Historical Architectural Detail in the Landscape of the 21st Century on the Example of the Train Building Development of Opole Silesia

Marek Konopka

The Faculty of Architecture of Wrocław University of Technology

Scientific work financed from funds for the science in years 2008–2010 as a research project

The train building development coming into existence in Poland since 1842 was ruled by its own laws. Owing to its ennobling character, it was modelled on majestic patterns of recognised architecture. The expression of its form was emphasised with numerous details which with time underwent a specific transformation. After the Second World War this process was stopped. Attempts of the reconstruction of old objects and erecting new ones demonstrate significant ignorance in view of the historical and aesthetic values of train buildings. This translates directly into the actual impoverishment of the architectural detail on railways and breaking the natural cycle of the development of construction.

Keywords and phrases: architectural detail, railway station, restoration.

Forms

When in 1842 the first public, passenger train in Silesia set off from Wrocław to Oława, nobody was able to predict how far within 170 years the technological development will reach. Buildings coming into existence then which accompanied railways were raised in accordance with contemporary stylistic trends, of which an architectural detail was domain. Railways, perceived as an outstanding manifestation of modernity and progress, received the majestic casing emphasizing its seriousness. Models of the architectural setting of newly created functions were drawn from acknowledged examples of representative buildings. Hence forms of big stations were modelled on palaces and of the smaller ones on small manor houses. In every case an architectural detail appeared. Sometimes it was an ordinary decoration or a sophisticated functional form, but largely it was a decorative finishing of structural elements. Its numerous examples have been preserved till the present times. Most often it appeared on stations buildings. Slightly more modestly it was presented on technical buildings — water towers, signal boxes, engine sheds, forwarding magazines. It was also present on small outbuildings or public toilets which were decorated in a minimal way.

Transformations

Station buildings raised in the second half of the 19th century were characterized by a classical decoration. Their cornices, pilasters, full arches crowning holes or bases were made from stone or in plaster, and visible wooden elements of rafter framings were decorated with simple carpenter's detail.

In Opole Silesia a brick detail which decorates train buildings raised at the end of the 19th and at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is the most widespread and the most recognizable. This period was characterized by a rich choice of ceramic fittings and bricks, from which cornices, pilasters, pediments, frames or base courses were easily constructed. These decorations were often supplemented with typically decorative ceramic elements such as finials or rosettes. In these buildings next to the brick detail also a wooden detail connected with the rafter framing and window and door frames functioned. Rafters in eaves gained carpenter's ornaments, and decorative poles and openwork patterns appeared in gables. Not less striking were elements of window and door frames. Complex cross-sections of pillars, transoms, muntin bars and frames gave lightness to even big holes. In many cases such looking stations were accompanied by platform sheds which also carried a considerable

Fig. 1. Decorative carpenter's detail of the rafter framing visible on ends of the rafter and the purlin; by their decorativeness, carpenter's decorations of eaves as well as cast-iron consoles sustaining the overhang of the gable balance strict brick walls of the station in Otmuchów (Pic. by author, 2009).

number of decorative elements. This was often a metal detail — cast-iron or steel. It is mainly visible in the form of moulding poles (classical tripartite division) and of trusses of the rafter framing. However, these sheds were usually made later than the main station buildings, and what follows, in their style they often reminded of Secessionist models.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and at the beginning of the 20th c. Secessionist and regional forms appear. Brick walls of stations started to be partly covered by plaster. The brick detail was intertwined with stone elements. Wooden ornaments assumed sophisticated and firmly rounded off shapes. The main holes of windows and the door grew much wider. Also small stations built in skeletal systems and the style imitating the Alpine and Sudeten construction appeared. Further evolution in the 1920s entered modernist forms. Walls were plastered in whole, and the detail was maximally simplified. Simple geometrical cornices and simple window frames were made. Only the main entrances gained a richer geometrical decoration in plaster or in stone. Also forms of the woodwork underwent simplification.

Elements of functional forms, which corresponded with their style to the entire architectural form,

Fig. 2. A shed of the island platform in the station in Otmuchów. Cast-iron decorative poles carry steel trusses on which the wooden rafter framing was based. Clearly one can see the classical tripartite division of the pole modelled on the Corinthian order (Pic. by author, 2009).

Fig. 3. Fragment of classical finishing of the wall of the station in Gogolin. Simple classical pilasters and arches are modelled on the Doric order. The rafter framing of the shed and the tap were added later (Pic. by author, 2009).

Fig. 4. Elevation of the station in Długomiłowice. An eclectic form with regional elements. Next to brick cornices there are stone finishings of corners, frames, stone bases and keystones of arches. The majority of the elevation is covered by plaster. The rafter framing refers to the Sudeten construction. The main entrance leads through a wide and glazed door opening (Pic. by author, 2006).

commonly accompanied the architectural detail. These were primarily clocks, taps, benches, balustrades, boards and information devices. A few historical examples can be seen even today; however, these elements were most susceptible to changes resulting from the technological progress (clocks, information elements) and from public changes (taps, benches). In the 21st century it is actually possible to shape clocks in any form and to use their many technical solutions, whereas taps have become unnecessary, because all hygienic or dietary activities are mostly performed outside of the range of the station.

After the Second World War the development of railways was stopped. The cultural tradition and the continuity of stylistic changes were stopped in the process. Thorough overhauls and post-war reconstructions of train buildings in Opole Silesia are few and difficult to systematize. In the vast majority the current class of the train building development is made up of buildings raised till the time of war. Thus historical architectural

Fig. 5. Modernist door portal of the station in Olesno. Its modest geometrical detail remains in the shade of the monumental mass of the building. A characteristic extensive peak protects the wide access to the main room of the station. The door carpentry dates back to end of the 20th century (Pic. by author, 2009).

Fig. 6. On the left: clock in the station in Paczków. In the steel structure dating back to the turn of the 19th and the 20th century a mechanism from the end of the 20th century was enclosed. On the right: decorative cast-iron tap in the Szymiszów station. Unused and not-conserved yields to further destruction (Pic. by author, 2009).

forms still function. Post-war forms can be mainly found in buildings of platform sheds which were built within the Opole hub and on the line Opole Główne — Kędzierzyn-Koźle. These simple steel constructions of rolled beams and metal sheets present, however, more engineering than architectural forms.

Threats

Relying on a historical building development in the days of the fast technological and social progress is asynchronous. Buildings become impractical and are brought to technological death. Simultaneously, no space for moulding new forms appears. There arises a threat of making barren the space in which former buildings become derelict, but new ones do not appear and do not carry on the continuity of the development cycle. Such an image in a macro scale directly translates into the scale of the architectural detail which grows poorer.

Global expectation of a better world on the threshold of the 21st century could also be felt in basic aspects of the rail transport in Poland. Transformations and possibilities of the development following the development of economic ties of Europe lent credence to the effectiveness of general modernization investments. A still conducted redevelopment of railway on the line from Wrocław to Katowice is one of them. Along with the repair of tracks and the infrastructure, modernizations of the part of the building development are also conducted. Even though an improvement in the quality of functioning of railways is undoubtedly their purpose, the form of the conducted actions causes a lot of reservations. First of all, the historical value of buildings

Fig. 7. Building of the station in Lewin Brzeski. During the modernization conducted in 2007 walls were covered with an even layer of polystyrene foam, due to which all details of the elevation were covered depriving the entire building of any stylistic values. Additionally, it was painted in the expressive orange colour (Pic. by author, 2009).

Fig. 8. Modern platform shed in the Przecza station. Made in 2007, after two years of use demonstrated strong wear and tear and damage. The fragile steel construction presents faint aesthetic values. The wire fence and seats are a complete denial of the former majestic style of the train building development (Pic. by author, 2009).

is not respected. Walls are covered with a thick layer of polystyrene foam, ceilings with simple suspended ceiling coffers, and the whole gains new bright colours. The outstanding and functional detail is killed without thinking, and nothing comes into existence in its place. Next to rebuilt buildings new ones appear: prefabricate steel-glass sheds resembling roofs of bus stops, wire seats and monumental concrete ramps with indistinct tubular balustrades. Their shape is merely a connection of technique and usefulness.

The ultimate form of such modernizations is dictated by the economics of the undertaking without an analysis of aesthetic values. It would seem that the culture of the contemporary society gives an unrestricted range of possibilities and ideas which can be fulfilled in an amazing, fascinating and innovative way. It is puzzling then why no use is made of it. Why do people pay homage to junk and cheapness? Why are tradition and knowledge not respected? The effect of this is a situation in which the common legacy is destroyed and simultaneously nothing that could testify to the present time in the future comes into existence. Areas appear in which cultural awareness starts disappearing. Its place starts to be filled in by the economic calculus. This builds an image of mindless modernity, and the ever existing principle of moulding the space, which consists in conscious transformations, is ignored.

References

[1] Jerczyński, M., and S. Koziarski. *150 lat kolei na Śląsku.* Opole–Wrocław: Instytut Śląski, 1992 [in Polish].
[2] Lijewski, T. *Geografia transportu Polski.* Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 1977 [in Polish].
[3] Pregiel, P., and T. Przerwa. *Dzieje Śląska.* Wrocław: Cadus, 2005 [in Polish].
[4] Salmonowicz, S. *Prusy — dzieje państwa i społeczeństwa.* Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 2004 [in Polish].
[5] Taylor, Z. *Rozwój i regres sieci kolejowej w Polsce.* Warszawa: IGiPZ PAN, 2007 [in Polish].