

A Quest for Identity

An Interview with award-winning architect Krzysztof Ingarden

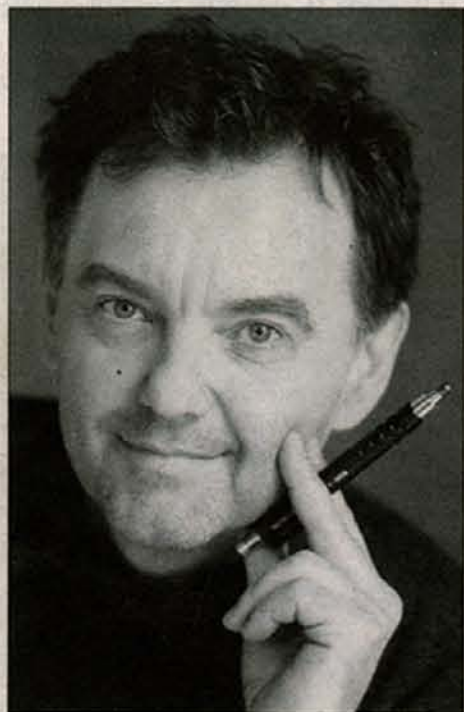


Wyspiański 2000 Pavilion / courtesy of Ingarden & Ewy Architekci

In June this year, the Association of Polish Architects (SARP), the Chamber of Architects and the City of Krakow, together with newspaper Dziennik Polski, announced the winner of a new competition for the title of Cracovian architect of the year. Here, winner Krzysztof Ingarden reflects on the challenges of his profession in today's Poland.

Krakow Post: It seems that since the advent of Modernism, architects have often struggled to win public approval - at least in their own lifetimes. Was it gratifying to be recognised in this way?

Krzysztof Ingarden: You are right. I was quite surprised to receive the accolade, because the



Krzysztof Ingarden / photo A. Świetlik

prize was related to the Wyspiański 2000 Pavilion, which was chosen by the public as the best building created in Krakow over the last twenty years. So that was of course very nice from one perspective, but also quite shocking. When we designed the pavilion with Jacek Ewy - and the design and construction took us ten years - at that time, it was extremely hard to convince people, local authorities and the lobby of historians in Krakow, that this modern building could indeed be built in the very centre of Krakow.

We were, I would say, absolutely lucky that it was finally built after a long period of public discussion about whether it could or could not be done. When the building opened there was a big misunderstanding as to its form. And some people were of the opinion that it clashed with the historical context. They didn't understand the building, they didn't know why we did things a certain way - what was the message, why we used custom-made ceramic tiles on the façade, and what the role of the building was within the old city. The building was controversial. And this presented a clear explanation to me: it meant that if the building was not equally well perceived by all, then it had an original and intriguing new form and message. If we talk about novelties in architectural language, it's obvious that not everyone will understand them - some time must pass before these new messages become regarded by the public as self-explanatory.

Now, two years after the opening, suddenly the building is well accepted. So that quick change was shocking for me. But maybe it also means that we took the right path in our analysis of the historical context and of the role which this modern building should play in the city.

KP: Do you think that generally speaking, Poles afford architects the same prestige that composers and painters enjoy?

KI: Absolutely not, because I think that people tend to hold our profession responsible for everything bad that happened in Polish cities and villages since the Second World War, whilst at the same time there is a lack of appreciation for the good examples of architecture and city planning that were created.

First of all, we should say that architects do not play any leading role in the creation of our cities. They cannot work without clients - public and private. There are political and business forces which create the "frame of the game", which is being played in public spaces. Of course, after certain decisions are made, architects then play a role. However, it was not a group of professional architects who decided that huge, prefabricated and oppressive housing projects and factories were to be built in the sixties and seventies. That kind of building typology created the current image of many cities and suburbs, an image which endures until today. The legacy of the sixties and seventies has been a very bad living environment for many people. So these were political decisions, and of course economic decisions to a certain extent.

Various kinds of problems piled up one on top of the other, creating bad circumstances for Polish architects to work in. But what kind of work were Polish architects actually able to do within the system? First of all, the group of professionals was small. Owing to the war, a lot of the leading intelligentsia - including architects - died, or in later years left the country. The majority of those who remained had to adapt their talents to the limiting system of state architectural offices and the poor level of the construction industry. So suddenly, the tradition of the free profession was endangered. And the tradition is very important, because architectural skills and thinking require direct transmission of experience from great masters and teachers to the younger gen-

eration. And there was not much of a chance for the younger generation to get inspiration from the works and ideas of the older generation - and even to oppose these ideas in their own practice. A kind of creative struggle between generations is always very important.

KP: Like Seville, Bruges and Florence, Krakow is a city with a remarkably well-preserved historical fabric. Do you think that it is important for so-called heritage cities to commission modern buildings?

KI: It is very important. Because no city is ever a completed city. A city lives with each new generation. There is no reason not to build a contemporary building. Of course, this regards buildings which have some relationship with this continuity - buildings which have some meaning for the city within this historical period of development. Of course, it's very difficult to build in a city so defined by history as Krakow and the cities you mentioned. But it is necessary to understand this continuity, and to try to find our generation's place within this heritage.

KP: Rem Koolhaas is reputed to have said "screw the context". Judging by your handling of the Wyspiański Pavilion, you don't entirely agree?

KI: Well, Rem Koolhaas, and figures such as Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind et cetera, these are architects who, to use Isosaki's phrase, "surf the tsunami of globalism". From that perspective, it is I think impossible to regard context as something interesting. The goal of Globalism is not to understand context, but to maximise the commercial effect, the quick and spectacular effect which pushes the wave further. A work of architecture - likewise a work of art - is treated in this global space as a commodity; everything is commercialised.

KP: Krakow has for a long time needed a conference centre. I understand that the work planned will be one of the largest single commissions for the city since the National Museum was built before the war. Could you tell us a little about the project?

KI: This type of enterprise, near to the Vistula River boulevard and the Manggha Museum, will be extremely significant, because it will encourage people to go beyond the boulevard - to go to the other side of the river.

It is composed of three different heights. The lowest part, the foyer, faces the river, so it has a harmonious relationship with the riverbank. It will be about 16 metres high. From this foyer, people will be able to see the whole panorama of the Old City. It's a fantastic panorama, not accessible to the public at the moment. And this was one of the most important things that we wanted to create in this building.

The form of the building gets higher and higher behind the foyer, which is logical if we know the function. The building will incorporate three halls: the largest, for about 2000 people, will be devoted to big conferences and symphonic concerts. The medium-sized hall (600 seats) will also have a congressional function, but it will be a more multi-functional space, including theatre

and chamber music, but also banquets and business fairs, because the floor is adjustable - we can create one big flat floor there. And then the third hall is for 300 people, also a multi-functional space, very good for small theatrical productions. It's located near to the conference rooms, so together with the Conference Centre, when we open all the movable walls, it can create about 1,100 square metres of exhibition space.

KP: When Poland led the anti-communist revolution of 1989, the country was experiencing 650 percent inflation. Even here in Krakow, we can see that many historical districts were almost collapsing. What have been the main problems faced by Polish architects over the last 20 years?

KI: Well, at that time, two problems occurred. One problem was that Poland was lacking financial resources to invest in the renovation of those districts that you mentioned. Polish capitalism started without capital. There was also the question of how to renovate and improve the living conditions of people living in housing estates from the sixties. So you can say that we were going through a kind of crisis. Because the state wasn't investing in this anymore, and it was too early for private investors to have emerged.

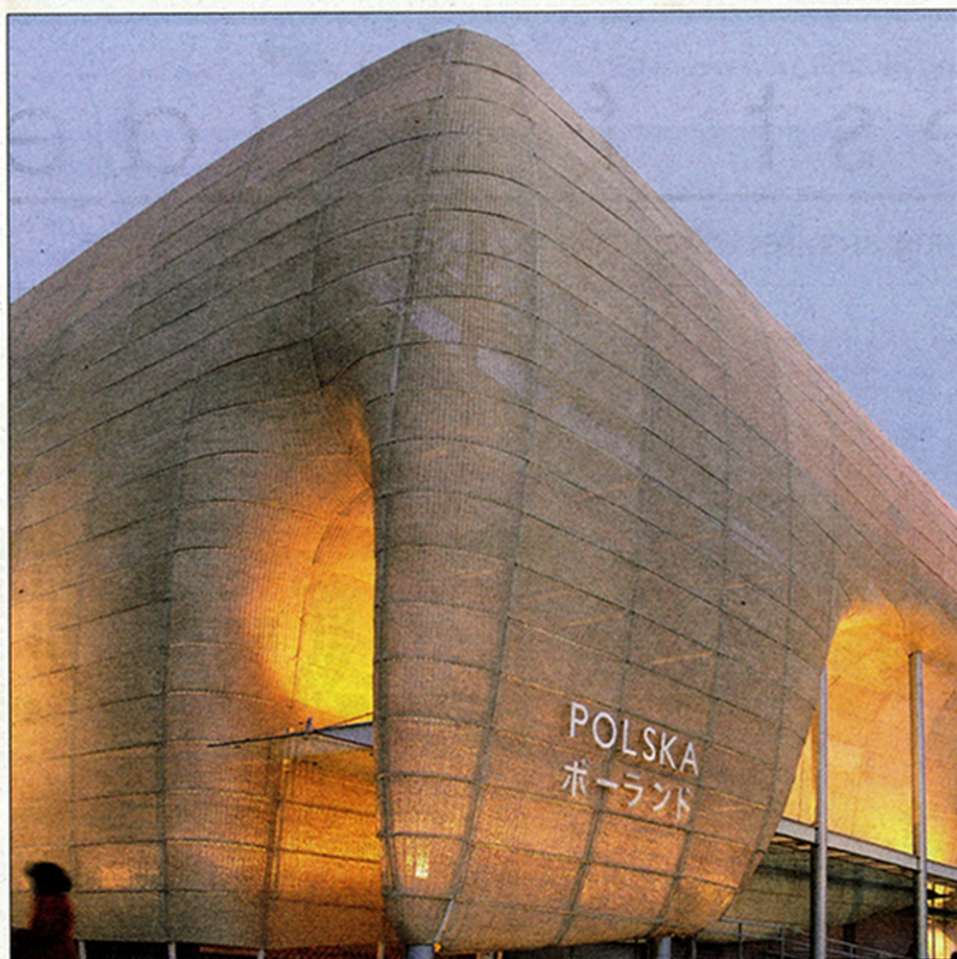
Polish cities were lacking infrastructure, they were lacking good roads, gas stations, cheap hotels, supermarkets - they lacked basic modern functions. Therefore, the cities' focus was on the improvement of these functions. These were the major jobs of architects in the nineties.

It is only just recently, since the year 2000, that the number of cultural commissions has started to increase, and this is a good sign. Cities are now thinking about cultural enterprises such as theatres, opera houses and museums. So for architects it's an exciting time. Because by and large, in Western Europe all of these establishments have already been built. Yet recently, Poland has had competitions for a new contemporary art museum in Warsaw, for an opera house in Białystok, a concert hall in Katowice, a congress hall in Krakow, contemporary art museums in Krakow and Toruń, an opera house in Szczecin, the Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, The Museum of Polish History and Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. These are very interesting projects, and I think that these are the projects which will define the profiles of the cities much more significantly than the commercial wave of architecture exemplified in office buildings and housing.

KP: You were intimately involved in the construction of the Manggha Museum with acclaimed Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. Indeed, you are now honorary Polish consul to Japan. What sets current Japanese architecture apart?

KI: What is very important is that from the end of the nineteenth century, Japanese architects, whilst very interested in foreign cultures, were at the same time profoundly seeking their own architectural style and their own cultural identity. Each generation of Japanese architects was trying to understand the essence of Japanese cultural characteristics, and how to express them in architecture - they were looking for a Japanese style. And I think this is the kind of direction that Polish architects should be more concerned with.

Poland, located in the middle of Europe, was a part of European culture, and its architecture followed the principal European stylistic canons, eventually developing some idiosyncrasies within each architectural style. But it did not develop a Polish style. We might say that there is a Polish



Polish Pavilion at the EXPO 2005, Nagoya, Japan / courtesy of Ingarden & Ewy Architekci

taste in food, and perhaps there is also some kind of Polish taste in architecture. But it's not very obvious. And if it exists, I think that we should research into it, and try and define it.

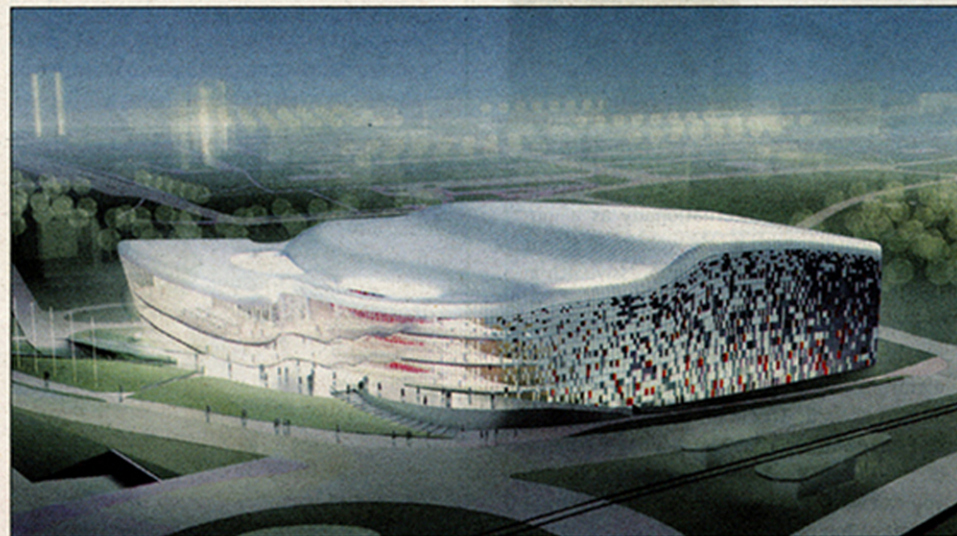
In my work, I'm trying to do that. I was trying to go this way with the Wyspiański Pavilion, and I could say the same about the Polish Pavilion at the EXPO 2005 in Nagoya and the project of the Malopolska Performing Arts Centre, where we analysed the typology of space around the building while we were designing it. And we composed the building using the morphology of forms which we found on the site - also using some materials that we discovered *in situ* - and expressed it all in a modern form, in a kind of metaphorical way, but in a very direct relation to our discoveries. This is the kind of architecture which is interesting for me - trying to find the deep structure or hidden characteristics of our culture and our historical architecture, and trying to use it, not by means of iconic similarities, but by selecting specific grammar and materials which are meaningful for the place, then composing it in a way which can be adjusted by local taste. And by doing this, I think we can create meaningful and culturally rooted projects.

KP: Of course, in the Polish imagination, the willow tree is very symbolic. And you used willow in the Japan Expo Pavilion.

KI: This is exactly what I mean. Ultimately it was wicker, which is from the same family as willow. I was trying to find a material for the Pavilion which had some meaning for us Polish people, and which can be related to the music of Chopin. The main question was how to relate music and material? This is very difficult. So in a way I made a kind of regression, not only in terms of material, but to the landscape. In our imagination, there is a deeply rooted relationship between Chopin and the Mazovian countryside, with willow trees dotted across the open landscape and leading far off into the horizon. It's so deeply rooted that even the statue of Chopin in the Łazienki Palace Gardens in Warsaw portrays the composer under a willow tree.

Whilst the material itself is natural and applied through the manual process of weaving, the way we designed forms of wicker modules and assembled them in the building is very technologically advanced. That's why I explain that in our buildings, low-tech meets high-tech - it was all designed by computers, and the form, composed of two-directionally curved surfaces, was very complex, and in a way very difficult to be constructed, but by means of our technology, we were able to do it with great precision.

Krzysztof Ingarden talked to Nick Hodge. The full interview can be read online at www.krakowpost.com



The future Krakow Congress Centre / courtesy of Ingarden & Ewy Architekci

CULTURE IN BRIEF

Construction Begins On Jewish Museum

One of the most ambitious museum projects of recent years has begun in Warsaw. On 30 June, a number of Polish and international dignitaries took part in ceremonies consecrating The Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The enterprise will explore a thousand year heritage, utilising the most hi-tech multimedia installations.

"Setting up this museum is not only a local matter or a matter only of Warsaw, it is building bridges based on respect and an understanding of our common history. This museum will show the richness of life, although it will be raised in a place with the stigma of death," said Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, mayor of Warsaw.

The winning design for the building - a glass and limestone concoction - was made by acclaimed Finnish architects Rainer Mahlamäki and Ilmari Lahdelma.

Construction is due for completion in March 2012. Meanwhile, the museum has just launched a virtual complement to the enterprise. A website named 'The Virtual Shtetl' chronicles Jewish heritage right across the historic Polish lands. Already, some 800 Polish cities and small towns are featured, with many more planned.

"This portal has the potential to become the greatest source of information about Jewish life in Poland prior to the war," explained Albert Stankowski, who conceived the project.

About six million Jews lived in Poland before the war. However, 90 percent of this community perished at the hands of the German occupiers. Thousands more left Poland in 1968, after the Communist Party launched an "anti-Zionist campaign", in the wake of pro-democracy liberation riots.

The portal can be explored at www.sztetl.org.pl.

Susan Sontag to be Published in Krakow

The Karakter publishing house, based on ul. Gazowa in Krakow, is now the Polish publisher of the late Susan Sontag's works. This autumn, they will release their first book by the American intellectual, writer and philosopher, a widely-acclaimed collection of essays titled *On Photography* (*O fotografii*).

Originally published in 1977, *On Photography* is a collection of essays written between 1973 and 1977 that were first published as a series in the New York Review of Books. In the essays, Sontag examines not only the history of photography in Western society, but how it has changed the way we perceive events.

Sontag, known as "the Dark Lady of American Letters", wrote extensively on photography, and *On Photography* is still widely read and referenced. In one of the essays, she wrote that "to collect photography is to collect the world." And now one part of that collection will be available to Polish readers.

Karakter will release more works by Sontag in the future, beginning with her non-fiction work *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which re-examines photography and art from a moral standpoint, in spring 2010.