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## Burdensome legacy of sports and tourism facilities from the time of the Polish People's Republic

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**Abstract.** “Unwanted child”, “ill born”, “concrete monsters”, “tendentious” – architecture created during the previous regime in Poland has been called many names. It has been accused of faulty craftsmanship, failed stylistics and dehumanized scale of settlements. However, this seems like throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as the designers of the post-war Modernism era took great care both of the stylistics and the functionality of their designs. Even despite having to design in extremely difficult political and economic circumstances. There were shortages of qualified labour and construction materials, and political propaganda interference on a daily basis. But the architects collaborated with painters and sculptors, and at the same time, observed the CIAM guidelines, producing some of the most imaginative, celebrated and humane examples of architecture in modern-day Poland. There is nothing to be said but praise about architecture for leisure and recreation in the form of the PTTK Tourist House in Płock designed by Marek Leykam, *Ustroń-Zawodzie* district by Aleksander Franta and Henryk Buszko or the “Warszawianka” sports centre designed by Jerzy Sołtan and Wojciech Fangor. Architecture is the art most susceptible to ideology, as it cannot be realized without a patron whose interests it serves, and recreational architecture bears the mark of the era of its creation. Sports and recreation were promoted in the People's Republic of Poland. The employing institution financed employees' holidays, and therefore, many of the companies were encouraged to build their own holiday resorts. For the most part, these objects were state funded and subsidized when they operated. The large scale complexes, like *Ustroń-Zawodzie*, were intended for collective leisure of workers originating from that same industry branch. They were the means of propaganda and social engineering aimed at consolidating and showing appreciation for specific social classes. For the less well-off and those who preferred closer contact with the nature *Polish Tourism and Sightseeing Society* offered accommodations in hostels. As state owned, they were granted priority locations, like the abovementioned Leykam's hostel in Płock on the Vistula embankment or the Miramar Hostel in Sopot designed by Stanisław Sowiński on the front shoreline of the Baltic Sea. The architects chose the functionalist approach and stylistics that allowed them more creative freedom. The authorities gladly welcomed modernist aesthetics. It fitted the ideology of a new forward-looking society, free of historic constraints. The transformation after the year 1989 significantly affected all aspects of architecture. Many leisure objects and resorts fell into disrepair without funding. Some of them were purchased by private investors and adapted to the contemporary needs with disregard for the original stylistics or simply torn down. On many occasions, the razing of modernist buildings has been met with applause from the general public, despite the efforts of art historians and architects who strive to educate on the merits of the post-war Modernism and preserve the outstanding examples. These objects constitute the so-called “dissonant heritage”,



as despite being propagandist, they are also a significant part of a modernizing movement in a country worn out by war and prime examples of the style.

## 1. Introduction

Post-war modernism in Poland begins during the so called “Gomulka’s thaw” between 1956 and 1970. However, it is a restart after a period of stylistic reversion to historicism, which was imposed on designers in countries under Soviet supremacy, when in most western countries modernism was taken up after the war as means of reconstruction. While post-war modernism was developing in Europe, the National Party Council of Architects, which took place in June 1949, adopted socialist realism as the official architectural style. This meeting was symptomatic, as it highlighted how deeply the politics pervaded all aspects of creative life. After this point, bypassing this rule became virtually impossible, as also in 1949, the process of dissolving private architectural studios was completed. The architectural design was taken over by state-owned studios, collectively called “Miastoprojekt”, which by cooperating with engineers from the building services, were able to comprehensively manage construction projects and thus monopolize the market. Non-conforming designs simply were not authorized and did not receive funding. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the restrictions of the Stalinist period began to be lifted. However, policymakers still engineered all aspects of social life by means of a centrally planned economy e.g. by imposing housing standards, typification of construction and furnishing elements as well as development limits on certain categories of construction. The National Council of Architects organized by Association of Polish Architects (SARP) in 1956 was hardly liberating, as it only changed one official aesthetic to another. It was decided that socialist realism was to be abandoned in favour of the international style. Therefore, one could say that one top-down, doctrine-driven approach was replaced by another one. Architectural design studios were still centralized and the State was, in fact, the only investor. Modernism gained a firm foothold in People’s Republics, as ideologically it aimed at improving the living conditions of the disadvantaged groups in society as evidenced by the 1933 Athens Charter. However, while modernism sought to define the minimum standards required for physical well-being, socialism considered these so called “housing normatives” as the maximum that citizens could expect [1].

Nevertheless, the Gomulka Period was a time of relative aesthetic freedom, which coincided with a construction boom. This heightened construction activity was mostly motivated by social engineering. To thrive, the new policymakers stimulated the creation of a new social class. It was to be recruited from the working masses, which were to receive special state favours against their past archetypal handlers – the landlords and factory owners. One of these favours was the provision of housing for the working intelligentsia and workers. Because of the extent of war damage in urban areas and the influx of people, who were encouraged to move from rural areas to cities, the policies regarding urban development had to change: instead of building monumental architecture, it was necessary to expand the housing supply [2]. In the difficult market conditions of a centrally planned economy, with limited access to construction materials, the housing supply had to be correlated with low-cost manufacturing [3]. In order to bring down the costs of construction projects and quickly expand the housing market, the designers were directed towards typification, prefabrication and increased height of buildings. Housing estates were composed of identical buildings around nucleuses made of low-rise pavilions with services. Instead of using brick constructions, which required skilled craftsmen, the designers turned to prefabricated systems, e.g. the so-called “H frame” or “Żerańska brick” that accelerated construction and lowered its cost [4]. The result was homogeneity of architecture.

## 2. Architecture for sports and recreation

However, these constraints did not apply to all branches of civil engineering and architecture. Industrialization of the country became the basic direction of economic development thanks to which Poland was meant to progress. Manual workers became an asset, whose needs needed to be catered to. During the “thaw”, as was promised by the authorities in 1956, the new phenomenon of a “free-time

society” appeared. As a result, cafes, bars, sport and recreation centres materialized, especially in estates linked to the key branch of the national economy, the heavy industry [5]. Leisure, sports and recreation became the means of pampering the workers. Incidentally, it was the commercial, sports and industrial facilities that, due to their inherent functionalism, were a niche for nonconformist designers, even in the times of strictest Socialist Realism doctrine [6]. As a result, post-war modernism in Poland was divided between two extremities. The first were mainly “industrialized” low-cost recurrent residential buildings deprived of decoration, based on typical designs and typified construction, produced in so called “house factories”. The second was the “prestigious” buildings, mostly competition entries, where architects could demonstrate their capabilities and utilize the newest construction [7]. As opposed to the typified housing districts, the holiday homes, spas and leisure resorts were usually designed individually and with great care both to the design and its correlation with the surroundings.

### 2.1. Sports facilities

Individual monumental buildings, e.g. sports facilities, are a reflection of the true quality of the architecture of those times. “The 10th-Anniversary Stadium” and the “Warszawianka” Stadium, were presented in a jubilee article entitled “50 Years of Architecture in Independent Poland”, published in 1968 in issue no. 11 of the “Architecture” magazine, which focused on the greatest achievements in Polish architecture in the bygone half-century (1918-1968). “The 10th Anniversary Stadium” was a landmark building and an expression of a new direction in which Polish architecture was headed. It was meant to encourage sports education in the war-ridden society. Warsaw, as the capital city, became the location of the largest sports investments during the People’s Republic of Poland. Despite shortages in the supply of materials and lack of qualified workforce, the July Manifesto 10th Anniversary Stadiums’ inauguration was scheduled for opening on its name day, July 22, 1955, since its conception in 1953. Nevertheless, even such tendentiousness did not influence the design by Zbigniew Ihnatowicz, which bore no traces of mandatory historicism. The shape of the stadium was strictly subordinated to the function and based on rational geometry to optimize visibility from various points of the audience [8].

The “Warszawianka” Stadium is a unique example of a large scale organic functionalism sports facility. The concept of Warsaw Sports Centre for Cooperative Organizations: the SKS “Warszawianka” was created in the Department of Art and Research architectural studio. Originally called the Experimental Department, it functioned at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw since 1954. The first stage of construction was completed in accordance with the original plan and included the following elements of the complex: the main stadium with 7,000 seats, training grounds with a sports pavilion, a tennis court with an umpire building and spectator stands, and an artificial mound created between the tennis complex and the main stadium. The project combined urban, architectural, artistic and landscaping elements. The “Warszawianka” was built on the Mokotow slope and it is this drop in elevation that mostly influenced its shape. The architects who designed it tried to take advantage of the landscape values offered by this location. The arrangement of the entire sports centre has the form of a series of terraces with a view of the old Vistula riverbed. Each of the terraces performed different functions while the picturesque embankments and slopes were also very practical: they protected the players against unfavourable atmospheric conditions, e.g. tennis players against excessive sunlight or wind gusts. This sequence of terraces made it necessary to reinforce the terrain by erecting multiple retaining walls, a fact that was even reflected in the configuration of the design team. Although the concept was designed by Jerzy Sołtan and Zbigniew Ihnatowicz, the team also comprised Lech Tomaszewski, who was responsible for the retaining walls. The system of prefabricated elements, which was designed exclusively for this project, had several advantages that reflected the availability of construction materials at the time. First, it did not require casting concrete at the construction site (and thus did not require formwork which was expensive and often impossible to implement due to the shortage of boards for the formwork), and second, did not require reinforcement (which solved the

problem of steel shortage). Concrete profiles functioned as a form of “reinforcement” for the native soil and, because they were hollow, they did not block the runoff rainwater.(Figure 1)

Due to the scale of the facility, the architectural expression was achieved mainly with gauge and terrain tectonics; the structure served as sculpting material complemented by *l'espace indicible*, i.e. Le Corbusier's ineffable space. The spatial form resulted from the crossing over of art and technology and also as the joint effort of the architect, constructor and artist, which is evidenced by the fact that Wojciech Fangor was on the team. Sculptural craftsmanship is also visible in the umpire building. Its geometrically sculpted shape matches the neo-expressionist facade. The building, whose body is clearly inspired by the work of Le Corbusier, e.g. by the structure of the *Notre Dame du Haut* chapel designed in 1950 for Ronchamp (the designer of the pavilion, Jerzy Sołtan, worked with Le Corbusier in Paris for four years). The design was highly praised by architects. The facility appealed to the citizens of the capital so much that it won the first prize in the poll for the best construction project of 1972, the so-called “Mister Warsaw” contest organized by “*Życie Warszawy*” newspaper.



**Figure 1.** A dedicated type of hollow bricks was designed for retaining walls

## 2.2. Company leisure centres

In an effort to build political capital within the society, the rulers granted the working class favours traditionally reserved for the elite. Vacationing ceased to be the domain of the rich and became available to all. Due to “iron curtain” all national borders were closed. Therefore, all holidays had to take place domestically. Bolesław Bierut symbolically handed over the exclusive pre-war presidential resort in Spała for the needs of the working population [9]. The employing institution financed employees' holidays and therefore many of the companies were encouraged to build their own resorts. They were the means of propaganda and social engineering aimed at consolidating and showing appreciation for specific social classes. For the most part, these objects were state funded and subsidized when they operated. After a decade of arduous reconstruction, the “thaw” brought about a boom in construction. So many of the new-build investments were holiday resorts, that the 1960s were deemed “the decade of leisure construction” [10]. The large scale complexes, like Ustroń-Zawodzie, were intended for collective leisure of workers originating from that same industry branch.

The example of town Ustronie is symptomatic. Before the war, it was promoted to become the next ultimate spa for the white-collars. This idea stuck and sometime after the war, it was taken up, this



time as the location for the blue-collar leisure destination. Henryk Buszko and Aleksander Franta designed the holiday house for Polish Teachers' Union in Ustronie-Jaszowiec, which was realized in the years 1960-63. (Figure 2) The design resulted straight from the surrounding landscape. It envelopes the slope with a terraced layout and unfolds along the contour line of the hill [11]. Low-key, ascetic aesthetics and alternating rows of windows and horizontal lines of ceiling endowed the design with organicity.



**Figure 2.** Ustronie-Jaszowiec, Teachers' Union holiday House envelops the slope

The leisure complex that Henryk Buszko, Aleksander Franta and Tadeusz Szewczyk started building in Ustroń-Zawodzie in 1967 was meant for the workers originating from Silesia, the predominantly mining district. The area of 200 hectares was to accommodate ca. 7,000 guests in medical and spa facilities and additional company recreation centres. It was a huge complex and it was meant to bring the local economy a boost, but it was also a burden to the local community and landscape if treated schematically. Thankfully, the architects approached the subject responsibly. The authors avoided creating ample dehumanized gauges in favour of smaller tectonically varied buildings. They proposed to create the company resort out of 28 identical truncated 8-story prisms. (Figure 3) Triangular shapes were scattered along the slopes of the mound "Równica" in an effort to reference boulders protruding from a mountainside [12]. To break the monotony resulting from the need to use large-scale elements, balconies and loggias were built to serve as quasi-tectonic decorations, which added depth to the facades, sculpted the walls. In the best of modernist traditions, the north faces had stepped elevations. The zigzagged facade was further sculpted with lineal balconies, unevenly spread on various levels, to cause variations in shading. The south faces were outfitted with continuous open-air galleries, which cast a deep shadow and protected the rooms from overheating. At the northernmost extremity of the complex, the architects proposed a large unit, much like the *Unité d'habitation* with *pilotis* and terrace on the roof in the stylistics of the *streamline moderne*. This district made the cut to "20th-Century World Architecture: The Phaidon Atlas" which best describes its architectural values.



**Figure 3.** Ustroń-Zawodzie truncated-prism buildings of the holiday resort

Similarly, streamline aesthetics is used in the health resort built in Krynica-Zdrój according to the design by Mieczysław Gliszczński in the years 1968-72. The shape of the building and its functional solutions derived from the terrain shape. The building stands on an N-S axis and was designed along the slope of a hill. It is approached approximately in its midriff. Above this “zero level” are five floors of guest rooms; stacked one over the other and tapering from bottom to top. Below “zero level” the building expands in a plan to accommodate three high stories containing a common-room, dining area, pool and treatment rooms [13]. Long continuous lines of windows alternating with horizontal strips of white balcony bannisters make it resemble from a distance a cruise ship on a rough sea.

Holiday home “Harnaś” in Bukowina Tatrzańska was constructed during the “thaw” as well. Designed in 1962 by Leszek Filar and Jerzy Pilitowski the building was perched latitudinally on a steep slope [14]. It stands on a dais created by a glazed *pilotis*, almost hovering above the mound. Above it, three stories of guest rooms overlook the mountainous panorama through southern elevation outfitted with loggias: preventing excessive insolation of the rooms but offering recreational space. Because the levels slightly cascade the whole building seems to lean backwards, faintly off balance. The balconies on the east side, however, remain horizontal, giving the elevation a wing-like appearance. (Figure 4)

### 2.3. Hostels and tourist houses

For the less well-off and those who preferred closer contact with the nature Polish Tourism and Sightseeing Society (PTTK) offered accommodations in hostels. As state owned, they were granted priority locations, like the Marek Leykam’s hostel in Płock on the Vistula embankment or the “Miramar” hostel in Sopot designed by Stanisław Sowiński on the front shoreline of the Baltic Sea. The buildings were usually petite: two-story at most, offering mostly provisions and place for rest, with limited accommodations. The architects chose the functionalist approach and stylistics that allowed them more creative freedom. The authorities gladly welcomed modernist aesthetics. It fitted the ideology of a new forward-looking society, free of historic constraints.





**Figure 4.** “Harnaś” hostel with a *pilotis* and wing-like balconies

An example of this trend is the PTTK Tourist House in Płock designed by Marek Leykam, which was completed in 1962 and is distinguished by its interesting form and its visual union with the surroundings. The building, opened in 1961, consisted of three stories: a technical basement, elevated ground floor with common rooms and dining areas, and first floor with bedrooms. The topmost floor overhung the rest of the building, which protected the terraces accessible from the dining areas against unfavourable weather conditions. The top facades were expressionist in design. The first floor, in the shape of a squashed hexagon, was placed on top of a pyramid-shaped ground floor. The rhythm of the longer façade is produced by transverse structural walls and structural ribs – nicknamed “razor blades” that are characteristic of Leykam’s work [15].

Similar constructivist, brutalist forms were used by Stanisław Sowiński in his “Miramar” hostel on the Baltic Sea. It was a rigorously functionalist object built of reinforced concrete. Its purpose and use determined the design. On the street side, it could be approached by a long flight of steps. The upper floor protruded significantly outside the ground floor creating a sort of a porch around the building. It stood on a slight mound on the front shoreline and therefore had an unobscured view of the sea. It was covered with a butterfly roof so that the upper floor, which housed the restaurant, had a tall panoramic window. (Figure 5) On the side of the street, a corresponding window was shaded with concrete vertical ribs.

#### 2.4. Leisure in the city

The “thaw” meant more shopping activity and socializing. This resulted in the evolution of spaces for leisure in the cities. The downtown complex of the so called “Eastern Wall” in Warsaw is an example of such space and it falls short neither with regard to its layout nor with regard to its program. The complex stands along the east frontage of the busy Marszałkowska Street. The frontage of the street comprises of three 3-story department stores that overhang a promenade. Behind and parallel to them are alternating 11 and 25-story apartment blocks. The key feature, however, is the internal pedestrian zone (known as the “Downtown Passage”). The promenade was placed between the commercial

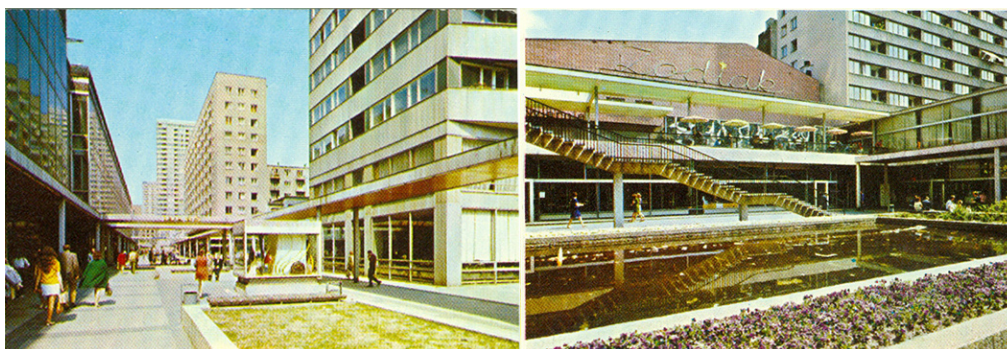


buildings and a residential district thus becoming a transitional, recreational area. However, it was surrounded on all sides by high-build and therefore seemed ill-disposed for leisure purposes. Therefore, the designers introduced street furniture to humanize the scale. Other types of decorations were developed in consultation with artists, e.g. socles made of pebbles and mosaics on street furniture that complemented the space. The low-rise elements which pedestrians directly interacted with, i.e. the pergola railings, pavilions with food services, display windows, fountains, benches and banks of flowers - drew the attention of pedestrians away from the high-rise buildings in the background and gave the passage a sense of intimacy, creating the perfect conditions for socializing and quasi *flaneurial* strolls. (Figure 6) The scale of the high-rise buildings was only visible from a distance. To make it easier for pedestrians to navigate the area, signs with names of each adjacent store (“Wars”, “Sawa”, and “Junior”) were placed on pergola railings. The most important, however, were the centre-forming facilities, built between residential buildings, along the pedestrian zone, but not directly in it, such as the “Relaks” cinema and the “Zodiak” cafe, etc.



**Figure 5.** “Miramar” hostel made the best of the view with a panoramic window to the sea

The “Zodiak” pavilion designed by Jan Bogusławski and Bohdan Gniewiewski was built in 1968. The two-story building originally housed a diner. It stood against the blank wall of the adjacent building, which only emphasized the cafe’s light-weight frame structure with a translucent facade spanning two floors. The glazed ground floor was undercut to create a small overhang that protected customers from unfavourable weather conditions. A roofed terrace on the first floor was accessible via an external openwork staircase directly from a small city square in front of the cafe. The terrace was decorated with a mosaic of broken glass. Owing to the street furniture and other enhancements, the passage at the back of the department stores attracted crowds and “engaged them” for a longer period of time, thus becoming a place for meetings and recreation, as evidenced by numerous photos.



**Figure 6.** Street furniture turned the “Downtown Passage” into a place of leisure and recreation

### 3. Conclusion

The transformation after the year 1989 significantly affected all aspects of architecture. Many leisure objects and resorts fell into disrepair without funding. Some of them were purchased by private investors and adapted to contemporary needs with disregard for the original stylistics or simply torn down. On many occasions, the razing of modernist buildings has been met with applause from the general public, despite the efforts of art historians and architects who strive to educate on the merits of post-war Modernism and preserve the outstanding examples [16]. These objects constitute the so-called “dissonant heritage”, as despite being propagandist, they are also a significant part of a modernizing movement in a country worn out by war and prime examples of the style.

Contemporary fortunes of the abovementioned designs cover the whole spectrum of possible attitudes. “The 10th-Anniversary Stadium” quickly became obsolete and degraded slowly unfit for hosting any sports events. In 1989 it was leased to a company, which reimagined it as a general market and in 2008 it was torn down. Today there is another stadium in its place. Since the 1990s, the “Warszawianka” sports complex has been neglected. The land was divided between several leaseholders. Sports facilities have been rebuilt, and the neglected spectator stands deteriorated. Today, the expressive and well-designed composition is unintelligible. The Ustroń-Zawodzie district was also divided between several proprietors and today the state of the different buildings vary from perfectly restored condition to a ruin. “Harnaś” hostel was aptly refurbished and is now a luxury hotel, but “Miramar” was demolished. The PTTK hostel in Płock was sold to a hotelier who expanded the building with no regard for its provenience. It was only after the refurbishing in 2018 that the conservator inscribed the remaining original parts of the building, like the foundations, the staircase, the ceilings in the heritage register. The “Eastern Wall” has also lost its original shape. It too was not considered a consistent complex and some of its elements have been demolished and replaced with a new architecture. In the 21st century, the department stores were extended upwards, which distorted their scale and shape. The “Zodiak” bar was demolished and rebuilt as a promotional pavilion for SARP. Warsaw authorities will use it primarily to promote new urban investments. The renovation of the pedestrian passageway amounted to removing the street furniture: the pergola, flowerbeds, ponds and display cabinets. After the railings were removed, the view was opened to the high-rise apartment buildings, which made the passage lined with grey stone resemble a canyon. Today, it is only used for quick commuting and does not engage the crowds.

The Polish post-war modernism is currently at its most vulnerable. The value of objects from that period remains for the most part unrecognized. It results from a common aversion to the harsh aesthetics of untreated concrete and glass, which characterize late modernism in the People’s Republic of Poland. This stylistic is also often accused of “ungraceful ageing”. It has been associated with faulty craftsmanship and dehumanized scale of settlements. However, examples show that the designers took great care both of the stylistics and the functionality of their designs. It is the textbook example of a “dissonant heritage” [17]. The lack of acceptance for buildings erected during the Polish People’s Republic as well as the consent for such buildings to deteriorate is largely a consequence of how society perceives the ideology connected with the times in which they were built. In addition, architecture-wise speaking, those times are mainly associated with cheap, typified housing developments that became popular in the 1960s and spread throughout the cities of all sizes in the next decade or so. Only recently have architecture historians noticed these late-modern works and there is still no set method for their description, categorization or evaluation [18]. Therefore, it is paramount that the general public is made aware that apart from the standardized housing districts, especially the 1960s abound with pioneering, as for local conditions, ambitious designs in those areas in which ideological control was less strict. And one of those areas was the leisure and sports facilities design. The creative freedom that the designers experienced allowed them to bridge the gap caused by the years of strict social realism, which stifled modernism in Poland. They were the means of artistic modernization of a country made backward by a totalitarian regime. A method should swiftly be

developed for evaluation, regeneration and inscription of late-modernist designs, or else we'll be left with cases like the tourist hostel in Płock or worse: with just the memories and postcards of glorious examples of architecture. The leisure and sports facilities expedite the regeneration, as recreation is always in demand, as exemplified by "Harnaś" hostel. Therefore, these objects are a good way to start a widespread support for nobilitation of the post-war modernism.

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