. Stanisław Brukalski, building of the General Staff of the Polish Army, ul. Rakowiecka 4a (1938-39), fragment. Photo: author

frontage, with immense buttresses framing the entrances, at the same time (as paradoxical as this may seem considering the overall impression of bulk), in accordance with the “raised off the ground” principle, has flat walls, horizontal window rhythms which however do not form ribbons but are mounted in-between carefully arranged stone slabs (Fig. 16). At this stage of functionalism the regular pattern of the slabs took over the role of a sign-symbol for the modern construction hidden behind the “free façade”. The symmetry of the façade, embellished with an original pattern of spaces, a “frieze” of crowded openings on the top floor, the motto *SPRAWIEDLIWOŚĆ JEST OSTOJĄ MOCY I TRWAŁOŚCI RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ* (“Justice is the mainstay of the power and continuity of the Republic”) chiselled in Roman lettering, the quiet order of composition and form are rooted in the classicist tradition, proper for the severe gravity of a temple of law (Fig. 17).

A brief presentation of the tones of modernism in the architecture of state and municipal offices in Warsaw cannot be without two more examples of advanced functionalism: the *Patents Office* (*Urząd Patentowy*) at

Niepodległości 188/192 designed by R. Świerczyński in 1938 and realized 1939-48 (reorganized and rebuilt in 1999-2000 to a plan by *Andrzej Fajans*) as well as the building of the *General Staff of the Polish Army* (*Dowództwo Sztabu Generalnego*) at Rakowiecka 4a, built in 1938-39 to a design by *Stanisław Brukalski*. The design by R. Świerczyński was evidence of further adaptation of *Le Corbusier's* forms and rules. The free-standing construction was placed on pillars exposed against a retracted wall of glass bricks (instead of an open space). The regular placement of windows arranged between the pattern of stone wall slabs was a novel way of approaching the aesthetic problem of the relation between a modern inside construction and external wall (Fig. 18). The architect also introduced soft and rounded elements: an oval roof form, a Le Corbusieran concave back wall to the staircase, with a compelling cylinder on the front to shield the vestibule and support a bay window, complete with caryatid, here representing reminiscences of classicism (Fig. 19, 20, 21). In the career

of this architect of older generation at was as far as he went in his acceptance of functionalism and reduction of classicism. It was different with *S. Brukalski* who arrived at a symbiosis of functionalism and classicism, leaving behind his earlier avant-garde purism. The pillared building of the Command was closed by the architect with two symmetrical wings that have horizontal bands of windows, while in the inner corners of the complex he situated cylindrical towers with staircases, where the waving walls are covered with an expressive stone texture (Fig. 22).

These two designs are evidence that functionalism had settled and matured in the version that came to be known in Poland as “the style of 1937” [5], proving its triumph and inclusion of other trends, with particular regard to classicism, not that of the distant past but the new one which constituted the classic/academic phase of functionalism together with its universal form patterns and rules. The capacious formula of “soft” international functionalism synthesized earlier trends, intersected on one plane the evolutions of the creative workshops of architects pursuing various directions, developed universal forms which incorporated all functional types of architecture. If functionalism can be acknowledged as a mature form of modernism, then the technically and technologically advanced, aesthetically consistent phase of the “international style” and “style of 1937” seems to be the peak of functionalism.

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