

History and architecture of the Warsaw School of Economics campus

# *Esprit maçonnique* in Warsaw



**MARTA LEŚNIAKOWSKA**

Institute of Art, Warsaw

Polish Academy of Sciences

marta.lesniakowska@wp.pl

Assoc. Prof. Marta Leśniakowska is an historian of art and an authority on the history of 19th- to 21st-century architecture, art and the methodology of art history

**The Warsaw School of Economics campus, a fascinating and intricate monument of art-deco architecture, was designed and constructed in the 1920-30s as one element within a broader concept of building a modern society**

Warsaw guides for tourists from the 1930s highly recommended the group of buildings comprising what was then the Higher School of Commerce (WSH) in the Warsaw district of Mokotów - praising the intriguing architectural forms built on the campus in the 1920s, such as the gold attic mosaics gleaming in the sun and the fascinating glass “aquarium” of the library, with its extraordinary reading room’s glass domes supported by wooden columns. This cluster of buildings - which now serve as the campus of the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH) and are today listed as architectural monuments - still arouses similar emotions. As one of Europe’s leading architectural and design projects in the art deco style, the campus certainly merits a closer look.

## Roots of the school

Warsaw’s economic college was founded back in 1915 as a private foundation for industrial and commercial circles associated with the Polish Freemasons. It was the largest private school of economics in interwar Poland and one of the largest in Europe, with a teaching program that introduced the principle of modern, democratic, liberal capitalism. The establishment of WSH/SGH was associated with a demand in newly independent Poland for highly qualified economic and administrative personnel. Once Poland’s sovereignty had been regained following 150 years of oppression, it became necessary to build a modern state. The main organizer of the university and its first president, Dr. Bolesław Miklaszewski (a political activist and an important personage in Polish Freemasonry), sought to establish a proper campus in 1918. Mokotów was chosen in view of the urban progression then taking place in Warsaw. This part

of town provided the location for three nationwide major universities: Warsaw Agricultural University (SGGW), the Geological Institute, and WSH/SGH, which were together meant to create Warsaw’s “Latin Quarter.”

The WSH/SGH campus projects were assigned to one of the most original Polish architects of this period, Jan Koszczyk Witkiewicz (1881-1958) - a cousin of avant-garde artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy). The investor planned construction in a series of stages, so the design called for free-standing residential buildings, educational pavilions, and academic houses all grouped around an internal garden. Only three buildings were completed before the outbreak of WWII: the Workshop Pavilion (1925-26) on Rakowiecka Street, the Library (1928-1931) on Batory Street, and the Professors’ Residence (1935). The first two were immediately hailed as Poland’s modern equivalent of European and American art deco architecture projects, combining modernist historicism and its redefinition through the latest design concepts.

## The temple of knowledge

The focal point of the design was the library, the most awe-inspiring building on campus and one of the most original in early 20th-century European architecture. This extremely modern building introduced new, innovative ideas to the architecture of libraries. Modeled after the first two modern libraries (built in Zurich and New York around 1912), the



**The glass pyramid over the main assembly hall is the symbol of the Warsaw School of Economics**

Juliusz Sokolowski



The huge column in the SGH reading room was designed as a “cathedral of knowledge”

WSH/SGH Library was much more advanced than they: it is by no accident considered the first modern library building in Europe. Its uniqueness lies in the use of a skeletal frame reinforced with concrete, with the remainder almost entirely made of glass. Both buildings (the Library and the Workshop Pavilion) have identical square outlines, 45.38 m to a side, and follow the same 4x4 m square modular grid. The library was designed for 1,000 people and 1 million volumes, the Workshop Pavilion for 1270 students.

In formal execution, the two pavilions reached a compromise between the functionalist “international style” (which began to be promoted in Poland in the 1920s) and the modernist tradition (national decorationism), which embraced the pan-European notion of manifesting elements of identity through architecture. The architecture of the pavilions thus echoes classical Florentine Renaissance palaces and Alberti’s architectural theories (elementarism, arcades, a closed system of solid shapes), while on the other hand there are also clear references to architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s novel 19th-century concept, based on a modular system of open, solid shapes permeated with light.

### Lighting the way

The formatted space found in the architecture of the SGH pavilions conceals a “hidden” symbolism associated with Freemasonry. The Masonic tradition, based on building a democratic, liberal society of modern capitalism, imparted a specific deeper meaning to architectural design: the use of a building, its style and conceptual program were viewed as part of a broader project aimed at fostering social happiness in the service of one’s nation, fatherland, and humanity. The influence of this *esprit maçonnique* is clear especially in the Library. Its space graduates slowly along the “road to enlightenment”; from its dark beginnings it lightens gradually until the climax of the entire building: the reading room’s great column, shaped as a big bright “cathedral of knowledge.” This most remarkable library in all of early 20th-century architecture ensures Jan Koszczyc Witkiewicz a special place in history.

The way light and glass is used in the SGH buildings, in the glazed, openwork designs, glass pyramids and domes, etc., is derived from expressionist architecture and is characteristic of the lighting effects of this movement, from the beginning of the 20th century believed to be an essential

element of new architecture. The expressionist architectural effects of glass and light are, of course, a reference to the utopian idea of glass houses (*Glasarchitektur*), fashionable from the beginning of the twentieth century.

The architecture of the SGH buildings springs from structural modernism, which newly redefined the Gothic tradition. This is why the SGH’s pavilions have such distinctly “Gothic” motifs, found in, for example, the great cathedral windows of the library (which originally featured blue window panels). The architect joined those threads with the classical tradition, and also added so-called native motifs, particularly promoted by the Kraków workshops and the Polish Society for Applied Arts. The aesthetic design of the two pavilions (unfortunately partially destroyed during the war) is arguably one of the most interesting implementations of art deco style in Warsaw and in Poland.

The architect collaborated with prominent artists and designers. The interiors are the work of painter and graphic artist Wojciech Jastrzębowski (1884-1963). It was his hand that created the ceramic plaques on the attic of the Workshop Pavilion, with symbols and allegories alluding to the various branches of industry and trade, along with the schools’ coat of arms: a sailing ship. Such ceramic work on the façade of the library (1929) – here based on a drawing by Koszczyc himself – also symbolized a book opening. The arcades of the Workshop Pavilion featured the coats of arms of the largest Polish cities – including Lwów and Wilno (now Lviv and Vilnius) – and wooden frontons with allegories of industry and agriculture plus Masonic allusions (now lost), all the work of sculptor Tadeusz Godziszewski (1904-1977).

### Resurgence

The SGH campus survived the war; only the Workshop Pavilion, housing the Archives of Modern Records, was seriously damaged after being set aflame by the retreating Germans. In 1949, due to changes in the legal and political systems, the college, its land and buildings were nationalized, and its name changed to the Central School of Planning and Statistics (SGPiS). During this period, a third building was added to campus: the Main Building (1950-1953), carried out based on the same project plans conceived by Koszczyc back in 1924. In 1991, the university reinstated its pre-1939 name, becoming once again known as the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH). The reinstated international prestige of one of the largest economic universities in Europe is now accompanied by a new interest in the unique architectural, artistic, and cultural treasures of the SGH campus. ■

#### Further reading:

Leśniakowska M. (1998). *Jan Koszczyc Witkiewicz i budowanie w jego czasach [Jan Koszczyc Witkiewicz and construction in his times]*. Warsaw: PAN Institute of Art.