

## REVIEW

# Breslau Modernism, Back on the Map: A Review of Beate Störtkuuhl, *Moderne Architektur in Schlesien 1900 bis 1939: Baukultur und Politik*, and Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *Beyond the Bauhaus: Cultural Modernity in Breslau, 1918–1933*

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Review of two books: Beate Störtkuuhl, *Moderne Architektur in Schlesien 1900 bis 1939: Baukultur und Politik*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 512 pages, 645 illustrations, 2013, ISBN 978-3-486-71208-7.

Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *Beyond the Bauhaus: Cultural Modernity in Breslau, 1918–1933*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 272 pages, 48 illustrations, 2016, ISBN 978-0-472-11990-5 <[https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ku01.r2\\_97;view=1up;seq=1](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ku01.r2_97;view=1up;seq=1)>.

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Architectural modernism was constituted as much in the provinces as in the buzzing national centers of the time. We are reminded of this when we look at Henry Russell Hitchcock's and Philip Johnson's canonizing *International Style* (1932), an extension of the exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition and the book together helped solidify the position of modernism's undisputed heavyweights – Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and J.J.P. Oud. But the two events were also proof of the scattered nature of the movement's architectural manifestations. Brno, Hyères, Turku (Åbo), Celle – such places covered the map with signature buildings of the time. Breslau, the seventh largest city of the Weimar Republic (now the Polish city called Wrocław), was among the peripheral cities exhibited in the MoMA show, represented by Hans Scharoun's Bachelor Apartments of 1929.

In the publication, however, Breslau is not mentioned. Erich Mendelsohn's Petersdorff department store in Breslau was less photogenic than his Chemnitz Schocken Store. The city's Centennial Hall by Max Berg may have been a modernist frontrunner, but it had an ambivalent, still somewhat Wilhelminian, exterior appearance. And Breslau's 1929 Werkbund show, *Wohnung und Werkraum* (WuWA), not only appeared two years after Stuttgart's seminal Weissenhof exhibition, but it also featured only local architects, such as Scharoun and Adolf Rading.

Around 1930, however, Breslau undoubtedly held a spot on the modernist map, albeit imputed with a notorious provinciality. Two recent publications have tackled the ambivalence of a Breslau modernism and its alleged

provincialism. In Deborah Ascher Barnstone's latest book, *Beyond the Bauhaus: Cultural Modernity in Breslau*, the limelight is on the 'abundance of talent that gathered there between 1918 and 1933' (2016: 2). While Barnstone's study concentrates on the narrow scope of Breslau's Weimar heyday, three years earlier, Beate Störtkuuhl published an overview of modernist architecture in Silesia, *Moderne Architektur in Schlesien 1900 bis 1939: Baukultur und Politik*. Her subtitle, 'Building Culture and Politics', renders obvious Störtkuuhl's approach not only to Breslau architecture, but to the architectural culture of the entire Eastern German province as well as its Polish counterpart east of the border. Störtkuuhl's book forms a solid background for the sort of discussion about the area's major architects that Barnstone provides.

*Moderne Architektur in Schlesien* is a milestone in the scholarship of German and Polish architectural production in the disputed borderlands before, during, and after the Weimar Republic. It delivers an overview of both German and Polish research – the latter a substantial body of work – that has been conducted on the region in recent years. Although most of the Polish research is relegated to the footnotes and bibliography,<sup>1</sup> Störtkuuhl's study draws on every major and almost all minor studies on the area.

Störtkuuhl's scholarship exercises her comprehensive knowledge of the Eastern German province of that time and also, to some extent, of the Polish industrial area of Upper Silesia.<sup>2</sup> She relates regional events to the broader context of Weimar architectural history. The value of her study, however, lies in differentiating the genesis of the very notion of 'modernism' from lesser-known antecedents, including those at its margins and where the notion frays into more conservative approaches. Roughly one third of the volume is dedicated to the period before

World War I, focusing most prominently on Hans Poelzig's early years in Breslau and Max Berg's Centennial Hall. Apart from the nationally important figures of Poelzig and Berg, much neglected by historiography of the period, Störtkuhl assesses the role of the province around Breslau as its center – a theme that continues throughout the book, zooming in as it does on the interwar era.

While others fell into oblivion, some Breslau protagonists continued to play a role in architectural history after World War II, such as the notable examples of Hans Scharoun and Ernst May. Störtkuhl elaborately scrutinizes May's work in Breslau, which includes the housing estates in the rural areas around the city as well as in parts of Upper Silesia, planned and constructed right after World War I, during the years in which May had taken up the directorship of the Silesian Homestead (Schlesische Heimstätte). Before he went on to Frankfurt-am-Main to realize the full-fledged modernist housing program of Neues Frankfurt, May and his team had developed prototypes in Breslau for standardized rural dwellings that would counteract the bleak housing crisis of the early, unstable Weimar years. In Störtkuhl's narrative, the work of the Homestead office, nothing close to modernist in appearance, is shrewdly set in relation to Berg's utopian high-rise plans of 1920 and to other takes on interwar urbanism.

Störtkuhl's decision to keep the chapter called 'Neues Bauen in Breslau' relatively short (it comprises a mere 30 pages) mirrors the strength of her study: to provide the reader with a balanced account of Silesian and (more broadly) Weimar 'building culture' at the time – which was not at all limited to Neues Bauen (see Kähler 1996). Moreover, the author consistently analyzes German architectural achievements against the backdrop of what was happening on the other side of the border. The postwar dispute around the coal-rich area of Upper Silesia and the consequences of the 1921 plebiscite indubitably call for a comparative view of the region; and Störtkuhl provides astute interpretations of the cultural antagonism alongside the fluid border.

Architectural production in the German as well as the Polish province represents a telling example of the fundamental relationship between building, politics, and economy. Representational architecture in the young Silesian Voivodeship, which after the plebiscite had become part of the newly re-established Polish Republic, and above all the neo-classicist Sejm building in Katowice (1924–1929), reflects the political importance of the industrial area for both nations. Störtkuhl analyzes Silesia as it was, historically – a province between the nations whose architectural heritage can only be understood through a bi-national take on its past. While Berg's high-rise visions in Breslau were completely illusionary right after the war, Katowice experienced the advent of moderately scaled high towers in the 1930s, designed by such ambitious architects as Tadeusz Michejda and Karol Schayer, who rendered it a modern little "city of skyscrapers".<sup>3</sup> Polish modernism was then cut short by the German invasion. Although treated in a mere twenty pages as nothing more than an outlook

on what was to come, the National Socialist propaganda around the German *Siedlung* as well as the urbanistic redesign of Gau-city Breslau ends Störtkuhl's account of the interwar years in Berlin's periphery.

The virtue of *Moderne Architektur in Schlesien* is also its drawback. It scrutinizes every major theme from *Heimatstil*, expressionist, housing, and representational architecture, up to broader urbanistic schemes. It integrates Polish as well as German research on the region and extends beyond it in astute conclusions. As is the case with most studies ambitious to cover a large quantity of works and a substantial period of time, however, the book offers neither a strong thesis nor a stringent argument to which it might have referred along the way. This is not what Störtkuhl intended and it is not what the book delivers. It instead reads as a highly informed compendium of the research conducted until now, the author's own as well as that of other scholars. And, abundantly illustrated, it offers numerous starting points for further in-depth studies.

Barnstone's *Beyond the Bauhaus*, published three years after Störtkuhl's volume, scarcely moves beyond the existing research – including her own previous publications. What is more, as a scholar of Weimar modernism Barnstone reads German sources and cites some of Störtkuhl's earlier studies, yet in no way gives credit to her German colleague's vast research. Incomprehensibly, she nowhere mentions Störtkuhl's *Moderne Architektur in Schlesien*. In the age of the Internet, where publication profiles are easily accessible, this leaves the aftertaste of an evasive academic morale at best and dishonesty at worst. Veiling the merits of others is a disservice also extended to scholars such as Christine Nielsen, Jadwiga Urbanik, and Petra Hölscher, all of whom are mentioned but never given comprehensive credit (see Nielsen 1996 and 1999; Urbanik 2010; Hölscher 2003).

*Beyond the Bauhaus* is organized into six chapters, each focused on another aspect of Breslau's cultural modernity. While the main emphasis is laid on architecture in and around its urban center, three chapters deal with the broader art scene of the city. The chapter on Breslau's art academy – where Poelzig, Rading, Scharoun, and later Lauterbach all taught at a given moment – is an enhanced version of Barnstone's article 'Not the Bauhaus', from 2008. It judiciously reworks the theme of Breslau's marginality not only in contemporary Weimar culture, but from both a geographical as well as a mental perspective. Although in tone almost a mirror image of the inferiority complex Breslauers often harbored in the 1920s, Barnstone correctly and consistently seeks to reconstruct what Breslau was before its disappearance behind the Iron Curtain. Her main aim is to tackle the inverted question raised in the beginning of her book: 'Why Breslau matters'. The answer is an apt characterization of Breslau's ambivalent modernity: the city gave rise to a substantial urban modernism, with seminal buildings such as Berg's early hydroelectric power stations, Mendelsohn's Petersdorff, or Hermann Dernburg's Wertheim department store. And its great event of 1929, the Werkbund exhibition *WuWA*, certainly deserves more historiographical attention than

it has received so far, even 25 years after the fall of communism. Yet Breslau was located in the country's proverbially backward east, and it never escaped its retrograde reputation. Even the promising *WuWA* ended in a citywide crisis, which had Scharoun, Rading, or Johannes Molzahn indignantly leave the local Werkbund chapter.

It might be the logic of the English-speaking academic market that has the author justify time and again that Breslau, peripheral as it might have been, *was* modern *too*. While little of the research on the Oder city has been made available to the English-speaking public,<sup>4</sup> the great value of Barnstone's volume is to provide the reader with an overview of Breslau architecture and art during the Weimar Republic.

Probably the strongest part of the book is the chapter shedding light on Breslau's art collectors and art associations. Drawing on earlier research on the primarily Jewish scene of art collectors and museum benefactors, Barnstone judiciously illustrates Breslau's rich cultural life. Home to prominent individuals, such as Carl Sachs and Max Silberberg, Breslau at one point hosted outstanding art collections, now scattered between Zurich, Paris, and São Paulo.

*Beyond the Bauhaus* transmits a clear sense of Breslau's unfavorable hinterland status. The importance of regionalist attitudes for Silesian culture is a point worth stressing as much as Barnstone does. As she never mentions today's Polish street and place names, her book, however, unfortunately *re-constructs* a city in an almost atemporal realm. Not to mention them once, not even in the footnotes, is to untether as ahistorical this modernist Atlantis, which in her hands has seemingly no correlation in the present.

Apart from numerous typographical errors, *Beyond the Bauhaus* features outright mistakes. Breslau was located in Silesia, not in East Prussia.<sup>5</sup> In the original source, 'Stadtbaurat a.D. Berg' ('a. D.' meaning retired) turns into an obscure 'city architect D. Berg' (137), whom the author distinguishes from Breslau's local matador Max Berg (245). Or we read of 'cities like Hesse and Weimar' (109). It is a pity that the first major English publication attempting an overview of Breslau's cultural life during the Weimar Republic has not been better edited. The elimination of unnecessary mistakes would not have improved Barnstone's lack of critical discourse analysis when dealing with the sources and architects' writings. But it would have cast less of a shadow over her welcome endeavor finally to insert Breslau into an English historiography of architecture and art.

It is the great achievement of a critical historiography to analyze also those developments that either were cut short or were highly ambivalent to start with. While modernity's appeal to researchers continues to derive, to a large extent, from the lure of a Benjaminian view on the metropolis, the subject requires still more differentiating analyses of the periphery in all its contradictions. Both *Moderne Architektur in Schlesien* and *Beyond the Bauhaus* evidence an increased recent attention to the significant history of a modernism outside of the cultural and national centers.

A greater volume of research prepared to breach borders (in the sense of a *histoire croisée*) and disciplines (scrutinizing the aesthetic with respect to the political realm) is crucial for a broader understanding of the cultural as well as architectural modernity beyond a romanticizing conception of the 'metropolitan modern'. Another look at Hitchcock's and Johnson's canon illustrates the complexity of what modernism 'was' in 1932. Places in their selection have re-surfaced from the obscuring east–west divide. Lesser-known architects, like the *Siedlung* designer Otto Haesler, once much praised by Johnson, deserve re-evaluation, too, as their careers have often been veiled by historical developments. In that sense, Barnstone's title is a call worth following: moving 'beyond the Bauhaus', beyond its Harvard import as well as its re-export into Europe, is of incomparably higher value to the historiography of architecture than the continued repetition of modern tropes.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a more elaborate critique of Störtkuhl's use of Polish citations, see Zabłocka-Kos (2013).
- <sup>2</sup> Her research benefits from eminent Polish researchers, such as Ewa Chojecka and Irma Kozina, and from her ongoing collaboration with Jerzy Ilkosz.
- <sup>3</sup> This refers to a Polish journal headline of 1932, cited in Störtkuhl (2013: 346).
- <sup>4</sup> Two fortunate exceptions are Ilkosz (2006) and Urbanik (2010).
- <sup>5</sup> 'Breslau was both different from and similar to other German cities, unique because of its location in East Prussia' (Barnstone 2016: 8).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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