

Architektur im Ringturm

Modernism in Krakow 8 April to 20 June 2025

Press tour: Monday 7 April, 10am

Speakers: Adolph Stiller (curator) and
Małgorzata Jędrzejczyk (academic consultant, Krakow/Berlin)

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Curator: Adolph Stiller

Venue: Ringturm Exhibition Centre
Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna

Opening hours: Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)

Official opening: Monday 7 April, 6.30pm
(invitation only)

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Old connections – new perspectives

The latest exhibition at the Ringturm focuses on Krakow's architectural evolution, spotlighting the interplay between tradition and transformation. Taking Krakow's close links to Vienna – which have grown over time, and can be seen in an urban structure and building typologies that date back to the days of the Habsburg monarchy – as its starting point, the exhibition runs the rule over less-well-known architectural developments since the end of the first modernist era. Influenced by the sociopolitical upheaval seen after 1945, and above all after 1989, this "second modernist" period was reflected in numerous building designs which have, so far, slipped under the radar.

The aim of the exhibition is to broaden the commonly held, often nostalgic view of Krakow, and steer attention towards architectural achievements located away from the well-trodden tourist trails. Geographical and cultural ties – strengthened by Poland's EU membership and integration into the Schengen Area – provide the current framework for a new architectural dialogue. The projects presented in the exhibition illustrate the internationalisation of architectural practices in Poland, while at the same time highlighting the continuity of local building traditions.

The show is accompanied by a catalogue featuring essays by two renowned experts: Konrad Mýslik explores Krakow's urban development, while Dr. Małgorzata Jędrzejczyk examines the architectural dynamic of the interwar years as a period of new departures for the country.

Modernism in Krakow, 1918-1939

Compared with other urban centres in the Republic of Poland of the interwar period, the unmistakable nature of Krakow's architecture has its roots in some very specific phenomena. Between the first and second world wars, the city was shaped by its search for an identity that was supposed to be founded on modernism, but was understood in numerous different ways – and definitely not in terms of modernism, which was seen as idolising the new or a break from tradition. And it was not deemed strictly necessary to articulate this particular type of modernism through visible, external and form-based features. Besides the architectural forms themselves – which are interpreted as new – the primary means of expression are the purposes for which the buildings were designed.

This modernist style is reflected in changes to the spaces that make up the urban fabric, as well as in typologies, which are aligned with the new rhythms of life, modernisation processes and opportunities opened up by technological advances and industry. In many cases, these are examples of a local form of modernism that was rooted in cultural tradition and originated in the debates on the national architectural style which took place at the time.

Ultimately, it is a form of modernism that is related to the tensions and interweaving of art and architecture in other parts of Europe. As a result, the identity of architectural designs in Krakow that date back to the interwar period eludes the contrast between modernism and tradition. It is not driven by the impulse to play these values off against one another, but represents more of an attempt to bring about their coexistence – with a variety of emphases. In some cases, this type of modernism can be labelled as romantic, national, "restrained", or even as not modern enough.

However, it can be placed alongside the many other modernist styles that evolved in Europe and on other continents during this period, and which are commonly referred to as an "alternative modernism".

Modernism in Krakow after 1989

The second world war and the following decades under the Communist system act as historic parentheses for the period from which the designs selected for the exhibition are taken: the second part of the 20th century, which began with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the resulting political upheaval, and the reshaping of Europe.

Architectural activities from the real socialist period are consciously put aside for later consideration. The complex situation after 1945, Poland's totally different political system, and its geographical focus in these close-on five decades meant that architecture evolved under entirely distinct circumstances.

So far, Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 – which also explains why the country currently holds the six-month rotating presidency of the European Council – can be seen as the high point of the transformation process that began in 1989.

Linked to the process of sociopolitical change over the past 30-plus years – referred to here as the second modernist period – architectural developments are reflected particularly clearly in the examples showcased in this exhibition. Although embedded in the region and their specific contexts, all of the designs stand out for their distinctive sense of internationalisation – through their architectural expression, their construction standards in terms of technique, materials and aesthetic, and their interior design. In some instances, this internationalism is underlined by the commissioning of renowned international firms following design competitions.