

Modernist Architecture and the Sacred – the change of contemporary architecture in the perspective of the early modernism sacred buildings

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Representatives of natural sciences are fully aware of the fact that searching for the truth, even when it concerns a limited reality of the world or that of man, never ends and always refers to something that is beyond the direct object of study, to a question opening access to a mystery²

Introduction

Criticism of contemporary architecture encounters many difficulties, “for the first time, to such a considerable extent, diametrically different trends coexist. [...] The paradigms of absolute freedom, liberalism, tolerance and pluralism, supported by technological possibilities result in unprecedented ambitions of investors and authorities.”³ A similar phenomenon occurs in sacred architecture which constitutes a unique creative activity. The phenomenon concerns not only man’s material but, most of all, man’s spiritual needs. Sacred architecture includes every human activity whose aim it is to separate the profane from the sacred. However, “difficulties appear when one tries to define the scope of the sacred.”⁴ The paper presents an analysis of contemporary churches which are particularly important to modernist movement as well as objects whose idea stems from modernism. In this paper studied the latest publications, books and magazines on contemporary religious architecture such as: M. Bergamo., *Mattia del Prete, Spazi celebrativi. L’architettura dell’Ecclesia*, Roma 1994, L. Feireiss, *Closer to God, Religious Architecture and Sacred Spaces*, Berlin 2010, E. Heathcote, I. Spens, *Church Builders*, London, Great Britain 1997, E. Heathcote., Mofatt L, *Contemporary Church Architecture*, Great Britain

2007, E. Heathcote, *Monument Buildings*, Great Britain 1999, N. W., *Rubens Places of worship*, USA 2004, Stock W. J., *Architectural Guide – Christian Sacred Buildings in Europe since 1950*, Bonn 2004, Stock W. J., *Christian Sacred Buildings In Europe Since 1950*, Germany 2004. The analysis also applies to the case study sites and publications related to the work of early modernists : L. Corbusier, *Esprit Nouveau*, Paryż 1921 [w:] Gossel P., Leuthauser G., *Architektura XX wieku T.1*, Kolonia 2010, J. Bonta, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*, Warszawa 1987, Evers P. B., *Architectural Theory – From the renaissance to the present*, Koln 2011. Ch. Jencks., *The language of post-modern architecture*, Londyn UK 1991, R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art Press, New York 1966, R. Venturi., *Learning from Las Vegas* (with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour), MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1972, revised 1977. The paper will also examined assumptions liturgical movement and its influence on the shape of modern churches. The key question, however, remains the issue of progress in the connections of contemporary religious architecture It is an attempt to find out how the progress in contemporary architecture has influenced contemporary sacred architecture.

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² John Paul II, *Encyklika Fides et ratio, O relacjach między wiarą a rozumem*, Watykan 1998. 106.

³ W. Kosiński, *Trwałość i przemijanie architektury- stymulacje twórczości* [w]: *Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej, Trwanie i przemijanie architektury*, Kraków 2011, p. 200.

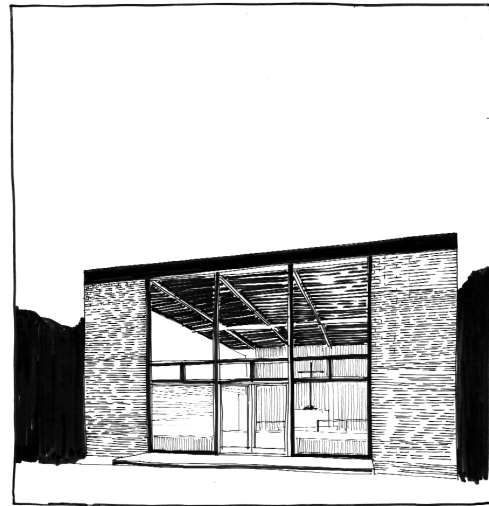
⁴ M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, Łódź 1993, p.7.



il.1, il.1b Church of Votum Alex in Tarnow, Poland, design studio Beton arch. (Marta and Lech Rowinscy), 2010

Sacred architecture in the context of development the modernism movement

As an architect R. Gieselmann aptly points out, “a discussion of contemporary sacred architecture is, in fact, a discussion of religion;”⁵ however, technological progress, access to a variety of new means of expression, engineering advances in construction as well as the modernist thought have all affected contemporary buildings. However, defining modernist architecture is far from unambiguous. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as a movement in art and architecture, modernist architecture broke off all ties with tradition and history. Architecture was to be rational, functional, asemantic and, as a rule, abstain from using ornaments. The leading representatives of early European avant-garde modernism, were Walter Gropius, the author of “Bauhaus”, Mies van der Rohe, the author of the German Pavilion at Barcelona international exhibition in 1929 and Le Corbusier, who in his “work referred to rationalist tradition of French art.”⁶ As early as 1929 in purism manifesto, together with Ozenfant Corbusier, he published his theoretical assumptions; “even then he claimed that in the modern age all forms of human activity, including literature, art, philosophy and technical arts have to be subjected to one principle which at the last stage has to express itself through the absolute sense of construction and synthesis. According to him “a work of art should appear to have a mathematical order.”⁷ In spite of rational theoretical assumptions, Mies as well as Corbusier became the authors of sacred objects. In 1952 Mies designed the chapel at Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, which reflects his design ideas [il.2]. They were based on the principle of “extreme simplicity of solids developed from a steel carcass and



il.2 University chapel Crown Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology College of Architecture– Academic Building, arch. Chicago, Illinois, USA, designed arch. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1956

transparent glass walls. He believed that the simplicity of his buildings reflects modernism in the only possible way, i.e. by means of monumentality.”⁸ Designed as a steel structure with brick filling and a glass front wall the chapel is an example of extreme minimalism in sacred architecture. Meaningful elements were reduced to a minimum; a cross placed behind the altar and visible from the outside is the only element that reveals the religious purpose of the facility. However, what distinguished Mies from other modernists was reduction mastered to perfection, which influenced other designers of sacred architecture in the future.

⁵ R. Gieselmann *Neue Kirchen*, Stuttgart 1972, Verlag Gerd Hatje p. 8 quoted after M. E. Rosier- Siedleck, *Posoborowa Architektura Sakralne*, Lublin 1980, p. 8.

⁶ Kotula A., Krakowski P., *Architektura współczesna*, Kraków 1967 p.75.

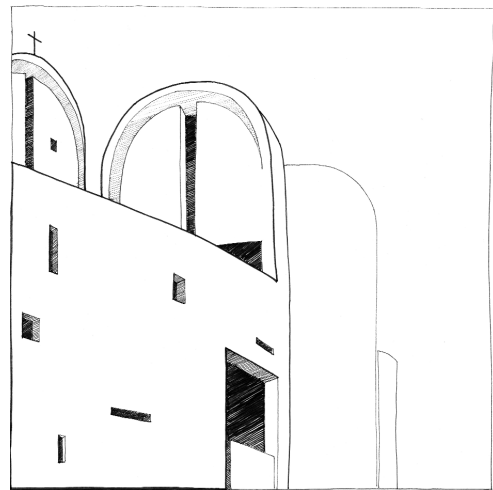
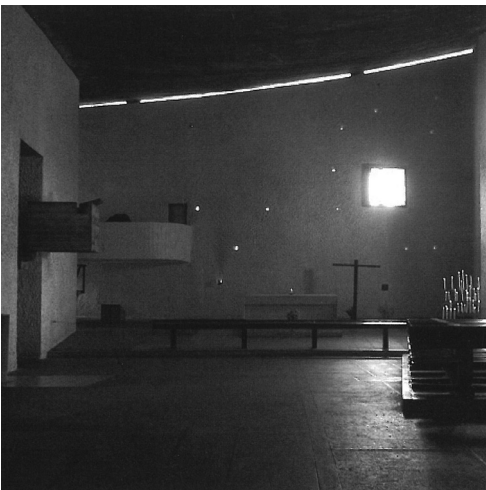
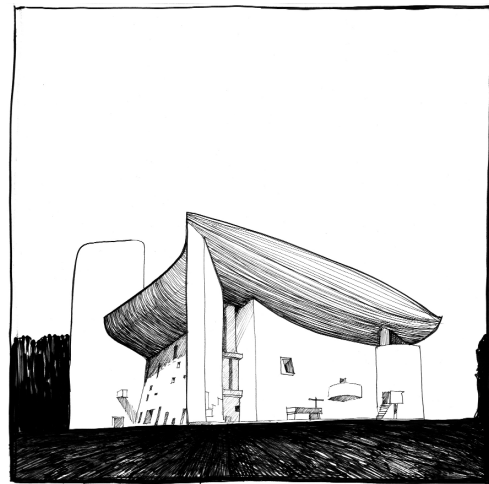
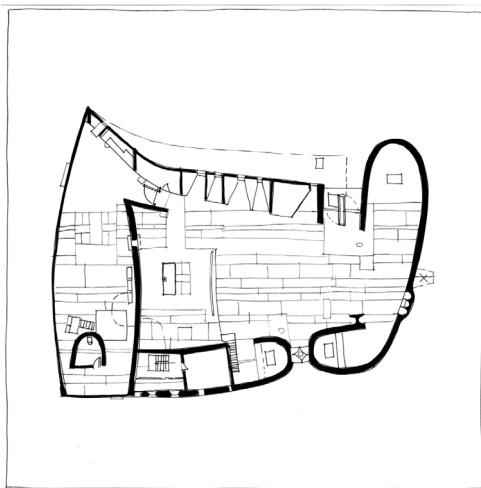
⁷ Por. ibidem

⁸ Por. ibidem p. 72.

Sacred architecture of le corbusier

The first important work which has considerably influenced contemporary architecture was a small pilgrimage chapel in Ronchamp designed by Corbusier; “that small church, built on a forested hill, [...] consecrated on 26th June 1955, soon became world-famous. Here elements of architecture and sculpture have become a perfect entirety.”⁹ [il.3,4,5,6] The irregular projection of the chapel and its thick walls which let in the light through small openings enhance the impression of the sacredness of this space. The roof covering the building is “an empty concrete shell and its plasticity of forming the space corresponds to bare concrete.”¹⁰ The light as one of symbolic elements of a Christian temple creates this space, “white, softly designed walls supporting the lifted concave ferroconcrete roof, whose shape resembles organic forms and is similar to a big mushroom.”¹¹ [fig.4] Le Corbusier himself said that while designing the chapel he was able to “plunge into problems for which did not have to serve any practical purposes.”¹² Some modernists perceived Notre Dame du Hout chapel in Ronchamp “as an affront of the functionalism which its architect has been instrument in creating [...] but, on other hand, the building emanates from a single, brand idea, justified in the name of modern architecture.”¹³ However, Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book *Meaning in Western Architecture* came to a conclusion that the chapel is a confirmation of “a symptom of a revival of interest in existential content.”¹⁴ [fig.5][fig.6]

La Tourette Dominican Monastery in France designed by Le Corbusier before the Second Vatican Council between 1957 and 1960 is his second sacred facility. Designed in the modernist style the monastery in La Tourette does not contradict centuries-old tradition of Christian ar-



il.3, il.4, il.5, il.6, Chapelle Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, France, designed arch. Le Corbusier, 1950–1954

⁹ A. Kotula, P. Krakowski *Architektura współczesna* Kraków 1967 p.159.

¹⁰ W. Koch opt.cit. p.284.

¹¹ A. Kotula, P. Krakowski opt.cit. p.160.

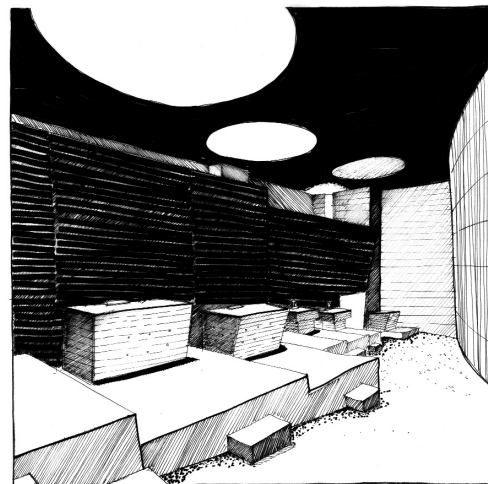
¹² Le Corbusier [w:] A. Kotula, P. Krakowski opt.cit. p.160.

¹³ E. Heathcote, I. Spens, *Church Builders*, Greater Britani 1997, p.46.

¹⁴ Ch. Norberg – Schulz *Znaczenie w architekturze zachodu*, Warszawa 1999 p.213

chitecture. [il.7,8,9]. The garden, according to the modernist style, was economically designed on the roof of the chapel. Grass, the concrete garden walls and the sky are all elements of the structure. The space participant perceives the space as a homogeneous being, which facilitates contemplation and calm. It is a garden where man can find out that “the earth cannot exist without the sky, just like a human being cannot exist without God. The whole universe together with human beings adore their Creator through silence.”¹⁵ The space participant of this unique garden is not, however, separated from the outside world; while climbing to the top of the structure he or she is in touch with the surrounding landscape. Despite its evident modernist style, the project does not reject the symbolic meaning which proves its “exceptional invention in lighting the interior”¹⁶ both of the chapel and the monastic cells.

The last sacred facility designed by Corbusier between 1960 and 1968 is St. Peter’s Church in Firminy, France, [il.10,11,12,13] also referred to as the church of the modernists. The church was built by Jose Oubrerie between 1968 and 2006 on the basis of Corbusier’s drawings and sketches. The interior of the chapel is covered with a truncated cone stemming from the base of a square; “on the wall of the cylinder behind the altar Le Corbusier placed a series of small round openings resembling a constellation.”¹⁷ This apparently static church is enriched with an extraordinary symbolism of light. “Above the chancel there is an irregular network of small glass openings in the nave – the Orion constellation – a symbol of God’s endless cosmological order.” Le Corbusier’s sacred projects “have remained a distinct proof that the emotional climate is of utmost importance when perceiving the space of the sacred”¹⁸ and modernism did not totally reject the meaning in architecture.



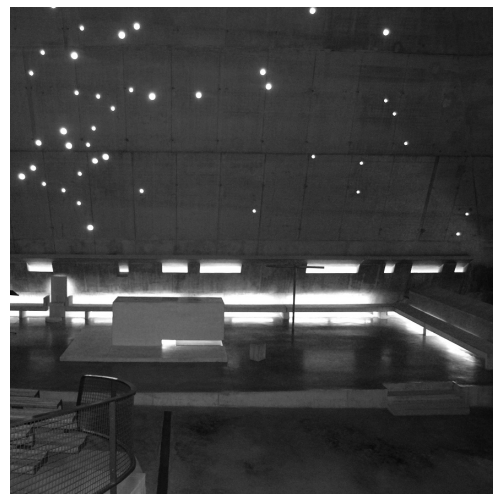
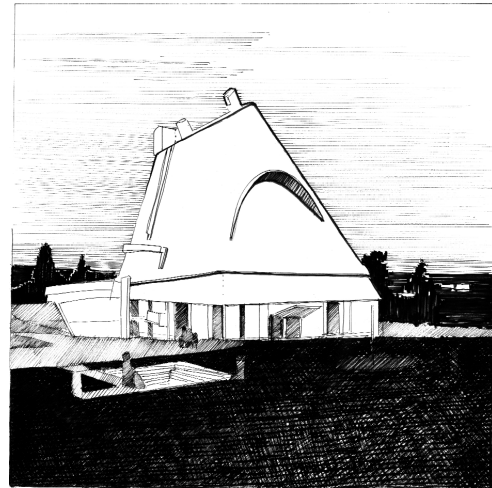
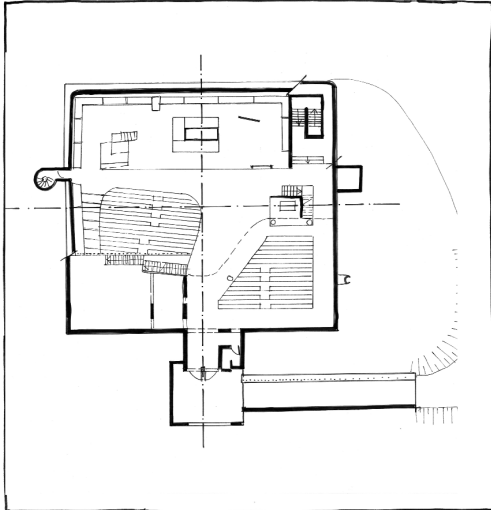
il.7, il.8, il.9: Convent Sainte Marie de La Tourette, near Lyon, France, designed arch. Le Corbusier (with Iannis Xenakis), 1957–1960

¹⁵ J. Trzebuniak, Teologiczny wymiar milczenia- na podstawie autobiografii i wybranych pism Tomasz Mertona, Pieniężno 2006 p.64.

¹⁶ C. Wąs, Antynomie współczesnej architektury sakralnej, Wrocław 2008 p. 236.

¹⁷ K.Kucza-Kuczyński Ostatni kościół modernizmu [w] Tygodnik Powszechny, 13.01.2009 form <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/1,19682,druk.html>

¹⁸ K. Kucza-Kuczyński Analiza współczesnej architektury sakralnej w 40 lat po Soborze Warszawa 2003 p. 15.



il.10,il.11,il.12,il.13 Church, Saint-Pierre, Firminy, France, designed arch. Le Corbusier, The building was completed by the French architect, José Oubriere, Le Corbusier's student for many years, 1965 -2006

The liturgical reform of vatican II and the cotemporary modern sacred architecture

At the same time when the idea of modernist architecture was conceived a movement of liturgical revival began in Germany. It had a significant influence on the modernist idea of the space of the sacred and the liturgical revival itself began in the 1930s. Romano Guardini, a German liturgist, in his book *Sacred Signs* stressed the importance of the common space of holy liturgy: "The space in nature has the three dimensions that we all know. They prove that there is no chaos but order in space, that things are situated next to, above or behind one another in an orderly fashion. It is thanks to this order that our lives can develop and move, that we are able to build many works, give them shape and inhabit them."¹⁹ Guardini's papers resulted in a new way of perceiving sacred space. The liturgist became friends with a German architect Rudolf Schwarz who, who was also a friend of Mies van der Rohe's, and later with

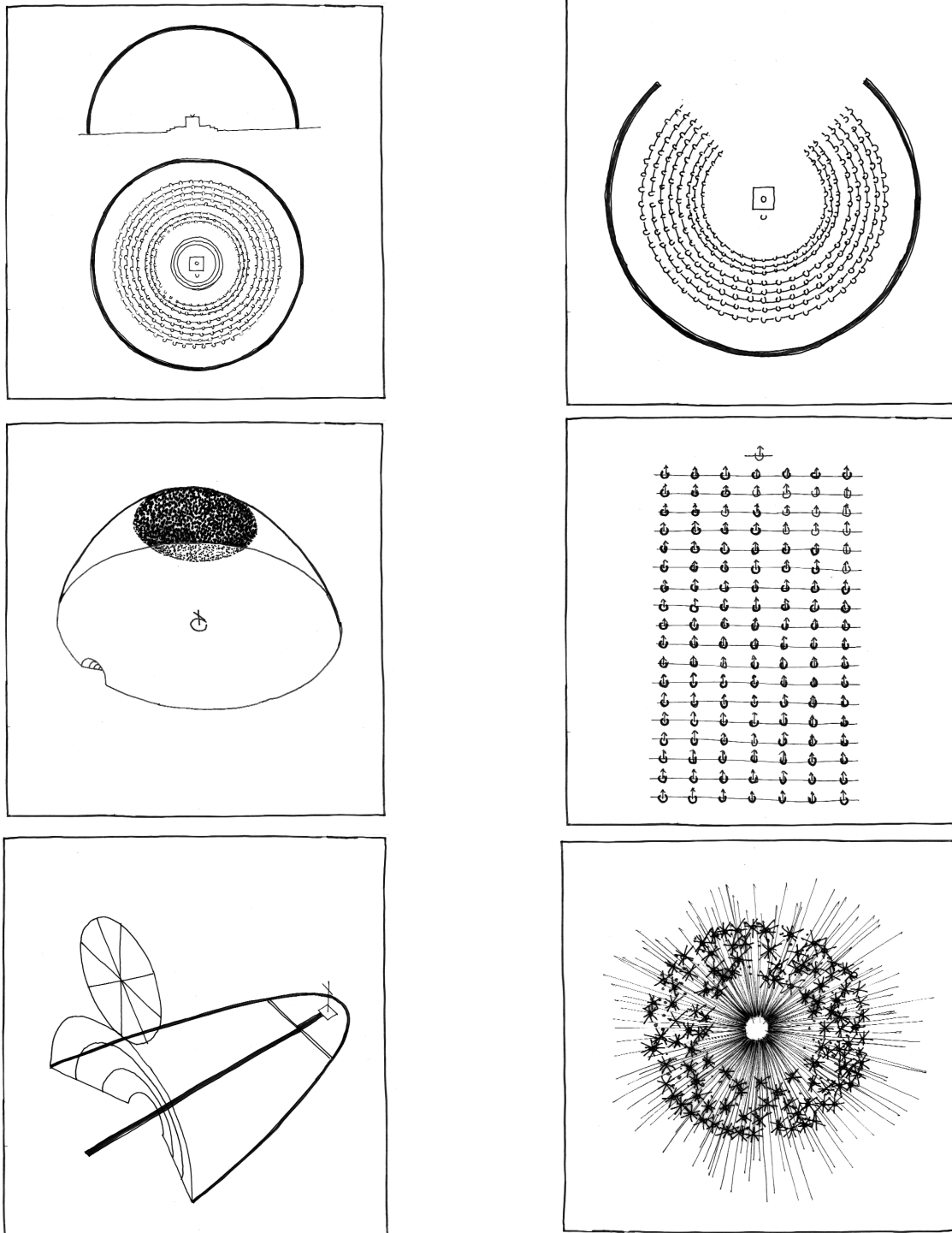
Dominikus Bohm and Otto Bartning, who initiated a new thought about church space.²⁰ The new liturgical movement in Germany as well as the new modernist thought about architecture were the harbingers of changes which finally occurred after the Second Vatican Council. Both the liturgists and the architects searched for an innovative way to renew and return to the fundamental roots of arbitrary meaning. This is what Schwarz wrote in his book concerning architectural space entitled "*The Seven Plan. The Cathedral for all Time. The Entirety*" from 1938.[il.14-20] and in "Von Bau der Kirche" about liturgical changes: "we cannot return to the architecture of cathedrals of the early Christianity and draw from the patterns of that time. This was a mistake that historicism made. And our new technologies would let us down. Obviously, it would be possible to reconstruct Roman or Gothic architecture. Would it be true, though? For us architecture is something different. [...] Architecture has to correspond to the condition and the meaning of our time. It is only from the sacred that

¹⁹ R. Guardini *Znaki święte* Poznań 1937 Chapter *Przestrzeń święta* [w:] [http://msza.net/m/i/om14_0.html]

²⁰ K. Kucza-Kuczyński *Znaki i symbole we współczesnej polskiej architekturze sakralnej* Warszawa 2001 p. 29.

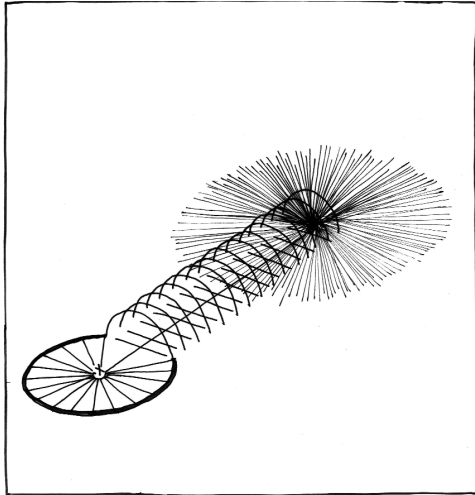
the architecture of a church can derive. Sacred architecture does not derive form the world but from faith and is the answer to our times. [...] Sacred matter, from which church architecture is to be created, should be a living response to the needs of our generation.”²¹ In this case mod-

ernists rejected tradition and searched for a symbol in the design. The symbolic layer of the work was to be the function and in the case of religious facilities – liturgy, i.e. the plan of the church.[fig.14,15,16,17,18,19,20,]

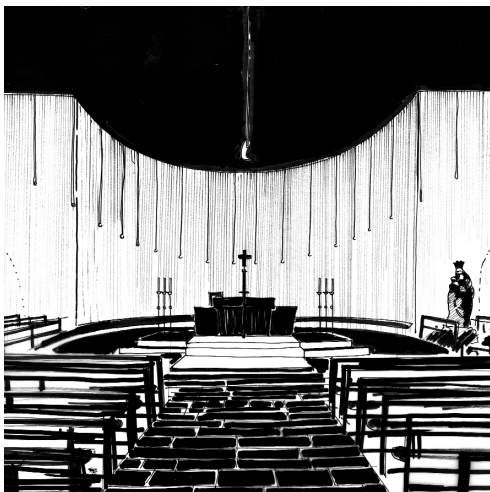
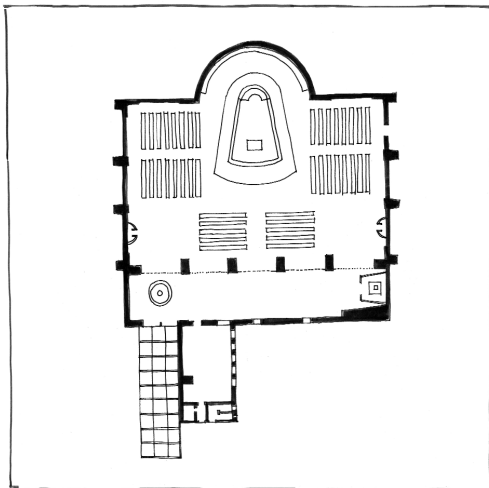


il.14-19. Seven “plans” as an expression of the Christian community, arch. Rudolph Schwarz, in "The Iconic Architecture of Rudolph Schwarz,": 1 – Holy Ring, 2 – Open Ring, 3 – Light Gral , 4 – Holy Journey , 5 – Murky Gral , 6 – Holy Firmament, 7 – The Cathedra for all Time, inThe Christian Scholar, Winter 1964.

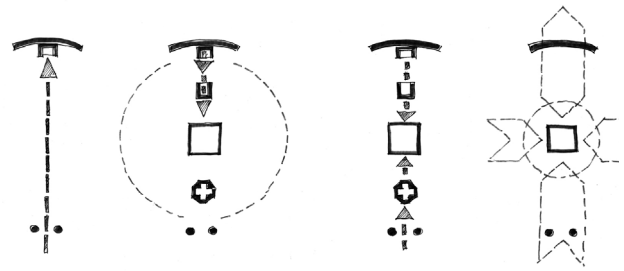
²¹ R. Schwarz The Church Incarnate USA 1958 s.8-9 I publication vom Baum det Krich, Heidelberg Germany 1938 [w:] E.Heathcote & L.Moffatt Contemporary Church Architecture Great Britain 2007 p.36 .



il.20. Seven "plans" as an expression of the Christian community, arch. Rudolph Schwarz, in "The Iconic Architecture of Rudolph Schwarz,": 1 - Holy Ring, 2 - Open Ring, 3 - Light Gral , 4 - Holy Journey , 5 - Murky Gral , 6 - Holy Firmament, 7 - The Cathedra for all Time, inThe Christian Scholar, Winter 1964.



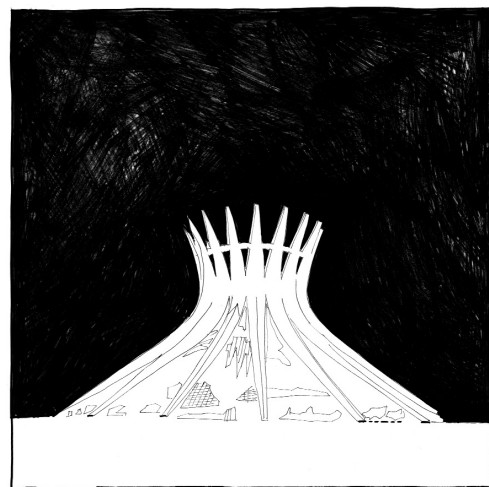
il.21, il.22, Church of St. Laurentius, in Munich, Germany arch. Emil Steffann, 1955



il.23, The plan of the church after the II Vatican Council from A. Zeto

In 1938 Emilolo Steffano with his idea sketch representing the congregation around the altar introduced an innovative way of understanding space in a Christian church.²² Before the Second Vatican Council in 1955 two architects, Schwarz and Steffano, jointly designed St. Laurentius's church in Munich.[il.21,22] It is one of the first sacred projects in which liturgical movement is recommended and the approaching changes suggested by the Second Vatican Council were anticipated. Inside the church, the altar is in the center so that the faithful can surround it on three sides.²³ The new principles concerning the liturgy were introduced in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and General Instruction of the Roman Missal in 1969 as well as in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy; according to them the faithful are to participate in the Eucharist actively and cease to be only viewers. The church ought to be designed in such a way that the faithful feel part of God's community.

Designing central churches which make a close contact with the altar possible was a response to the Council's recommendations. One example of such a church is Oscar Niemeyer and Joaquim Cardos's cathedral in Brasilia built in



il.24 Cathedral of Brasilia, Brasilia, designed arch. Oscar Niemeyer, completed and dedicated in 1970.

²² A. Zeto Spazi celebrativi figurazione architettonica simbolismo liturgico Italia 1994 p.29.

²³ W.J.Stock Christian Sacred Buildings In Europe Since 1950 Germany 2004, p.133.

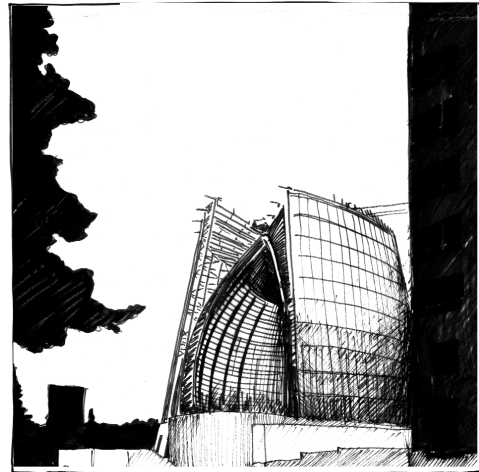
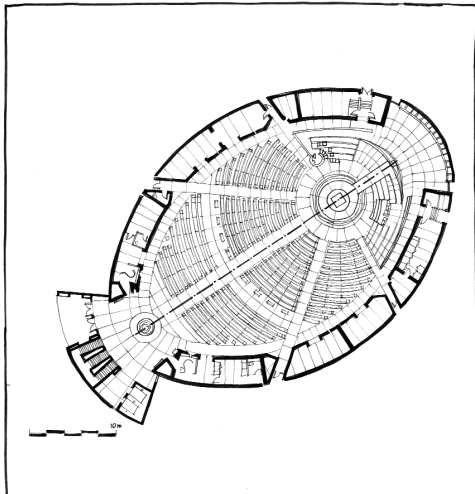
1970.[il.24] The cathedral is a great work of world architecture and one of the most recognizable works of modernist architecture. According to Heathcote, "After Le Corbusier's Ronchamp this is perhaps the most iconic church of the modern spirit. The cathedra as a type that was made almost anachronic by literal reform."²⁴ However, the scale of the object, despite its central internal layout does not create the atmosphere of community, contrary to the facility itself.

Modern trends in the sacred architecture in the context of technological development and the design of different directions

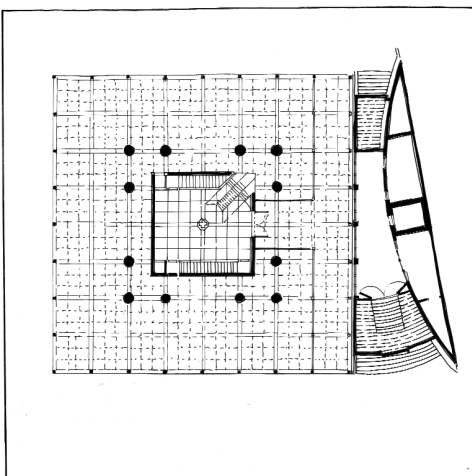
In contemporary sacred architecture, just like in secular architecture, one can see many stylistic forms appearing simultaneously. New modernist ideas, separation of the form from the construction, sacralization of some materials and the use of new materials have created new creative possi-

bilities. Undoubtedly, the Second Vatican Council had a huge impact on contemporary sacred architecture due to the fact that it opened up new opportunities for architects by claiming that "no church of any style should be considered as the only acceptable one but churches of different artistic styles of each epoch adjusted to the nature and circumstances of the particular nations and the needs of the particular rites are admissible and that the ensuing treasure trove of art should be carefully preserved."²⁵

Modern sacred projects show architects' different, sometimes extreme attempts to find a language of the sacred. As a result, sacred facilities in extremely different architectural styles have been built recently, such as 1. High-Tech [1st place project, authors JEMS architects, Temple of Divine Providence 2000 competition, Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland in California, USA, architect Skidmore Owings + Merrill, built in 2008[il.25,26], Notre Dame de l'Arche d' Alliance Church, Architecture



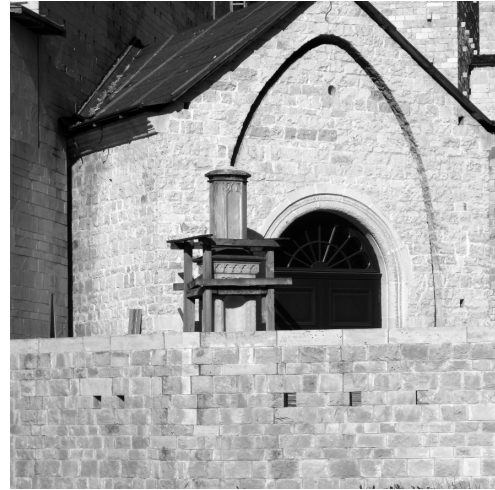
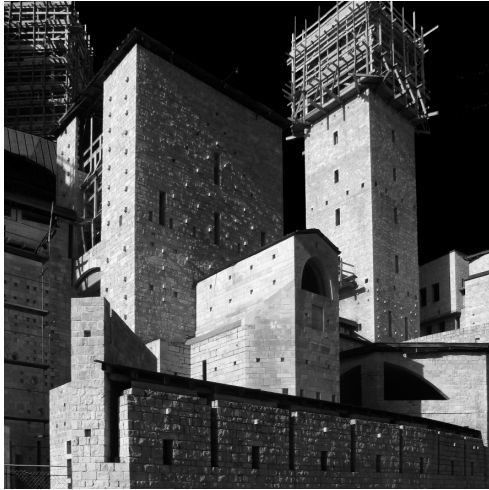
il.25, il.26 Cathedral of Christ the Light in City of Oakland, California, designed arch. Skidmore, Owings, Merrill, LLP, SOM, 2008



il.27, il.28, Church Notre Dame de l'Arche d'Alliance, Paris, France, designed arch. Architecture Studio, 1998

²⁴ E. Heathcote, J. Spens, Church Builders, Great Britain 1997, p.59

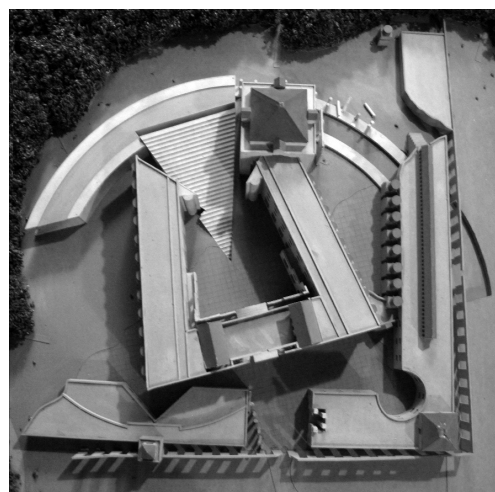
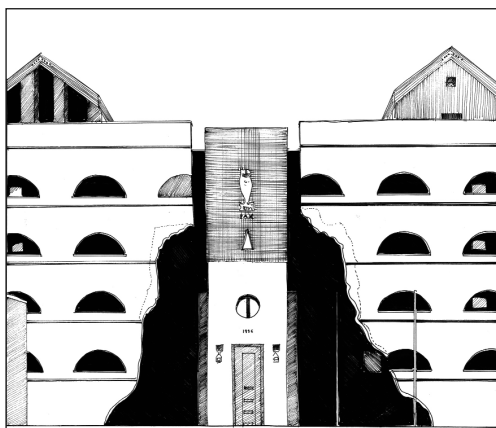
²⁵ Documents of the Second Vatican Council, Chapter 7 Sztuka kościelna i sprzęty liturgiczne KL 123.



il.29,il.30. Convent of S. Francisco in Tych, Poland, designed arch. Stanisław Niemczyk, 2000 – until today.

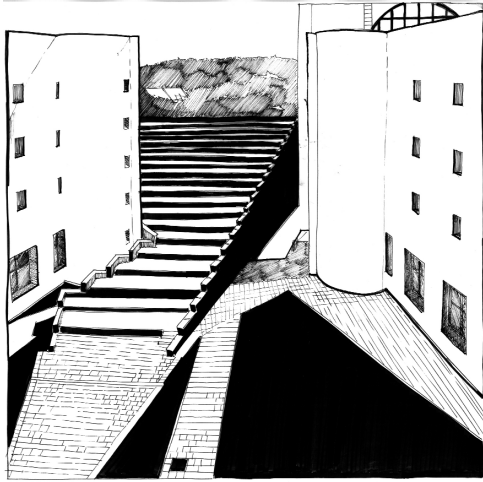
Studio, 1998, Paris,[il.27,28] Sacred Heart Church in Munich, Germany, architects Allmann, Sattler, Wappner, built in 2000], 2. Minimalism [Santa Maria Church, architect A. Siza, Portugal, built in 1995, St. Rose in Louisiana, USA architect S. Amant, built in 2004], 3. Brutalist architecture [Ecumenical Center, authors and architects J. Kister, S. Gross, S. Loupe, Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany, built in 2004, Loupe, Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany, 2004], 4. Expressionism (St. Monica's Church, architect Vincents+ Ramos in Madrid, Spain, built in 2009[il.36,37], 5. Mimicry [church in Paks, Hungary, architect Imre Makovech, built in 1990], 6. Neomodernism [San Paolo Church in Foligno, Italy, architect M. D. Fuksas, built in 2009, Cathedral in Monagua, Nicaragua, architect

Legorreta, built in 1993], 7. Constructionism [Padre Pio Pilgrimage Church, San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, architect R. Piano, built in 2004], 8. Neo-Rationalism [Cathedral of the Resurrection in Every near Paris, architect M. Botta, built in 1993, Franciscan Monastery in Tychy, architect S. Niemczyk, built in 2000, [il.29,30], 9. Postmodernism [St. Basil's Chapel at St Thomas University in Terasa, USA, designed by architect P. Johnson, built in 1997, Wyższe Seminarium Duchowne Księży Zmartwychwstańców in Cracow, designed by architect D. Kozłowski, W. Stefański reevaluated in 1984-1993 [il.31,32,33], 10. Historicism [Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw, architects W. J. Szymborscy, built in 2005.²⁶ [il.34,35]



il.32,il.32, Seminar fathers of the Resurrection, Krakow, Poland, designed arch. Dariusz Kozłowski, arch. Maria Misiągiewicz,

²⁶ A division of objects into styles and tendencies in architecture is not precise and explicit. It is proposed by the author in order to show variety of style in sacred architecture. Some of the objects are difficult to classify and some have variety of features characteristic to different styles.



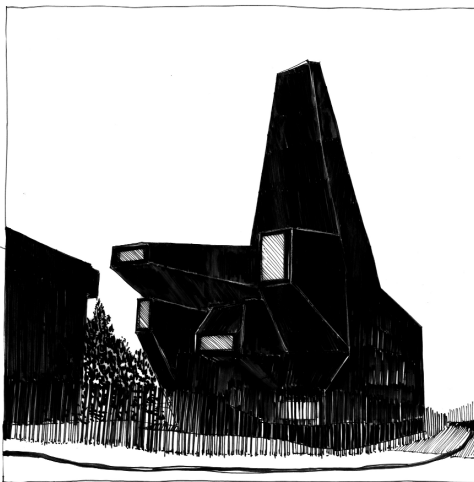
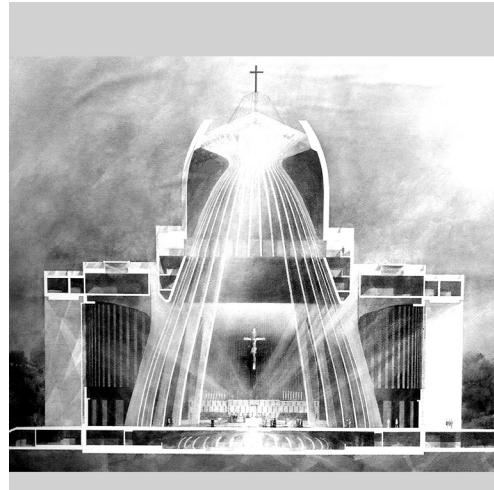
il.33, Seminar fathers of the Resurrection, Krakow, Poland, designed arch. Dariusz Kozłowski, arch. Maria Misiągiewicz

Summary

The examples provided above confirm the pluralism of tendencies in sacred architecture which, contrary to asemantic modernist art, stems from innovative perception of sacred space. Modernism provided sacred architecture with a possibility of a new creative way and often of re-discovering the symbol, thereby breaking up with the assumptions of modern art. The above-mentioned examples prove that extreme modernism cannot fulfil its role in the architecture of the sacred. Both the works of Mies and Corbusier, the founders of modernism and projects and theoretical works of Schwarz, Bohm and Steffano show that it is impossible to reject the meaning in sacred architecture. While searching for extremely innovative forms, contemporary artists always use “the source which is a pithy symbol.”²⁷ According to E. Cassirer, the symbol is an a priori being and its



il.34,il.35, The Temple of Divine, in Warsaw Poland, designed arch. Wojciech Szymborski, arch. Lech Szymborski, 2001-until today



il.36,il.36, Church of Sts. Monica in Madrid, Spain, designed by arch. Ignacio Vicens and arch. Jose Antonio Ramos, 2005

²⁷ A. Wierzbicka, Symbol jako język komunikatu we współczesnej architekturze polskiej, Warszawa 2010, Doctorate paper defended at WAPW available in the library of Division of Architecture at Warsaw University of Technology

meaning can only be discovered, not created, as successful modernist works of architecture show.

As Michel Foucault aptly points out “in spite of all the new technologies and the whole knowledge that helps us to define or formalize modern space, it is not completely desacralised [which modernism expected] contrary to time that was desacralised in the 19th century.”²⁸ Modernism as a concept in architecture has failed to define what the contemporary sacred is. Extreme rationalism rejected the semantic layer of the medium, thus reducing transcendental needs. Modernists’ concepts have failed to accomplish the task of creating the space of the sacred space because space can become sacred only thanks to and through symbols.²⁹ However, as Ratzinger claims “[...] we do not only experience a crisis in sacred art but a crisis in art in general to an unprecedented extent. The crisis in art is a symptom of a crisis of mankind which has fallen into a state of a peculiar blindness resulting from the conquest of the world by the material element; as a result, mankind has become totally blind to the issues that go beyond materialism; this blindness which can also be called a blindness of the spirit.”³⁰

Modernist architecture opened up new opportunities for artists, without indicating one principle for solving the space of the sacrum. As many examples of modern sacred architecture show, it can fulfil its function only thanks to man who experiences it. That means that architectural space becomes alive only in its contact with man, who experiences it in contemporary culture. The role of architectural space as a spiritual shelter is of utmost importance. Here imagination and symbolic meaning that architecture has besides the material dimension have an essential meaning. Such meaning can only be acquired by entering into an ambiguous sphere of human feelings – happiness, love, calm and tension. This is the real domain of architecture which cannot be precisely defined. Only through a synthesis of the two worlds – the real world and the pre-arranged one can architecture come into existence and rise to the level of art.³¹ [il.1,1b]

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all drawing Anna Maria Wierzbicka
 fot. 29,30,32, Wojciech Wierzbicki
 fot. 9,12,13,28 Konrad Kuczka- Kuczyński
 fot. 34,35 Wojciech Szymborski

²⁸ M. Foucault, *Inne Przestrzenie*, [w] :*Coś które nadchodzi, Architektura XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2010, p. 127 a text of the lecture given in 1967 at Cercle d'Etude Architecturales conference, published in „Architecture. Movement. Continuity” Paris 1994

²⁹ A. Wierzbicka, *Symbol jako język komunikatu we współczesnej architekturze polskiej*, Warszawa 2010, Doctorate paper defended at WAPW available in the library of Division of Architecture at Warsaw University of Technology

³⁰ J. Ratzinger *Duch liturgii* Poznań 2002 pp.118-119.

³¹ T. Ando, the Internet, an interview given after he received Pritzcker award.