Is it worth revitalizing the auditorium of the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University?

This article was commissioned by the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University in order to outline the history of the Chemistry Auditorium building, its needs, possibilities and consequently – opportunities offered by the planned revitalisation process.

One could pose this pertinent question while looking at the currently empty building standing near the new edifice of the University Library and the metallic grey tower of the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University. The onlooker's eyes would first fall on the unusual and distinctive body of the building, which represents an increasingly rare example of the heritage of Polish modernism of the 1960s and 1970s. However, focusing attention solely on the body could easily lead to overlooking other unique characteristics of the object, which result from its original architecture as well as from the interaction with its closest surroundings lying in the very centre of Wrocław. The edifice offers not only interesting possibilities of adaptation for academic purposes, which would be most natural in the context of its past, but also of other functions, which would make it more accessible to the general public by exceeding the label of a university auditorium and a monument of post-war modernism.

Figure 1 The auditorium of the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University. Source: http://bi.gazeta.pl/im/43/54/ef/z15684675Q,Budynek-Audytorium-Wydzialu-Chemii-Uniwersytetu-Wr.jpg

Origins and architecture

Just like the adjacent buildings of the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University, the auditorium was created largely thanks to the efforts of Professor Bogusława Jeżowska-Trzebiatowska (Fig. 2), a chemist from Wrocław who is nicknamed the mother of Wrocław's academic chemistry. In order to address the burning need for expanding the Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, she was determined to construct a new Faculty of Chemistry in an empty lot near Ostrów Tumski. The architectural design was prepared by architects Marian Barski and Krystyna Barska[i] (Fig. 4) and selected in a 1964 competition for the expansion of an academic district in Wrocław. The design included the construction of the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University in the form it has today

(Fig, 3, Fig. 5, Fig. 6, Fig. 7). Importantly, the architects also intended to erect other structures in the direct proximity, e.g. the "legendary" Kredka and Ołówek student dormitories, the Parawanowiec dorm, the tower of the Department of Construction of Wrocław Polytechnic (the C7 building) or the building of the Faculty of Mathematics of Wrocław University with the twin auditorium. Thus they became the chief designers of the academic district of Wrocław that still spreads along the so-called Grunwaldzka Axis, which has become a unique collection of modernist architecture and testament to an ambitious plan of elevating science to the foreground of social progress.

Unfortunately, not all of the Barskis' designs have been fortunate enough to survive in an unchanged state until today. Some of them have undergone reckless "modernisations" that blurred their original forms and qualities, as was the case with the buildings of the Faculty of Mathematics or the aforementioned tower of the Department of Construction of Wrocław Polytechnic. Consequently, they have lost a considerable portion of their original quality, which resulted in the distortion of the harmony, integrity and heritage of the entire plan of the district. Therefore it is vitally important to preserve and maintain the auditorium, which has survived practically intact and still carries the original values of the time when it was constructed.

Figure 3 Professor Bogusława Jeżowska-Trzebiatowska. Source: http://www.mbd.muzeum.uni.wroc.pl/assets/uploads/s467/ea62f-trzebiatowska_www.jpg

Figure 4 Krystyna Barska and Marian Barski. Source: http://www.inmemoriam.architektsarp.pl/img/1615_5073329d4c597-krystyna_i_marian_barscy.jpg

Figure 2 View of the auditorium and the tower of the Faculty of Chemistry of Wrocław University. Source: http://x3.cdn03.imgwykop.pl/c3201142/comment_0bqTXvDRNna0UqQpyVf8bC1HFXtcbufB.jpg

Moving on to the very form of the building, it is impossible not to notice that it is fully subordinated to its original function. The main and dominant element of the body is the elevated (on pylons, in keeping with Le Corbusier's principle) section that contains lecture halls, which is very clearly visible from the outside. Placing this section above ground level can be interpreted as its symbolic entry – or perhaps intentional elevation – into a higher semantic register, a space of heaven, which is often equated with thinking and ideas[ii]. In this way, the architects and their contemporaries manifested the special role of science. The form of the building – both simple and distinctive – reflects the then principle of modernism/functionalism stating that "form follows function." Little wonder, then, that the section containing the main function of the building – the lecture halls – is so unambiguously highlighted. This highlighted fragment simultaneously constitutes the base for the rest of the building, which is made up from a glazed hall in front of the auditoria and a cloakroom hall downstairs.

It is worth adding at this point that both halls are connected with ramps, which are also characteristic features of modernism and draw upon Le Corbusier's inspirations. They are among the numerous accents proving that the architects attempted to create quality architecture capable of establishing a dialogue with the world's best manifestations at the time. By using ramps, which are too steep by modern standards but not at the time of their construction, they managed to strike a harmonious balance between the horizontal planes situated at different elevations, which became open to each other and connected with the main edifice of the Faculty of Chemistry by a walkway.

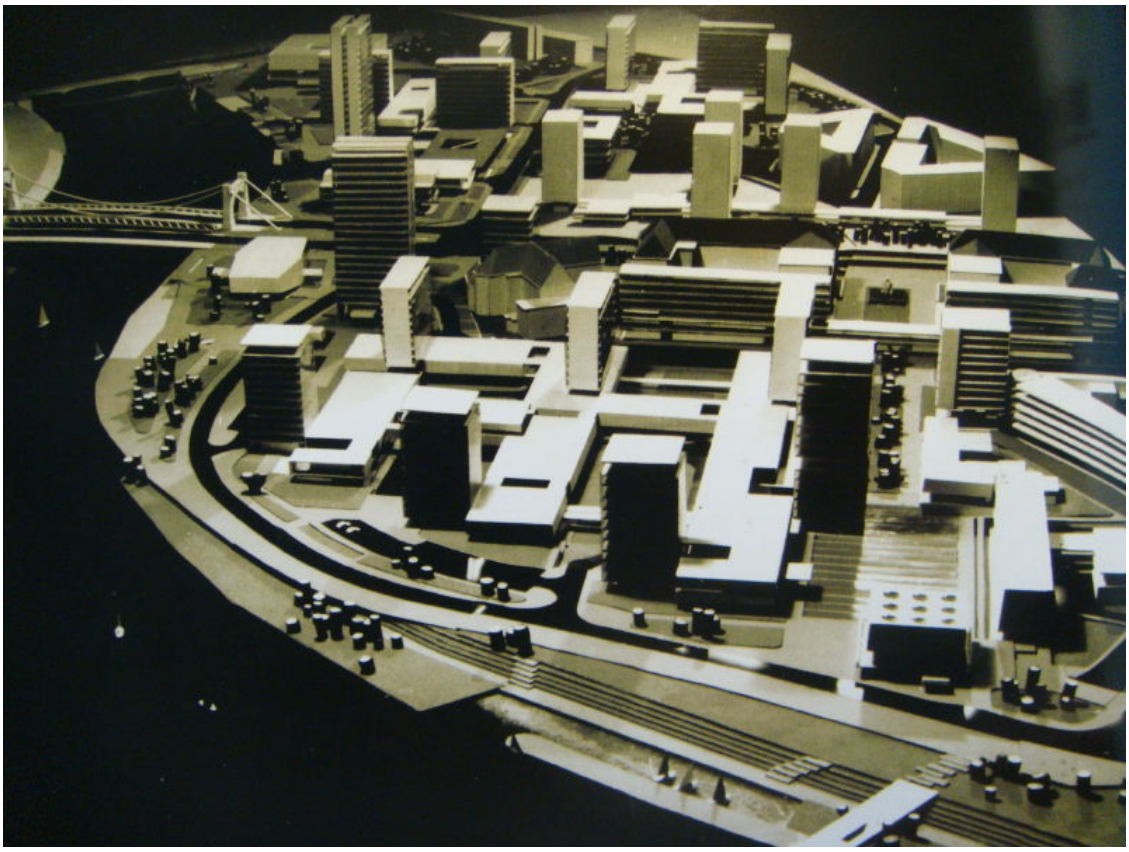

Figure 5 Photograph of the scale model of the design the won the competition for the concept of the academic district in Wrocław – view of a part of Wrocław Polytechnic. Source: http://images48.fotosik.pl/56/514e1321fecfa06c.jpg

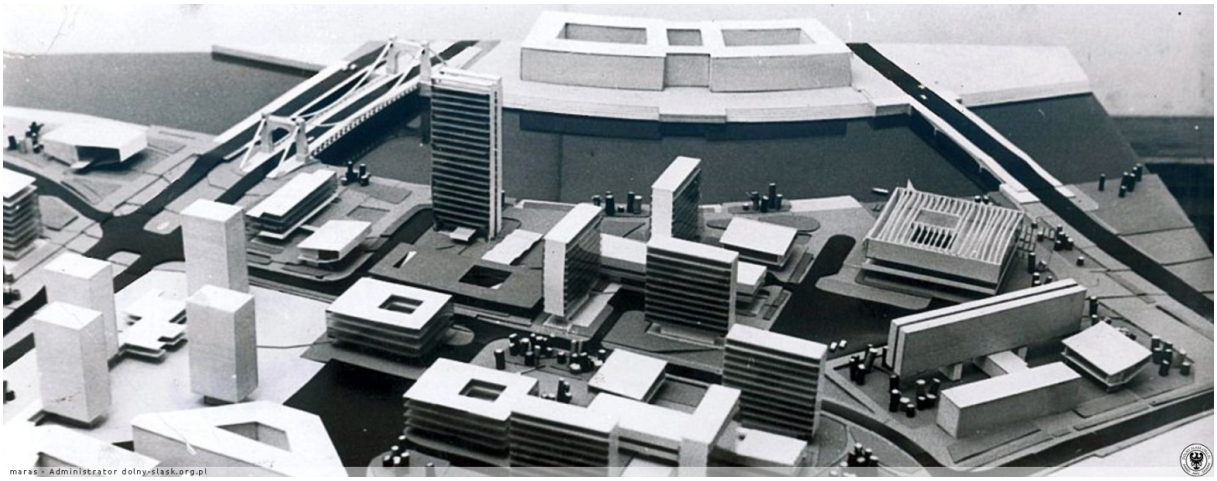

Figure 6 Photograph of the scale model of the design the won the competition for the concept of the academic district in Wrocław – we can see constructed elements of Wrocław University's campus – the Faculty of Chemistry with the auditorium (centre) and the Faculty of Mathematics (near Grunwaldzki Bridge). Source: http://dolny-slask.org.pl/foto/5971/5971541.jpg

Figure 7 Photograph of the scale model from the side of the Oder. The constructed buildings of the Faculty of Chemistry can be seen on the left. Source: http://dolny-slask.org.pl/foto/25/25977.jpg

Moreover, the design of the object is clear and simple, based on large glazed areas emphasising the "purity of form" as it was understood at the time, which was supposed to provide the users with ample daylight and attractive views of the surroundings. Thanks to this, the building is open to the world around it, which is among its greatest assets. It is clearly observable in the cloakroom hall,

which is creatively situated under the lecture halls. By equipping it with a glazed wall and thus opening it up to the river, it combines elements of a relaxation area for students and functions as an entrance zone.

The terrace in front of the building, which triggers associations with sunbathing areas on rivieras, seems particularly interesting. Connotations with sea resorts are additionally strengthened by the proximity of the Oder, which endows it with characteristics that make it ideally suited for resting in the open air. When combined with the arrangement of the interiors, this area literally asks for being used as tea garden or an open-air extension of a restaurant (Fig. 8, Fig. 9, Fig. 10).

Figure 8 The potential of the terrace in front of the object as a space for relaxation manifested itself during the workshops of the Polish Association of Architecture Students, Wrocław 2013. Source: https://reachtywacja.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/1022_ossawroclaw2013_028.jpg

Figure 9 By organising the workshops in the old cloakroom hall, the interesting possibilities offered by this place could be seen. This vision of a space with people sitting at tables is an inspiration to turn it into a zone of relaxation and integration, in keeping with the "meeting place" motto. Source: https://reachtywacja.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/1021_ossawroclaw2013_010.jpg

When writing about the auditorium's architecture it is impossible to omit the refined details ornamenting the building, which often draw upon the interplay of statics and dynamics. For instance, the alternating divisions of windows are contrasted with the simplicity of the building's facing (made of aluminium, which was very modern at the time), whose texture, in spite of being corrugated, is still monotonous. The terrace, which gently opens up with stairs, is paved with subtly, almost chaotically arranged stone slabs that fill up its rectangular outline.

In the entire object, friendly and natural materials are used, in keeping with the modernist principle of "truth to materials." The interior décor is mostly based on the combination of warm wood, ornamented stone and, whenever necessary, crude metal – steel or aluminium, which creates a peculiar harmony that is unique to the epoch. All these details, from the arrangement of paving stones to railings, were meticulously designed by the Barskis. It is also worth emphasising their attention to ensuring top quality of each and every detail, as evidenced by the floor of the hall connecting the building with the main edifice of the Faculty of Chemistry, which is paved with marble – a rare luxury at a time when financial cuts and shortages were a norm rather than an exception.

Another particularly interesting detail is the sizeable triangular concrete bowl situated on the terrace, which receives a cascade of water from the roof of the auditorium through a cubistic gargoyle (Fig. 1). Also unusual are the gently falling stairs leading from the bowl to the ground level, with another ramp in their middle. This time, however, the stone-paved ramp is not intended for people; instead, it carries the excess of water from the bowl on particularly rainy days. Perhaps, together with the bowl and the gargoyle, it is supposed to trigger associations with mountain streams and picturesque waterfalls.

The interiors of the lecture halls are as well preserved as the entire building and contain unique décor from the 1960s-1970s, combining custom-made tip-up seats and pulpits against the pronounced, regular structures of panels suspended under the roof of the main hall. Both lecture halls are characterised by exquisite acoustic properties, reflecting their original function (Fig. 12, Fig. 13).

Possibilities of use and adaptation

The object offers exceptional potential to become an unusual focal point on the map of Wrocław and beyond. With appropriate development and promotion, thanks to its sophisticated and distinctive form it could become a unique point on a supralocal scale because many other outstanding examples of architecture from the communist era in Poland (such as the Supersam supermarket in Warsaw or the brutalist Central Railway Station in Katowice) have been torn down. Revitalising the object and inscribing it in a broader context of the renovated academic district in Wrocław may result in increasing Wrocław's recognition on a European scale.

Figure 10 One of the designs that won the competition for the adaptation of the building, prepared by Justyna Brząkała, Aleksander Chamielec, Aleksandra Czupkiewicz, Paweł Floryn. It is based on turning the cloakroom hall into an eating place/café. Source: https://czupkiewicz.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/zelig-chemistry-auditorium/

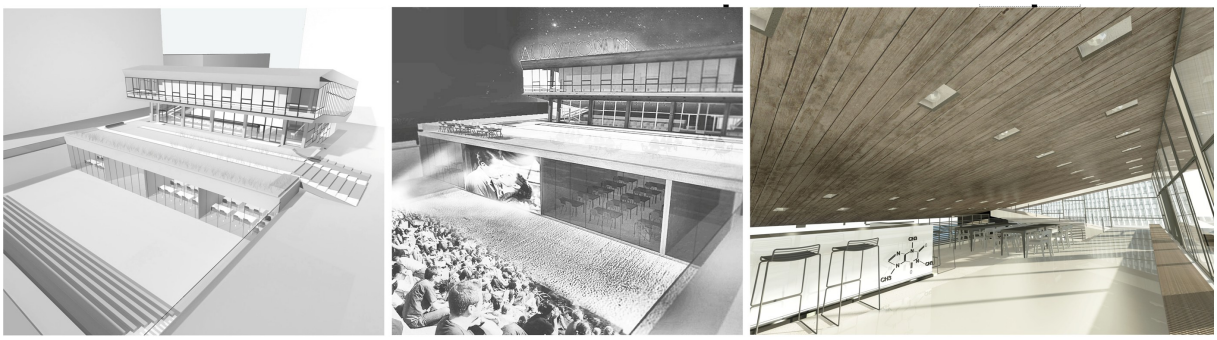

Figure 11 The second design that won the competition, prepared by Marta Michalak, Blanka Omari, Małgorzata Orłowska, Daria Socha. It illustrates the potential of the square in front of the building and the possibility of expanding the object. Source: https://reachtywacja.wordpress.com/nowe-audytorium-uniwersytetu-wrclawskiego/

Numerous possibilities of adapting both the object and the square in front of it were put forward during the 2013 student competition accompanying the architecture workshops organised by the OSSA Polish Association of Architecture Students, the Self-Government of Students of the Faculty of Architecture of Wrocław University of Technology, and the Jednostka Architektury Foundation, held under the patronage of arch. Jadwiga Grabowska.[iii] Among the proposals was turning the interior into a café (fig. 10) and adapting the square near the building. One of the two designs that were awarded joint first prize was based on creating a hollow in front of the building, which would increase the usable surface of the object and constitute an intriguing public space (Fig. 11) connected with the currently revitalised boulevards along the Oder.

Figure 12 Source: https://reachtywacja.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/1020_ossawroclaw2013_076.jpg

Figure 13 The interior of the old Grand Lecture Hall with the original décor from the 1960s-1970s. Source: https://reachtywacja.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/ach_zwiedzanie1.jpg

Summary

The building of the Chemistry Auditorium carries considerable potential as a venue where various social events could be held. While remaining a genuine element of a more comprehensive plan – or actually one of its most important components – it may bring substantial benefits for the city and the University of Technology, provided its significance and advantages are highlighted in the right way.

Due to all these advantages, the auditorium may become one of the centres of the academic district. Its central location and accessibility by public transport make it easily available to the inhabitants of the entire city, who could visit it as the main lecture and presentation centre during the Lower Silesian Festival of Science, for example. Throughout the rest of the year it could serve the role of a conference and academic centre. Proper development of the object could start a new chapter in its history, in which all its strengths would be put to optimal use. It therefore seems that it is worth revitalising the auditorium of the Faculty of Chemistry, and we should wish it for ourselves and the object.

prepared by arch. Adrian Mermer, MSc., Eng.

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[i] Ziental, Krzysztof, *Instytut Matematyki i Instytut Chemii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego w kontekście rozwoju dzielnicy naukowej w rejonie placu Grunwaldzkiego* (The Institute of Mathematics and the Institute of Chemistry of Wrocław University in the context of the development of the academic district near Grunwaldzki Square), M.A. thesis written under the supervision of dr hab. Agnieszka Zabłocka-Kos, Wrocław, 2009. Source: Wrocław University archive. This work is a monograph of the building, with its detailed description and its history. The author used some of the information shared by K. Ziental during presentations in the course of his lobbying for the Auditorium of the Faculty of Chemistry. The author also derived inspiration from arch. Anna Rumińska's article available on http://cargocollective.com/powojennymodernizm/Audytorium-Chemii-we-Wroclawiu.

[ii] *http://jacko.econ.uj.edu.pl/Publ/Wertykalika.pdf*

[iii] *https://reachtywacja.wordpress.com/organizatorzy/*