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EVIDENCE OF THE CREATIVE SPIRIT. ARCHITECTURE OF MUSEUM BUILDINGS IN THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC OF POLAND

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Abstract: May this Parthenon of arts (...) be heart consoling evidence of the greatness of an immortal, everlastingly creative spirit of Poland. These words, written in the foundation act of the National Museum in Warsaw, leave no doubt – the authorities of the Second Republic of Poland (1918–1945) perceived culture as an extremely important factor creating the identity of the reborn state.

The construction of theatre and museum buildings was planned and conducted, and new institutions were conceived almost immediately after regaining independence. Suffice to mention that in the mid-1930s there were 135 public museums, half of which were established after 1918.

The culture-forming role of the construction of public buildings consolidated an image of the Second Republic as an heir of pre-partition Poland, and subsequently – as a modern state cherishing ambitions of achieving regional leadership. The first projects and their realisations were

a direct continuation of style from the turn of the nineteenth century. Theatre buildings designed by Czesław Przybylski in 1924, i.e. the National Theatre in Warsaw and the Municipal Theatre in Łódź (the latter was never erected) featured simplified Classical forms. Similarly, first projects of the National Museum in Warsaw (Marian Nikodemowicz, 1924) or the Museum of Pomerania in Toruń (Czesław Przybylski, 1926) followed the nineteenth-century tradition of the "museum-palace" and the "museum-temple of arts".

The late 1920s and the early 1930s marked a significant turning point; projects of the period reflected a search for an individual reception of modernity combined with national identity.

Architects of the Silesian Museum (Karol Schayer) or the National Museum in Warsaw (Tadeusz Tołwiński) sought a creative path linking modernity and the "state creating" character of architecture.

Keywords: architecture of museum buildings, avant-garde, Modernism, Classicism, national identity, national style.

John Ruskin described architecture as the most "political" of the arts while, at the same time, indicating its enormous propaganda potential. True, the role performed by architecture and, to a lesser degree, town planning in the process of creating or reinforcing national identity appears to be undeniable. In the wake of 1918, public investments in the newly emergent state bodies of East-Central Europe became the domain of formal experiments whose shared objective was expressing national identity in architecture. The

renascent Second Republic was by no means an exception and the construction policy conducted by the re-emergent Polish state as regards public utility objects placed equal emphasis on the modern and national character of realisations.

Amidst public utility buildings special place belonged to objects fulfilling a cultural function. In their case, the contents (function) merged into a single entity with the form, thanks to which they exerted a particularly strong impact upon the recipients. This article is an attempt at

following main currents and tendencies present in the architecture of museum buildings designed after 1918 within the context of creating the identity of an independent and modern Polish state.

Identity expressed in architecture

Architecture of the Second Republic should be perceived as a complex and multi-motif phenomenon containing both historicising, vernacular, and radically avant-garde tendencies. In his book: Architektura użyteczności publicznej II Rzeczypospolitej 1918-1939. Forma i styl Michał Pszczółkowski evoked several relatively universally used definitions concerning Polish architecture during the interwar period such as: "between tradition and the avantgarde" or "between historicism and functionalism". The evolution of chief trends in the architecture of the reborn Republic was characterised already in the 1960s by Andrzej K. Olszewski, who distinguished successive periods of a search for "the new form" in Polish architecture.² At the same time connections between particular stylistic currents and parallel political-social processes are clearly visible. The popularity of traditional forms identified primarily with the native and manorial style in sacral and residential architecture³ ended in the mid-1920s. The political situation of the period was relatively stable and Polish frontiers had been constituted by international resolutions. A vision of the Second Republic as the heir of pre-partition history and tradition became perpetuated, while the leading social role of the landowners and, consequently, the imaginarium associated with it became questioned.⁴ Poland made a decisive turn towards widely comprehended modernity, and architecture was supposed to stress the crucial role of the state both in modernisation and affiliation to the Western cultural range.

The concept of "modernity" appears to be of special importance within this context. According to Andrzej Szczerski the Second Republic opted for modern development according both to the advanced methods known in Europe and her own ideas, while cherishing the ambition of joining the best developed states of the Old Continent.⁵

If, however, we accept as the point of departure the definition proposed by Jürgen Habermas, who described "modernity" as questioning the outer world tenets, 6 then we may, while following the example of Andrzej Leder⁷ or Adam Leszczyński, 8 ask whether Polish "modernity" was not actually a costume used to adorn archaic social structures. Such a conception is reflected in the history of Polish architecture. Note that from the onset of the second decade of that century all the way to 1939 Poland was the site of a strong avant-garde movement whose activity, however, was not converted to state realisations with a significant identity role. In The Birth of the Museum, History, Theory and Politics Tony Bennet defined nineteenth-century museums as an extension of a certain social order. In Poland the construction of new post-1918 reality merged the conservative consolidation of the social status quo and the building of a new identity and image of the independent motherland into a single whole. This is also the way in which it is possible to explain the relatively small representation of the revolutionarily inclined architectural avant-garde among all cultural objects. The phenomenon in question was confirmed by Mieczysław

Treter, who in 1928 summed up the progress of art in the first decade of independence while stressing the need for creativity endowed with local, national specificity. At the same time, he rejected constructivist abstraction for the sake of realism, 10 which in architecture denoted a dialogue with tradition and history.

Architecture and culture in space

An analysis of buildings functioning as seats of cultural institutions cannot be limited to reflections on their pure functionality but, in accordance with the conception outlined by Umberto Eco, 11 include turns towards the semantics of an architectural work. Attention should be, therefore, concentrated on its non-implication as a sign or a collection of signs. The semiotic merit of representative cultural objects is contained in all their strata: from interiors, architectural detail, and the shape of the solid, to localisation within the town-planning context. The latter aspect played a significant part across the centuries, both in antiquity and in eighteenth-- and nineteenth-century Europe when, following the example of the plans of Frederick II the Great, particular states started to create a "cultural forum". Hans Selmer perceived this phenomenon as the socialisation of secular life. Temples of art (theaters and museums) were to replace churches and their traditional function within the urban structure. 12 Voltaire postulated to restore to cultural buildings the role of national monuments, as in ancient times. 13 True, already Vitruvius placed theatres among buildings normative for municipal complexes.¹⁴

During the twentieth century the part of a reference point was played not by private foundations and collections created upon the basis of the subjective predilections of individuals or narrow elitist groups but by public realisations often financed by the state. Grzegorz Dziamski accentuated: It is necessary to reject the false genealogy proposed by Julius von Schlosser, who derived modern museums from the Late Renaissance Kunst- und Wunderkammern, sixteenth-seventeenth century cabinets of curiosities. 15 In their stead he proposed Altes Museum designed in Berlin in 1824 by Karl Friedrich Schinkel¹⁶ as the original model of a "pure" conception of the modern museum. Michel Foucault contrasted archaic institutions, which were the expression of an individual choice, with modern museums and libraries conceived as heterotopias, in which time never stops building up.17

The Second Republic benefited already from the entire resource of the experiences of other European states, at the same time enhancing it with an individual character and new objectives created for art and architecture. May this Parthenon of arts (...) be heartening evidence of the greatness of the immortal, everlastingly creative spirit of Poland. 18 These words inscribed in the erection act of the National Museum in Warsaw leave no doubts – the authorities of the Second Republic perceived culture as an extremely essential factor forming the identity of the renascent state. The construction of theatre and museum buildings was planned and conducted, and new institutions were established almost from the very onset of independence. Suffice to mention that in the mid-1930s there were 135 public museums in Poland, of which half were created after 1918. 19



1. Project of the National Museum in Warsaw, architect Marian Nikodemowicz, 1924

At the same time a specific absence of cohesion and consistency was a characteristic feature of state policy focused on cultural investments. Despite an awareness of the importance of culture and art pertinent expenditure comprised a slight percentage of all the outlays in the budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, and in 1930 totalled 1%.²⁰ Pszczółkowski stressed that the functioning of a decisive majority of investments was thus the effect of assorted social initiatives or public collections, which, nonetheless, were supported by the state or self-governments.²¹

The museum as a temple of art

The culture-creating role of public buildings after 1918 consolidates an image of the Second Republic as an heir of pre-partition Poland. Hence first projects and realisations constitute a continuation of the paseistic style based on Classical models. Take the example of the conceptions of new museums originating from the first half of the 1920s together with other cultural objects, with particular attention paid to theatres. Although the process of shaping their architecture was subjected to different determinants than those of museums, which are the object of these reflections, they comprised an element of a single symbolic space. It seems, therefore, fully justified to outline a wider spectrum composed of representative buildings – seats of the cultural institutions of the Second Republic.

An excellent example of a traditional functional configuration and conservative form was the theatre in Częstochowa, built in 1928–1931 according to a project by Józef Krupa and Teodor Łapiński. The solid, whose design was inspired by the nineteenth-century building of the National Theatre in Warsaw,²² features solutions characteristic for academic Classicism although subjected to a modernisation of sorts. A similar approach had been applied earlier by Czesław Przybylski in his unrealised conception of the Municipal Theatre in Łódź (1923). Despite the absence of architectural order articulation it is possible to easily distinguish the

symmetric composition of monumental elevations as well as the application of many other solutions of Classical provenance.²³ Przybylski, who designed an imposing edifice containing the main and chamber halls, wished to impact the spectator by means of the monumental scale of the cubature and its Classical proportions and not by the sumptuousness of the decorations.²⁴ This intention was confirmed also by the conception of interior outfitting distant from the opulence of nineteenth-century theatres; here, the design foresaw, apart from an attractive foyer, modest and unembellished forms.²⁵

The mentioned objects continued the nineteenth-century tradition of the "cultural object-palace" and "temple of art". Monumental forms were connected both with the conviction about the representative character of Classical forms and their compatibility with the ceremonial function of cultural buildings. Following the steps of Carol Duncan, Maria Popczyk underlined that museums (as well as other cultural buildings) resemble ritual sites not only due to characteristic architectural references but also, or perhaps predominantly, because they too possess ritual appropriation.²⁶

The cited idea was to be realised also by the National Museum in Warsaw. Selected in a competition held in 1924 and awarded first prize, the project by Marian Nikodemowicz, an architect from Lwów, was a continuation of Schinkelian examples from the previous century. The building, erected on the plan of a rectangle, was organised around two inner courtyards between which the project foresaw a main hall covered with a flattened dome. The solid of the building was composed in the spirit of academic Classicism, which, in accordance with nineteenth-century principles, appeared to be the most suitable for public utility objects. This is confirmed by the fact that all the distinguished works presented a Classicising appearance and by the statement made by Alexander Raniecki, one of the competition judges, who wrote in "Architektura i Budownictwo": The façade of the building (...) should create a monumental and uniform architectural composition.²⁷ The axial composition of the façade, with a strong accent on the central part in the shape of a portico supported by columns, created the image of



2. Project of the National Museum in Warsaw, architect Zdzisław Mączeński, 1924

a "temple" dedicated to art and of a setting for the ritual of its contemplation. Starting with the elevation and details, all the way to the hierarchic spatial configuration of the interiors, the architecture of the museum was to comprise both the decoration and the scenario. ²⁸ The results of the competition gave rise to a controversy. The organisers were accused of an erroneous formulation of the programme and of restricting the architects' invention by indicating Classical forms as suitable. ²⁹ Ultimately, the conception proposed by Nikodemowicz was not realised and a new competition was organised in 1926. Its outcome was completely different and predicted a breakthrough in the current of so-called official architecture.

With time, architecture intended for the purposes of culture underwent transformations accompanying an evolution of the image created by the renascent Republic. In as late as 1925–1930 Stefan Narębski, author of the Museum of Kujawy, erected at the time, resorted to historical forms but subjected them to a modern composition of simple solids. By following the example of Pszczółkowski we may easily discover in the ogival portal and the trefoil blind windows an original example of the application of Gothic references, 30 which, however, had been subjected to far-going simplifications.

Transformations affected also the forms and typology of museum buildings and the philosophy accompanying them. The question of designing new buildings with their future expansion in mind was raised increasingly frequently. This was the approach recommended by Zenon Przesmycki, who accentuated that the role played by a museum would exceed far beyond the exposition of collections, and that the architect should keep in mind the fact that in the future the given museum shall irrevocably become an entire complex, a conglomerate of buildings. Moreover, Przesmycki mentioned numerous types of interiors, which should be included in the newly planned building, at the same time making the reservation that the future would certainly bring solutions, which he was incapable of imagining.

Przesmycki postulated that the architecture of new museum buildings should be characterised by moderation and restraint. Instead of applying decorativeness obligatory in the nineteenth century he stressed the necessity of subjecting architectural form to the fulfilled function, indicating that it should constitute a discreet frame for the collections.³² Mieczysław Treter spoke in a similar vein.³³

Modernity in the service of the independent state

A breakthrough in the development of Polish architecture took place at the end of the 1920s and the onset of the 1930s. In accordance with the idea expressed in the above-cited declaration made by Mieczysław Treter, artists and theoreticians sought a style that would express the national spirit and, at the same, accentuate the modern character of the Republic. This is the role that Classicising Modernism was to play.

Architecture that combined the unadorned simplicity of the avant-garde with the monumentalism of antiquity not only granted a suitable setting to official rituals but also realised the idea of "Poland on the Mediterranean", as if stressing affiliation to Latin culture. Avant-garde Modernism, deprived of national attachment, was incapable of fulfilling this function, as testified by, i.a. the opinions expressed by designers.

Architects associated with the moderately conservative monthly "Architektura i budownictwo" searched in the forms of public buildings for values close to monumental architecture of Classical provenance. *In Poland tradition is eagerly trampled or regarded as evidence of dementia and negative values* – they wrote,³⁴ thus clearly dealing a blow aimed at the Modernist avant-garde. While discussing the results of the second competition for a project of the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow editor Stanisław Woźnicki underlined: *Respect for, and a profound understanding of the eternal values of Classical traditions revealed by the Soviet state undergoing industrialisation on an enormous scale, deserve*

to be watched carefully. ³⁵ In such a situation the monumental character of the buildings of the Silesian Museum in Katowice, the Museum of Crafts and Applied Arts in Warsaw, and the National Museums in Warsaw or Cracow should not come as a surprise.

The National Museum in Warsaw, designed by Tadeusz Tołwiński, was erected in 1927-1932 and 1935-1939. The main part was established on a plan of an elongated rectangle, with four adjoining wings creating open courtyards. The competition judges praised the exceptional clarity of the plan and the attainment of the largest utilitarian squaring of the circle of interiors. 36 Simple and functional spaces illuminated by overhead light (or overhead-side lamps) implemented a new program of the exposition of artworks. Already in 1917 M. Treter drew attention to the purposefulness of placing and displaying works of art in objects specially intended for this purpose. In addition, he stressed the necessity of applying modern technical solutions that would not only ensure comfort for the visitors but also be safe for the accumulated exhibits.³⁷ Special attention was paid to lighting, considered in detail in the first half of the 1920s by Juliusz Zborowski³⁸ and Julian Leonard, 39 who postulated overhead-side lamps instead of the until then used overhead light and side lamps.

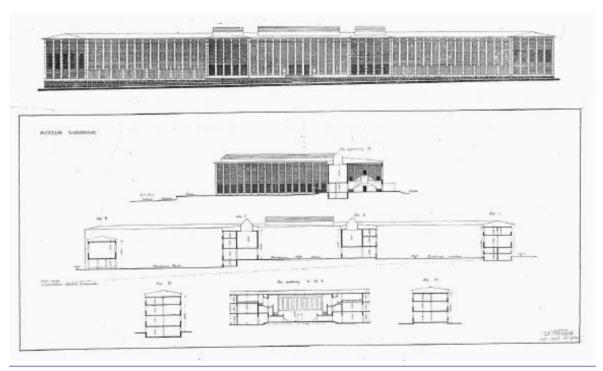
Despite certain functional insufficiencies or shortcomings (communication within a multi-storey layout of the interiors) Tołwiński proudly accentuated: From the viewpoint of technical outfitting and special equipment the National Museum is one of the most modern and best-appointed museums. 40

At the same time, simple solids received a setting that referred to simplified Classicism. Here, the decisive factor was the axial nature of the composition, the monumental character of the entrance hall preceded by a portico supported by pillars, and the regular rhythm of simple lesenes,

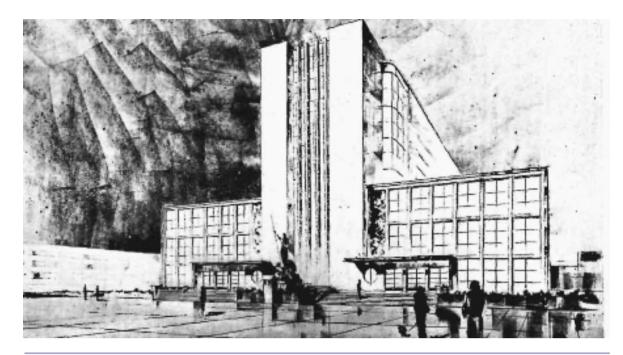
which created the articulation of the façade and rendered reference to a Classical colonnade legible.

Similar premises, although expressed by different means, were realised by the Silesian Museum in Katowice. Its construction had been considered already in 1924, and in 1927 Michał Grażyński, the then voivode of Silesia, entrusted Tadeusz Dobrowolski with the office of head of the Department of Art and recommended to create a collection, which was to become the core of the ensuing museum. Initially, the exhibits were presented on the uppermost storey of the seat of the Voivodeship Office. 41 but no one doubted that it was necessary to erect a modern building, which would fulfil the function of a museum. Work on raising the edifice according to a project by Karol Schayer was initiated in 1936. Numerous historical connotations are to be encountered in its Modernist form, and the shape of the solid *makes it possible* to decipher an allusion to forms resembling a monument. This holds true for the central projection, bringing to mind the shape of a tower, a residence of a sovereign, and, at the same time, a fortified space dedicated also to commemoration and defence. 42 The ideological significance of the Schayer museum is explicitly evidenced by the fact that it was supposed to create, together with the nearby Silesian Sejm, a Polish imperial forum with a monumental architectural program.⁴³

Other noteworthy objects whose architectural form accomplished the official program of an intentional merger of modernity with the spirit of Classicism include the National Museum in Cracow and the Museum of Pomerania in Toruń. The first, designed in 1934 by Czesław Boratyński, Bolesław Schmidt, and Edward Kreisler, combined Modernist simplicity of the cubature with monumentalism and spatial distribution based on a layout organised around inner courtyards originating from nineteenth-century museum architecture. 44



3. Project of the National Museum in Warsaw – chosen for realisation, architect Tadeusz Tołwiński, 1926



4. Edifice of the Silesian Museum, architect Karol Schayer, 1936

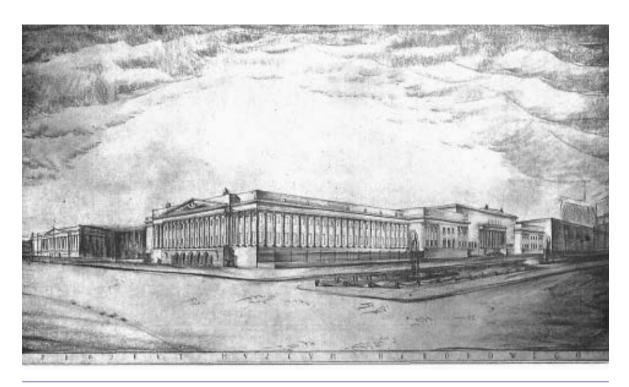
The Museum of Pomerania was to constitute not only a monument of Polish culture but also homage paid to Józef Piłsudski. A competition announced in 1935 attracted over thirty projects, from which the concept by Franciszek Krzywda--Polkowski was selected for realisation.⁴⁵ Construction work was inaugurated in 1937 and accompanied by a public collection of funds as well as a widely conceived propaganda campaign aimed at increasing social awareness of the object's meaning for the region. The campaign in question was conducted by the Executive Committee for the Construction of the Museum of Pomerania, which also played the part of coordinator of the investment.⁴⁶ The building, which today is the seat of a University, was moulded in a "purely Modernist fashion", with the entrance in the central part of the edifice accentuated by a simplified portico, a distant echo of Classical architecture.

The avant-garde and identity

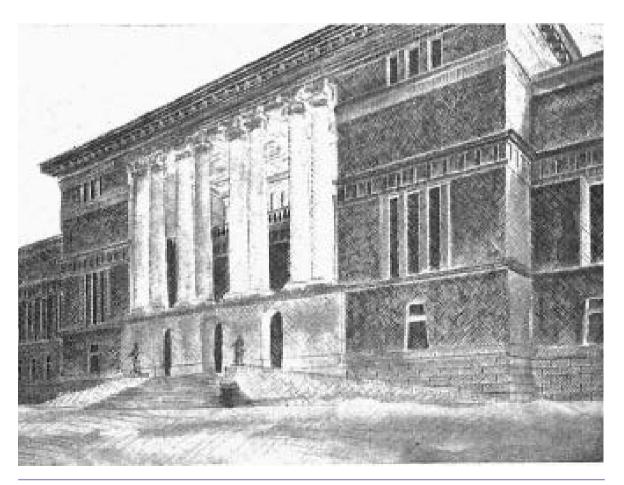
As has been mentioned, the part played by avant-garde architecture in the creation of official architectural symbolic space in the Second Republic was slight. This is not to say, however, that Functionalistic objects did not come into being. In 1924 Jarosław Girin designed the People's House (Dom Ludowy) in Białystok, which in the course of its realisation was changed into a municipal theatre. Some forms of small-scale architecture originate from the premises of the modern movement although, at the same time, it is difficult to speak about this object as an icon of architecture from the era of Functionalism.⁴⁷ This is also the way in which the seat of the Stanisław Moniuszko Theatre in Stanisławów, designed in 1929 by Stanisław Trela, should be assessed. Its simple geometric forms, rounded quoin, and the architect's inclination towards operating with large surfaces devoid of articulation bring to mind realisations from the range of Italian rationalism.

While considering the impact of the avant-garde on the architecture of cultural objects in the Second Republic it is impossible to ignore the unrealised conception of a "simultaneous theatre" by Helena and Szymon Syrkus and Andrzej Pronaszko. The project, presented in New York in 1927, broke with the heretofore tradition of shaping theatre interiors and thanks to an extremely expanded stage apparatus was supposed to enable the accomplishment of the postulate of a spectacle's simultaneousness. As Nonetheless, regardless of the pioneering character of this conception, the avant-garde did not fully join the current of constructing the identity of independent Poland by means of the architecture of cultural objects.

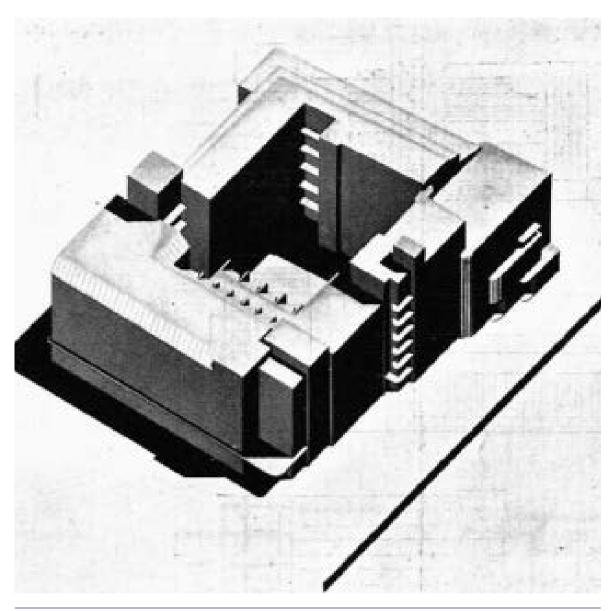
It is difficult to discover among the discussed projects and realisations of museum buildings those, which could be unanimously attributed to the current of Modernist avant-garde. The fact that even designers whose works are associated with Functionalism endeavoured to grant cultural buildings a Classical and monumental character appears to be symptomatic. The project of the Warsaw National Museum, devised by Jadwiga Dobrzańska (jointly with Bolesław Żurkowski and Stefan Sienicki), features instead of Modernist simplicity typical for the later oeuvre of this architect also solutions close to academic Classicism. The conception proposed by Maksymilian Goldberg and Hipolit Rutkowski should be assessed similarly. Against the backdrop of numerous comparable cases Czesław Przybylski's project for the Museum of Crafts and Applied Arts in Warsaw remains distinctive. This multi-functional object (apart from showrooms it was to contain also, i.a. a library and a school) was planned around an inner atrium.⁴⁹ The solutions applied for the interiors and the solid were differentiated depending on the purpose of a given part of the building, which obtained an attractive setting maintained in the style of avant-garde Modernism with elements of Art Déco characteristic for Przybylski's oeuvre.



5. Project of the National Museum in Warsaw, architects Jadwiga Dobrzyńska, Stefan Sienicki, Bolesław Żurkowski, 1924



6. Project of the National Museum in Warsaw, architects Maksymilian Goldberg and Hipolit Rutkowski, 1924



7. Project of the Museum of Crafts and Applied Arts in Warsaw, architect Czesław Przybylski, 1930

(Fot. / Photo: 1, 2, 5, 6 – w / in: "Architektura i budownictwo" 1925, nr / no. 1; 3 – w / in: "Architektura i budownictwo" 1926, nr / no. 9; 4 – in/: "Architektura i budownictwo" 1936, no. 2; 7 – w / in: "Architektura i budownictwo" 1930, no. 7)

New architectural projects and their realisation within the domain of public utility objects were of enormous significance for creating the image of the Second Republic and building community — and identity-oriented attitudes. This phenomenon is accentuated by the presented evolution of museum architecture, whose origins date back to nineteenth-century projects emulating solutions

devised in Western Europe. In time they became supplanted by such conceptions as the National Museum in Warsaw or the Silesian Museum, whose pioneering character was by no means inferior to leading realisations of the period. Architects simultaneously sought an answer to questions concerning the "new form" in architecture not by pursuing ready-made schemes but by striving towards expressing in stone and concrete both the spirit of the time and the identity of the nation and the independent Republic.

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