

The Dome in Sacral Architecture. The Spatial and Symbolic Considerations Based on the Projects for the National Temple of Divine Providence in Warsaw

Anna Agata Wagner

*Ph.D., Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology,
Koszykowa 55, 00-659 Warsaw, Poland*

Through reviewing the projects for the creation of the symbolic votive temple of outstanding importance to the history of the Polish nation, which have been developed over the last 200 years, I intend to present the evolutionary nature of the dome within the sacral architecture, both in the symbolic and spatial sense. Beginning with the classical Palladian forms, through the constructivist-expressionistic forms of the thirties of the XX century up to and considering contemporary spatial shapes originating in the idea of a dome, formally not always being a dome.

Keywords: sacral architecture, Polish architecture, symbolism of domes.

1. The first concept of the votive Temple of Highest Providence in Warsaw

The idea of erecting a Temple of Highest Providence was originally the personal invention initiated by King Stanislaw August Poniatowski over 200 years ago. The King planned to realize his dream of building a perfect symbol-temple at Agrykola in Ujazdów. The construction of the sanctuary was eventually associated with the important political events of that time and started to be treated as a votive shrine of the Polish nation. Intended to serve as a thanksgiving gift in return for the successful conclusion of the Four-Year Sejm (Polish parliament) and the declaration of the May 3rd Constitution in 1791, an attempt to save the weakening state.

The winning project chosen in the course of the first architectural competition held in Poland was designed by Jakub Kubicki. Kubicki was the typical representative of the architectural classicism of the end of XVIII century. His works represented the mature phase of classicism with the visible impact of the Palladian architecture. Both the King and his court architect were connoisseurs of classical culture, but were also involved in the Freemasonry movement which also sought inspiration in classical antiquity. For the then social and intellectual

elites Providence was a word synonymous with “Wisdom,” while “Reason” was one of the most important values of the Enlightenment noted as the universal human feature, both for Christians and pagans. Stanislaw August considered wisdom as the most excellent virtue. He enjoyed being compared to King Solomon, who for centuries has been called the personification of this human characteristic. Therefore it is with no surprise that we notice the resemblance between the composition of the chosen project and the ideal renaissance depictions of the Jerusalem Temple (Raphael’s “The Marriage of the Virgin”, or Perugino’s “The Delivery of the Keys”) as the circular or octagonal building with four porticos that point toward the four corners of the world and is crowned with a dome. The circle symbolizes God, perfection; the Greek cross, whose arms are outlined by the porticos symbolizes Christian universalism, but also the four corners of the world or, in other words, something of the natural Earth, as opposed to the heavenly symbol of the circle. The interlocking of the two shapes may be seen as the symbolic conception of the two realms: Heaven and Earth. Furthermore, the cross in the circle is one of the oldest symbols present in all the aboriginal cultures – the solar cross, symbol of light and sun. A perfect form to reflect the Enlightenment idea

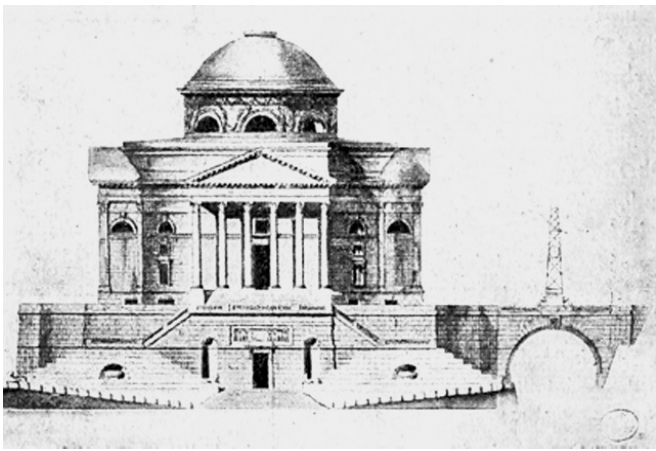


Fig. 1. Jakub Kubicki, *The vista view of the Temple of Divine Providence*. Warsaw University Library. Print Room.

of transforming the material world not with the light of the human mind alone but with the participation of the spiritual element as well – the divine light of Providence.

Kubicki designed the shrine on the central plan of a circular rotunda with the four six-columned porticos. In terms of the three-dimensional structure the central plan was completed with the dome originating in classical forms (Fig. 1). The hemispherical dome was said to represent Heaven, Universe and all that which is divine and perfect. What actually matters in the architectural structure are not only the composition and construction themselves but also the treatment of light, “designing” with the light. The dome does not constitute the structural element only: the dominant dome is shaped with space and light. In Kubicki’s designs the archetypal form of the Roman Pantheon dome can be found in the shape of the dome of a palladian-like transformation form based on the drum with the ring of eight arched windows. The dome was an inevitable element of sacral architecture in the era of Modernity, being the symbol of the *sacrum* itself. The classical architecture of the Age of Enlightenment appealed to the arts of antiquity and renaissance, to their *noble simplicity and calm grandeur*. And these very characteristics can be traced in Kubicki’s design of the shrine of Highest Providence, of the Temple which was intended to become the symbol of the enlightened values: freedom, tolerance, freemasonry and also of the modern nation *in statu nascendi*. The Third Partition of Poland (1795) halted the construc-

tion work started in Agricola in Warsaw. Only a fragment of the pillar under which was laid the cornerstone of the planned shrine has survived until modern times.

2. The interwar projects of the shrine

After Poland regained independence in 1918 the efforts to construct the Church were resumed, but the idea was altered to reflect a strictly catholic temple devoted to Divine Providence. Following a Parliamentary resolution in March 1921 it was decided to finance the project from the state budget. The location and plan were to be chosen by a special committee formed by the representatives of the clergy, state and municipal authorities and the Association of Polish Architects. It was finally decided to erect the temple at Pole Mokotowskie, the newly designed, representative district of Warsaw. The plan of the temple worked out by Bohdan Pniewski, was selected in the course of two competitions held in 1929 and 1930.

The competition prerequisites provided for the construction of a church of monumental scale with a capacity of 5000 people, not only for serving official functions at the state level, but foremost to embody the essence of the governing idea of creating a thanksgiving monument for the country’s regaining its independence. The Monument-Temple integrated with the monumental plaza – a National Forum – was intended as the main spatial focal point of Pole Mokotowskie. In a search for new spatial expressions for the sacral architecture there were very few projects that proposed the traditional form of a church with a dome; only one project by Czesław Przybylski referred to Kubicki’s design of the XVIII century (Fig. 2).

The most original project was submitted by Jan Koszczyk-Witkiewicz, who proposed a centralized arrangement on the open-work plan of intricate geometry with concave, arch-bent walls and tapered skylight-dome (Fig. 3). Its ferroconcrete structure consisted of cascade-like lifted multi-pointed arches with color glazing which created the outstanding luminosity of the church interior.

This visionary design, comprising both the barocco-guarinesque and the gothic forms transposed onto the expressionistic-cubist language of architecture, included the spiritual aspect, most noticeable by the way light

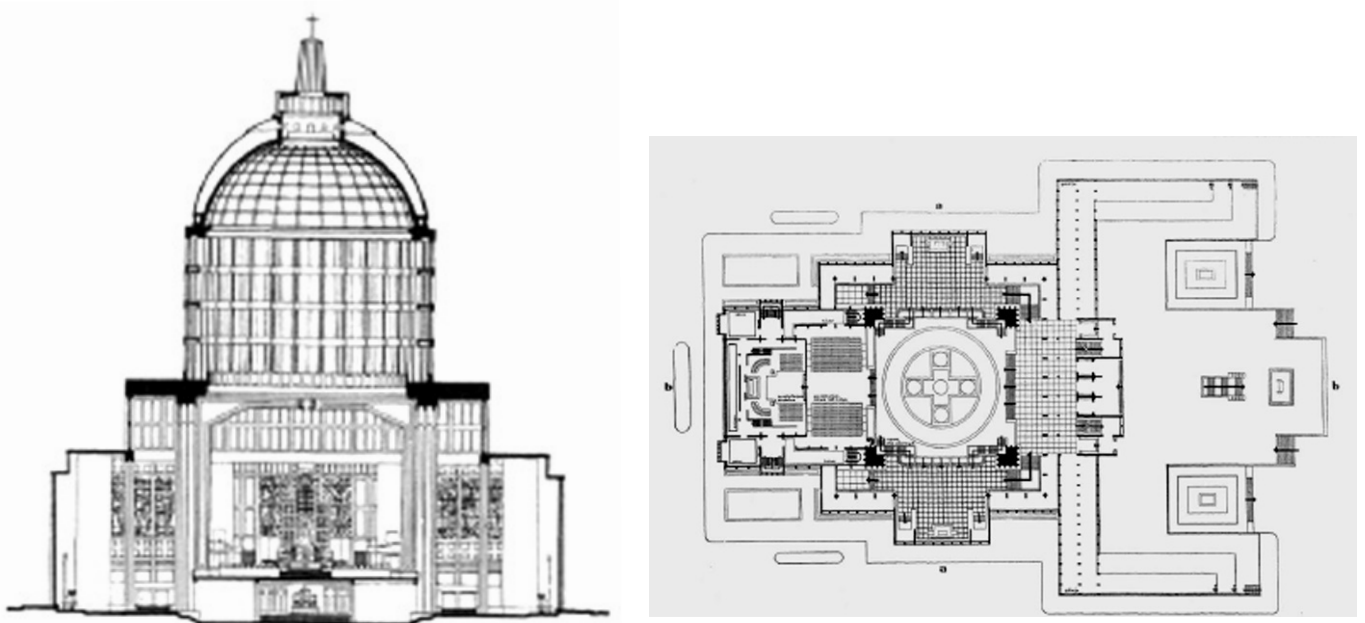


Fig. 2. Czesław Przybylski, *Competition design of the Temple of Divine Providence at Mokotow Field, Warsaw, cross-section and ground floor plan, 1932. After Architektura i Budownictwo (thereon A i B), 3-4/1932, p. 83.*

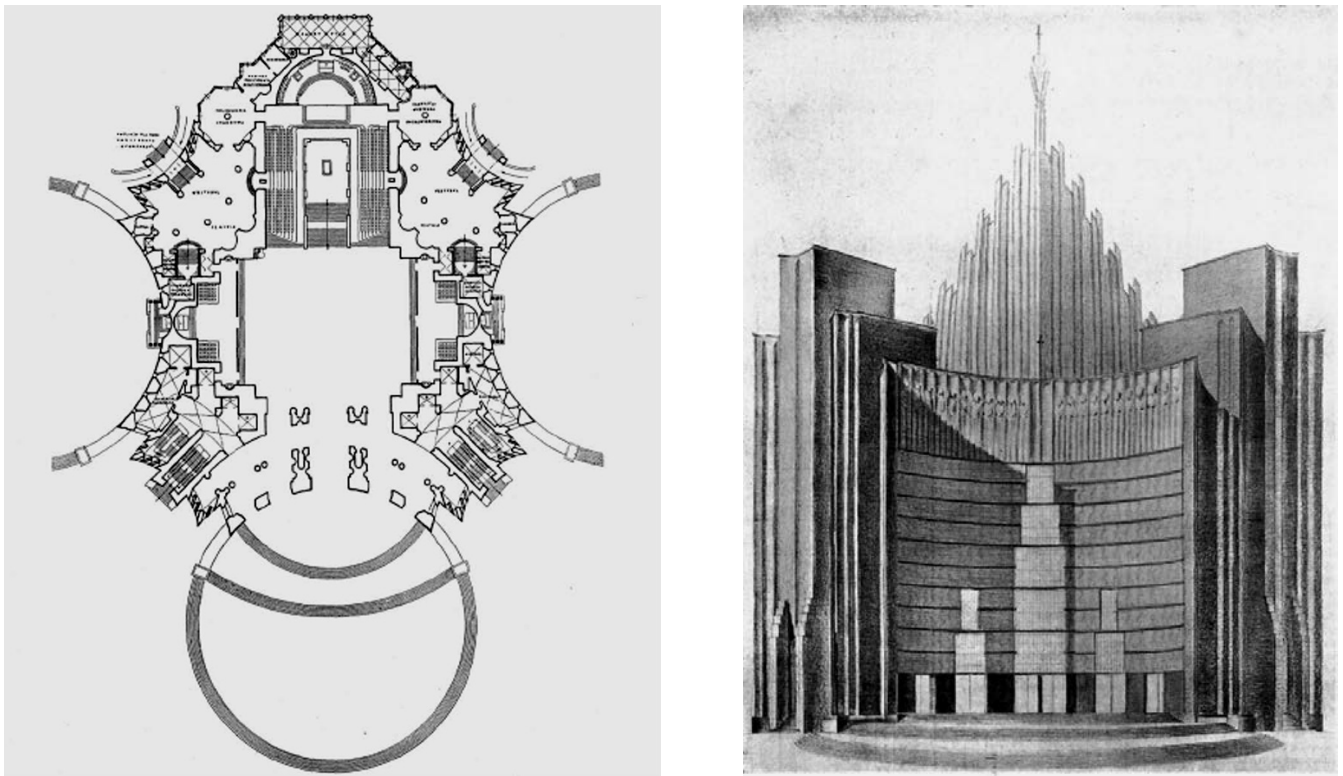


Fig. 3. Jan Koszczyz-Witkiewicz, *Competition design of the Temple of Divine Providence at Pole Mokotowskie, Warsaw, ground floor plan and west elevation, 1930. After A i B, 9-10/1930, pp. 339, 341.*



Fig. 4. Reconstruction of Solomon's Temple by Charles Chipiez, 1890. After G. Perrot, *Ch. Chipiez (1890), History of Art in Sardinia and Judea*, London: Chapman and Hall limited; New York: A. C. Armstrong and son.

shapes space (an effect obtained due to the “crystal” dome). Despite indisputable values of design uniqueness and monumentality, the Koszycz-Witkiewicz design was criticised for its lack of harmony between the temple interior and its outside appearance.

The other submitted designs were mostly modernistic proposals, with cubic shapes based on reinforced concrete structures, in which the dominant dome was replaced with tower forms. Reference to the idea of Solomon's temple can be still observed as in the XVIII century, but not to the renaissance depiction from before, but to the popular reconstruction by Charles Chipiez from the end of the XIX century¹ (Fig. 4). Those references to the idea of Solomon's temple were visible both in Judaic and Christian sacral architecture, and it was a global phenomenon (ex. church of ss. Annunziata in Sabaudia, 1933).

The winning design by Pniewski, one of the most distinguished Polish architects of the interwar period, was an example of this category of sacral architecture from that period. The cascade-mounted body of the tower, with delicate, vertical divisions filled with glass, was placed on top of the front part of the temple and dominated the plaza (Fig. 5). Thus the church's monumental form was emphasized. At the same time the I S. R. Kravtsov, *Reconstruction of the Temple by Charles Chipiez and Its Application in Architecture*, *Ars Judaica*, 4/2008, pp. 25-42.

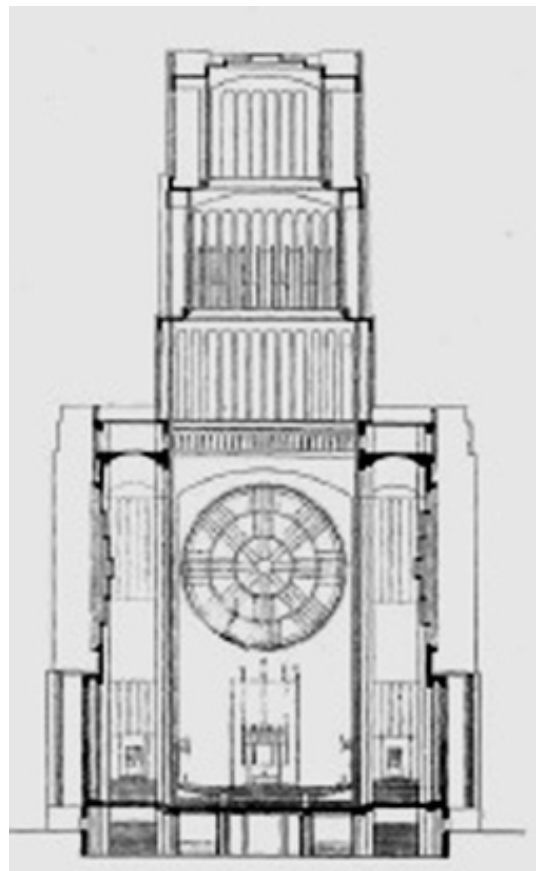
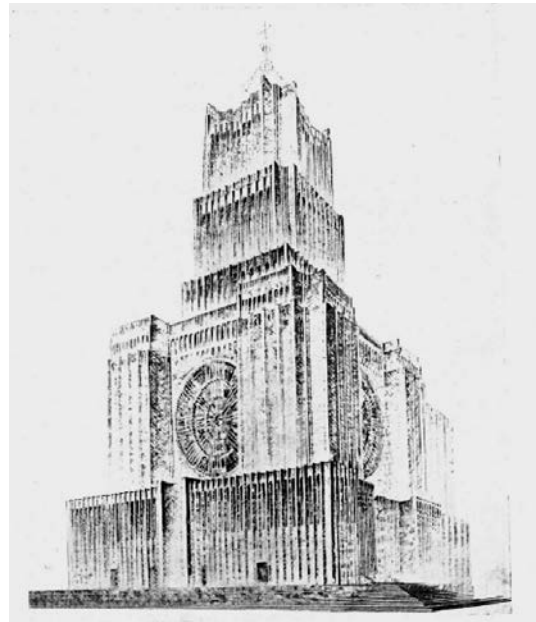


Figure 5 - Bohdan Pniewski, *Competition design of the Temple of Divine Providence at Pole Mokotowskie, Warsaw, the vista view from the north-east and cross-section, 1932*. After A i B, 3-4/1932, pp. 74, 80.

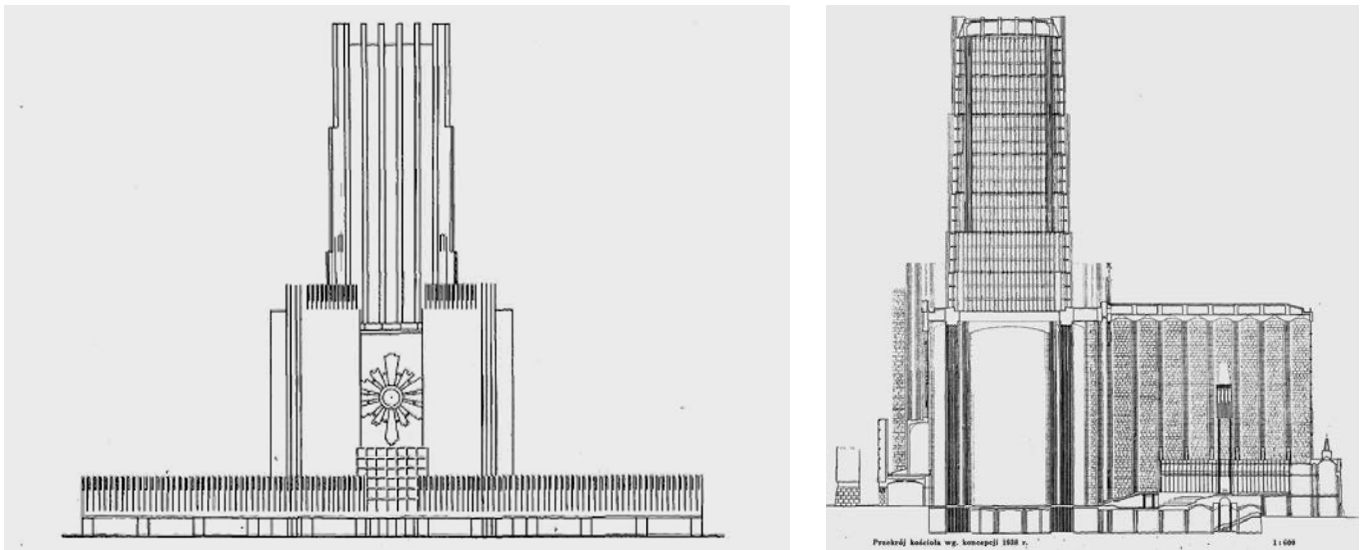


Fig. 6. Bohdan Pniewski, East elevation and longitudinal-section of the Temple of Divine Providence at Pole Mokotowskie, Warsaw, 1938. After *A i B*, 11-12/1938, pp. 363-364.

temple composition and the spatial solutions bore a resemblance not only to the modern architecture of skyscrapers but to the gothic as well (*quasi* gothic bar tracery, huge radiant rosettes on the main portico and choir, and on the side-walls of the tower), which was commonly believed to best reflect the spirituality and characteristics of the Catholic Church. There is hardly anything in common between the tower in Pniewski's design and the dome form, though the architect himself stated: "I locate the crowd of 4000 under the dome, and the officials and the clergy in the lower, more intimate part of the church"² [in an extended choir]. On examining the design one can understand Pniewski's declaration as the intention to place that many believers under the "dome of light," because the tower is in fact a huge lantern form, absorbing and reflecting the intensive outside light and brightening the sky around the temple.

The economic crisis at the beginning of the thirties postponed the fulfillment of the Parliament act. More vigorous activities were undertaken only after 1935 and were connected with the initiative to transform Pole Mokotowskie into the representational district named after Marshall Józef Piłsudski. It was planned to be a monumental urban architectural arrangement, the town showcase situated along the three-kilometer long Piłsudski Avenue and the Field of Glory – the location for the

military parades and more prominent public buildings in Warsaw with the dominating structure of the Temple of Divine Providence. The design of the architectural concept of the area was also entrusted to Bohdan Pniewski. In 1938 Pniewski prepared the actualization of the Temple design closely linked to the urban development plans for the new district. In the last version of the design from 1938 the body of the Temple was further synthesized (Fig. 6). The apparently simplified, lighter form of the glazed tower with clearly marked verticals contrasted with the cubic shape of the stone core of the temple. Direct associations with the gothic were breaking down in favour of the modernistic connotations. The functionality of the lantern-tower was thus strengthened and the light that was transparently passing through the structure was supposed to symbolize the transcendental values even stronger.

3. The Temple of Divine Providence in Wilanów, Warsaw – the fulfilling of the vows made by the Polish Nation.

The outbreak of the 2nd W.W. stopped the construction of the temple for more than 50 years. Cardinal Józef Glemp, the Primate of Poland, launched the renewed initiative for constructing the temple on the 400th anniversary of

2 *Architektura i Budownictwo*, 3-4/1932, p. 75.

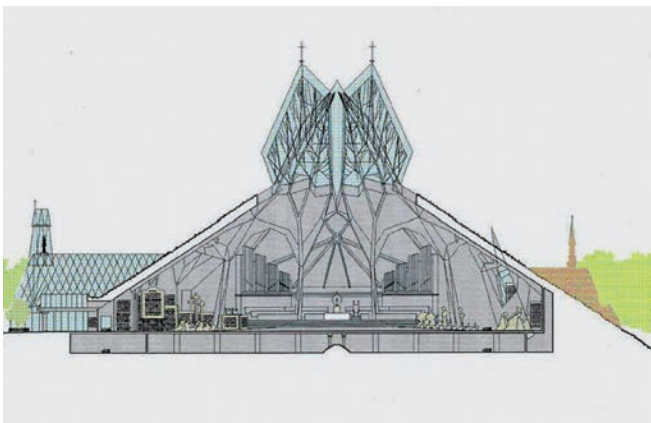


Fig. 7. M. Budzyński, Competition design of the Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw, plan and section, 2000. After <http://www.mbarch.pl/pl/koscioly/swiatynia-opatrzności-bożej.html>

Fig. 8. M. Budzyński, Images of the Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw, 2000. Watercolors: M. Koziarski. After <http://www.mbarch.pl/pl/koscioly/swiatynia-opatrzności-bożej.html>

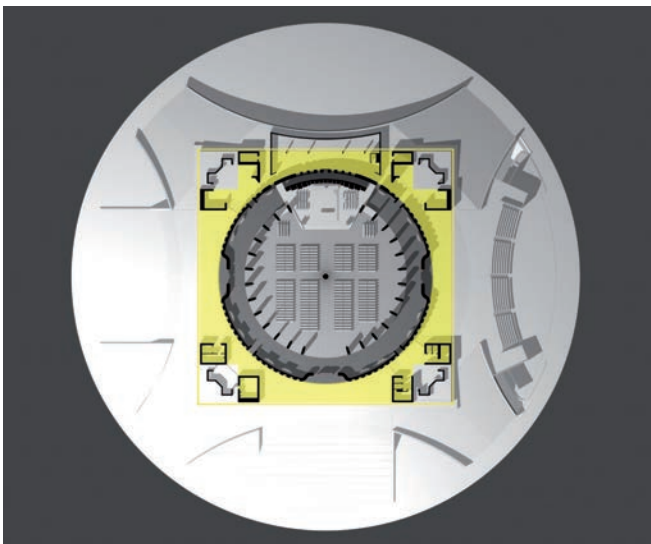


Fig. 9. Wojciech Szymborski, Lech Szymborski and the Team, Design for the Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw, the scheme of ground floor and the vista, 2003. Source: Szymborski i Szymborski Architekci Studio.

Warsaw as the capital city. This time the Pola Wilanowska on the southern outskirts of the city, the symbolic end of the Royal Route, was chosen for the temple location. Following the competition completed in 2000, the project of Marek Budzyński was selected for realization by the Primate.

The work by Budzyński depicted the church as a symbolic hill crowned with a crystal skylight. The author intended to express the ideas of Polish modern Catholicism coupled with the symbolic, modern language of architecture, reflecting the unities of Faith and Reason and of Nature and Culture³. The “Sacred Hill” with the four incoming entrances symbolizing the paths of the Polish nation towards freedom stand as a material depiction of the idea of unity, of the cross-references between environment and civilization which contributed to the picture of modern Poland, while the crystal structure of the skylight can be seen as the symbol of Providence, of its “spiritual” emanation (Fig. 7). The spatial forms were thus enhancing the symbols of the Temple.

In classical architecture the purity of the geometric forms of the sanctuary’s core, with the dominating dome, was depicting or modeling the perfection of Universe. This spatial composition was also creating an impression of the “sacred hill”. Especially the dome pointing and opening upwards into the “heavenly sphere,” became a synonymous archetype of the “sacred place” – the sign of an everlasting divine presence.

The crystal form of the skylight in Budzyński’s project both dominated the temple hill and organically interfered with its structure. And assumed the functions of the classical dome which affected the *sacrum* through light and space. The skylight element can be interpreted in many ways. The principal inspiration was explained by the architect himself with the citation from John Paul II encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: “*Faith and Reason are like two wings supporting the human spirit in its contemplation of the Truth*”. The crystal, orderly structure of the skylight can be also viewed as the symbol of wisdom and divine light. That was principally the light which symbolized the Divine Providence and was driving out and emphasizing the material form of the temple, both inside and outside the sanctuary’s body (Fig. 8).

According to the members of the jury the project by

Budzyński distinguished itself with the combination of its monumental scale and the romantic landscape arrangement, thus giving consideration to the Polish national identity. The project was vigorously debated. It received numerous approvals from within the artistic community for its boldness and momentum. Yet it was criticized by part of the clergy. According to some opinions the project was merely a misunderstanding, since the shape of the temple “would resemble a Slavonic sacred hill or an Egyptian pyramid rather than a Christian temple”. Due to the critical opinions the Foundation for the Construction of the Temple abandoned the execution of Budzyński’s project. The high costs of the planned undertaking were given as an explanation.

Finally the project of the team headed by Wojciech Szymborski and Lech Szymborski was chosen for realization after several stages of the submission process. The temple design was situated on the central plan with four entrances and crowned with a tall dome with cross (Fig. 9). Subsequent modifications of the project following discussions held with the Board of Foundation led to the final design being a modernistic version of Kubicki’s project. The Szymborski’s team, with reference to Christian symbols and classical design rules, based their idea on the interlocking between the basic geometric shapes – circle and square (the symbols of Heaven-universe and Earth) and the connecting element of the Greek cross (the symbol of Christ).

The cubic shape of the temple was dominated by the arms of the Greek cross, intersecting with the interior church rotunda, and by the soaring, steep-sided dome above. The dome curvature was defined by the tapered ellipse (the symbol of eternity) framed at the cross-section of the main nave (Fig. 10). This unusual shape of the vaulting resulted – according to the authors own words – from combining the archetypically classical form of a dome with soaring gothic forms and the distinctive aspirations towards heaven. The straight frames enclosing the cross arms act as the symbolic triumphant arches – gates for the four incoming routes that were followed by the Polish nation in a struggle for freedom: the path of fighting, the path of suffering, the path of culture and the path of praying⁴. Those four routes are crossing each other in the center of the sanctuary with the vertical axis completed with a soaring dome and a cross. Pointed

3 M. Budzyński, Świątynia Świętej Opatrzności Bożej. Opis projektu. (2000), <http://www.bbk.v-net.pl/fides>

4 Szymborski i Szymborski Architekci Studio, Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej. Opis projektu. (2001), <http://www.szymborskiarchitekci.pl>

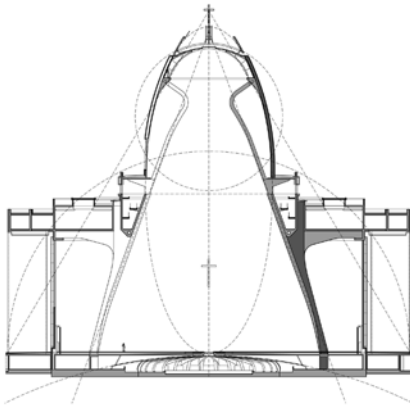
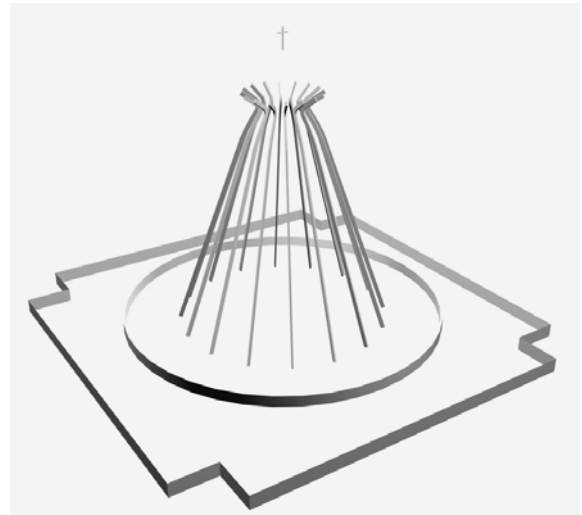


Fig. 10. Wojciech Szymborski, Lech Szymborski and the Team, Design for the Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw, the dome and section, 2003. Source: Szymborski i Szymborski Architekci Studio.

Fig. 11. Wojciech Szymborski, Lech Szymborski, Design for the Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw, the ideogram and perspective section, 2003. Source: Szymborski i Szymborski Architekci Studio.

downwards - it extends towards the realm of the dead – *sepulchrum*, the place of eternal rest of notable Poles; pointed upwards – it heads towards the divine realm marked by the dome representing the “sacred hill.” Over the centuries the “sacred hill” has been perceived as the communication channel transmitting the words of prayers into Heaven and God’s blessings back to the Earth. The idea of the spatial form of the shrine’s dome was based on the symbol of light equated with God’s Providence (Fig. 11). Within the architectural idea of the temple the petrified sun-rays were descending towards the believers in the symbolic form of the concrete rib-pillars situated on the circle plan, which separated the space of the main nave from the ambulatory and embraced the believers as if with the caring arms of Providence (Fig. 12). Coming upwards closer to each

other the ribs created the open-work rack for the shell of the dome and the radiant oculus – the glory of the “Eye of Providence”. The light penetrating between the ribs was coming not only from above but also through the window slots at the bottom of the dome hemisphere. Diffused light strengthened the mystical aura of *sacrum* and symbolized the proximity of God.

Conclusions

The architectural conceptions referring to the construction of the symbol-temple as a votive church for the Polish nation can be said to have characterized the full circle of ideas over the past 200 years. The spatial idea behind it has principally remained the same but the ar-

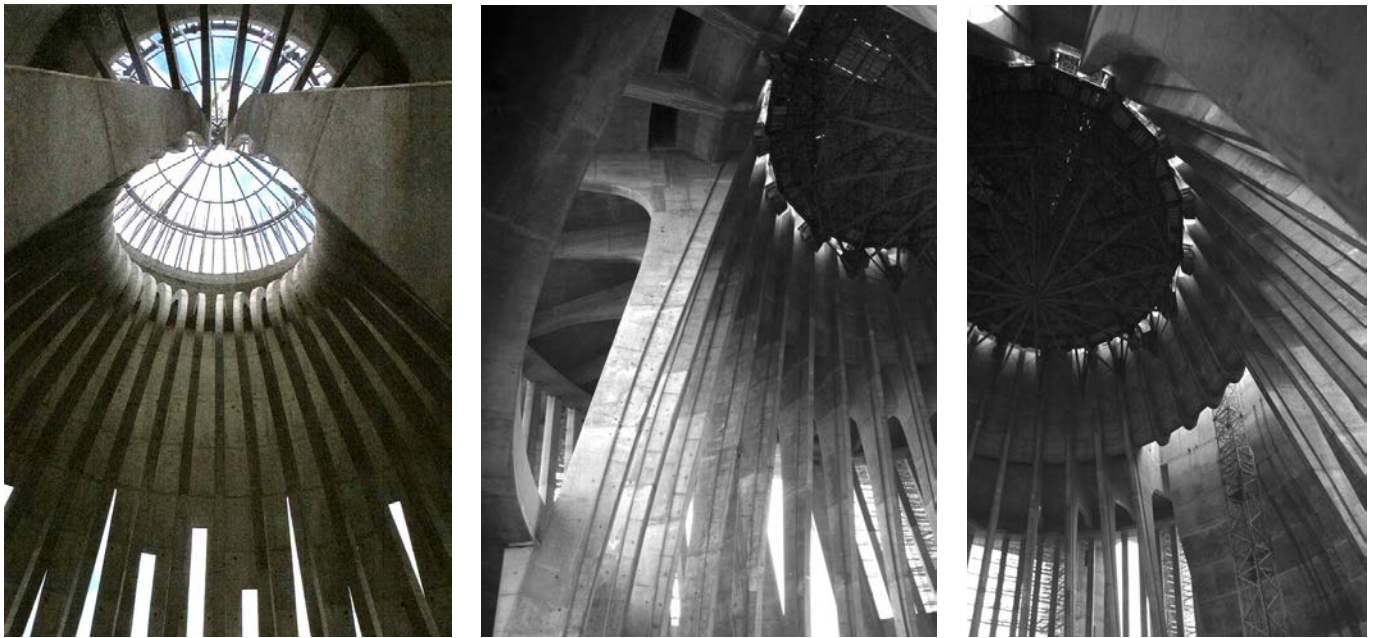


Fig. 12. The Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw. Realization photographs, 2010-2011, Szymborski i Szymborski Architekci Studio.



Fig. 13. The Temple of Divine Providence at Pola Wilanowskie, Warsaw. Photos: author, 2011.

chitectural language and the technical means of “expression” have changed significantly (Fig. 13). Numerous symbols were adopted from the civilization heritage of ancient Greece and Rome which also constituted the foundation of Christianity and to which the Catholic church was the legitimate successor. Those were the very symbolic issues deeply rooted in the tradition of western Christianity which mostly influenced the choice of the final project for execution. And the dome crowning the temple can be seen as the semantic materialization of that tradition.

References

Books

- Grzesiuk-Olszewska I., *Świątynia Opatrzności i Dzielnica Piłsudskiego. Konkursy w latach 1929-1939*, Warszawa 1993.
 Hani J., *Symbolika świątyni chrześcijańskiej*, Kraków 1998.
 Karaskiewicz K., *Świątynia Opatrzności Bożej. Dzieje idei i budowy*, Kraków 2011.
 Kopaliński W., *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1991.

Magazines

- Architektura i Budownictwo*, 9-10 /1930; 3-4 /1932; 11-12 /1938, Warszawa.
Architektura-Murator, 7 /2000; 4/2001; 2/2002, Warszawa.
 Kravtsov, S. R., 2008. Reconstruction of the Temple by Charles Chipiez and Its Application in Architecture. *Ars Judaica*. 4: 25–42.

Web Sites

- <http://www.bbk.v-net.pl/fides>
<http://www.mbarch.pl/pl/koscioly/swiatynia-opatrzności-bożej.html>
<http://www.szymborskiarchitekci.pl>