

# False Windows - Yesterday and Today

Stefan Niewitecki <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> nievi@pg.gda.pl

**Abstract.** The article is concerned with a very interesting aspect of architectural design, namely, a contradiction between the building functions and the necessity of giving the building a desired external appearance. One of the possibilities of reconciling this contradiction is using pseudo windows that are visible on the elevation and generally have the form of a black painted recess accompanied by frames and sashes and often single glazing. Of course, there are no windows or openings in the corresponding places in the walls inside the building. The article discusses the differences between false windows and blind windows (German: blende), also known as blank windows, which, in fact, are shallow recesses in the wall having the external appearance of an arcade or a window and which had already been used in Gothic architecture mostly for aesthetic reasons and sometimes to reduce the load of the wall. Moreover, the article describes various false windows that appeared later than blind windows because they did not appear until the 17th century. Contemporary false windows are also discussed and it is shown that contrary to the common belief they are widely used. In his research, the author not only used the Internet data but also carried out his own in situ exploration. The false windows constitute very interesting albeit rare elements of the architectural design of buildings. They have been used successfully for a few hundred years. It might seem that they should have been discarded by now but this has not happened. Quite contrary, since the second half of the 20th century there has been a rapid development of glass curtain walls that serve a similar function in contemporary buildings as the false windows once did, only in a more extensive way.

## 1. Introduction

In architecture, we often encounter a discrepancy between the functional needs of a given building and its desired external appearance. One of the methods of reconciling this discrepancy is the use of so called false windows, or in other words pseudo-windows, that are visible on the elevation and generally have the form of a black painted recess accompanied by frames and sashes and often single glazing. What is clearly understandable is that there are no windows or openings in the corresponding places in the walls inside the building. It should be stressed that a false window is not the same as a blind window (German: blende), also known as a blank window, which is a shallow recess in the wall having the external appearance of an arcade or a window and which had already been used in Gothic architecture mostly for aesthetic reasons and sometimes to reduce the load of the wall. False windows were created later than blind windows and they did not appear until the 17th century. One of the most famous false windows in Poland were used by Dominik Merlini in Warsaw, in the Łazienki Palace (also called the Palace on the Water or the Palace on the Isle) which was remodelled between 1788 and 1793, [2].

## 2. Blind windows (blanks)

Although blind windows are typical of Gothic architecture they were already used in Romanesque architecture - the Rotunda of St. Gotthard in Strzelin constitutes a great example of this case. It was probably built in the first half of the 13th century, however, there are sources that claim that its construction finished in 1150. It is a small central-plan church [5]. Figure 1 shows the blind windows of



the rotunda. As they are extremely shallow they serve a purely decorative purpose (they were not supposed to reduce the load of the walls).



Figure 1. The Rotunda of St. Gotthard. One can see a blind window in the rotunda and three blind windows in the rectangular top part of the church

However, a real development of blind windows took place in Gothic architecture where the blind windows were often used as decorative elements of top parts of the buildings and were plastered white or filled with painted tracery imitating window bars. The Old City Town-hall in Toruń is an exquisite example of blind windows as it is shown in Figures 1 and 2. The town-hall in question is the main secular building of Toruń Old City and its Gothic part was executed in several stages during the 13th and 14th centuries and was remodelled in the 17th and reconstructed after it was severely damaged in the 18th century. It is one of the most extraordinary examples of medieval burgher architecture in Central Europe [3].

St. Mary's Church is one of the most important, right after the Wawel Cathedral, churches in Cracow. It is a Gothic church from the 14th and the 15th century [2]. Its general view and blind windows are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

There are also blind windows in the Gothic Malbork Castle which was built in several stages from the third quarter of the 13th century up to the middle of the 15th century by the Order of the Teutonic Knights [9]; some of the windows are shown in Figures 6 and 7.



Figures 2, 3. The tower of the Gothic Old City Town-hall in Toruń; Figure 2 – a general view and Figure 3 - numerous blind windows



Figures 4, 5. A general view of St. Mary's Church from the side of the market and the white blind windows in its towers

One can find the examples of blind windows from the later architectural period in the Palace of the Cracow Bishops (Pałac Biskupów Krakowskich) in Kielce. It was the place of residence of the Cracow bishops and nowadays it is the best-preserved example of the Early Baroque residential palace in Poland. It was built from 1637 to 1641 on the Cathedral Hill (Wzgórze Katedralne). Its construction was initiated and founded by Jakub Zadzik, a Cracow bishop. Tomasz Poncino carried out the palace construction and the design was most probably created by Giovanni Trevano [1]. The blind windows of this palace are shown in Figure 8.



Figures 6, 7. The Malbork Castle. The example of a blind window (left) and a partially blind one (right)



Figure 8. Blind windows in a Baroque, Palace of the Cracow Bishops in Kielce

The town-hall in Chełmno was erected at the end of the 13th century and was expanded in the periods from 1567 to 1572 and from 1884 to 1887. It is one of the most valuable monuments of the Polish Renaissance and today it houses the Museum of Chełmno Land (Muzeum Ziemi Chełmińskiej) [4]. Figure 9 shows the front elevation of the town-hall and Figure 10 shows a decorative blind window on the side elevation.



Figures 9, 10. Town-hall in Chełmno. A general view of the front elevation (left), blind window (right)

### 3. Examples of heritage listed false windows.

The reason for using the majority (if not all) of false windows is the discrepancy between the functional needs of the building interiors, that exclude the possibility of having a window in a specific place inside, and the necessity of keeping a certain elevation rhythm – order – that enforces the necessity of placing a window there. Thus, it may be stated that every (or nearly every) false window annihilates the discrepancy between the building function and the building external shape resulting from the building architectural order. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, for instance, a Renaissance palace in Markuszowce (Slovakia) that is presented further on in this work. The owner of the building used false windows on the non-existing storey only to make the building look more prestigious.

One of the most interesting examples of false windows can be found in a tenement house called “Dwór Polski” in Wrocław. It is a Gothic-Renaissance building with Late Baroque elements. It is located at the market square and is the last (apart from the tenement house at 8, Rynek) Gothic tenement house with such evident medieval roots. The building was remodeled in 1574. Apart from other alternations a new Renaissance façade was created during the remodelling works, however, the facade was again rebuilt in the middle of the 18th century. After 1740, the front of the tenement house was rebuilt in the baroque style that is visible till today. The carved plaster decoration of the windows and the three-storey gable divided by classical order pilasters and two prominent cornices come from this period. The tenement house preserved this shape until now and may be admired till today (Figure 11), [7].



Figures 11, 12. A tenement house “Dwór Polski” at 5, Rynek in Wrocław. The front facade, the present view. The leftmost false window on the fourth floor (left). The front facade, details of the false window (right)

A false window in the front elevation on the third floor – the leftmost window – constitutes a very interesting and exceptional case. The frames and muntins of this window were painted white against the black background (Figure 12).

There are very interesting false windows on the second floor of a Renaissance palace in Markuszowce (Slovakia, 1643, there was an extensive remodelling in the rococo style in 1773 [6]). To increase the owner's splendor, this one-storey palace, along with its ground floor, was decorated with an impressive attic on which the windows were painted on, in fact, the non-existent storey. Real, wooden shutters, although non-openable, were added to the false windows (Figures 13-15).

As it was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, one of the most known false windows in Poland may be found in the Łazienki Palace in Warsaw [8] – Figures 16-20.

In the south and north elevation, the Ballroom has got three windows on both the first floor and the second floor. However, the windows in the middle are not the real ones and have single glazed, opened outwards sashes (Figure 20). Inside the room, there are fireplaces in the place where the middle windows are – one with a sculpture of Hercules in the south wall and the other with a sculpture of Apollo in the north wall. Apart from these windows, there are also other false windows in the palace, however, the ones from the Ballroom are the most famous.



Figure 13 (left). Slovakia, Markuszowce. A Renaissance palace from 1643. All the second-floor windows are the false ones with non-openable shutters. Figures 14, 15. Markuszowce. The first floor windows have openable shutters and the false windows on the second floor have non-openable shutters.



Figure 16. The Palace on the Water, the south elevation; the false windows of the Ballroom – second from the left on the first floor and the second floor: Figure 17 (right). The Palace on the Water in Warsaw, the north elevation. The false rooms of the Ballroom – second from the right on the first floor and the second floor



Figures 18, 19, 20. The Palace on the Water in Warsaw, the second window from left is the Ballroom false window on the first and the second floor as seen from outside (Figure 18), the fireplace with a sculpture of Hercules in the place of the false window as seen from inside (Figure 19). The Palace on the Water in Warsaw, the south elevation, a detail of the Ballroom false window on the first floor. One can see a single glazed pane and the wall behind painted black (Figure 20 -right).

Another type of false windows (cheaper because without glazing) can be seen in Warsaw, too. It can be found in the building of the Royal Baths, in the Old Orangery (1786-88, D. Merlini) [8], Figures 21-22. The main building core with the glazed south elevation is an Orangery, namely, the place where orange trees were stored in winter. There is also a court theatre – unique in the world – in the east wing, and the Gallery of Polish Sculpture XVI -1939 in the west wing (previously these were the quarters for gardeners and servants).



Figure 21. Warsaw, the Royal Baths, the Old Orangery, the south elevation Figure 22. The Old Orangery, on the left – a real window, on the right – a false window painted in the recess on the wall, no glazing. The main muntins of the latter one slightly protrude from the wall to intensify a 3D effect of the window, the muntins of secondary importance are painted on the wall.



Figure 23. Fake arched windows in a redecorated building in Sopot at Al. Niepodległości; the end of the 19th century.

Later, apart from typical false windows, other architectural tricks associated with windows were used, for example, the arched windows in the elevation that, in fact, were rectangular inside the building – as it is shown in Figure 23. These windows being rectangular were a few times cheaper than the arched ones, but the visual effect was the same as in case of the arched windows.

#### 4. Examples of contemporary false windows

The “Little Castle in Dębogórze” (Zameczek w Dębogórze) may serve as an example of the contemporary use of “classical” false windows (the wall recess painted black along with a window frame and glazing). It is a single-family residential house – the architect’s own house - in Dębogórze, near Gdynia at 24E, Jagodowa street built in the period from 1998 to 2014. There are two false windows in the vestibule on the first floor. The windows were unnecessary inside as they would have been located right behind the wardrobe, but outside they are extremely important due to their compositional effect – see Figure 24. Therefore, the recesses were made in the wall from outside and once the building had been insulated with polystyrene foam they were painted black and the glazed frames were mounted. The window producer’s lack of experience resulted in window seal loosening in the upper part of one of the windows – inside the recesses there is a high temperature resulting from the black colour and the sun exposure – Figure 25. Thus, the ventilation openings were made in the wall into the vestibule interior, both in the upper and the lower part of the recesses. This should serve as a warning to window producers that in case of false windows it is necessary to consider significant heating up of window recesses. The window should be single glazed with anti-reflective panes and cannot be fitted in airtight sealing. The window recess should have at least the pressure gravity ventilation.



Figure 24. The “Little Castle in Dębogórze” (Zameczek w Dębogórze), a general view. Two false windows visible in the vestibule, on the first floor, left to the entrance door.

The natural successors of the classical false windows are contemporary curtain walls, that are translucent at a height from 1.1 to 2.5 m on each storey; the strips between the windows are made of bricks, reinforced concrete or a lightweight material - they are insulated from outside and covered with non-translucent or reflective glass – Figures 26-27.



Figure 25. The “Little Castle in Dębogórze” (Zameczek w Dębogórze), two false windows. The loosened window seal resulting from high temperature in the left window.



Figure 26 (left). La Defense district in Paris. The example of the extensive use of false windows in modern architecture. Figure 27 (right). Hilton Hotel in Budapest (Hungary). False windows placed interchangeably with real windows in the vertical strips of the curtain wall – the „copper” colour of the windows is worth noticing

## 5. Conclusion

The false windows constitute very interesting albeit rare elements of the architectural design of buildings. They have been used successfully for a few hundred years. It might seem that they should have been discarded by now but this has not happened. Quite contrary, since the second half of the 20th century there has been a rapid development of glass curtain walls that serve a similar function in contemporary buildings as the false windows once did, only in a more extensive way. Today, these are not only single false windows that make us believe that there are non-existent openings in the walls but also whole buildings pretend that they have the elevation made of glass, while, in fact, they are mostly made of other materials such as bricks or reinforced concrete.

## References

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