



The New Europe

Ingarden & Ewy' Architekci, Polish Pavilion, Expo 2005, Aichi, Japan
View of entrance detail: glass, wickerwork and steel, meticulously constructed
yet quite poetic.



New Polish Architecture – Seeking to Establish Order?

Poland is a 'shifting country'. In the postwar era it shifted geographically – 300 kilometres (186 miles) to the west – and since 1989 it has been undergoing enormous political and economic transformations. It is one of the leading ex-Soviet bloc economies. Such huge changes, however, come at a price. The combined expiration of a comprehensive planning system and excessive bureaucracy provides difficult and uncertain conditions for architects. **Marta A Urbańska** explains how a generation of young, enterprising Polish architects have equipped themselves to deal with this 'quicksand-like situation' by becoming great improvisers and jacks of all trades, as savvy about development, planning and finance as they are about design.

The so-called New Europe (the very term sounds like a coinage of norm-loving Brussels bureaucrats, or did it hail from across the Atlantic?), the former eastern bloc countries recently admitted into the European Union (EU) probably still appear as interlopers in the family of the original member states. The new additions are commonly viewed as interesting yet rather poor relations, whose ways are not quite suited to those of, what is to the newcomers, an all too established society.

This stereotype, a legacy of the bad old days of the iron fist of communist Big Brother and Iron Curtain repressions, does not really equate with Poland's present-day reality: the country has been not only at the forefront of political reform, but the leader of economic regeneration since 1989.

In tandem with Poland's burgeoning transformation into a 21st-century democracy, international interest in the country is growing, and tourists of every level of demeanour and income now flock here, mostly, of course, to visit its incredibly preserved historic cities. So, are the Poles to be viewed as noble savages finally relieved from oppression, or simply as arrivistes? The emerging and fascinating new Polish architecture, designed to respond to the immediate needs of rebuilding the country, but also inextricably linked to issues of cultural identity, provides a few useful answers.

Even though this magazine is devoted to recent architectural events, it is impossible to imagine the absurdly difficult conditions and constraints to which present-day Polish architecture is subject without referring to the past and its consequences. In the West, where architecture is increasingly self-referential, and the degree of abstraction is high and the taste educated, such obsession with context, both the historical and the physical, may seem excessive. However, as architecture is a political art, it is still marked in Poland by the country's turbulent history. The golden age of Poland lasted from the late 15th to the early 18th centuries and saw the construction of magnificent vernacular,

Renaissance and Baroque architecture – Catholic and Orthodox churches, synagogues, castles, palaces, ideal cities, manors – set in the vast expanses of the old Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, once the largest state in Europe. Out of some 100,000 manors, once the most pronounced architectural features of the Old Polish landscape, a mere 2000 have survived into the 21st century, half of them in ruins. Since Poland's loss of independence at the close of the 18th century at the hands of the Russians, Prussians and Austrians, who mercilessly looted the country, liberty and cultural identity have been crucial issues for Poles.

The 19th century saw national uprisings, cruel repression, and the breaking of laws that were imposed on a proud nation by the occupying powers. Needless to say, this legacy of contempt for the law has a lot to do with the present state of affairs. The full independence of Poland – won by the sabre during the First World War – lasted for only 18 years. Nevertheless, prewar Modern Polish architecture is splendid and provides an unceasing source of inspiration for today's architects. The Second World War deprived the state of half its territory, and deprived us of 6 million citizens and two-thirds of our cultural heritage, including the total destruction of Warsaw. The loss of the prewar generation of intelligentsia, who fell prey to both the Nazi and the Soviet occupations, haunts the state of Poland to this day, as do the territorial changes and enforced exodus. Poland is, according to my favourite definition, a shifting country – it shifted 300 kilometres (186 miles) to the west, forfeiting the fine cities of Lvov and Vilna – and the resulting loss and deep rifts are still evident. The dreary communist regime, although much more lax than in the Soviet Union itself, was no friend to any tradition, to say the least.

Has the country retained some of its cultural identity? That is the question. And our young architects, busy with construction, what are they looking for in their projects? Are



Ingarden & Ewy' Architekci, Polish Pavilion, Expo 2005, Aichi, Japan

The pavilion as the logo of Poland: the metaphorical combination of recent technologies and ancient craftsmanship, two-dimensionally bent steel and wickerwork, glass and the music of Chopin, all capturing the Polish spirit, proved to be a great success in Japan.

they endeavouring to find a pragmatic solution to the immediate problems of their respective sites, starting from the most basic needs, such as building essentials like petrol stations or modern industrial plants? Are they seeking national styles, international styles, to exhibit a quality of wit, or are they engaged in a serious attempt to endow their new buildings with poetic expression? How do they deal with the conspicuous changes to every aspect of life in Poland and the raging chaos manifest in the spatial disorder?

Poorly enforced and thought-out laws and a lack of imagination on the part of local administrations, both state and regional, result in a lack of valid spatial planning. The old plans expired by law in the year 2000. Only some 15 per cent of Poland is covered by valid plans; in large cities, like historic Kraków, the figure amounts to a meagre 5 per cent. Faced with the absence of valid plans, which otherwise entail laborious and extensive preparatory work, approval by vote and adoption as local law, the architecture departments of communes and towns are issuing permits based on the so-called 'law of the good neighbourhood'. This 'Bandaïd'

approach refers to analyses of the immediate surroundings and is not only time-consuming, but also devoid of broader spatial perspective. Obtaining a building permit is a process of veritable martyrdom, for both architect and client, and may take up to two years after the appropriate papers have been filed. Excessive bureaucracy and the lack of cash in society as a whole create a rather messy picture. In addition, there is no aid in the form of billions in hard currency, or regular maintenance of the infrastructure, both of which are commonplace immediately to the west.

Shall we, in the words of the Polish saying, sit and weep aloud then? Let me refer you to one German example, albeit a rather mythical one: that of a *Lügebaron*, or the notorious but charming liar Baron von Münchhausen. He famously saved himself from drowning in a swamp by pulling himself up by his own pigtail. Why the analogy? In the words of the jazzy duo Przemio Łukasik and Łukasz Zagala, founders of medusa group, one of the trendiest architectural offices in Poland: 'The profession of architect has undergone ... a major change. We are not just architects in the strict sense anymore; we're

also becoming graphic designers, developers, and creators ... [The field] is very broad, very flexible and requires of us a totally new approach ... we have often had to find a site, and then a way of financing a project we dream about. Then we have to find an investor, a client and actually, it is only at the very end that we get a chance to design it. It's a kind of paradox, but this is exactly the situation we have to live in. Well, we're not complaining too much about this situation.'¹

Architect Zbigniew Maćków adds humbly: 'We have the ambition to be an ordinary, average practice that solves everyday problems, and architecture is the last of these problems ... the legal problems, ownership issues, plans and such like. If we're lucky enough ... to design a building in the end, we're happy.' This epitomises the condition of architects here, at least the situation for young architects. In fact, the need to engage on so many fronts is also a source of strength; fighting the daily obstacles, contradictions, deficits and absurdities requires lots of inventiveness, flexibility and that old Polish quality – the ability to improvise.

Instead of describing high-powered practices, like APA Stefan Kurylowicz & Associates and JEMS, or Romuald Loegler, who build huge, fine and sleek commercial and public buildings, I have chosen to present the younger generation here. All the architects showcased are under 50, and most of them under 40. They mainly studied in Poland, but many of them, typically for the enterprising Poles, either continued their education, or worked, abroad: in Holland, France or even Japan. Their modesty might be excessive, as in the case of medusa group, Maćków Pracownia Projektowa and KWK Promes architekci – three of the talented architectural practices that have recently emerged in Poland – but they are

building architecture by every available means, even radical ones. They are based in Silesia, the industrial, or postindustrial region that is full of disused coal mines, old manufacturing plants, prefab blocks, old Prussian architecture and has an unemployment rate of nearly 20 per cent.

Dealing with the raw context is what matters for all of them, as is the case of the Kraków-based practices of Biuro Projektów Lewicki Łatak and Ingarden & Ewy'. In fact, as Poles are very sociable and love to talk, the projects presented below seem to be as eloquent about the context as the architects themselves. The variety of their commissions is typical, ranging from single-family houses to state buildings. From small to large scale, architects have to try to make it, usually starting with small private commissions, progressing to designing housing for developers (recently a booming trade), and finally advancing to commissions given by the public purse – communes and the regional and state administrations. These last usually prove to be the most complicated due to both legal and budgetary constraints, a situation that is certainly expected to improve with the hoped-for arrival of large funds from the EU coffers. Whether the administration is ready for them – and is prepared to spend them on quality architecture – is another matter. Big corporate commissions are rather a rarity in these architects' circles.

The first project, and one that is already quite famous, is the Bolko Loft, Łukasik's own house, an extremely low-cost conversion of an elevated former lamp depot for the now defunct coal mine-cum-steel mill in Bytom. Unbelievable but true – yet typical of the absurd conditions here – miners had to climb up in order to get their lamps before descending again to the mine itself. The works bore the proud name



medusa group, Bolko Loft, Kruszcowa Street, Bytom, 2003
medusa group partner Przemek Łukasik converted this derelict mine-lamp depot into his own house – as witty as it is unexpected. View of the stairs and the former coal-mine tower.



Maćków Pracownia Projektowa, Faculty of Law and Administration, Wrocław University, 2002

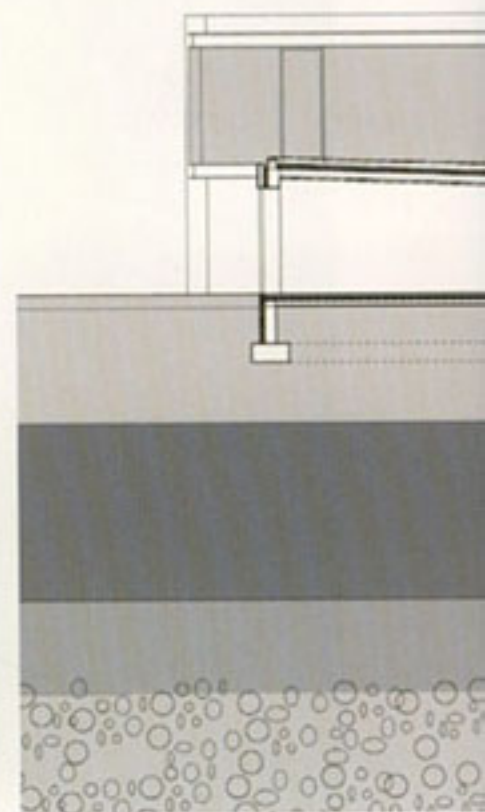
Left: Side elevation showing the sober, Modernist face clad in travertine. Right: The airy and glazed interior includes a piazza in front of a Baroque church.

'White Eagle'. Łukasik acquired the derelict depot, on eight reinforced concrete legs, in 2001, exposed the steel structure, deliberately left its grey industrial tones, added the bathroom and a dressing room in red and set off to live there with his family two years later. In the meantime, medusa group has been involved in the conversion of numerous industrial buildings in Upper Silesia, as well as with witty designs such as a table without legs, an award-winning object promoting social interaction during your lunch or coffee break. If you leave your table companion, the coffee will inevitably spill!

In a similar vein, Maćków Pracownia Projektowa, despite the understated approach of its principal, is rebuilding the small industrial town of Siechnice near Wrocław in Lower Silesia with considerable success. Projects are funded by the

regional government, but are also supported by enthusiasts in various central offices. Maćków looks on his work as a great adventure: 'But actually, it's not architecture that is most important here. What is most important is the fascinating process and adventure that come from the fast development of Siechnice, of its infrastructure, based on purely human enthusiasm and the desire to tidy up the surroundings. At the beginning, it was a terribly neglected area ... cowsheds, stables ... These were replaced by a sports hall, and the wave of fascination that it started soon generated new ideas: to build a stadium, games fields and a number of similar facilities. People got high, so to speak, and started to extract money from various institutions: Lotto games, the Central Sports Office and such like.'

KWK Promes architekci, Silesian Soil House, Katowice, 2002
Stunning consequence: from tectonic shift in Silesian soil to a house.



The architects design both spatial plans and architectural volumes, truly like the famed Modernists, from a teaspoon to a town. Their inspiration is the local Expressionist buildings left by the disciples of Max Berg. Maćków admires the geometry, discipline and craftsmanship of 1920s architecture and applies these principles in his own work, and also to those buildings completed elsewhere, such as his impressive new Faculty of Law and Administration that faces the Baroque complex of Wrocław University.

Next come the cases of architecture both rigorously logical and poetically metaphoric. The first of these is also located, one might even say embedded, in Silesia. Robert Konieczny, the kwk Promes architekci partner (and the second half of Marlena Wolnik-Konieczny) says: 'We designed the Silesian Soil House in 2000. It is located near Katowice, on a beautiful site, which, however, had one drawback: fourth category mining damage, involving the possibility of tectonic shifts ... Then someone had the idea of making the roof ... touch the ground, making it possible to walk from the upper floor directly onto the garden ... so that it looked like an element emerging from the ground, prompting an association with the geological result of tectonic uplift, which was actually the main problem of the site. Subsequently, the design began to "align itself" on its own. A ribbon emerging from the ground became its main motif, going around the perimeter of the grey cuboid solids, tying in with the cube-shaped houses in the neighbourhood.'

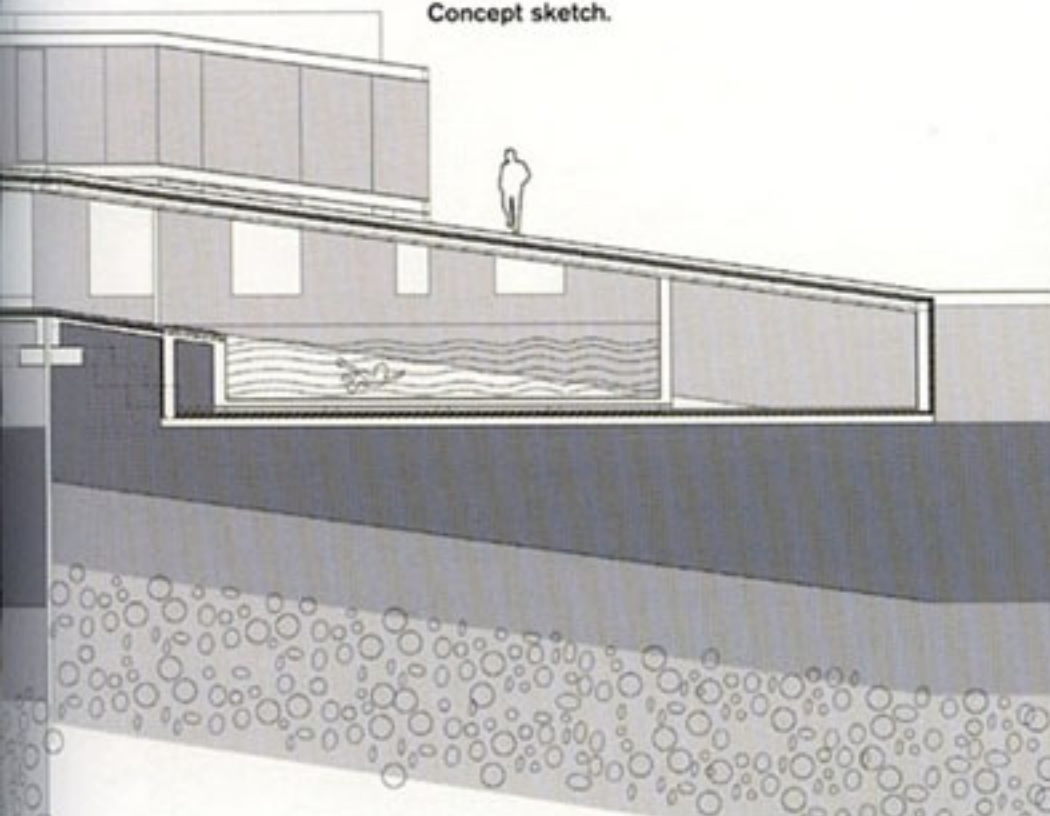
But there is no perfect happiness, as the Eastern saying has it: the architects were hamstrung by their own mistake, forgetting in their sketches about the landings in the ramp, and only after a month and a half, when 'the client was

starting to get a little nervous', did they come up with an experimental solution: a ramp with bent planes on its course. The last, but not the least experimental, house in kwk's programme is the recently completed Aatrium House in Opole. It has a geometry that is both rigid and literally as twisted as the name, as well as the tallest window panes (5.5 metres/18 feet) in Poland, which were set in place by hand. The office is keenly interested in innovative, geometrical models of residential spaces.

Similar qualities – intellectual, rational or even mathematical – are also highly esteemed in Kraków, at least in the two interesting young architectural practices there. One of them is Biuro Projektów Lewicki Łatak. Its architects have worked together for 10 years, recently successfully managing the jump from smaller commissions to larger public projects, a transition that inevitably involves larger complications, as was the case with their competition entry for the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (2004). This venerable institution, founded in 1364, is currently building its new campus in a picturesque setting on the outskirts of Kraków. The long, linear building, designed with mathematical precision, followed both an axis joining the historic city centre with the campus, and the slight slope of the terrain. Rumour has it that the length of corridors rising as ramps proved to be a bone of contention for the former rector of the university (regrettably a professor of literature rather than a pure scientist), who finally rejected the award-winning project despite the clarity of the mathematical analogy.

On a totally different agenda, one that looks to Poland's past as opposed to its future, in an act of commemoration of

Concept sketch.



Views of the interior with the innovative ramp, which is the main element of the house.





Biuro Projektów Lewicki Łatak, Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, competition entry (1st prize), 2004
Perspective hovering above the grass.



Biuro Projektów Lewicki Łatak, New Concord Square (Square of the Heroes of the Ghetto), Kraków, competition entry (1st prize), 2004
Under construction: night view. Overscale chairs are situated on the former central square of the ghetto, as a mute expression of the absence of their owners who were deported to Nazi death camps.

the dark side of the country's history, the tragedy of the Jewish Ghetto in Kraków has finally achieved its richly deserved material commemoration. The competition to design the memorial was won in 2003 and is currently under construction, commissioned by the City of Kraków. The rising surface of the New Concord Square, or the Jewish Ghetto Heroes Square, will be paved with cobblestones. The overscale metal chairs, 'both traditional and ahistoric', as Lewicki observes, will be set on it as a reminder of the furniture stacked there by the inhabitants of the ghetto, who were dragged by the Nazis to the concentration camps. This mute expression of absence has the potential to become a true architectural monument, despite the absence of overtly dramatic gestures.

Another poetic architectural monument, even if an ephemeral one, was constructed in 2005 by the office of Ingarden & Ewy'. The brilliant and eye-catching Polish Pavilion for Expo 2005 in Aichi, Japan, has proved a great success (and certainly not just because of the beer on offer

courtesy of the sponsoring brewery). Krzysztof Ingarden assisted Arata Isozaki in the construction of the Centre for Japanese Art and Technology 'Manggha' in Kraków in the early 1990s. His ties with Japan include the design of the Polish Embassy in Tokyo and the School of Japanese Language in Kraków. In the Polish Pavilion, the architecture of Ingarden & Ewy', usually informed, Minimalist and elegant, attained the heights of metaphor. This was achieved by a highly inventive response to the guidelines of the Polish Chamber of Commerce: to illustrate the themes of the music of Chopin and the salt mine in Wieliczka! The most interesting element is, according to Ingarden, the elevation. 'It was supposed to show an affinity with the Polish landscape, and thus symbolically relate to Chopin's music ... The [universal Polish] association of Chopin's music with the Mazovian landscape and the willows – provided an impulse to look for a method to use willow withes to form the elevation of the building. Wicker (*Salix* Sp.), being a variety of willow, proved a perfect material for this purpose. Namely, when

woven, it is susceptible to spatial forming; it is light, cheap, and it also ties in with the Polish tradition of arts and crafts.'

The bent steel frames for wicker were designed using the most advanced CAD techniques. 'It is a unique combination of "high-tech" design methods with "low-tech" production,' says Ingarden. Thus the cutting-edge Western technology and precision construction methods joined with traditional vernacular craftsmanship and materials. Wickerwork has been known here since the dawn of time, while 3-D modelling arrived only relatively recently. This situation mirrors that of the state of Poland itself, aspiring to the highest achievements in industry, the arts and sciences, while simultaneously battling the lows of inadequate infrastructure and acute underfunding, more than a dozen years after the heroic Lech Wałęsa proudly announced the construction 'of a second Japan' in Poland, signalling the green light for rapid technological progress!

Apropos Japan. In professional circles there is a growing interest in recent Polish architecture, especially since the organisation of the international exhibition '3-2-1: New Architecture in Japan and Poland' (curators: Krzysztof Ingarden, the man whose brainchild it was, and Dorota Leśniak). The exhibition toured Europe, or rather Old Europe, to considerable acclaim, and even received plaudits in China's *World Architecture* magazine. And talking of the Far East, it is

pertinent to recall here that Maciej Nowicki, author of the once famous *Raleigh Arena*, wrote his final letter from India (where he was working on the Chandigarh project before his tragic and untimely death in 1950). Under the influence of oriental wisdom a Romantic idealist, like most Old School Poles, he maintained that architects should not behave like fools with an attachment to material things, but rather that they should seek to establish order in the world. Whether this is feasible for architecture is first and foremost a very material thing, and whether his younger compatriots will succeed in establishing any order amid raging chaos remains to be seen. Perhaps one should aim to posit a clearer goal. Poland is a rather unpredictable country, as are the Poles themselves. We hope to navigate the chaos we have inherited, to rebuild our country, to raise architectural culture to a higher level in line with the achievements of ... the young architectural practices whose work I have described above. Time, architecture's best critic, will certainly reveal what we have done to our space – and whether we have succeeded in rising to the challenge that we were bequeathed. ▮

Note

1. All quotations are from Magdalena Poprawska and Marta A Urbańska (eds), *Kierunki/Directions: Seminar Accompanying the 3-2-1 Exhibition*, trans Jerzy Juruś, Centre of Japanese Art & Technology 'Manggha' (Kraków), 2005, courtesy of the publisher.



Ingarden & Ewy' Architekci, School of Japanese Language, Kraków, 2004
Night view of the Minimalist, elegant project against the background of the Manggha Centre designed by Arata Isozaki (with Krzysztof Ingarden).