

Architektur im Ringturm



MACIEJ NOWICKI

An architectural career between Poland, America and India

27 November 2012 until 15 February 2013

Curators: Adolph Stiller, Tadeusz Barucki

Venue: Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30

Opening hours: Monday to Friday: 9 am to 6 pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays and on 24 and 31 December 2012)

Press tour: Monday, 26 November 2012, 11 am

Speakers: Adolph Stiller, Tadeusz Barucki

Official opening: Monday, 26 November 2012, 6.30 pm (by invitation only)

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Maciej Nowicki: an architectural career spanning Poland, America and India

First exhibition devoted to a modernist pioneer

The latest exhibition in the Architektur im Ringturm series, which is sponsored by Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein, the main shareholder of Vienna Insurance Group, is the first to focus on the life and work of Polish architect Maciej Nowicki. An architect's reputation is usually based on the plans that are turned into reality. But in this regard Nowicki is something of an anomaly. He was one of the leading lights of Polish architecture in the late inter-war and early post-war years, and is widely regarded as a pioneer of modernism. Nowicki secured a place in history thanks mainly to his observations on architectural theory – which ring just as true now as they did in his days. His architectural career was cut short by the onset of World War II, but although they would never come to fruition, Nowicki had visionary plans for the rebuilding of Warsaw. Maciej Nowicki took his place in the annals of architecture with only one building to his name, which was constructed after his death: the State Fair Arena in North Carolina, later renamed J.S. Dorton Arena.

Architectural beginnings in Poland

Born in 1910, Maciej Nowicki spent most of his childhood in Poland. He came into contact with the USA at an early age after his father became Polish Consul General in Chicago in 1918. Nowicki attended primary school there and his love of drawing grew out of his visits to the city's Museum of Fine Arts. After returning to Poland in 1929 he studied art in Warsaw and Krakow, before starting a degree in architecture in the Polish capital.

During his time at university Nowicki designed a house for his parents at the request of his father, whose aim was to open his son's eyes to the technical side of the architecture profession. Even at this early stage, Nowicki had a number of successes to his name as a graphic artist, and he channelled all of his energies into the project. The result was heavily influenced by the functionalist movement – a plain white cube, with a windowless facade on the street-facing side. The house was also a tribute to the work of Le Corbusier, who had taken Nowicki on for a short internship. At the age of 26 Maciej Nowicki received his diploma in architecture under the tutelage of Professor Swierczynski for the design of the Polish Architects Club headquarters.

After finishing his degree Nowicki married Polish architect Stanislaw Sandecka. Together they set up an architectural firm that came up with designs for exhibition stands and business premises, as well as for several small-scale developments in Warsaw, such as Hotel Holiday, the Centre for Physical Education, the Latona cafe and Cafe Pluton. Most of these buildings are now no longer standing. Nowicki also took part in a number of architectural competitions, submitting plans for a mosque in Warsaw and an administrative building in Lodz. Although these designs took first prize, they were never realised. In 1938 Nowicki collaborated with Jan Boguslawski on the design of the Polish pavilion for the World's Fair in New York.

Going underground

Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the Nowickis found themselves in an increasingly difficult situation, and their work was restricted mainly to graphic design commissions for posters and magazines. An illegal underground movement sprang up in occupied Warsaw in response to the crackdown on cultural activities, including architecture. A number of competitions were held, with Nowicki among the entrants. Between 1941 and 1944 he worked closely with fellow Polish architect Stefan Putowski, as well as teaching at an officially sanctioned vocational college of civil engineering. However, Nowicki also taught secret classes at the Warsaw University of Technology, which had been closed by the German occupying forces, forcing the Faculty of Architecture underground. In addition he worked at the Private Women's School of Technical Drawing for Civil Engineering.

Plans for rebuilding Warsaw

After the Warsaw Uprising had been put down, Nowicki fled to the Carpathian Mountains. In 1945 he resumed his work on plans for the revitalisation of the shattered centre of Warsaw. He chose to strike out in a completely new direction and proposed bulldozing the remnants of the city's ruined buildings. A focus on freestanding buildings was the only logical modern approach suited to his plans. At this time Nowicki began to present his thinking and theoretical views on architecture and functionalism in literary form. One of his articles, published in the new weekly magazine *Skarpa Warszawska*, was entitled "The search for a new functionalism".

Life and work in America

In late 1945 Nowicki travelled to the US as a cultural advisor with the Polish diplomatic mission. Working on behalf of the Polish state, he was a member of the United Nations Board of Design Consultants which drew up the plans for the UN headquarters in New York. Still in his thirties, Nowicki had not yet completed a large-scale construction project based on his own designs. But this did not stop him taking up his seat in the ten-strong advisory group charged with assessing Wallace K. Harrison's designs for the new UN building. His colleagues included high-profile figures such as Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer and Sven Markelius. Although it is hard to identify those features of the building that bear Nowicki's design signature, he succeeded in leaving a lasting impression through his collaboration with such internationally renowned architects. What is certain is that Nowicki was a resourceful mediator when it came to settling differences of opinion. His talent for appraising situations, as well as his comments and sketches, were invaluable in defusing tensions within the group. As American architecture critic Lewis Mumford wrote a decade later: "A few years later Nowicki presented his designs for the parliament building in Chandigarh, which demonstrated the sort of imagination that was completely lacking from the UN building".

Also in New York, Nowicki organised an exhibition under the title "Warsaw is still alive". The show was extremely well received and Nowicki was quick to pick up on the significance of staging such an exhibition on American soil. He also drew on his experience as a teacher in Poland. To begin with, he occasionally taught at the prestigious Pratt Institute School of Architecture in New York, before moving to the North Carolina State College School of Design in Raleigh in 1948. Around this time Maciej and Stanisława Nowicki decided to remain in the USA for family reasons. Both were teaching at North Carolina State College, and Maciej had been named the first head of the School of Architecture. Outside the university, they both also pursued their architectural careers. In 1949 Maciej Nowicki spent several weeks working closely with Finnish architect Eero Saarinen. Together they designed several buildings for Brandeis University near Boston, and Saarinen later oversaw their construction.

His greatest challenge: India

Maciej Nowicki received his last major commission, for the planning of Chandigarh, the new capital of the northern Indian state of Punjab, from Lewis Mumford, who in his advisory role worked to establish a new school. Mumford was also Nowicki's first biographer. The Polish architect collaborated with Albert Mayer and Henley Wittlessey on the Chandigarh project. Both of them underlined the significance of Nowicki's contribution to the design process. Chandigarh gave Nowicki a far bigger canvas for his ideas than any of his previous commissions. The architects at Albert Mayer's office came up with the original designs, but Nowicki quickly took the initiative and assumed overall responsibility for the project.

In spring 1950 he presented numerous sketches for the Capitol Complex, a shopping centre, the railway station and residential blocks complete with their own markets. Nowicki and Mayer flew to India in June that year, and during their eight-week stay, Nowicki developed his plans for the Superblock L-37 apartment building. He felt that brick was the ideal construction material for his designs, and it features in various residential complexes around the city. Nowicki also drafted proposals for additions to the Capitol Complex. Fascinated by his projects and methods, and

captivated by the man himself, the Indian authorities asked Nowicki to oversee the construction of Chandigarh, offering him a ministerial-level post, which he accepted. Before the project could get under way, Nowicki had to return to Raleigh to put his affairs there in order, but on his way home, Nowicki was killed when his plane crashed. The Chandigarh commission was later awarded to Le Corbusier.

The Dorton Arena by Maciej Nowicki

The only building ever to be built according to Nowicki's plans has gone down in the history of modernist architecture. The Parableum – now known as the Dorton Arena, a multi-purpose complex in Raleigh, North Carolina – is one of the most striking stadiums built after World War II. The structural engineering techniques employed at the arena have been frequently copied.

Nowicki and his partner on the project, William Henley Deitrick, aimed to come up with a groundbreaking, customer-focused solution for the new exhibition hall. The eye-catching elliptical construction was primarily intended as a venue for livestock shows on the North Carolina State Fairgrounds. In early autumn 1949 it became clear that the facility was in need of redevelopment. The commission included the drafting of the new site layout, the design of spectator seating, and a hall for cattle exhibitions. An amphitheatre-like structure was originally proposed for the hall, but the final construction stands out for its unique form, light-filled interior and the minimal use of expressive architectural language – a reflection of Nowicki's imaginative powers. The structure consists of two huge reinforced concrete parabolic arches sloping in opposite directions, and the point at which the arches cross extends beyond the building's physical footprint. The roof is suspended above the massive single-auditorium arena using steel cables.

In 1953 the arena received the First Honor Award of the American Institute of Architects. In 2010, to mark the 100th anniversary of Nowicki's birth, an initiative was launched to have the arena designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Exhibition

This exhibition portrays the life of outstanding architect Maciej Nowicki and sheds new light on his creative output. The exhibits include original and facsimile documents acquired from international archives and from private collections in America, India and Poland, as well as photographs and drawings that offer telling insights into Nowicki's constructions and design plans. Besides a description of the man and his work, the catalogue includes a collection of his articles that appeared in a wide range of publications. Nowicki's theoretical observations on architecture and comments on his projects paint a revealing picture of the mindset of this extraordinary figure.

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm XXX, Maciej Nowicki 1910 - 1950, Architect _ Poland | USA | India
Published by Adolph Stiller; featuring contributions from T. Barucki and original texts from Maciej Nowicki
Approx. 120 pages; German/English; fully illustrated.

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