

CONSERVATION OF THE ‘PIAST’ CINEMA IN SŁUBICE: AN ARCHITECTURAL, URBAN OR MORAL PROBLEM?

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Abstract

For many years, attempts have been made to remove the relic of the ‘Piaśt’ Cinema in the western town of Słubice from Poland’s monuments register. This would allow for its demolition and construction of a modern commercial building on the site. The majority of the building has already be demolished, with only the front elevation remaining. The façade of the cinema has unique artistic value, representing a rare example of the art deco style in the region. The building also forms an important part of the cultural landscape of this border town, representing the history of both Słubice and nearby Frankfurt. With its total demolition, Słubice would lose a unique monument and the entire frontage of the street on which it is located would be downgraded.

Keywords: monument, cinema building, façade, renovation, monuments register, art deco, cultural landscape, history

1. INTRODUCTION

For several years now, the owner of the historic cinema building in Słubice, on Jedności Robotniczej Street, has made every effort to have the cinema removed from the monuments register and clear the way for its total demolition. Plans are being made to construct a modern commercial building at this site instead.

Jedności Robotniczej Street is one of the main arteries of Słubice town center. It begins at the bridge over the Odra river and runs north-east. The cinema is located about half-way along its length, at the intersection with A. Mickiewicz Street. It

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is part of a series of historic buildings that form a dense frontage on the north-west side of the street.



Fig. 1. Frankfurter Dammvorstadt street, the 'Film - Palast Friedrichstraße'.
Photo circa 1935

2. CASE STUDY

Before 1945, Słubice was actually the right-bank suburb of the city of Frankfurt. Jedności Robotniczej Street ('Friedrichstraße' in German) was laid in the 1890s at the same time as the (then new) bridge over the Odra. It was planned as the main artery for the Dammvorstadt suburbs and a representative entrance to the city. In a short time, a tight group of four-storied tenements were built from the intersection to A. Mickiewicz Street ('An der Seidenfabrik' in German). The remaining part of the street connected with an earlier street and was already partially built. By continuing the new developments in an easterly direction, the frontage of the existing buildings was also met. On this particular section, at Friedrichstraße 8 (No. 10 Jedności Robotniczej street), in January 1925 the 'Film

- Palast Friedrichstraße' cinema was opened. The building was designed by architect A. Rebiger from Charlottenburg, Berlin, who also did the interior in collaboration with the Berlin painter, M. Kujawa. The cinema opened with a silent film entitled *Carlos und Elisabeth*. In 1930, the cinema was then closed and for the next few years was the 'Elyseum' dance hall.



Fig. 2. Słubice, The 'Piaśt' Cinema. Photo c. 1950s/1960s

In 1937, the building was restored to its original function, and from the Second World War until 2005 it was the 'Piaśt' Cinema. The cinema was then closed again, and the street-side rooms on the ground floor were turned into a small shop. In 2007, the building's owner commissioned a technical evaluation of the structure, as a result of which in 2008 it was decided to dismantle the auditorium and the boiler room. Following that, the Lubuski Provincial Monuments Conservator initiated proceedings for the cinema to be listed on the monuments register. Upon analysis of the evidence collected in the course of the investigation, it was established that only the façade of the building retained any artistic merit and that the remaining part of the building, including the auditorium and boiler room, did not qualify for protection through conservation. The proceedings were discontinued, but in March 2009 further proceedings were initiated *ex officio*, for listing of the front elevation. Even before a judgement on protection was given, the owners were informed that they were allowed to carry out the agreed demolition works on the auditorium and boiler room, and that the manager of the Provincial Office for Monuments Conservation had requested that every effort be

made to preserve the architectural detail on the façade of the cinema. The façade was listed on 27 July 2009. In October 2011 the boiler room was demolished, and in December 2012 demolition works began on the auditorium. At the request of the National Building Inspector in December 2012, a structural and building report for the remainder of the building was prepared. Based on this report, an architectural opinion and an opinion from the National Provincial Sanitary Inspectorate, the owners' legal proxy filed an application for the front elevation of the cinema to be de-listed.



Fig. 3. Słubice, Nos. 9-10 Jedności Robotniczej street. Façade of the 'Piast' Cinema.

The façade of the former cinema building is distinguished by rich architectural and sculptural decoration in the art deco style. It is symmetrical and consists of three parts, with the main entrance located in the central part, recessed from the plane of the side parts and consisting of four glass doors. The entrance is bordered by a broad concrete frame embellished with a stylized floral relief, including four masked figures seen from the waist-up, all of which creates a rhythmic composition. '1924' is also inscribed in the upper part of the border. Above the main entrance are four small windows in two rows, separated by vertically-profiled frames and finished at the top with a simple beam. In the extreme axes, at ground level, there are doors on the south side and a glass 'cage' on the north side. Above these, on the second floor, are individual windows. These were installed in common frames with profiled columns closed at the top with a triangular beam, the shape of which accommodates a diamond-shaped window

within the profiled area. The entire façade is topped by an open gable roof, the triangular frontage of which houses a small four-paned window on the axis line. Part of the wall at street level is slightly extruded from the façade and tiled with ceramic tiles. The horizontal divisions strengthen the cornicing along the external axis between the first and second floor and the profiled belt crowning the cornice.



Fig. 4. Słubice, No. 10 Jedności Robotniczej street, main entrance.

The façade of the Cinema, which is No. 10 on the street, was designed in such a way that it also forms part of the façade of the next building, at No. 9. Both buildings are located in a dense development, have the same height, a common ridge and gable roofs, the slopes of which are at the same angle of inclination on the street side. At a width of five window axes, the façade of the tenement at No. 9 does not feature much architectural detail, while the sixth, external axis is integrated into the façade of the cinema building at No. 10, and joined at the top. Thus, the doors in the southern façade of the listed cinema building open on to the staircase and backyard of the tenement at No. 9. Access to the interior of the former cinema is possible only through the wide doors at the front. From the back of the cinema building, the auditorium, together with the boiler room located further back, was adjacent only to the building at No. 10. It was lower from the building facility reaching as far as its third floor. As a result of the demolition works, an old inner wall was exposed, above which the longitudinal wall of the fourth floor of the main building rises. This wall was not built up from the walls

of the lower floors, and in fact runs diagonally from them, supported by a steel joist. Prior to demolition, the resulting small wedge-shaped space and the auditorium were covered by a common ceiling.

The demolition of the rear parts was carried out based on an approved plan, in which the last stage of the demolition was conducted in such a way as to avoid damaging the remaining four-story historic façade. To ensure its stability, the plan called for clamps to be attached to it in runs made through the longitudinal walls, and taken down using steel rods. The structural and building report prepared in December 2012 specifies the building's technical condition. It was considered, for example, that any changes made to the static system of the diagonal outer wall on the ground floor could lead to a construction disaster. It also stated that the front wall and the cross walls were stable, without visible damage or excess load, and that the ceilings met load and usage requirements. The report concluded that "...the present condition of the remainder of the building that is not subject to demolition does not provide for its security in terms of construction and usage", and specified the work that had to be done to secure the building. Total reconstruction or complete demolition of the building were specified as the only alternatives.

In the architectural report, reference was made to the issue of demolishing the remaining part of the cinema building. Further demolition, while maintaining the façade, was specified as inadvisable for structural reasons, or as presenting major technical difficulties. But the assumption that the demolition of the building while leaving the façade standing could pose a threat to the neighbouring tenement at No. 9, while demolition of the entire building would require only structural protection provided to the adjacent building, was questionable. Finally, the report stated that after complete demolition of the building, an investor "...would gain complete freedom in shaping its future function" The issue of the façade being (partly) common to two buildings is not considered, which in this case is vital, as any possible removal of the façade of the cinema building would result in a fragment belonging to building No. 9 being cut out too.

During visual inspections conducted on the 6th of March 2013, it was found that fragments of this historic façade had been damaged during the works. As agreed with the Provincial Office for Monuments Conservation, grooves had been forged in the wall under the windows of the first and second floors, to accommodate clamps for propping up with braces. Part of the decorative entry frame and pieces of the frontage had been destroyed. While drilling holes, the upper north corner of the front wall had been damaged, and the unsealed gutters and flashing there had led to a loosening of the plaster and partial destruction of the exposed brickwork. The main entrance from the street had been boarded up, preventing access from the front, while access to the higher floors was still possible via a door at the back of the building. The building was run down inside, due not only

to the recent building works and related untidiness, but also the many years of neglect. The walls were damp, with visible mildew stains in places. Due to the fact that the demolition works had not yet been completed, the remaining building was not fully secured. For example, holes in the exposed back wall after the demolition had not been bricked up, and an exposed portion of the walls had no roof. This had caused further damage to the building.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Still, the façade of the cinema retains its unique artistic value in the region, representing a rare example of a building developed in the art deco style.



Fig. 5. Ślubiце, No. 10 Jedności Robotniczej street.
Close-up of the decorative border around the main entrance.

As it stands, the damage to the decorative border around the main entrance does not affect the value of the entire wall, as the defects can be restored based on extensive photographic documentation. The front elevation still remains an integral part of the historic street frontage of Jedności Robotniczej street, which over the years has retained its character and continues to be representative of Ślubiце. The cinema building with its characteristic front wall, located at the

terminal end of the main access road to the cross-border bridge, has, over the years, become a recognizable part of the town - a symbol, even. For many residents it still carries emotional value, which has been confirmed by their immediate response to the attempts to demolish the building and by the fact that its listing was a social initiative that included the involvement of, for example, both Polish and German students. The building forms a vital part of the cultural landscape of this border city, and documents Słubice and Frankfurt's common history. Separate structural and building reports have confirmed the stability of its façade and do not see a need for its demolition. There are also no indications as to its inability to be used as the façade of a new building.

Demolition of the 'Piaśt' Cinema's façade would mean not only the loss of an extremely valuable monument, but also the downgrading and degradation of an important street in Słubice's centre.

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KINO "PIAST" W SŁUBICACH. PROBLEM KONSERWATORSKI, ARCHITEKTONICZNY, URBANISTYCZNY CZY MORALNY?

Streszczenie

Od wielu lat podejmowane są próby skreślenia z rejestru zabytkowych reliktyw kina „Piaśt” w Słubicach. Pozwoliło by to na ich rozbiórkę i budowę w tym miejscu nowoczesnego obiektu handlowego. Rozebrano już znaczą część budynku, pozostała jedynie elewacja frontowa. Fasada kina posiada wyjątkowe w skali regionu wartości artystyczne reprezentując rzadki przykład budynku opracowanego w stylistyce art déco. Budynek jest istotnym elementem krajobrazu kulturowego przygranicznego miasta, obrazuje historię Słubic i Frankfurtu. Jego rozbiórka spowoduje to, że miasto utraci wyjątkowy zabytek, zubożeniu ulegnie też cała pierzeja ulicy przy którym się znajduje.

Słowa kluczowe: zabytek, budynek kina, fasada, renowacja, rejestr zabytków, art déco, krajobraz kulturowy, historia

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