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## Elementary Forms and Meanings in Contemporary Sacred Implementations in Poland

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# Elementary Forms and Meanings in Contemporary Sacred Implementations in Poland

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**Abstract.** The simplicity and elementariness of forms present in contemporary sacred buildings is an expression of a modern approach to architecture. Monasteries, churches, shrines and chapels shape spaces with structures coherent in their ideological assumptions. One can often find their references to objects and thoughts derived directly from religion. The coherence of the external structure and the interior of sacred buildings is certainly another dominant feature of their idea. An important role is played by light, which emphasizes the importance and impact of space on human emotions through its play. The introduction of the landscape to a temple through spacious glazing, especially in the altar area, encourages the users to reflect on their unity with nature, but also results in the fact that the expression of the interior is never the same. As the seasons and arrangements of greenery change, so does man. Since transience is part of our own existence, it is worth reminding about it in the spatial structure of churches and chapels. The simplicity of expression can also be enhanced by other factors, such as façade materials adapted to the context or basic land development. Contemporary sacred architecture is not just chapels, churches and monasteries. There are also smaller-scale structures. The power of their message also lies in the elementariness of the form and meanings. It is the simplicity that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. On the one hand, it shows the way, but on the other hand it gives freedom. And so does religion. The architecture of small forms, such as chapels, determines the elementariness of meaning expressed through a very simple message. The idea that can be read in a very short time period of time, walking or driving by this type of structures. Contemporary sacred architecture in Poland is heading in a very good direction, but the number of projects of high architectural values is still relatively small. This is mainly due to the low architectural awareness among people who manage religious property. However, certain projects show that the creative potential is very high and can positively change the general expression of Polish sacred architecture.

## 1. Introduction

The coherence of the external structure and the interior of sacred buildings is certainly another dominant feature of their idea. “The plan proceeds from within to without; the exterior is the result of an interior.”, [1]. An important role is played by light, which emphasizes the importance and impact of space on human emotions through its play. The simplicity of expression can also be enhanced by other factors, such as façade materials adapted to the context or basic land development.

A contemporary approach to design requires completely new methods. As Walter Gropius writes: “New buildings must be invented, not duplicated.”, [2]. It is influenced by a number of factors, ranging from technological development, through the way of spatial development to lifestyle changes. While looking at contemporary designs and constructed sacred buildings, one can notice utter chaos and



uncertainty. There are projects that stubbornly imitate old architectural styles, there are also those that combine old and new. Until finally, we notice a distinctive group of sacred architecture, presenting a contemporary way of designing, based primarily on the elementariness of forms and meanings. Unfortunately, there are still not many developments of this type in Poland. However, once they are created, they undoubtedly generate a great interest.

## 2. Analysis of situation in Poland

We will start the short journey around Polish architectural developments from the church in Mirów in Częstochowa. The work designed by Romuald Loegler is an example of contemporary sacred architecture of the highest standards. According to Le Corbusier's statement: "The elements of architecture are light and shade, walls and space." [3] The project consists in a rectangular body of the church set against the background of the landscape and the low form of the rectory. Situating the building on a hill and setting it at an angle of probably 45° to the neighbouring roads additionally add to its monumentality. Represented by a large cross, the glass and wood façade extends a very clear invitation to the interior of the temple. After stepping through the entrance door, we can see great simplicity and ample space for reflection and prayer. Unfortunately, the original idea was largely spoiled due to the introduction of unfavourable changes in the development without the architect's knowledge. The initial effect presented an engaging play of light against the background of concrete, which gets inside through the openings in the walls and ceiling that appears to be floating in the air. Presentation of the cross as a void in the interior wall constituting the background for the altar was also immensely interesting.



**Figure 1.** The church in Mirów in Częstochowa (photo: Grzegorz Skowronek, [3])

A simple and sparse in expression chapel in Tarnów designed by Marta Rowińska and Lech Rowiński from Beton studio reveals its sacred nature with form and material rather than scale. Its coherent and elementary body shaped on the basis of a rectangle with a sloping roof perfectly corresponds with the surrounding greenery. The wooden and visible structure constitutes the only detail of the interior. A significant role here is played by the introduction of the landscape to the temple through spacious glazing in the altar area. It encourages the users to reflect on their unity with nature, but also results in the fact that the expression of the interior is never the same. As the seasons and arrangements of greenery change, so does man. Since transience is part of our own existence, it is worth reminding about it in the spatial structure of religious structures.



**Figure 2.** The church in Mirów in Częstochowa (photo: Grzegorz Skowronek, [4])

The inhabitants of the town of Tarnów played a major role in the development of the building, which strengthens the attachment and identification of the local community with the religious structure in question.



**Figure 3.** The chapel in Tarnów, [5]



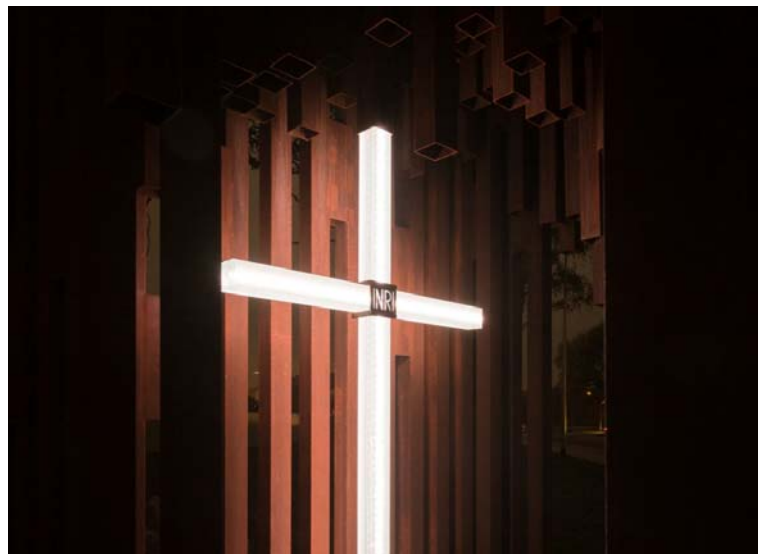
**Figure 4.** The interior of chapel in Tarnów, [5]

Contemporary sacred architecture is not just chapels, churches and monasteries. There are also smaller-scale structures. The power of their message also lies in the elementariness of the form and meanings. It is the simplicity that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. On the one hand, it shows the

way, but on the other hand it gives freedom. And so does religion. The architecture of small forms, such as chapels, determines the elementariness of meaning expressed through a very simple message. The idea that can be read in a very short time period of time, walking or driving by this type of structures. Sometimes the chapel is a form that offers shelter to passers-by, as seen in the case of the Shrine / roadside cross in Bronowice (Kraków) designed by Przemko Łukasik and Łukasz Zagala from medusa group studio. The most important point of the structure – the cross – was hidden in a rectangular block hollowed out in an uneven manner. The elementary form has a clear structure consisting in vertical posts finished with a coating that resembles rust. The coherence between exterior and interior is preserved here through the openwork nature of the walls, resulting in the fact that the cross inside is visible from a very long distance. The presented structure is characterized by an extremely expressive play of artificial light whose source is the cross itself. Its glow breaks through the voids in the body of the chapel, emphasising the significance of the symbol. The internal space encourages reflection and prayer, introduces mystery and builds a sublime expression of the place. In the case of this kind of shrine, we have an excellent opportunity to experience the elementariness of form in a more intimate and individual way.



**Figure 5.** The Shrine - roadside cross in Bronowice, [6]



**Figure 6.** The Shrine/roadside cross in Bronowice, [6]

### 3. Conclusions

The phenomenon that currently occurs in contemporary architecture, including sacred architecture, can be called style formation. There are clear attempts at the actions shaping the direction of the contemporary times. Apart from the designers, decision makers on the investor's side also have an enormous influence on the final expression of the architecture of religious buildings. Unfortunately, this often has a negative impact on the quality of the design project as well as its development. "Architecture requires strong beliefs and leadership skills. Its shape cannot be determined by clients or public opinion polls, the results of which most often boil down to the desire to preserve what everyone already knows well." [7] New thinking about designing, availability of materials and technologies lead to an attempt at presenting a modified definition of contemporary sacred architecture. It is the approach that places more emphasis on sparseness and clarity of the message than on the elements that are completely unnecessary, like ornament.

Architecture with this function has always been the dominant feature of the place. Nowadays, it is more difficult to achieve since we frequently lack the possibility to use the argument of scale. This is primarily due to design assumptions that usually do not provide for building such large structures as historic cathedrals. Another argument is the density and scale of the neighbouring buildings. Nowadays, building development is more intense and higher. Therefore, there is no reason why one should compete spatially with the size of the surrounding buildings. Marking one's presence can be seen in the architectural order of both the bodies of buildings and land development. Proper location and relations with the neighbouring structures are extremely significant in this matter. Owing to its function, sacred architecture requires a special approach to the space it will affect. Positive solutions will result in bringing order and enhancing the sense of place identification. Otherwise, it can even spoil a well-functioning fragment of the city, introducing spatial and aesthetic chaos. Symbolism expressed in an elementary way remains an extremely important issue in designing. The simplicity of the façade, the light in the interior, or the cross in the structure of the form are just a few of the design references to meanings that are used at present.

Churches and chapels very often constituted a spatial dominant, which resulted primarily from their scale. A characteristic feature here was certainly the towers as an element of the structure of a building. The currently shaped sacred architecture allows for the departure from such an expression of monumentality in favour of many other spatial and ideological values. An example here is the chapel in Tarnów whose contractors were mostly residents of this town. We therefore notice the phenomenon of socializing religious structures, especially in terms of their scale. Ornamentation loses its importance, giving way to elementariness and spatiality. Contemporary buildings are strongly defined on the one hand, and extremely sparse in their expression on the other hand.

The above analysis of religious structures supports one more principle. Regardless of the types of structures, which are characterized by different sizes, the underlying idea about the elementariness of forms and meanings remains unchanged. Simplicity and elegance, mystical character and playing with light may be a common feature as can be seen in the above examples.

Contemporary sacred architecture in Poland is heading in a very good direction, but the number of projects of high architectural values is still relatively small. This is mainly due to the low architectural awareness among people who manage religious property. However, certain projects do show that the creative potential is very high and can positively change the general expression of Polish sacred architecture.

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