

A DIARY OF A POLISH ARCHITECT AND FILM MAKER FROM HIS TRAVELS TO THE WEST. MODERN ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE IN THE POLISH DOCUMENTARIES DATING BACK TO THE TURN OF THE 1950S AND 1960S.

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Abstract

At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, travelling to the Western countries was to a large extent limited for an average citizen of the socialist Poland. After the democratisation of the country in 1956 travelling options improved a bit, however, the Poles could not travel as freely as they do today. Polish architects could learn about the architecture of Western Europe mainly from such sources as the magazines and occasional travels. In the second half of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, a documentary film became a new medium presenting modern architecture. This article shows how modern architecture of Italy presented in the documentary films of the turn of the 1950s and 1960s supplemented the knowledge of Polish architects on modern Europe in that period. The film image was, on the one hand, a form of a public diary from the travels and, on the other hand, a medium which recorded and preserved the images of places popular with tourists and showed these images to the Polish architects who were not allowed to travel there.

Key words: modern architecture, regionalism, the West, documentary films

Polish architecture before and after 1956

The history of Polish architecture marked with features of modernism dates back to the interwar period¹. In the years 1918 to 1939 modernism was a trend widely discussed and commented, in Poland and in many other European countries, as an example of a movement propagating modern architecture, so much divergent from the ²previous styles. Many Polish architects of the times travelled to the West, practising among others in Le Corbusier's studio to gain more insight into the new trend. Experience gained when travelling and

¹ The interwar period in the European architecture

²Historical styles, neo-romanticism, neo-gothic, neo-classicism, neo-baroque, neo-classicism and other styles

practising in renown European architectural studios contributed to the propagation of the features of that new, international style in the Polish realia. Nevertheless, international trends have always involved the inclusion of local traditions and culture to extend or modify the 'base model' so that it could encompass the regional tastes and expectations. Somehow Polish modern architecture has always developed with the use of regional motifs, thus, in this case we can talk of a particular type of transposition of modernity encompassing local traditions and conditions. In the period after the 2nd World War modern trends were in the focus of Polish architects. This was abruptly halted in 1949³ once the state introduced a top imposed style in arts called social realism. The main feature of this trend, conceived in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, was the application of classical styles. Architecture created in compliance with these guidelines, among others in Poland ⁴until 1956, featured a number of references to Ancient architecture⁵ and shared very little with the ideas of modernism. This period in the Polish architecture was aptly defined by Adam Kotarbiński (1914-2010) at the beginning of the 1980s (Kotarbiński, 1985, p.49). "*The theses posed by social realism were mainly the theses of negations. These negations made numerous 'modernists' in the Western Europe 'personae non gratae'. Cosmopolitanism was the enemy number one.*" [own translation]

After 1956 Polish architecture again turned to modernism. To make up for the time lost, architects, similarly to architects of the interwar period, set off on journeys to the Western Europe to seek inspiration for their artistic activities. Of course, for the reason of the socialist political system in Poland, they could not travel as freely as we can today. They had to apply for a passport and a visa to

³ In 1949 a heated discussion was pending in Poland regarding further direction of the post-war architecture in the socialist block countries. Modern form with socialist content was no longer acceptable. Functionality was obviously to prevail in the new socialist architecture, however, strong bonds with traditions and elements of the past contributed to strong anchorage of the socialist doctrine in Poland.

⁴ A housing estate called "Marszałkowska Dzielnicą Mieszkaniową" (MDM), erected in the downtown area of Warsaw in the period from 1950 to 1952, within the framework of the reconstruction of city centre totally destroyed in the military acts during the war, can be a major example of architecture of social realism in Poland. The estate was designed by Stanisław Jankowski, Jan Knothe, Józef Sigalin and Zygmunt Stępiński. In 2017 the estate was registered into the register of historic monuments as a historic spatial assumption.

⁵The period from 1948 to 1956 in Poland saw numerous republications of works of Ancient architects, among others: "Ten Books on Architecture" by Vitruvius, which were supposed to inspire the contemporary architects with examples how to construct buildings in compliance with the 'classical' spirit.

be able to go to a particular country. Irrespectively of the fact, whether such architect has returned to Poland or not, he was able to share his impressions with others and to create following the principles of works that have inspired him. In 1960, Bohdan Paczowski⁶ (1930-2017), a Polish architect, emigrated for economic reasons to Italy. He then described his impressions concerning Italy and Italian architecture of the beginning of the 1960s in an essay published in 2003 in 'Tygodnik Powszechny' magazine. I would like to quote parts of his essay because it, in a very interesting way, refers to the issue of regionalism in Italian architecture of those times.

The post-war reconstruction of Poland mainly consisted in fast and mechanical multiplication of box-like building structures in the 'vulgarised' international style. The elite of Italian architects voiced their protests against such style of construction and came up with a motto that the building "numbers should be improved and quality multiplied". They postulated that architecture be close with its form and materials to a complex, impoverished realia of the country, close to its region, that it should seek references to traditions and the surroundings that would counterbalance cosmopolitan abstraction with their own culture and realia and that architecture should undertake the issue of ornaments with no inferiority complexes. This architectural "neo-realism" was the first trend in the history of the 20th century architecture undermining the simplified modernity, a pioneer of criticism of the 'international style', later voiced by post-modernists, yet to a much lesser degree. (Paczowski 2003, p.1)

With these comments of Paczkowski in mind, I would like to focus my considerations here on the issue of regionalism. As follows from the presented quotation, the attitude of Italian architects of the 1950s and 1960s was to promote modernity, however, featuring the local traditions and culture. In their mind, modern architecture was not just to copy patterns from other countries but was supposed to adapt them to local realia. In their designs, Italian

⁶ Architect and author. He lived abroad since 1960. After 20 years in Italy, he moved to Paris for another 10 years and next to Luxembourg, where he ran the operations of the Foundation of Architecture. He published for "Architectural Review", "L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui", „ArchiCREE" and other architectural magazines. He also befriended Witold Gombrowicz, a Polish writer.

architects of that period aspired not only to use the local traditions but also the local building materials derived from local construction traditions or commonly used for hundreds of years in a given town or region. The views of Polish architects in the middle of the 1950s were similar, though demonstrated in practical applications on a smaller scale due to limitations concerning materials, finances or due to ideological constraints of a socialist country. Socialist economy to a large extent promoted the construction of modern buildings that were to serve the utilitarian function for the community, the best example here would be residential, multi-family development. The issue of the shortage of residential units due to the 2nd World War destruction was a topic frequently discussed and analysed by Polish architects. Regional demand for residential units resulted in the erection of numerous constructions, with some features of modernism, yet their quality was questionable, both as regards their designs and construction expertise. To the contrary, regionalism expressed in facilities or spatial assumptions created for the needs of culture, art, relaxation or governmental institutions was of the top quality.

A new voice in the discussion on regionalism was the exhibition organised in 1959 in Warsaw by the Association of Polish Architects. It was aimed to present new trends in Polish architecture after 1956⁷. It shall be added that most of the designs presented at the exhibition and classified into thematic groups⁸ represented regional modern architecture. Such regionalism will be here deemed by the author hereof as creative activities meeting the criteria of modernism with strong adherence to the genius loci through the prism of the realities of Polish spatial layout of the 1950s. Modernism as a creative movement has defined general framework of architectural and urban planning activities, with an admissible option of modernism demonstrated via inclusion of the local features.

⁷ The Warsaw exhibition displayed works created in the years 1956-1959.

⁸ The designs presented at the exhibition were grouped into the following themes: residential buildings, architecture and urban planning of Polish rural areas, educational institutions, sports facilities, health care facilities, public utility buildings, trade and fair buildings, industrial facilities

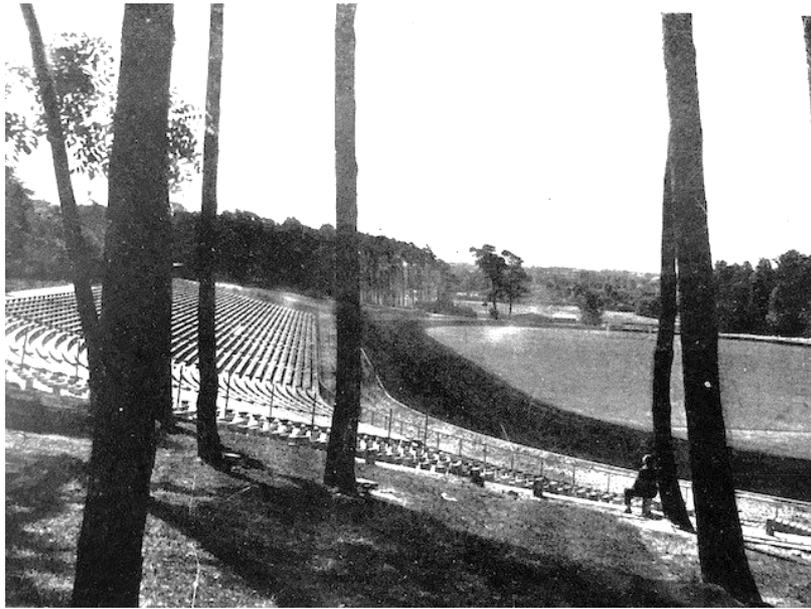


Figure 1. Example of regional architecture Modern stadium of "Olimpia" sports club in Poznan, constructed in the second half of the 1950s. Designed by Poznanian architects: J. Hofman, Z. Samulczyk, Z. Madejczak, H. Gawroński. The form of the facility, with features of modernism, was introduced into the existing spatial structure of green areas of the northern part of the city. Author of the photograph - unknown Source: Wiloch, J. (1959).

To sum up this part of my paper, I would like to quote part of the introduction to the catalogue of the aforementioned exhibition of 1959, where Jacek Nowicki wrote as follows: (Wieloch 1959, p.9) *'An architectural form that meets the conditions of proper composition is a derivative of a building - that is the purpose why it was erected, a derivative of a structure - that is overall terms and conditions for its execution and a derivative of a situation - that is local conditions in the broadest meaning of the term.'*

A DIARY OF A POLISH ARCHITECT AND FILM MAKER FROM HIS TRAVELS TO ITALY IN 1957

In this article focused on the issue of regionalism, I would like to include a description of a particular journey made at the end of 1957 by Mieczysław

Wiesiołek (1921-2011)⁹, a film maker and Tadeusz Barucki¹⁰ (1922), an architect, to familiarise Polish viewers, including architects, with modern Italian architecture of the 1950s. The effect of their journey was a documentary film entitled „Notatki o nowej architekturze Włoch” [“Notes on modern Italian architecture”] of 1958¹¹. The presented documentary was aimed as a comment on modern trends in Italian architecture of the times. In the 11 minute long documentary, the authors have succeeded in showing a wide range of activities of Italian architects at the end of the 1950s, starting from such renown examples as the railway station Roma Termin¹² or Palzetto dello Sport¹³. The documentary additionally presented also industrial facilities such as for example the Olivetti factory or public interior of Italian cafés or shops in Milan or Rome. Because as regards Polish architecture at the end of the 1950s the priority theme of discussions was residential multi-family development, the theme was much exposed in the documentary. The audio comments which refer to the achievements of Italian architecture are very positive in this area. Spatial solutions and applied materials that were unknown in Poland or too expensive to be used were much praised. For example the duralumin façades of the Olivetti office towers.

I can only speculate what the most probable origins of that documentary film were. In spring 1956, a group of Warsaw students, taking the advantage of the political thaw, organised a bus tour over Western Europe to familiarise young artists with the achievements of Western architecture, including the works of Le Corbusier. The authors of the documentary that is analysed herein, that is Tadeusz Barucki, an architect and Mieczysław Wiesiołek, a film-maker, took part in that tour. It can be inferred that the architect and the film-maker visited Italy

⁹ Polish film-maker and cameraman, film editor, screenwriter and director of documentary films.

¹⁰ Polish architect, representative of modernism, art historian, documentarist of architecture, feature writer

¹¹ Made in: Poland, in 1958, Genre: A popular science full-colour film, 35 mm, 1 act, 313 m, directed by: Mieczysław Wiesiołek, photos by: Mieczysław Wiesiołek, film editing by: Krystyna Rutkowska, audio: Bohdan Jankowski, made by: Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych [Documentary Film Studio] (Warsaw)

¹² The building was constructed in the period 1947-1950 in the mature modernist style, as per the design of a group of architects: Callinie, Castellazie, Fidagatie, Montuorie, Pintonelle and Vitellozzie

¹³ Architect Pier Luigi Nervi 1956-1958. Built in accordance with a general plan by architect Annibale Vitellozzi and a project for the reinforced concrete portion by Engineer Pierluigi Nervi—under the direction of Engineer Giacomo Maccagno.

again to one more time study Italian modern architecture and to present it in the form of a short film or that the film material was prepared by them in 1956 during the said tour. Unfortunately, I have been unable to confirm which was the case. The five week journey was summed-up in a short book published in 1957 under the title: „*Architekci autokarem. Czechosłowacja, Austria, Szwajcaria, Francja, Włochy*”. [“Architects on a bus tour through Czechoslovakia, Austria, Switzerland, France and Italy”] This minor publication, which comprised a number photographs presenting new European architecture made by the tour participants, has become an interesting testimony to the searches undertaken by Polish architects for new creative directions. The book preface includes the following conclusion of the completed journey:

‘Five weeks of numerous, strong and fast changing impressions. Caught in the momentary act, they ripen up upon return to compose a synthetic image of a very general nature. [...]. It is an important catch - the feeling of scale. The tour participants can now look at their designs, their towns, their work skills, their country and... are able to make comparisons. They are deeply convinced that many things can be improved, that the ideas they come up with do not belong to the world of fantasy only.’ (Barucki, Dobrowolski, 1957, p. 5)

As can be observed, for many participants, the tour to Western Europe was an incredible experience, both in professional and social terms. Each of the architects, in their own ways, looked for elements that might enrich their individual designing style. Nevertheless, it must be observed without any doubts that examples of solutions applied in Italian architecture spotted during the tour could give rise to searches for new solutions with the account for regional specifics of Poland. New trends in the Italian architecture of the times and no political limitations imposed on designing and construction of buildings was probably what the Polish architects liked. As well as the already mentioned attachment of Italian architects to the local context and preferences. This stress on importance of creating regional architecture might have been also transposed on the Polish realia.

Italian architecture in the film of 1958 and searches for its impact on the Polish architecture of the second half of the 1950s.

In this part of my paper I would like to focus on the presentation of attempts of the application of the Italian examples shown in the documentary film of 1958 in the Polish architecture designed in that period with the account for the regional aspects. The first building the documentary film under the analysis here shows is the building of the railway station in Rome - Roma Termini [fig. 2]



Figure 2. The building of the railway station in Rome - Roma Termini - frame from the documentary film entitled „Notatki o nowej architekturze Włoch” made by Mieczysław Wiesiołek in 1958. Author's elaboration

The characteristic pavilion of vertical shell walls and wave-like roof was, at the beginning of the 1950s, an example of good practice in modern architecture, acting in contrast to the historical town structure. Rhythmically designed façade and the play of light and shadow made the building look grand. Should we look for references thereto in the Polish architecture of the 1950s, we will find a similar example of the application of alternating concrete and glass vertical geometric planes in the building of the “Kijów” cinema in Cracow designed by Witold Cęckiewicz [fig3]. The cinema model was displayed at the exhibition of new Polish architecture in Warsaw in 1959. This building, similarly to its Italian

(Roman) predecessor, has become an icon of Polish post-war architecture. Seeking for regional features in this building will first mean the analysis of its location in the structure of the historical town. The proposed by the architect modern building block ideally corresponded to the local atmosphere and features of its location. The author, inspired with the works of the Italian architects, created a facility featuring the international style, nevertheless strongly rooted in the atmosphere of the town and the country of its origin.

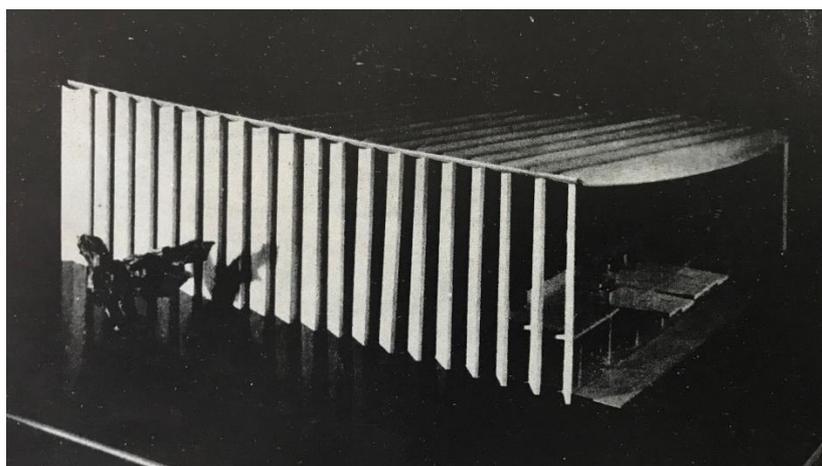


Figure 3. A mock-up model of the "Kijów" cinema, author W. Cęckiewicz. Built after 1960. The design featured similar vertical sub-division of the façade as those incorporated in the ticket office area of the railway station Roma Termini. Author of the photograph - unknown Source: Wiloch, J. (1959).

I would like to refer to another example of a building shown in the documentary film of 1958, namely the building of the Olivetti factory [fig4]. In numerous film frames we can see spacious, well-lit interiors of the factory as presented in the text. Horizontal conception of the building and a very high number of glazed planes underpin its almost immaterial expression. Numerous views of the structure of production halls and office buildings contribute to the building prominent outlook. Italian industrial architecture of the 1950s was characterised with numerous examples of buildings with outstanding forms and advanced engineering and technological solutions. There is no wonder that Polish young architects meticulously presented this building in the documentary film of 1958. In case of Polish industrial architecture, we can observe a similar way of thinking

about the form and structure of the building, for example in the building of the knitwear factory in Warsaw [fig5] presented at the exhibition of new Polish architecture in 1959. Modernity, spaciousness of the interiors and extremely advanced structure are featured on the photo included in the text. We may have the impression that it may well have been constructed in Italy not in Poland.



Figure 4. Fragment of the interior of the production hall in the Olivetti factory - frame from the documentary film entitled „Notatki o nowej architekturze Włoch” made by Mieczysław Wiesiołek in 1958. Author's elaboration

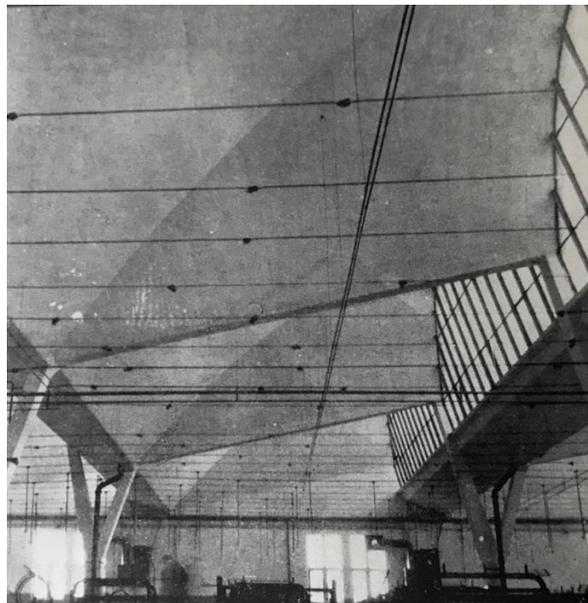


Figure 5. Fragment of the interior of the production hall in the knitwear factory in Warsaw. Designed by: D. Krajewski, H. Marconi. Author of the photograph - unknown Source: Wiloch, J. (1959).

Regionalism in the Polish architecture of the second half of the 1950s.

The process of seeking regional directions of creative activities in Polish modern architecture can be divided into several directions. I would like to discuss them following the template presented in the documentary film of 1958. The first direction is the architecture of public utility buildings. In many instances, these buildings, erected at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, featured modern attire both in terms of the external form and its interiors. The interiors to a certain extent accounted for regional characteristics. Local materials, such as stone or ceramics made by local artists, were often used. The interior of the already mentioned herein building of the "Kijów" cinema in Cracow by W. Cęckiewicz may serve as an example of buildings where local ceramics are used. The end of the 1950s saw an increased interest in the interior design. Many cafés and shops were opened and their interior design, with the atmosphere, selection of colours and applied ornaments, resembled the interiors of shops in Milan presented in the documentary film. The "Wenecja" bar in Warsaw completed in 1961 and designed by Zbigniew Ihnatowicz, Jerzy Sołtan, Adolf Szczepiński may serve as a very interesting example in this respect. Przemysław Szafer, critic of architecture, so wrote about the interior of the bar at the beginning of the 1970s (Szafer, 1972, p.163) *'Outstanding effect both as regards the elevation and interior design was generated through the application of natural materials such as the ceramic bricks, terracotta tiles, raw concrete and glass. As a result [...] extremely vivid colour effects were avoided.'* Residential architecture in Poland presented in the documentary film significantly differed from the Italian examples. Mainly due to different attitude to construction industry in a socialist and a democratic country. Nevertheless, as far as industrial buildings are concerned, architecture in Poland developed at a pace similar to that in Western Europe. Numerous factories erected in those times are characterised with well-thought of spatial and interesting structural solutions. A good example of such a building, compliant with regional practices, yet with features of a modern building, was the furniture factory in Wyszaków¹⁴ incorporating in its form repetitive structural components made of concrete. The already referred to P.

¹⁴ The factory design was displayed at the exhibition of Polish architecture of 1956-1959 in Warsaw.

Szafer, so wrote about this building (Szafer, 1972, p.309) *'Large industrial forms cease to be grey and heartless 'production machines and more and more often become true 'landmarks of the epoch'.*

Summary

In case of socialist Poland, an ordinary citizen could not freely travel to Western Europe at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. After 1956, in the period of the political thaw, travelling opportunities improved a bit, however, were much behind the contemporary travelling freedom. The main sources from which Polish architects could learn about architecture of the Western world were mainly magazines and occasional travels. At the second half of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s modern architecture started to be presented through a new medium, namely a documentary film.

There were two documentary films made in 1956 and 1958 by Mieczysław Wiesiołek, in the form of a diary from the travels, which presented modern architecture of France ¹⁵ and Italy that met the criteria of modernism¹⁶. In his short, 10-12 minute long films, the director presented the richness of new Western architecture seen through the prism of public utility buildings and residential buildings in both countries. Colourful film has enabled him to preserve the achievements of Western architecture observed by a Polish film maker and selected in consultations with the architects.

For the purpose of this article only one of those films has been used for the reason that the copy of the documentary on French architecture was impossible to get. An interesting part of both films is the image of downtown of Paris, Rome, Milan and other cities full of colours and freedom in full contrast to the grey space of Polish towns. A question arises why were France and Italy selected? The relations with these countries were approached with a more positive attitude of the communist regime than the relations with the USA or the

¹⁵ Modern French architecture, directed by: Mieczysław Wiesiołek, made in 1956

¹⁶ Notes on modern Italian architecture, directed by: Mieczysław Wiesiołek, made in 1958

Federal Republic of Germany. These were the countries connected with Poland with historical links - Italy in the Renaissance period and France in the 19th century prior to partitioning of Poland.

The film image, on the one hand, became a medium of a diary from the travels and, on the other hand, enabled the director to preserve the images of the visited places so that other architects, who could not travel to Western Europe, could see them as well. The film image has become a record of changing dynamics of the urban space and its architecture. What is conceived in the form of a design or a concept, is then preserved by the architect on paper or carbon paper, with the intention of a 3D facility, where respective views combine into one space of an architectural work piece and interact with the recipient/user or viewer. Modern architecture and modern town presented in the film under the analysis here, which dates back to the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, is a certain spatial game played between the user of the space and the architectural facility. Polish modern architecture at the end of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s is a theme not yet fully studied and analysed in view of its impact combined with ideology and film industry. Because of the political system, in which it was created (socialist political system), this architecture is marred with a particular, top imposed manner of its interpretation. In view of the political changes, which took place in Poland after 1956 (democratisation) we can see that architecture became a tool of propaganda. For the reason of its international character, on the one hand, it provided a link with Western architecture and, on the other hand, its domestic impact was meant to take advantage of the spatial and visual assets of such new architecture to present it as part of the propaganda of success of the period within the framework of which the citizens and foreigners were to be presented with a positive image of the political system.

The images of modern architectural works and the towns in Polish documentary films of the times were intended to show only their positive spatial, visual and economic aspects in a regional perspective. A documentary as a medium became a perfect tool of showing modern Poland through the prism of newly constructed facilities featuring the criteria of modernism. The epoch is a model research material, the subbase, which allows us to show and grasp the

atmosphere of the epoch through the criteria of modernity recorded in a film frame with the account for the regional features. To sum up my reflections herein, I one more time I would like to quote a phrase from the book: „*Architekci autokarem. Czechosłowacja, Austria, Szwajcaria, Francja, Włochy*”. [“*Architects on a bus tour through Czechoslovakia, Austria, Switzerland, France and Italy*”], which gives explicit testimony why the Polish architects travelled across Western Europe (Barucki, Dobrowolski, 1957, p. 6), ‘*Participants of the tour aspire to make up for the delays and to be part of modern technology in terms of Polish modern architecture.*’

Acknowledgments

This article constitutes part of the studies the author carried out at the Faculty of Architecture at Poznan University of Technology, Poland within the framework of the research project entitled the “*Architecture and the city in Polish feature films of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s*”, stage V [10/04/DSPB/0142]

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