

Bottom-Up Postmodernism – Unauthorised Church Architecture in Socialist Poland

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Abstract

This article introduces unusual examples of postmodern architecture in socialist Poland: Roman Catholic churches built in rural or semi-rural settings under the direction of a local parish priest, and financed through informal means such as in-kind donations, volunteer work, and financial support from partner congregations abroad. In the politically unsettled climate of the 1970s and 1980s, these were erected either without or with insufficient permission, but grudgingly tolerated by the socialist authorities who feared further confrontations with an increasingly unruly population. Just as much as popular discontent with socialist rule do they evidence the efforts of priests and bishops to strengthen the Church's spatial presence and social influence, as well as tensions within the Catholic Church hierarchy, who were generally supportive of sacred construction while at the same time disapproving of rebellious action against state powers.

Postmodern neo-historicism was the style of choice for many of these buildings. Out of hundreds of unauthorised churches that were built in Poland at the time this article focuses on three characteristic examples: St Lucia in the Warsaw suburb of Rembertów (1972-93, priest Ryszard Łapiński, architect Feliks Dzierżanowski), St Michael the Archangel in Kamion, central Poland (1978-1990s, priest Paweł Flaszczyński, architect Tadeusz Bronowski and others) and St Francis of Assisi in Mierzowice, Lower Silesia (1977-80, priest Franciszek Rozwód, various designers).

Based on archival documents and interviews with the protagonists this article will show that this version of postmodernism was an outcome of socio-political transformations under a declining authoritarian regime and a struggle over the symbolic occupation of public space. The postmodern principles of "non-elitist" design, pop-cultural references, and use of historical typologies lent themselves favourably to the simple construction materials available and the need for popular support, as well as to the desire for alternatives to the architectural modernism associated with the socialist government. Furthermore the semiotic aspects of postmodern architecture responded to local contexts. These include historic quotations and "speaking" forms, which came to express patriotic narratives and a nostalgic vision of a pre-modern society centred on the Catholic Church. In this regard the postmodern churches built under socialism represent themes that remain influential in contemporary Poland.

Introduction

Many Polish villages boast remarkable examples of recent sacred architecture. Churches such as Świętej Łucji (St Lucia) in the Warsaw suburb of Rembertów, Świętego Michała Archanioła (St Michael the Archangel) in Kamion, Central Poland, or Świętego Franciszka z Asyżu (St Francis of Assisi) in Mierzowice, Lower Silesia, at first glance might appear to be centuries-old monuments. Upon closer examination, they are nonetheless clearly recognisable as examples of postmodern neo-historicism, in which carefully chosen historical references are combined with late-twentieth-century forms and technology.

Just as noteworthy is the history of these churches. Like hundreds of similar houses of worship, they were built in a bottom-up manner by local residents under the guidance of a parish priest. They were constructed in the two decades that preceded the end of socialist rule in 1989, during a period characterised by waves of political protest and the rising influence of the Catholic Church. They evolved without or with insufficient authorisation, using informal resources, and in defiance of the socialist authorities, who often responded with repressive counter measures. Nonetheless it would be oversimplified to interpret Poland's unauthorised churches as the architecture of "the people" as opposed to that of "the regime." Just as much as popular discontent with socialist rule do they evidence the efforts of priests and bishops to increase spatial presence and social influence of the Catholic Church, as well as tensions within the Church hierarchy, who was generally supportive of sacred construction, but at the same time sharply opposed unauthorised building or similar rebellious action against state powers.

The three examples stand for the hundreds of churches that were built in late socialist Poland outside the metropolitan areas. Although only a portion of these churches feature postmodernist design elements, they were particularly effective in responding to the requirements of the time, namely traditional modes of construction and a symbolic framework pointing to an idealised vision of the past. They therefore evidence a form of postmodernism far removed from that of capitalist commercialism, which has recently become the subject of scholarly research.¹ These churches point to an extended field of postmodern architecture, which in the context of this article will be understood as comprising the diverse, neo-historical, neo-classical or deconstructivist currents related to criticism against modern architecture in the late twentieth century.² This extended definition corresponds to that used in recent historiographical publications, although not necessarily to the designers' self-understanding, or to the debates on international postmodernism in Polish architectural journals since the late 1970s.³ While both the clients and the architects of these churches often rejected or were unaware of postmodernism, their concern with neo-historicism and its symbolic dimension aligned with certain strands of the international postmodern discourse.

Postmodernism in Poland has recently received increasing scholarly attention.⁴ There is also growing work on the big wave of church construction in the late twentieth century,

All translations by the author.

¹ See for example Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Terry Farrell, and Adam Furman, *Revisiting Postmodernism* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2017); Geraint Franklin and Elain Harwood, *Post-modern Buildings in Britain* (London: Batsford, 2017); Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale* (Milan: Marsilio, 2016).

² See for example Francis Ching, Mark Jarzombek, and Vikramaditya Prakash, *A Global History of Architecture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2007), 746-52; Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 117-13.

³ For example "Postmodernizm 1979" *Architektura* 33 n. 379-380 (May-June 1979), 70-74 as well as other articles in the same number.

⁴ See for example Lidia Klein and Alicja Gzowska, eds., *Postmodernizm polski – architektura i urbanistyka* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo 40000 Malarzy, 2013) or the special number "Architektura Postmodernizmu" of the journal *Autoportret* 63 n. 4 (2018) with contributions by Aleksandra Stępień-Dąbrowska, Piotr Winskowski, Łukasz Wojciechowski and others, or the very comprehensive volume by Anna Cymer, *Architektura w Polsce 1945-1989* (Warsaw: Centrum Architektury and NIAIU, 2018), 347-76. See also Łukasz Stanek, *Postmodernizm jest prawie w porządku: polska architektura po socjalistycznej globalizacji* (Warsaw: Bęc Zmiana, 2012), 59-72 [in Polish and English] or Lidia Klein and

including a noteworthy attempt to take stock of all sacred buildings constructed at the time.⁵ Sources mention over 1,500 churches built between the mid 1970s and 1989, of which many were built in a postmodern, neo-traditional style.⁶ The most famous, such as the Ascension Church in Warsaw-Ursynów or the Holy Spirit Church in Wrocław, are situated in cities. However, the rural or semi-rural examples discussed in this article in many respects provide a clearer picture of the socio-political contexts of such architecture.

The three examples St Lucia in Rembertów, built 1972-93 by parish priest Ryszard Łapiński and architect Feliks Dzierżanowski, and St Michael in Kamion, built 1978-c.90 by parish priest Paweł Flaszczyński and architect Tadeusz Bronowski, feature both modern and conspicuously neo-baroque elements. St Francis in Mierzowice, built 1977-c.90 by parish priest Franciszek Rozwód, is a modern adaptation of the late-medieval stone-masonry type. St Lucia was built from scratch in a private garden, St Michael replaced a wooden early-twentieth-century church, and St Francis evolved from the ruins of a very different late-seventeenth-century church destroyed in the Second World War. All three buildings were further fitted out after the end of the socialist regime in 1989, and all are still used to date.

The three buildings evidence a common approach. Their designers and builders made use of both formal and informal resources, and to a great extent circumvented the official design and construction process required by the centralised planning institutions. Nevertheless they were based on some kind of permission and provoked varying reactions from the authorities. The construction of St Michael resulted in legal prosecution and a suspended sentence against the parish priest (but not the requirement to demolish the building), while in the other cases repression was limited to threats and intimidation attempts by the Secret Service.

In all three cases postmodern neo-historicism had an anti-socialist dimension, pointing to patriotism and a nostalgic vision of a pre-modern society centred on the Catholic Church. These connotations differed from those in Western Europe and North America at the time, where postmodernism was connected to an advanced stage of market capitalism, reactions against a modernist architecture perceived as elitist, and criticism of the discipline of architecture. This applies particularly to the early conceptions of postmodernism during the 1970s and 1980s, which were implicitly aimed at promoting, justifying or qualifying the new architectural movement. But it can also be found in more recent, purely historical accounts.⁷ The Polish village churches thus show that postmodern architecture did not

Alicja Gzowska, "Late Socialist Postmodernism and Socialist Realism in Polish Architecture" in Vladimir Kulić, ed., *Second World Postmodernisms* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁵ Izabela Cichońska, Karolina Popera, Kuba Snopek, *Architektura siódmego dnia* (Warsaw: Bęc Zmiana, 2016) [contributions by different authors] and the accompanying website architektura7dnia.com (accessed May 2019)

⁶ Estimates vary between 1,000 and 2,000 in the whole country between 1970 and 1989. Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, *Nowe kościoły w Polsce* (Warsaw: PAX, 1991), 11. On new sacred architecture in the context of political change see for example Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, *Widzialne niewidzialnego – nowe kościoły warszawskie* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, 2015); for an analysis of semiotics in recent church architecture see Anna Maria Wierzbicka, *Architektura jako narracja znaczeniowa* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej, 2013). On the political conditions see Andrzej Basista, *Betonowe Dziedzictwo – Architektura w Polsce czasów komunizmu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2001) or Błażej Ciarkowski, *Odcienie szarości. Architekci i polityka w PRL-u* (Łódź: Politechnika Łódzka, 2017).

⁷ For the former, see for example Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977) and subsequent editions; Robert Stern, "At the Edge of Postmodernism" [1977] reprinted in *Architecture on the Edge of Postmodernism: Collected essays 1964-88* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodern: l'architettura nella società post-industriale* (1982); Heinrich Klotz, *Die Revision der Moderne* (Munich: Prestel, 1984).

For the latter, see for example Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman, eds., *Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern. Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Kathleen James-Chakraborty, "From Postmodern to Neomodern: the United States and Europe" in Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *Architecture Since 1400* (Minneapolis:

have a fixed and well-defined meaning around the globe, but rather responded to different cultures and political contexts.

Sacred Architecture in Socialist Poland

The increase in sacred architecture since the mid 1970s was indicative of the disintegration of the socialist regime. The country at the time experienced worsening economic decline and rising popular discontent. Edward Gierek (in office 1970-1980), the First Secretary of the ruling *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* (PZPR, Polish Unified Workers' Party), had managed to finance a short-lived rise in living standards through foreign credits, but failed to provide long-term solutions when the economy began slumping again in the mid 1970s. Popular protest led to the foundation of the Workers' Defence Committee (founded in 1976) and the Solidarity Trade Union (founded in 1980), and brought the regime to the brink of collapse. The ensuing carrot-and-stick policy, in which repression alternated with concessions, made the weakness of the Party leaders even more apparent. This situation did not fundamentally change when the hopes for reforms were crushed in 1981 with the appointment of General Wojciech Jaruzelski as First Party Secretary and the declaration of martial law. While the economy remained precarious the big wave of church construction continued until the end of the socialist regime in 1989, and well beyond.

"Bottom-up" church architecture was facilitated by three factors. First, Poland had been a strongly religious country for centuries, and the Catholic Church an important power in both spiritual and economic terms. Having only partially lost its influence under socialism, the Church became a catalyser for alternative visions to the ruling ideology. It was the only organisation independent of the state authorities and arguably the most powerful religious institution anywhere in the Eastern bloc. Its position was further strengthened by the 1978 appointment of John Paul II, the first Polish pope in history, and by the subsequent increase in visible religiosity.

Second, Party leader Gierek, in his attempt to appease the political opposition, relaxed restrictions on church construction around 1975, giving in to popular pressure on what had been a bone of contention for decades. The policy change was never officially proclaimed, but since then permission for church construction had a significantly higher chance of being granted.⁸ This was greeted favourably by the majority of the population, who despite several decades of officially promoted atheism continued to be practicing Catholics.⁹ The difference between Church and state was nonetheless not as clear-cut as such appeasement policies might suggest. Many Party members at the same more or less openly attended Church, including, for example, Warsaw's Chief Architect Tadeusz Szumielewicz.¹⁰ And also the Church did not unambiguously back the political opposition. The highest-ranking Church leaders persistently opposed strikes and other acts of civic disobedience against the secular authorities, although they eventually expressed their support for Solidarity's cause.¹¹

And third, economic reforms started in the 1980s increasingly enabled construction "outside the plan."¹² This augmented the importance of private and semi-private builders and clients who in contrast to some other Eastern bloc countries had always retained a certain significance in Poland. It also had an effect on informal or unauthorised architecture, which profited from increased supply of materials and labour, was less

University of Minnesota Press, 2014): or Akos Moravanszki and Torsten Lange, eds., *Reframing Identities – Architecture's Turn to History 1970-1990* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017).

⁸ There is no evidence of a particular directive allowing for increasing church construction. According to architectural historian Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński, rather, it was a practice backed by Gierek. Kucza-Kuczyński, *Widzialne Niewidzialnego*, 28, and conversation with the author, Warsaw, 27 November 2018.

⁹ In 1987 the socialist authorities estimated that 70 per cent of Warsaw residents were practicing Catholics—numbers in rural areas must have been even higher. *Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy, Wydział do Spraw Wyznań, Memo "Budownictwo sakralne i kościelne 1945-87", 1987?*, Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie 72/2305, p. 42.

¹⁰ Tadeusz Szumielewicz, conversation with the author, Warsaw, 3 January 2020.

¹¹ Brian Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), 292-6

¹² A full-fledged market economy was eventually established in December 1988 with the passing of the "Wilczek Law" that effectively ended the socialist planned economy.

affected by the corset of industrialised design, and, within the limits of economic shortage, could lend itself to experimentation.

St Lucia: Pastiche Deconstructivism

In Rembertów, a sleepy, semi-rural Warsaw suburb ten kilometres east of the city centre, the harmony of repetitive two-storey single-family houses with pitched roofs and front lawns is suddenly broken by an unusual church (figure 1). The white-and-yellow, quasi-baroque plaster façade is set back from the street. The interior is a traditional church space with three naves and colourfully glazed round-arch windows. The clerestory rests on square concrete columns (figure 2). The gilded main and side altars, the carved wooden pews, as well as the statue of patron Saint Lucia at the entrance recall baroque models.



Figure 1: St Lucia in Warsaw-Rembertów, built 1972-93 by parish priest Ryszard Łapiński and architect Feliks Dzierżanowski (author).



Figure 2: St Lucia in Warsaw-Rembertów, interior (author).

The most surprising feature is the Mediterranean-inspired tower with a curved helm roof. The open lantern features loudspeakers rather than bells, and is adorned with a Sacred-Heart-of-Jesus statue. The tower seems to grow out of the entrance wall and leaves the observer startled as to whether it is a façade ornament or a self-supporting element of the building's main volume.

There is no evidence of a direct influence of international postmodern theory on this unusual design. However, there are striking similarities. The façade-turned-tower looks like a pastiche version of the "different sensibility in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed," as Mark Wigley prominently described Peter Eisenman's, Zaha Hadid's and some of their contemporaries' "deconstructivist architecture" exhibited at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1988, the year in which the tower was built.¹³ It also conspicuously transcends what Peter Eisenman eight years earlier referred to as "modernist sensibility."¹⁴ And it is a not-too-sophisticated "manifestation of both-and," which Robert Venturi famously celebrated in his 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.¹⁵ As we will see in the following, the unusual belfry did not derive from the influence of New-York-based theorists, but rather from a creative attempt to circumvent socialist building regulations as well as from the experiences of an architect trained in the context of postwar reconstruction and historic conservation. And yet St Lucia Church is in many ways related to the criticism of modernism expressed in these ideas.

This remarkable building was the lifetime achievement of a headstrong priest, Father Ryszard Łapiński (1918-2008). He was born and raised in Rembertów, which in his youth he saw growing from a village of 120 houses into a suburb, profiting from the location on the eastern railway line next to a military training ground. When in 1971, at age 53, he took early retirement for health reasons and became associated with the existing parish

¹³ Mark Wigley, "Deconstructivist Architecture" in Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, eds., *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 10-20 [exhibition catalogue].

¹⁴ Peter Eisenman, "Post-Functionalism" *Oppositions* 6 (autumn 1976), reprinted in K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architectural Theory since 1968* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000), 237.

¹⁵ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* [1966] second edition (London: Architectural Press, 1977), 30.

church a few kilometres south of what would become St Lucia, Rembertów had about 17,000 inhabitants and had long outgrown the capacities of the old church.

His poor health notwithstanding, Łapiński did not retire to a quiet pensioner's life. He soon started his efforts to build a new church in the spacious yard of the single-family home he had inherited from his parents. Seeing no chance that construction of a fully-fledged church would ever be authorised, he took matters into his own hands and, over the following thirty years, jotted down the steps of his project in a handwritten chronicle.¹⁶

Beginning in the spring of 1972, he first built a chapel of about 100 square metres, and dedicated it to the saint after whom his mother was named, Lucia of Syracuse (figure 3). The building was erected on a plan of 10 by 19 metres, using, as noted by the authorities, "stones, bricks, cement, and chalk."¹⁷ Having no construction permit, he was helped by his cousin, a local volunteer and two retired bricklayers.¹⁸ Over the following two years electric cables and pipes were installed, walls were painted, a terracotta floor was laid, and the interior was fitted out. The building was finished in summer 1974. It was a simple pitched-roof shed decorated with simplified insignia of a traditional church: a cross on the gable, a quasi-baroque statue flanking the entrance, and a lightweight bell tower from welded steel tubes topped with a lantern-like metal structure and another cross.



Figure 3: St Lucia in Warsaw-Rembertów, the first church building, c. 1974 (courtesy of St Lucia Parish)

The tabernacle was a donation from the US, facilitated by Łapiński's uncle Stanisław Łapiński, who was a priest in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Uncle Stanisław visited repeatedly throughout the 1970s, and also supported the project with money and gifts. The local

¹⁶ Ryszard Łapiński, *Księga Pamiątkowa* [hand-written chronicle 1971-2016], available at St Lucia Parish, also online at <http://swlucja.pl/node/836>.

¹⁷ Józef Jaroń, vice-director of the Warsaw municipality's Wydział do Spraw Wyznań [Department of Religious Affairs], Memorandum dated 29 August 1978 Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań" 108/15, p. 63-65.

¹⁸ Ryszard Łapiński, *Księga Pamiątkowa*, p. 9. He reports to have poured foundations of 10 by 10 metres on 27-29 March 1972.

parishioners, in contrast, as Ryszard Łapiński sorely complained to his journal, did not chip in a single penny.¹⁹ This must have changed later, as in 1977 he proudly reports that stain-glass windows were financed by the parishioners' traditional Christmas donations.²⁰

To a great extent Łapiński's momentum hinged on being backed by the Catholic Church's top leaders. He enjoyed protection from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who was Poland's highest-ranking Church dignitary, carrying the title Primate of Poland, and the country's most popular religious figure at the time. Already in 1971 Łapiński had informed Wyszyński about his intention to build a chapel and establish a new parish.²¹ Wyszyński also stepped in with an official statement after Secret Service officers made an intimidating visit late at night on 8 September 1974. He had his secretary point out that the Church hierarchy had given Łapiński permission to build a "public chapel" on his private land. The letter left it deliberately open whether it was actually a building substantial enough to require municipal authorisation.²² In December 1974 Wyszyński established St Lucia as a new parish, which indirectly sanctioned the construction of a new church building. During the two weeks following the visit, parishioners guarded the chapel day and night to protect it against possible attacks by the Secret Service.²³ Conflict did not end, though, as in June 1975 the municipality's Department of Architecture and Urbanism set Łapiński a deadline to stop celebrating mass in his chapel, which he ignored.²⁴

Over the following years the building continued to be modified and extended. Responding to his congregation's continuous growth, Łapiński and his helpers widened the chapel in 1976 and also added a church hall. This time the Secret Service's late-night visit turned out to be a non-starter. As Łapiński gleefully note in his journal, on the next day, 25 June 1976, the workers in the potent Ursus machine factory in Warsaw went on strike, soon to be joined by colleagues all over Poland. This kept the socialist authorities busy with more substantial civil disobedience, and eventually led to the removal of Józef Kępa, the First Secretary of the powerful Warsaw Party Committee.²⁵ Unauthorised churches took a backseat. Łapiński was fined for violating construction laws, but eventually granted amnesty.²⁶

In 1977 he enlarged this church again, adding about 72 square metres, and not responding to municipal orders to stop construction and restore the building to its previous state. As in many similar cases, the socialist authorities were unwilling to respond with crude force. Somewhat acknowledging their helplessness, the public servants in Warsaw's municipal *Wydział do Spraw Wyznań* (Department of Religious Affairs) simply referred the issue to a superior administrative tier.

But also the Church hierarchy manoeuvred. The Warsaw Curia, in a 1978 statement, claimed that Łapiński was acting on his own and without instruction, which, in light of the close relations he maintained to his Church superiors, was a half-truth at best.²⁷ On a subsequent meeting between Warsaw's auxiliary bishop Jerzy Modzelewski and mayor Jerzy Majewski in September 1978, the bishop campaigned for authorisation of new churches, including the one in Rembertów, while the mayor asked for a "decided standpoint of the Curia against unauthorised construction."²⁸ There is no evidence that the dispute was resolved. Construction continued. The Curia officially did not assume any

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 9.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 21.

²¹ Ibid. p. 9.

²² The statement was signed by Father Hieronim Goździewicz, director of Primate Wyszyński's office. Ibid. p. 11.

²³ Ibid. p. 11.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 15.

²⁵ Andrzej Boboli, "Drugi po Komitecie Centralnym. Komitet Warszawski PZPR 1975-1989" in Konrad Rokicki and Robert Spałka, eds., *Władza w PRL* (Warsaw: IPN, 2011), 79-124.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 19-24.

²⁷ Józef Jaroń, Memorandum dated 29 August 1978 Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań", 108/15, p. 63-65

²⁸ Józef Jaroń, Memorandum on the results of a meeting between Bishop Jerzy Modzelewski and Warsaw mayor Jerzy Majewski on 5 September 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań", 108/19, p. 14-15.

responsibility, but also refrained from disciplinary action against Łapiński.²⁹ This reaction was emblematic for the Church's strategy at the time, which on the one hand supported sacred construction, and on the other hand condemned any insurgent activity against the socialist state apparatus, possibly to avoid further escalation and bloodshed.³⁰

In 1978 the municipal authorities ordered a site visit.³¹ Now the building, according to the report, had "taken on ever further traits of a church" because on the right hand side an annex/nave had been added and on the front façade there were three new brick arches. In this sense, the enhanced traditional form, recognisable for both parishioners and municipal controllers, was part of the provocation. The church intended look like a church, and thus to be a statement of the powerful presence of a different social sphere in the centre of Rembertów. The postmodern deconstructivist aspect thus had a strategic significance.

Throughout these years it had always been on Łapiński's agenda to construct a more substantial church. The year 1984 found him assembling bricks and other materials, "paying different prices," and augmenting his efforts through prayers and a pilgrimage to the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa.³² The long-desired construction permit was finally given in 1986, fifteen years after Łapiński's first construction activities, but, as he sorely noted, without allowing for a traditional church tower.³³ The cunning solution, mentioned previously, can be admired to date: the "tower" was merely a lantern, integrated into the front façade and seemingly growing out of the baroque gable. The important point, in the context of this article, is the strategic use of what otherwise could be interpreted as an aimless postmodern play with form and meaning. Since the tower was not a tower in a structural sense but looked like one, Łapiński could not be accused of violating the terms of the construction permit, and at the same time was able to powerfully inscribe his building into the townscape.

Photographs from 1987 show brick walls and concrete lintels half finished, and the walls supported by scaffolding made from tree trunks and planks nailed together (figures 4-7). The symbolic *kamień węgielny* (cornerstone) was laid by Primate Józef Glemp, Wyszyński's successor, in 1988 in a ceremony under the still roofless portal wall.³⁴ This again confirms the close connection Łapiński was able to maintain to the higher tiers of the Church hierarchy. The roof, a steel construction covered with zinc sheet, was completed in 1990, and the church was finally consecrated in 1993. A plaque still adorns the foyer celebrating Łapiński as initiator and commemorating his "great pains."

²⁹ Józef Jaroń, Memorandum "Tezy do rozmów z biskupem Jerzym Modzelewskim" dated 8 September 1978 (after the talk), Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań", 108/15, p. 23-7.

³⁰ Even high-ranking Party officials acknowledged the Church hierarchy's condemnation of public protest. See for example the minutes of the Politburo meeting on 23 September 1980, at the height of the Solidarity protests: "Sytuacja społeczno-polityczna oraz kierunki działania partii i Państwa" Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "PZPR KC Biuro Polityczne" V/157, vol. 4 (July-September), p. 438. For the position of the Church see also Brian Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), 292-6.

³¹ Józef Jaroń, Memorandum dated 29 August 1978 Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań", 108/15, p. 63-65

³² Ryszard Łapiński, *Księga Pamiątkowa*, p. 44.

³³ Ibid. p. 46.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 53.



Figure 4: Father Ryszard Łapiński (1918-2008), parish priest of St Lucia in Rembertów and initiator of the church at the construction site, c. 1987 (courtesy of St Lucia Parish).



Figure 5: Father Ryszard Łapiński at the construction site, c. 1987 (courtesy of St Lucia Parish).



Figure 6: Father Ryszard Łapiński at the construction site, c. 1987. The Sacred-Heart-of-Jesus statue was later installed on the tower (courtesy of St Lucia Parish).



Figure 7: Father Ryszard Łapiński with the tower under construction, c. 1989 (courtesy of St Lucia Parish).

Łapiński's journal is among the few long-term first-hand accounts of bottom-up church construction. The writing style suggests that it was written with future publication in mind, possibly in a parish context, and in fact the parish published it online after his death. Łapiński nonetheless did not put together a self-congratulatory narrative. He described his fight for a new church as non-heroic and at times rather lonely. He also mentioned numerous insecurities that also a capitalist client would also have to deal with: insufficient funding, unreliable builders, and unexpected technological complications. At some point the walls had to be improved because of shoddy workmanship; teams of workers had to be dismissed repeatedly, in one instance because they "were not sober;" and time and time again construction halted because of shortfalls of supplies. Only occasionally did he get unexpected support, for example in 1987 when "a certain engineer got in touch and revealed that he was a Catholic and would build the church."³⁵

Łapiński's notes also suggest that his eventual success relied to a great extent on powerful allies: Primate Stefan Wyszyński, his successor Józef Glemp, as well as the émigré sponsors including literal and proverbial uncles from America.³⁶ Their financial impact of such voluntary donations should not be underestimated, given that in the mid 1980s the unofficial rate allowed 33 dollars, roughly the daily minimum wage in the US, to be exchanged for 20,000 złoty, an average Pole's monthly salary.³⁷

There is little mention of stylistic deliberations, to the extent that Łapiński, despite being initiator, organiser and client, seems to not to take any credit for the building's unusual appearance. This suggests that he simply took certain traditional elements for granted: a directional building with naves, the necessity of a bell tower, stain-glass windows, and lush ornamentation including crosses and kitschy statues.

Although Łapiński was not an architectural professional, he must have been familiar with the sacred architecture of Warsaw, where he spent most of his life. This included stylistic experiments in many authorised churches, from the late modernist St Andrew Bobola Church in Warsaw-Mokotów (1980-91, Hanna Madejowska, Bogdan Madejowski) to the widely-published postmodern Ascension Church in Warsaw-Ursynów (1980-85, Marek Budzyński, Zbigniew Badowski, Piotr Wicha).³⁸ Likewise, architect Dzierżanowski, being a member of the Primate's Council for Church Construction, was aware of the latest trends in church design, which included different modernist and postmodernist styles. This suggests that St Lucia's ostentatious neo-historicism was based on choice rather than lack of knowledge.

The design for the final building was the work of Feliks Dzierżanowski (1928-2015), a local architect and conservationist employed with the *Pracownia Konserwacji Zabytków* (PKZ Historic Conservation Studios). He had worked, among others, on the fourteenth-century castle in Płock and the war-damaged early-twentieth-century Teatr Polski (Polish Theatre) in Warsaw and also served at the *Rada Prymasowska do Budowy Kościołów* (Primate's Council for Church Construction), the Church committee that oversaw sacred construction in Warsaw.³⁹ While designing St Lucia he was working on the reconstruction of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, a prestigious historicist building from the late nineteenth century with neoclassical and baroque elements.

Through his employer PKZ Dzierżanowski was connected to the tradition of Polish postwar conservation, which promoted the reconstruction of lost monuments in a more or less accurate historical style as a matter of cultural awareness and national pride.⁴⁰ The

³⁵ Ibid. p. 41.

³⁶ Mentioned by name are Łapiński's uncle, Father Stanisław Łapiński of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, USA, Father Edward Bujarski of Green Bay 150 kilometres east of Stevens Point, and Stanisława Trojanowska-Ciska of London. Ibid. p. 53.

³⁷ In 1985 the minimum wage in the US was 3.35 dollars per hour; the unofficial exchange rate was slightly over 600 złoty for one dollar, Brian Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), 309.

³⁸ Kucza-Kuczyński, *Widzialne niewidzialnego*, 74-5 and 88-9.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 53.

⁴⁰ Rebuilding of war-destroyed "national" monuments was first practiced after the First World War, based on the ideas of conservationists such as Jarosław Wojciechowski or Jan

Historic Conservation Studios, a state-operated firm with branches in numerous Polish cities and several thousand employees, were founded in 1951 in the context of the historically accurate rebuilding of Warsaw's war-destroyed old town (1945-63, directed by General Conservator Jan Zachwatowicz), to date the only rebuilt historic ensemble declared UNESCO World Heritage. They subsequently carried out other reconstructions of the many historical monuments destroyed in the Second World War. Against this background Dzierżanowski's neo-historical St Lucia Church had probably fewer implications of dishonesty or an illicit pretension of historicity than it would have had in a West European or North American context.

Much suggests that post-Second-World-War reconstruction, of which Warsaw's old town was only the most prominent example, had a significant impact for the positive image of neo-historical architecture. The extent of wartime devastation in Poland was unmatched in any European neighbour country, and in the postwar period all over Poland many destroyed buildings were rebuilt with different degrees of historical accuracy. These included hundreds of churches that were included in the reconstruction programmes financed by the socialist government.⁴¹ In this context, a whole generation of architects was trained in historicist (re)design and prepared to apply their skills in the profession. Likewise, the general public became used to a certain ambiguity with regard to what was to be regarded as genuinely historical, accurately rebuilt, or simply historically inspired.

It has already been mentioned that the traditional, directional basilica type, which St Lucia shared with the great majority of unauthorised churches at the time, aimed at legibility and visible presence in the public space. Such a design was also comparatively easy to build with the materials available in crisis-ridden Poland and the skills of retired bricklayers trained in the pre-war period. Most likely, it also responded to the conservative taste of local residents, upon whose support Łapiński relied (figure 8).



Figure 8: St Lucia in Warsaw-Rembertów, tower (author).

Alfred Lauterbach. See Piotr Majewski, *Ideologia i konserwacja. Architektura zabytkowa w Polsce w czasach socrealizmu* (Warszawa 2009), 13-15; Bohdan Rymaszewski, *Polska ochrona zabytków* (Warsaw: Scholar, 2005), 54-9.

⁴¹ Wydział do Spraw Wyznań of the Warsaw City Administration, document "Budownictwo sakralne i kościelne 1945-87," *Archiwum Państwowe, Warsaw 72/2305*, p. 44.

The parallels international postmodernism were thus to a certain extent rooted in the context of late socialist Poland and the need to cater to popular culture, material shortages, and the need for improvisation. Robert Venturi's famously asked: "Is not Main Street almost all right? What slight twist of context will make it all right?"⁴² His "almost," by which he distinguished soulless historicism from conscious contemporary sensitivity, was a given in Poland, as numerous compromises in materials, skills, and regulations had to be made that would prevent the building from becoming a historical copy. These included creative design variations such as the quasi-deconstructivist tower. Along those lines St Lucia's postmodern neo-traditionalism was an appropriate response to the conditions of the time.

St Michael the Archangel: Neo-historicism as a Criminal Offence

St Michael in Kamion, officially the Church of St Michael the Archangel and St Anna, is also an example of a postmodern building that responded to the requirements of the socio-political context (figure 9). Neither the village nor the church are extraordinary. Kamion is situated on the River Vistula about 70 kilometres northeast of Warsaw and belongs to the township of Młodzieszyn. It is a sleepy place surrounded by forests and cornfields, too distant and too badly connected to the capital to be a commuter suburb. In the 1970s it consisted of single-family houses for about 600 families, a few shops, a school and a fire station. The most extraordinary structure was the wooden church built in 1918. Predecessor buildings date back to the fifteenth century and were connected to the legend of Saint Jacek Odrowąż miraculously crossing the Vistula on his coat-turned-raft. They were repeatedly destroyed: the last building burnt down in the First World War and was subsequently rebuilt. By the 1970s it was in a poor state. The wood was damaged, walls were leaning, and the load-bearing structure had become unsound.



Figure 9: St Michael the Archangel in Kamion, township of Młodzieszyn, Central Poland, built 1978-1990s by parish priest Paweł Flaszczyński (author).

As with St Lucia, the ensuing illegal construction involved dedicated parishioners and a committed priest, Father Paweł Flaszczyński (1937-2018). He had served in different Warsaw parishes before becoming parish priest in Kamion in 1972, where he stayed for 14 years. Somewhat unusual was the fact that in this case state repression did not only include intimidation and clandestine action by the Secret Service, but to legal prosecution

⁴² Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* [1966] second edition (London: Architectural Press, 1977), 104.

and a trial that ended in a suspended sentence.⁴³ Obviously courts in socialist Poland were not independent institutions but depended on Party rule. And yet they chose an unexpected legal process: Flaszczyński was not sentenced for violating construction legislation and building a church where he should not, but for breaching historic conservation laws and disrespecting national heritage.⁴⁴ The socialist authorities thus implicitly fashioned themselves as protectors of Polish national culture against a perceived onslaught of the “internationalist” Catholic Church.⁴⁵ This was possibly one of the few cases in recent history where the Church was implicitly accused of deficient conservatism—by a socialist government of all things. But it also exemplifies the power of nationalist rhetoric in Poland, which was and still is used with similar zeal by very different political factions, including both socialist Party functionaries and Church officials.

As in Rembertów, in Kamion construction was both legal and illegal. When in 1977 Flaszczyński started planning a new church, his requests for a construction permit were rejected repeatedly. But he had received permission from the Warsaw Curia to undertake a “thorough renovation” of the old wooden church. Pondering the costs for refurbishment against those for new construction, he opted for the latter, reasoning that in any case the old church was too small for a growing congregation.⁴⁶

Among those involved in the preparations was Feliks Dzierżanowski, the Warsaw architect and conservationist who would later design St Lucia in Rembertów.⁴⁷ In 1977 Flaszczyński asked him for an expertise on the old church. Dzierżanowski confirmed the poor state of the building and its structural weaknesses, and proposed taking down the structure and rebuilding it elsewhere in an open-air-museum context. The records suggest that Flaszczyński at the time might have seen him as the designated architect for a new building, but it is not clear if he had an input on the final design.

The construction process was carefully planned.⁴⁸ The foundations were secretly laid in October 1977, with the old wooden church still in place, officially justified as a technical facility serving the improvement of the old building. The work was carried out on a Saturday, with the help of about 30 local volunteers. The second stage was executed after the winter. On a single day, 8 April 1978, Flaszczyński and about 130 parishioners built a 5.40 m high wall around the old church from breeze blocks, bricks and reinforced concrete. Over the following month about 40 people poured the floor slab under the choir, on 1 May about 120 volunteers took down the old church, the next day about 70 volunteers built the right nave, and a week later the left nave. Throughout the construction process Flaszczyński was the driving force and the chief organiser. He received technical assistance by the engineer Tadeusz Bronowski, a local resident employed by the township administration.

⁴³ See the court documents at Wojewódzki Urząd Spraw Wewnętrznych w Skierniewicach 1983-1990, File “Akta kontrolne śledztwa przeciwko: Flaszczyński Paweł” Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw, call number Ld PF65/2/J.

⁴⁴ Prosecution was started for “suspicion of unauthorised demolition of the listed church in the village of Kamion” on 26 June 1978, and crimes against the “Law on the Protection of Cultural Goods and Museums of 15 February 1962”. Wojewódzki Urząd Spraw Wewnętrznych w Skierniewicach 1983-1990, File “Akta kontrolne śledztwa przeciwko: Flaszczyński Paweł” Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw, call number Ld PF65/2/J.

⁴⁵ Such imputations reflected the strategy of the “national communists” under Party leader Władysław Gomułka in the 1960s, who fashioned themselves as protectors of the fatherland against the onslaught of the Church, most infamously in the row over the Letter of Reconciliation of the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops in 1965. See for example Brian Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), 248-50.

⁴⁶ Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory “Urząd do Spraw Wyznań,” call number 108/16, p. 141-165.

⁴⁷ Wojewódzki Urząd Spraw Wewnętrznych w Skierniewicach 1983-1990, File “Akta kontrolne śledztwa przeciwko: Flaszczyński Paweł” Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw, call number Ld PF65/2/J, pp. 32-39.

⁴⁸ Statement by Paweł Flaszczyński, *ibid.*, pp. 32-39; Decision by Regional Court in Sochaczew against Paweł Flaszczyński, dated 20 December 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory “Urząd do Spraw Wyznań,” 108/16, p. 142; Mieczysław Wiśniewski, resident and construction volunteer, conversation with the author, Kamion, 23 August 2018.

While aiming at a historic aspect, Flaszczyński and Bronowski nonetheless did not opt for the aesthetics of the old church, which was a dark-brown, barn-like timber structure with a pitched roof. Instead, the new building was a beige, neo-baroque structure built on a rectangular plan with three naves, 26 metres long, 11 metres wide, and 10 metres high.⁴⁹ (figure 10) The choir, unusually for a church, is situated on the western end of the building, as this was the far side from the street. It is topped by a square steeple with a bell, which is small yet tall enough to make the visual expression of a traditional church complete. While conspicuously neo-historical, the new church nonetheless contrasts with the only really historic building on the site, a small, shingle-covered wooden tower (figure 11), most likely a remainder of the old church, and now used for storage.

The entrance façade on the east side has wing-like parapet walls crowned by small turrets, a stylishly formed arched window at first-floor level, and a circular window on top of it. The side naves are lit through round-arch windows, while the clerestory features small stained-glass openings in the style of simplified rose windows. On the wooden doors there are baroque-style carved images of St Michael the Archangel and St Anna. The wing-like parapet walls on the entrance façade are faintly reminiscent of Marek Budzyński's, Zbigniew Badowski's, and Piotr Wicha's famous Ascension Church in Warsaw-Ursynów built at the same time (figure 12). Models for such generically baroque design could be found in many churches in the wider region, most famously in central Warsaw's St Jacek Church (1603-39, Giovanni Trevano). Like all churches in central Warsaw, it was destroyed in 1944 and rebuilt in 1947-59 as part of the Warsaw old town reconstruction. (figure 13).



Figure 10: St Michael the Archangel in Kamion, east façade (author).

⁴⁹ Voivodeship Inspector B. Okuniewski, "Notatka służbowa" dated 24 November 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań," 108/16, p. 146.



Figure 11: St Michael the Archangel in Kamion, wooden tower next to the church, most likely a remainder of the old church building from 1918 that was demolished in 1978 (author).



Figure 12: Ascension Church in Warsaw-Ursynów, built 1980-85 after a design by Marek Budzyński, Zbigniew Badowski and Piotr Wicha (author).



Figure 13: St Jacek Church on Freta Street, central Warsaw, built 1603-39 after a design by Giovanni Trevano, destroyed in 1944, and rebuilt in 1947-59 as part of the Warsaw old town reconstruction (Wikimedia Commons).

As in Rembertów, the postmodern forms built in Kamion also reflect socio-economic conditions. Traditional shapes and materials lent themselves better to improvised construction, unreliable supply, and volunteer labour than for example to a sophisticated modernist concrete frame. Baroque forms conformed to popular taste. And collective construction helped to build a powerful narrative: a strong village community defying material scarcity and intrusive state authorities, practicing solidarity in labour and festivity, ending hard days of bricklaying with common meals and celebrations, and eventually enjoying a conspicuous edifice as a common source of identification.⁵⁰ Similarly important were the implicit associations of virtually any historical design with the pre-war, non-socialist period and with the nationalist narrative of Polish resistance, struggle, and perseverance. This is for example evident in popular tales that link St Michael to the built icons of Polish national heroism, such as St Augustine Church on Nowolipka Street in Warsaw.⁵¹

While construction was straightforward the wider context was more complex. Flaszczyński's superiors manoeuvred in similar ways as in the case of St Lucia. His plans were known to and supported by the Church hierarchy, including bishop Modzelewski, who at the same time repeated like a mantra that national laws had to be respected and construction needed to be authorised.⁵²

But the socialist authorities' reaction was also contradictory. Charges against Flaszczyński were brought forward in June 1978.⁵³ Half a year later, in December 1978, he was handed a suspended sentence of ten months in prison, as well as a fine.⁵⁴ But he remained in liberty and retained his post. More importantly, much suggests that the lawsuit strengthened his standing in the village community. Construction carried on, and the authorities did not intrude or request the dismantling of the building. On the contrary, the voivodeship Building Inspection looked rather favourably at technical details and recommended technical improvement rather than demolition.⁵⁵ Such technical shortcomings included low-quality concrete, uncertified, low-quality steel, and soft ground. The potential solution, according to the Building Inspection, could be a placement of the truss on a new load-bearing construction. There is no evidence that these recommendations were heeded.⁵⁶ The most significant modification was the portico, which was built in the 1990s and added to the baroque impression. The church stands and is used to date.

The wavering between tolerance and authoritarianism was indicative of the unsettled political climate of the time.⁵⁷ It seems that there was no consistent state policy. In 1978, for example, the very same voivodeship administration that had remained lenient with Flaszczyński called the Warsaw Curia to remove a vicar in the village of Biała Rawska fifty kilometres south of Kamion, as he had ordered the tearing down and rebuilding of a listed

⁵⁰ This is for example how former volunteer Mieczysław Wiśniewski remembers the construction, conversation with the author, Kamion, 23 August 2018.

⁵¹ This was mentioned by local resident Mieczysław Wiśniewski, conversation with the author on 23 August 2018. In fact, St Augustine is a neo-Romanesque building that looks rather different. It is situated in the area of the former Jewish Ghetto, connected with anti-German resistance during the Second World War and was one of the few structures in Warsaw's city centre that survived the war.

⁵² Letter by the chancellor of the Warsaw Curia, F. Olszewski to the Voivodeship administration in Skierniewice, dated 19 August 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań," 108/16, p. 145

⁵³ Wojewódzki Urząd Spraw Wewnętrznych w Skierniewicach 1983-1990, Akta kontrolne śledztwa przeciwko: Flaszczyński Paweł. Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw, IPN Ld PF65/2/J

⁵⁴ Decision by Regional Court in Sochaczew against Paweł Flaszczyński, dated 20 December 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań," 108/16, p. 142

⁵⁵ Voivodeship Inspector B. Okuniewski, "Notatka służbowa" dated 24 November 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań," 108/16, p. 146

⁵⁶ Anecdotal evidence has it that there was no further improvement carried out. Mieczysław Wiśniewski, conversation with the author on 23 August 2018.

⁵⁷ See various complaints by the Voivodeship administration, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań," 108/16, p. 159-60.

chapel.⁵⁸ Repressions nonetheless remained few, and the majority of unauthorised churches provoked only mild protest by the authorities.

One of the most prominent characters in this context was Ignacy Tokarczuk (1918-2012), the rebellious bishop of Przemyśl, on the border with Soviet Ukraine, who in the 1970s and 1980s supported the construction of over fifty unauthorised churches and chapels in his diocese. This made him a hero for Catholic believers and an insurgent in the eyes of the authorities. His structures were nicknamed *nocne kościoły* ("night churches"), as they were frequently built in three nights from Friday to Monday.⁵⁹ Bishop Tokarczuk was harassed by the Secret Service and subjected to xenophobic abuse by socialist Party officials for allegedly being Ukrainian rather a real Pole—another example of the traitor-of-the-fatherland trope used indistinctively by both socialists and right-wing opposition members for their respective opponents.⁶⁰ But he remained in his post and his churches intact.

St Francis of Assisi: A Neo-Medieval "Decorated Shed"

The church St Francis of Assisi in Mierzowice, a village of about 350 inhabitants was also built without permit and initiated by a combative parish priest (figure 14). Mierzowice is situated in Lower Silesia sixty kilometres west of Wrocław, and thus close to a centre of architectural innovation that boasts famous postmodern churches such as the previously mentioned Holy Spirit (1973-81, Waldemar Wawrzyniak and others). There is comparatively little written evidence on the construction of St Francis of Assisi, but a lot can be deduced from historic images and the existing building. Pre-war postcards show that the village, which like the whole region had belonged to Germany until 1945, once boasted a half-timbered, protestant seventeenth-century church. It was destroyed in the Second World War.

⁵⁸ The chapel had been located in Grzymkowice. Lech Wiśniewski, Director of the Department of Religious Affairs of the Voivodeship administration in Skierniewice, letter to the Warsaw Curia dated 27 May 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań," 108/16, p. 159-60.

⁵⁹ Józef Bar, *Nowe kościoły diecezji przemyskiej w jej dawnych granicach powstałe w latach 1966-1992* (Przemyśl: Kollegium Wydawnicze Adam Szal, 1993), 10; Archiwum Akt Nowych, Inventory "Urząd do Spraw Wyznań" 125/186 k. 13 (1971). See also Antoni Dudek and Ryszard Gryz, *Komuniści i Kościół w Polsce (1945-1989)* (Krakow: Znak, 2006), 313-14.

⁶⁰ For example, Party official Stanisław Kania, who would later become Gierek's successor as Party leader, in 1973 stated that Tokarczuk behaved "like a commander of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army" [who during WWII committed numerous war crimes against Poles] and in 1975 that "Tokarczuk, a real Ukrainian, makes crazy policy," both quoted *ibid.*



Figure 14: St Francis of Assisi in Mierzowice, Lower Silesia, built 1977-c. 1990, built by parish priest Franciszek Rozwód, south façade (author).

In 1978 the voivodeship administration complained that the parish priest, Father Franciszek Rozwód (1911-2016), had illegally refurbished a ruin—possibly that of the destroyed pre-war church—into a “grotto-like” half-open structure suitable to celebrate mass.⁶¹ The new “church” was erected by local residents, presumably as a matter of convenience, as the parish church in Prochowice was five kilometres away. It was built from breezeblocks, with a corrugated cement asbestos roof. The main bones of contention were with the illegal construction activity and with the conspicuous celebration of public religiosity. The voivodeship administration called for punishment of the priest and his work to be dismantled.⁶² We can only assume that Rozwód defied the authorities in similarly cunning ways as his colleagues in Rembertów and Kamion did, and eventually either received the much-sought-after construction permit, or managed to avert retribution after proceeding without authorisation.

A photograph, possibly taken in 1982, shows him in front of the improvised altar, suggesting that the construction of the church proper was started in the 1980s (figure 15).

⁶¹ Mieczysław Przenzak, Director of the Legnica Voivodeship’s Department of Religious Affairs, memorandum dated 16 August 1978, Archiwum Akt Nowych Inventory “Urząd do Spraw Wyznań,” 108/16, p. 174.

⁶² Ibid.

Inscriptions on the structure proudly emblazon national symbols and a commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the acquisition of the famous Black Madonna image by the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa, which was celebrated in 1982. Our Lady of Częstochowa was later declared "Queen of Poland" and divine protector against seventeenth-century Swedish invaders and other enemies. Publicly commemorating such an event in the year following the declaration of martial law was a none-too-subtle message towards the socialist rulers. Notably, the imputation of being foreign or endangering national Polish culture, of which nationalist communists had previously accused Catholic Church officials such as parish priest Flaszczyński or bishop Tokarczuk, was now reversed and directed against the allegedly un-patriotic communists themselves.



Figure 15: Father Franciszek Rozwód, parish priest of St Francis of Assisi in Mierzowice, in his improvised church building, c. 1982 (Robert Białowolski).

The resulting church is noteworthy on many levels. It has one nave, which is lit by round-arch stain-glass windows on both sides and in the altar wall (the eastern wall). There are also round window openings in the altar wall and above the pointed-arch portico on the opposite side. Under the portico is a wooden door which allows entrance to the building (figure 16). Attached on the nave's south side is a bulky quadrangular tower with a helm roof, and a slightly larger second entrance through a wooden door under a parabolic arch. The church is situated on the main street of the village, surrounded by a no-longer-functional cemetery. A few richly ornamented seventeenth-century epitaphs were integrated into the façade.



Figure 16: St Francis of Assisi in Mierzowice, west façade (author).

The church was built from simple bricks, with stone cladding on the south and west walls that are visible from the street. The overall impression is that of a Gothic fieldstone church typical of Polish, German and Scandinavian villages from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, where the visual impression of the building suggested not only a house of worship but also a place of defence. Quite deliberately, as one might assume, there was no relation to the protestant pre-war church that had stood in Mierzowice when it was still the German village of Merschwitz. Also, the new church contained conspicuous modern elements. These included the pitched roof from corrugated sheet metal, the geometrical forms in the stain glass windows, and bright orange brickface ornamentations on the tower

and the portico façade. The fact that stone cladding and ornaments were only applied to walls visible from the main street reinforces the theatrical effect.

The most ostentatiously postmodern aspect is the inscription of the year 1980, the building's official foundation, in Roman numerals on the tower. The numbers were set in the same orange brickfacing that contrasts with the grey stone cladding. The reference to the "decorated shed" type celebrated by Robert Venturi and his co-authors in *Learning from Las Vegas* is most probably unintended.⁶³ But the underlying assumptions are similar. Rozwód also aimed for an inconspicuous building that "speaks" through its decoration. The contrast between the medieval typology and the bright orange signage touting the twentieth-century origin fulfils the same purpose. It makes the Gothic reference serious and playful at the same time. It clarifies that the design is not meant to fake historicity, but, rather, to open up a narrating framework of references.

The form-finding process can only be guessed at. But most probably there was no major input from debates over postmodernism and architectural meaning, which in Poland at the time were brought forward by the official journal *Architektura*, but largely limited to academic and professional circles.⁶⁴ Rozwód, who had been parish priest since 1964, had no architectural training and was already in his late sixties when he started construction. Born in 1911 and being fourteen years senior to Robert Venturi and Charles Moore, it is not likely that he was influenced by their calls for an architecture of historical continuity, although his experience of rupture and destruction was certainly more extreme than theirs. In his lifetime—he died aged 104—he lived under five different political regimes. He was born in a village near the city of Lwów (Lviv) in present-day Ukraine, where he was ordained to priesthood in 1937.⁶⁵ At the time of his birth Lwów was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the interwar years of the Second Polish Republic, from 1939 of the Soviet Union, from 1941 of the territory occupied by Nazi Germany, and from 1945 again of the Soviet Union. Forced to leave after the end of the Second World War along with the region's other ethnic Poles, he found a new home in the formerly German Silesia that the Allies had assigned to the recently established People's Republic of Poland, and served as a priest in the Wrocław archdiocese until his death.

Given his experiences one must assume that Rozwód had no illusions about the continuity of people and buildings in the modern era, and it is unlikely that he attempted to trick his parishioners into believing that they were using a genuine medieval fieldstone church. Nor is it likely that he intended his neo-historical design to be ironic or critical of the architectural discipline. Rather, the most probable explanation is that he used postmodern eclecticism to reconcile diverse and partially contradictory messages: a desire for history and tradition in a village whose inhabitants had all been refugees from elsewhere; a longing for the stability and continuity embodied by the Catholic Church; and the celebration of local religiousness in spite of socialism. The strategic significance of postmodern historicism is thus similar than in the context of Rembertów and Kamion: it was connected to a desire for historical continuity in light of political upheavals, and it responded to the necessity for improvised construction and popular support.

At all these levels the church's postmodern style met his expectations. It fulfilled the villagers' desire for a traditional church without claiming false lineage. It fit into the typological context of the wider region. And most importantly, it could be construed as both historical and modern and as celebrating both the traditions connected with the Catholic Church and the merits of dissidence under an officially atheist government.

The Influence of the Church

Unauthorised church construction was undoubtedly a courageous act of disobedience against an oppressive regime. At the same time the Catholic Church was not a

⁶³ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 88-103.

⁶⁴ For these discussions see in particular two numbers of the official journal *Architektura* on postmodernism, titled "Co dalej?" [What next?] *Architektura* 33 n. 379-380 (May-June 1979) and "Architektura na rozdrożu" ["Architecture at the Crossroads"] *Architektura* 36 n. 2/408 (July-August 1982).

⁶⁵ Franciszek Rozwód, obituary by the Wrocław Archdiocese, 2016, online at www.archidiecezja.wroc.pl (accessed April 2019).

disinterested civil rights advocate, but a powerful institution with its own agenda. Its high level of support among the population was due only to some extent on the Church's opposition to socialism, and just as much to long-lasting power structures that were established over centuries and had only partially lost their impact in four decades of socialist rule.

Particularly in rural contexts the Church remained the main organiser of social life. Even under socialism Polish villagers' spare-time activities tended to centre on charity events, choir rehearsals, Sunday school, confirmation classes, pre-marriage classes, or Bible study groups. The Church was also a significant provider of social welfare in contexts in which the state-operated support systems were absent or insufficient.

In addition, the Church had remained a wealthy institution. Expropriations in the postwar period notwithstanding, it continued to be a significant landowner and was also supported by the national *Fundusz Kościelny* (Church Fund).⁶⁶ Cemetery fees were an additional source of income. So were fees for christenings, weddings and funerals, as well as weekly donations during mass and annual donations during the priest's house visit. The authorities allowed Parish priests to set these fees at their discretion. They were not published and not taxed, and could vary significantly between parishes or even from case to case. The informal aspect of these fees, which could be in-kind and were thus not affected by inflation, made them particularly valuable in times of economic crisis.⁶⁷

The right to set the prices for indispensable religious rituals, combined with the fact that for a practicing Catholic there is "no salvation outside the Church," gave parish priests significant leverage, irrespective of the fact that many parishioners happily donated to what they believed to be a good cause. The asymmetric power relation between priests and parishioners was indicative of the Church's continuous socio-economic influence under socialism, which state authorities were unable or unwilling to question, and of which the great wave of church construction was a visible outcome.

At the same time, the Church's on-going influence was a thorn in the side of the authorities, who were eager to win what they saw as a struggle between progress and reaction. Unauthorised church construction was a particular obvious battleground. This is for example evident from the number of diploma theses written by aspiring Secret Service officers at the Military Academy in Legionowo near Warsaw during the 1970s. Titles include "Illegal Church Construction as a Threat to Public Order..." and "Prevention of Conflict Situations against the Background of Unauthorised Church Construction..."⁶⁸ In their dissertations students eagerly reproduced their supervisors' analyses and strategies. They paint the Catholic Church as an enemy organisation undermining socialist order, employing, among others, "events called 'miracles' [which] are among the most dangerous forms of threat," and best fought not in open battle but in covert operations.⁶⁹ These were specified, for example, in a speech given by a high-ranking Secret Service officer in 1976.⁷⁰ Secret collaborators in the church hierarchy should sow disagreement between the

⁶⁶ The Church Fund was a state institution incorporated in 1950 as a compensation for expropriated church property, paying for example for priests' pension schemes and church maintenance. Antoni Dudek and Ryszard Gryz, *Komuniści i Kościół w Polsce (1945-1989)* (Krakow: Znak, 2006), particularly 13-14.

⁶⁷ Such informal deals are for example described by architect Jerzy Gurawski, "Rozmowa" in Klein/Gzowska, *Postmodernizm polski*, 298.

⁶⁸ Zygmunt Majka, "Nielegalne budownictwo sakralne i kościelne zagrożeniem ładu i porządku publicznego (na terenie miasta i województwa krakowskiego), diploma thesis, 1975; Aleksander Kwaśniewski, "Zapobieganie sytuacjom konfliktowym na tle samowolnego budownictwa sakralnego na podstawie praktyki Wydziału IV w Tarnowie w latach 1975-1978, diploma thesis, 1979; Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw, call numbers BU 001834/73 and BU 1509/1035. There are many more examples.

⁶⁹ Colonel M. Sałkowski "Problematyka nielegalnego budownictwa sakralnego i 'cudów' oraz metod przeciwdziałania zagrożeniom występującym na tym tle w świetle Zarządzenia Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych nr 0077/70 z dnia 30-07-1970" lecture given to police officers in Olsztyn, 1970, Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw BU 01522/449, p. 68.

⁷⁰ General K. Straszewski, Director of the department IV of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Instruction no. 001/76 "w sprawie kierunków i taktyki działań operacyjnych na odcinku

different tiers of the Church hierarchy, and a climate of solidarity among Church officials should be counteracted. Suspicious activities, such as the collection of money designated for church building or the assembly of construction materials by priests, should be immediately reported. The goal was nonetheless to act strategically and avoid escalation and violence whenever possible.

Such comparatively restrained rhetoric suggests that even Secret Service officers were well aware of their limited powers among a population rife with disobedience. This explains their proceeding cautiously in the cases of St Lucia, St Michael and other churches, and their eventual acceptance of the unauthorised buildings. In any case, given the large number of Party officials who were practicing Catholics, the long-standing cultural influence of Catholicism on all aspects of social life, and the mutual dependencies of Church and state apparatus, the two cannot be considered entirely independent forces. Against this background it would be something of an oversimplification to call sacred buildings an architecture of the people that was "not part of the political and societal programme" of the People's Republic of Poland, as has been suggested.⁷¹ Although they are evidence of the Church's increasing influence on a nominally socialist society, they evolved under conditions set by the socialist regime and obtained their particular significance within the political context.

Conclusion

The Polish village churches are an example of postmodernism on the fringe—in an Eastern bloc-country riddled by economic crisis and political upheaval, and removed from the international centres of architectural and professional debate. The buildings nonetheless evolved in a global framework. They were financed partially through donations from the West, and they evidence a desire to overcome modernist architecture, which at the time widespread in many countries.

The churches show parallels to canonical postmodern themes: the return of architectural meaning and communication through "speaking architecture," and the use of an eclectic historical vocabulary. However, these did not develop from a direct influence of West European or North American theorists, but largely from domestic discourses on architecture, including historic conservation debates, as well as from the specific context of late socialist Poland. In St Lucia the pastiche play with the meaning of a church tower derived from the necessity to circumvent socialist regulations and at the same time build an effective communicative device for presence and influence of the Catholic Church. In St Michael the architectural message evolved in a framework of references to village life and the pre-socialist past. In St Francis the building "spoke" through its form—the medieval village church type as a symbol of long-standing continuity and social cohesion—, as well as through its content—the "sign" on the wall touting novelty and power despite economic crisis and socialism. The positive connotation of historic references in general, no matter how generic, proved to be particularly powerful in a context in which "Polish national tradition" possessed unambiguously positive connotations, and in which deficient patriotism or foreign associations tended to be indistinctly attributed to whichever group one considered the enemy—either the Church in the rhetoric of state officials, or the socialist regime in the eyes of practicing Catholics.

The postmodern/neo-traditional style of these churches was also directly related to context. Priests had limited materials and relied on volunteer labour, hence they favoured low-tech, traditional technology with bricks and mortar rather than reinforced concrete. They relied on retired joiners and bricklayers, who had been trained in the pre-war period and hence tended to use traditional construction techniques. And they were dependent on parishioners' support, hence the penchant for "pop-cultural references" and a traditional shape. In this context the churches reflect the struggle between Church and state authorities over the symbolic occupation of space, in which the Church was gaining ground against a socialist regime at the brink of ideological and economic bankruptcy.

Poland's postmodern village churches were thus an appropriate response to the challenges of the socio-political context. At various levels they bridged contradictory desires. They

zwalczania samowoli w budownictwie sakralnym i kościelnym", dated 26 October 1976, Institute of National Remembrance Warsaw, BU 00735/1651 t. 21, pp.1-3

⁷¹ Cichońska, Popera, Snopek, *Architektura siódmego dnia*, 32.

were construed as both traditional and forward-looking. They referred to both an idealised national past and a possible non-socialist future. And they embodied both historical continuity and transformative momentum. In this context they are vivid examples of postmodern architecture's adaptive power and reconciliatory potential.