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Concrete revelations. Modernist sacred architecture in Greater Poland in the 1970s and 1980s as a potential for the development of architectural tourism

Abstract: This article explores the tourism potential of selected modernist and brutalist churches built in Greater Poland during the 1970s and 1980s, positioning them as valuable yet underappreciated elements of cultural and architectural heritage. Drawing on recent theoretical perspectives in cultural and architectural tourism, the study proposes an alternative route connecting sacred modernist architecture in medium-sized cities such as Kalisz, Konin, Gniezno, Piła, and Ostrów Wielkopolski. The article argues that the aesthetic and historical distinctiveness of these churches — often located in peripheral districts and associated with the socio-political realities of the Polish People’s Republic — creates an opportunity to develop niche forms of tourism. These routes can appeal especially to younger audiences seeking unconventional experiences and new ways of interpreting 20th-century heritage. By combining architectural appreciation with historical awareness, such initiatives can contribute to the revitalization of local cultural narratives and regional tourism strategies

Keywords: architectural tourism, modernist churches, brutalism, cultural heritage, post-war architecture, PRL

1. Introduction

The following article serves to present an alternative approach to the tourist potential of selected cities in Greater Poland. A particularly important aspect of this approach is cultural tourism, understood not only as a distinct segment of tourist traffic, but also as a specific way of spending leisure time. Its essence is not limited solely to the most significant and most popular sites and routes recognised as shared world or continental heritage. It increasingly encompasses local and regional routes that emerge from political, social and economic history, or are deliberately constructed as tourist products centred around a chosen

cultural motif – both intangible and tangible (Mikos von Rohrscheidt, 2008).

An equally important – and perhaps even more significant – area of interest is architectural tourism. Although its basic premise, namely the practice of visiting places in order to see architectural works created over the centuries, has a long tradition, the term itself has come into use relatively recently. Today, we observe a growing interest in architecture also beyond specialist circles – for many tourists, it becomes a source of fascination and aesthetic experience. Architectural tourism is therefore based on the intersection of two fields: tourism and

architecture (Bursiewicz, 2019). Its essence lies in travelling to a specific place with the intention of seeing or visiting an architectural object that holds historical, aesthetic, or cultural value. It is therefore worth examining which factors, according to researchers, determine the attractiveness of a given architectural structure for tourists. As Bursiewicz (2019) notes, on the basis of earlier analyses, key elements include the aesthetics of the buildings (understood primarily as form rather than function) and the recognisability of the project's author. All these aspects shape how readily a given place is visited.

It should be emphasised that architourism – that is, architectural tourism – draws on a fascination with both historical and contemporary architecture, although it is the latter that has enjoyed growing interest in recent years. The recipients of this type of offer may include not only individual tourists but also a wide range of institutions and organised groups: from tourism operators, municipal authorities, schools, and associations to academic circles and communities of enthusiasts. The range of possibilities in this area is exceptionally broad – architectural tourism may focus on the most recent and repeatedly awarded realisations, but also on recognised, controversial, or unconventional objects characteristic of a given city, region, or country (Bursiewicz, 2019).

The subject of interest here are modernist churches which, often located on the peripheries, in housing estates or districts developing during the PRL era. They may become an attractive destination for architectural tourism, especially for young people seeking unconventional, alternative routes and experiences. For this group, the concrete aesthetic devoid of classical ornamentation constitutes a fascinating counterpoint not only to monumental historical architecture but also to contemporary design, offering a completely new perspective on

sacred space – as a form of material culture whose significance goes beyond its religious function and is embedded in broader social and artistic contexts. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that older generations who grew up surrounded by this architecture may perceive it through the lens of the social and economic hardships of the PRL period. This makes it all the more important to develop a model of tourist narration that not only “re-enchants” the aesthetics of late modernism but also places it within its historical and cultural context, enabling a conscious and multifaceted experience of it.

The thesis of this article is that churches built in the 1970s and 1980s may today constitute not only evidence of the socio-political realities of the PRL era, but also an attractive starting point for the development of niche cultural tourism focused on discovering less obvious examples of architectural heritage. Accordingly, the following section of the article presents an outline of a regional tourist route following the titular “concrete revelations,” linking selected modernist churches located in different parts of Greater Poland.

Such structures, treated for decades as marginal both in heritage studies and in tourism practice, are now regaining social interest, especially among younger audiences. In recent years, a clear increase in the popularity of Brutalism and late modernism has been observed – architectural trends which until recently were associated primarily with the rough, heavy aesthetics of the PRL era. Today, however, they have become the subject not only of historical and architectural reassessment but also of a new cultural fashion, expressed, among other ways, through numerous social media profiles popularising this style, an increasing number of popular science publications, and the organisation of events and themed walks dedicated to “concrete architecture”¹. Evidence of the

¹ Examples of such initiatives include, among others, the cyclical walks dedicated to modernism organised

by the Gdynia Design Centre and the Museum of the City of Gdynia.

growing interest in brutalist and modernist architecture includes, among other things, social media accounts that document such structures in Poland and around the world. Among the most popular profiles of this kind on one of the social media platforms, Instagram, are the international accounts @utilitarianarchitecture, followed by over 270.000 users (as of June 2025), and @socialistmodernism with more than 160.000 followers. In Poland, accounts enjoying considerable popularity include @maciejdusiciel (over 34.000 followers), @slaski_modernizm (approx. 9.000), @brutalism_the_religion (over 6.000), and @doktoor_betonista (over 3.000). Their success confirms that Brutalism and modernism today are becoming not only

subjects of academic research but also elements of an appealing visual narrative within digital culture. It is worth making use of this wave of interest as an incentive to rethink how the architectural heritage of smaller urban centers can be promoted.

The aim of this study, however, is to propose an alternative perspective on these centres through the lens of their post-war sacred architecture, with particular emphasis on modernist and brutalist realisations from the 1970s and 1980s. Accordingly, the following part of the article presents an outline of a regional tourist route tracing the titular “concrete revelations”, linking selected modernist churches located in different parts of Greater Poland.

2. Study subject and methods

The focus of this study is on modernist churches located in medium-sized urban centres of the Greater Poland voivodeship, excluding its capital, Poznań. This exclusion is a deliberate and purposeful decision. The regional capital dominates in terms of the number of heritage sites, tourism infrastructure, and cultural promotion, which means that its tourist potential is widely recognised and extensively utilised. For this reason, the present article concentrates on medium-sized cities with populations ranging from several tens of thousands to around one hundred thousand inhabitants. Cities such as Kalisz, Gniezno, Piła, Konin and Ostrów Wielkopolski are most often associated with their historical heritage: Kalisz is considered the oldest city in Poland², Gniezno is the first capital of the Piast dynasty and the place where kings were crowned, Piła is known as the birthplace of Stanisław Staszic, Konin boasts the oldest road sign in Central and Eastern

Europe – the so-called Konin pillar from 1151, while Ostrów Wielkopolski went down in history thanks to the Ostrów Republic – a short-lived independence uprising in November 1918. The article will focus on lesser-known sites in these cities, namely the Churches of Christ the Eternal High Priest and of Blessed Bogumił in Gniezno, the Church of St Maximilian Kolbe in Konin, the Church of Divine Mercy in Kalisz, the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Ostrów Wielkopolski, and the Collegiate Church of Our Lady Help of Christians in Piła.

The article employs the method of a literature and internet sources review, consisting of a bibliographic search and an analysis of available scholarly publications and online materials. Among the key studies on brutalist and modernist architecture one may indicate, for example, Niebrzydowski’s *Brutalism in the Architecture of Polish Churches* (2016) and *Architektura*

² Kalisz is often identified with the city of *Kalisia*, mentioned in the 2nd century by Ptolemy, and in later tradition – thanks to Jan Długosz – described as the oldest city in Poland. However, contemporary historical

research does not provide unequivocal confirmation of this identification; what is known is that Kalisz was granted city rights in the mid-13th century.

brutalistyczna a idee Nowego Brutalizmu (2018) along with *The New Brutalism: The Invention of a Style* (Groaz, 2023), and *Atlas of Brutalist Architecture* (2020). Within the field of modernism, important works include Grzegorz Piątek's *Gdynia obiecana. Miasto, modernizm, modernizacja 1920-1939* (2022), Szymon Kubiak's *Modernizm zapoznany:*

architektura Poznania 1919-1939 (2014) and Anna Cymer's *Architektura w Polsce 1945–1989* (2018). The popularity of these publications reflects the growing interest in post-war architectural heritage, which today encompasses not only specialists but also a broad cultural audience.

3. Data sources and research assumptions

3.1. Sacred architecture of the Polish People's Republic as an unobvious heritage

Sacred architecture created in the People's Republic of Poland was the result of a complex dialogue – and often tension – between the institution of the Catholic Church and the state authorities. Although the official ideology of the PRL assumed the secularisation of social life and the restriction of religion in public space, Poland – unlike other countries of the Eastern Bloc – did not introduce a complete ban on church construction. However, the erection of new churches was systematically hindered through permit refusals, prolonged bureaucratic procedures, and locational restrictions. Until the 1970s, most new churches were built through community-led efforts, often without the necessary permits, using materials obtained thanks to the labour of local parish communities and the strong involvement of parish priests. These were investments frequently carried out “against the state” – burdened with the risk of intervention by the Security Service, denunciations, or the need to disguise the true nature of the construction works. This form of “resistance architecture” contributed to the shaping of strong parish communities and the development of alternative, locally rooted

identities, particularly in newly built housing estates. A shift occurred only during the rule of Edward Gierek, who, in exchange for relative social stability and the Church's support, granted many parishes permission to build churches in developing urban districts. During this period (1971–1980), more than 1,000 new sacred buildings were constructed, a significant portion of which were designed in the spirit of modernism, and by the end of the decade also of Brutalism. Sacred space became simultaneously a site for exploring new liturgical forms inspired by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)³ and a terrain for architectural experimentation.

Although the dominant narrative of the PRL sought to marginalise the visibility of the Church in public space, the churches that were built often became urban landmarks of new districts – both physically and symbolically. Their forms frequently reflected a need for expression: monumental masses, raw materials, and innovative functional solutions (e.g., centrally planned interiors) articulated a narrative of spiritual and cultural independence in contrast to the “official” architecture.

³ The Second Vatican Council introduced significant changes in the understanding of liturgical space, calling for, among other things, greater involvement of the faithful in the liturgy, decentralisation of the altar and

simplification of sacred decorations. These recommendations had a huge impact on sacred architecture in Europe, including Poland.

3.2. Modernism and brutalism yesterday and today – a change of perspective

Before moving on to the analysis of individual buildings, it is worth briefly characterising the architectural styles discussed in the subsequent sections, with particular emphasis on their sacred variants. The first of these is modernism – a movement that emerged in the early twentieth century and developed after the Second World War as the dominant style in the architecture of Eastern Bloc countries. Its core principles were functionality, clarity of structure, and the rejection of historicising forms in favour of simplicity, light, and space⁴. In sacred architecture, modernism often meant a departure from classical basilican layouts in favour of centralised or asymmetrical interior compositions in which natural light and the rhythm of the structure played a key role. As Magdalena Wierzbicka (2014) observes, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council promoted architectural forms that supported the communal character of the liturgy and the active participation of the faithful – hence the increasing adoption of amphitheatrical or central arrangements that improved visibility and acoustics, while also creating a spiritual atmosphere through the use of natural light. Modernist churches of the second half of the twentieth century in Poland thus subordinated form to new liturgical functions and made extensive use of modern materials: concrete, glass, reinforced concrete, and prefabricated elements.

Brutalism, as a radical variant of late modernism, appeared in European and global architecture in the 1950s and 1960s, and its name derives from the French expression *béton brut* (“raw concrete”), used by Le Corbusier, one of the most prominent architects of the twentieth century. In Brutalism, material played an essential role – above all unplastered, rough concrete – as did

the clear exposure of the structure and technical elements. In sacred architecture, this style manifested itself in more monumental, often sculptural forms, deliberately raw and at times almost ascetic. Their expression was frequently more dramatic than that of classical modernism – emphasising the corporeality and materiality of space, while at the same time revealing spiritual power through the interplay of light and shadow on raw surfaces.

In the Polish context, especially during the period of the People’s Republic of Poland, both modernism and brutalism in sacred architecture emerged as responses not only to changing liturgical needs but also to political, economic, and technological realities. As Tomasz Niebrzydowski (2016) notes, the austerity of forms, the exposure of structural elements, and the use of unplastered concrete often resulted from limited material availability, time pressures, and the necessity of carrying out construction works informally, outside the official state system. As a result, buildings were created that were stylistically heterogeneous and often experimental, yet at the same time highly intriguing and original – structures that today align with the renewed interest in post-war architecture.

The contemporary wave of interest in post-war architecture, often referred to as the *brutalist revival*, encompasses not only brutalism in the strict sense but also a broader spectrum of modernist forms – from functionalist housing estates to sacred buildings distinguished by bold formal expression. Modernism, long regarded as “ordinary”, anonymous, or outdated architecture, has in recent years gained new appreciation, particularly among younger audiences seeking alternative narratives about twentieth-century heritage. Brutalism, as its

⁴ These postulates originate from the so-called Athens Charter, a document formulated in 1933 during the 4th Congress of the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) and published by Le Corbusier

in 1943. This charter was a manifesto of modernist urban planning, emphasising the functional separation of urban zones, access to daylight, open space and greenery for every resident.

most expressive and monumental manifestation, has become a symbol of this renaissance. Social media – especially Instagram – play a key role in this shift, as concrete, sculptural forms are presented as aesthetically intriguing, raw, and photogenic. The notion of *Instagrammable heritage*, which has emerged from this phenomenon, refers to heritage that is non-obvious, difficult, or even unpopular, yet acquires new appeal thanks to its visual qualities and the possibilities of digital exploration.

In addition to online activity, the revival of modernism and brutalism is supported by concrete curatorial and editorial initiatives: among the most popular are the map series published by Blue Crow Media⁵ and photographic albums documenting the concrete icons of the twentieth century, such as *Brutal Poland* (Zupagrafika, 2020), which, alongside the history of Polish architectural heritage, includes nine building models – such as Kraków’s Hotel Forum or the Katowice’s *Spodek* – ready to be removed from the sheets and assembled according to the instructions. As a result, we are witnessing a gradual shift in the perception of these structures: from being regarded as relics of an era to serving as carriers of aesthetic nostalgia and authenticity.

4. Results

Taking into account all the arguments presented above that justify the selection of these particular sites for the proposed concept of alternative tourism, the article outlines a route that can be completed as a one-day or weekend excursion across Greater Poland. The route includes five medium-sized cities: Gniezno, Konin, Kalisz, Ostrów Wielkopolski and Piła, unified by the presence of noteworthy

In the context of sacred architecture from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, this shift opens the way to their reinterpretation as potential points on alternative cultural tourism routes – especially in medium-sized cities and beyond major urban centres.

In this study, I deliberately focus on sacred rather than secular architecture, even though the latter also offered many interesting modernist and brutalist realisations. This choice is motivated by several factors. First, churches constitute a unique type of building – combining social, symbolic, and aesthetic functions – which allows for a deeper understanding of how modernism and Brutalism were adapted to spiritual space. Second, sacred architecture of the PRL period remained on the margins of research for many years, not only due to limited access to documentation but also because of its ambiguous status – often built “against the system”, initiated by local communities. Finally, these churches have retained their original function and accessibility to this day, which makes them capable of functioning as authentic elements of contemporary cultural tourism, unlike many secular buildings that have undergone significant transformations or have been demolished.

examples of post-war sacred architecture in the modernist or brutalist style from the 1970s and 1980s. This is one possible version of the route – its order may, of course, be modified depending on the point of departure, available means of transport, or the amount of time at the visitor’s disposal. Below, I present the selected sites together with a brief description and justification for their inclusion in the route.

⁵ Blue Crow Media is an independent London-based publisher specialising in architectural city maps dedicated to modernism, brutalism and other 20th-century styles. The Blue Crow Maps series includes maps of Berlin, London, Warsaw and Belgrade, indicating the locations and descriptions of important

modernist and brutalist buildings. These maps combine the function of a tourist guide with an architectural study, contributing to the popularisation of post-war architectural heritage. See <https://bluecrowmedia.com>.

The proposed route begins in Gniezno; one of the oldest and most important cities in Poland – considered the first capital of the Piast state – located in central-western Greater Poland, about 50 km east of Poznań. Gniezno is also the only city among those selected that has two sites that fit into the route. These temples are located a short distance from each other, which is conducive to organising a city walk in the spirit of architectural exploration. The first place to visit is the Church of Christ the Eternal Priest.

Designed by Aleksander Holas⁶ and built between 1974 and 1980, this church is a striking example of late communist-era sacred modernism. Its monumental, rectangular structure, built on an irregular quadrilateral plan, maintains internal symmetry while employing asymmetrical facades and varied textures, which fits in with the modernist aesthetic with visible influences of brutalism.



Figure 1. Church of Christ the Eternal Priest in Gniezno – front view. Source: https://archidiecezja.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DSC_9141-750x450.jpg

The church resembles a “church boat” – a space for the faithful to journey together, which is emphasised by the arched ceiling without internal supports and the vertical lines of the structure (Fig.1). The high nave (40 m) is not only monumental, but also spiritual: it draws attention upwards, and the light coming in through the narrow slit windows further enhances the feeling of concentration. The aesthetics of the materials remain honest and austere – the building was constructed using reinforced concrete technology, filled with

siporex and brick, without any masking plaster. Thanks to this, the architecture reveals its structure, and the texture of concrete, brick and prefabricated elements becomes one of the main means of expression.

The exterior walls of the church are decorated with large religious reliefs made of reinforced concrete by Benedykt Kasznia and Eugeniusz Obelkowski, including “The Miraculous Multiplication of Bread”, “Christ on the Cross” and “The Pilgrimage of the Holy Family”. The use of this type of monumental

⁶ Aleksander Holas (born 6 December 1911 in Jutrosin, died 27 June 1993 in Poznań) – Polish architect, conservator of monuments, urban planner and educator. A graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the Lviv Polytechnic (1939), in the post-war period he was involved in the reconstruction and conservation of

monuments (e.g. in Gniezno and Trzemeszno). He served as court architect in Gniezno (1948–1986) and Poznań (1969–1980), and also lectured at universities in Poznań. His oeuvre includes approximately 63 sacred buildings.

sculpture in a sacred façade is a reference to the idea of the integration of the arts, which was strongly present in post-war modernism. Above the main entrance is a figure of Christ the Eternal Priest, the patron saint of the

temple, whose style resembles late modernist figural simplifications, similar to the work of artists associated with the so-called monumental art of the 1970s.



Figure 2. Church of Christ the Eternal Priest in Gniezno – view of the altar. Source: https://archidiecezja.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DSC_9148.jpg

The interior of the church was designed with full liturgical clarity in mind, in accordance with the spirit of liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council. The nave has a central layout and a uniform space, in which every point offers a good view of the altar (Fig. 2). The altar is made of white marble, and behind it is a mosaic depicting the Risen Christ and the Apostles by Magdalena and Marcin Czeski – clearly modern, symbolic, economical in form, but intense in expression. The windows are filled with colourful, abstract stained-glass of a dynamic composition, diffusing light inside. The building is topped with a 27-metre tower crowned with a steel cross. This form – slender, vertical, devoid of unnecessary ornamentation – is not only a functional urban accent, but also a strong, modern sacred symbol visible in the urban space.

The whole fits in with the post-war desire to create a new language of sacred architecture – a form that speaks through light, proportion and structure, rather than traditional ornamentation. The temple in Gniezno is an important example of the adaptation of modernist ideas to the needs of liturgy and the local community at a time when projects of this type were only possible thanks to enormous social commitment and the determination of the parish.

The second church on the route is also located in Gniezno, the Church of Blessed Bogumił, a later project by Aleksander Holas, maintained in a similar, though slightly milder aesthetic. Compared to the earlier design by the same architect, this building is less austere in form, but still remains faithful to the principles of modern sacred architecture (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Church of Blessed Bogumił in Gniezno – front view. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2b/Parafia_%C5%9Bw._Bogumi%C5%82a_w_Gnie%C5%BAnie.jpg



Figure 4. Church of Blessed Bogumił in Gniezno – interior view, nave. Source: https://archidiecezja.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DSC_0297.jpg

The Church of Blessed Bogumił in Gniezno, built between 1981 and 1989, is one of the most striking examples of modernist religious architecture in the region. The symbolic character of the temple is emphasised by the fact that the cornerstone was

consecrated by Pope John Paul II during his pilgrimage to Poland in 1979, which gives the entire project a special spiritual and communal dimension.

The body of the church was shaped on the plan of two overlapping semicircles and

resembles a truncated cone – a spatial solution characteristic of late modernism, similar to central and symbolic forms. The building was constructed using reinforced concrete and steel, leaving the materials in an almost raw state – brick, concrete and steel elements dominate here, which, despite being covered with distinctive colours, remain authentic. The impression of simplicity and formal economy, typical of modernism and brutalism, is combined here with a functional interior layout. The church has two levels. The lower level houses, among other things, the Chapel of Our Lady of Częstochowa, an oratory for young people, a scout hall, a Liturgical Altar Service room, a charity point and Caritas rooms. The upper floor is the actual liturgical space – a spacious, single-space nave with a centrally located altar that guarantees good visibility from all sides. This layout encourages the community to participate in the liturgy, fulfilling the aforementioned postulates of the Second Vatican Council.

The interior is characterised by clear geometry and minimal ornamentation, concentrated around the modern altar design and colourful stained-glass windows with a contemporary feel (Fig. 4). The whole is complemented by a slender tower with a one-tonne cross – a strong vertical accent and, at the same time, a sign of the temple's presence in the urban space of the housing estate.

The Church of Blessed Bogumił is a testament to the consistent adaptation of modernist and brutalist ideas to the sacred realities of the 1980s. Its form – seemingly modest, but well-thought-out in terms of liturgy, symbolism, and function – makes it a valuable stop on an alternative architectural tour of Greater Poland.

The next stop on the route is Konin, a medium-sized town in the central-eastern part

of Greater Poland, situated on the Warta River, about 100 km east of Poznań. It has a population of nearly 70,000 and is an important industrial and transport centre in the region. Here, I would like to recommend a visit to the Church of St. Maximilian Kolbe, one of the most recognisable religious buildings in Konin and a striking example of modernist religious architecture from the 1980s.

The Church of St. Maximilian Kolbe in Konin, built between 1982 and 1994 according to a design by a team of architects led by Ryszard Głowacki⁷, is a striking example of late modernist religious architecture, set in the reality of the late Polish People's Republic and political transformation. The monumental structure with a geometric form, composed of overlapping rectangular segments and a tall, slender tower, is an important feature of the urban landscape of the Zatorze district in Konin (Fig. 5).

The church was designed as a two-storey building with a spacious lower part intended for pastoral, social and catechetical purposes, and a large upper part based on a basilica layout. However, instead of the classic tripartite division, solutions characteristic of sacred modernism were used – a strongly exposed axis leading to the presbytery, rhythmically arranged vertical slit windows and an open roof structure. The whole structure was built using reinforced concrete technology with prefabricated elements and brick and hollow block infill, which gives the building a raw and functional character, resembling in some aspects the aesthetics of late brutalism (Fig. 5).

The most recognisable element of the church is its massive tower, positioned asymmetrically in relation to the main body and topped with a simple metal cross. It is not only an architectural landmark, but also

⁷ Ryszard Głowacki (born 21 May 1933 in Poznań, died 12 July 2016 in the same city) – Polish architect associated with Poznań and the Greater Poland region, designer of religious and public buildings in the late modernist style. A graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the Poznań University of Technology

(1957), he collaborated with the Miastoprojekt Poznań Architectural Studio. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was the author or co-author of numerous church designs, including in Konin, Piła and Śrem.

a strong sacred symbol, both symbolic and urbanistic. The exterior elevations are kept in a the building a sense of dignity and clarity of

minimalist style, with limited ornamentation and large areas of raw brickwork, which gives form.



Figure 5. St. Maximilian Kolbe Church in Konin – exterior view. Source: <https://wp.pl.aleteia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2019/06/web3-maksymilian-parafia-konin-church.jpg>

The interior of the church is subordinate to the principle of liturgical transparency – the main altar is located centrally, in a space clearly visible from every point in the nave (Fig. 6). The interior design is dominated by simplicity and clarity – the altar, pulpit and baptismal font are made of simple, durable

materials, emphasising the importance of the sacred function over decoration. The stained-glass windows, with their modern, abstract form, diffuse the light in a way that creates an atmosphere of contemplation and concentration.



Figure 6. St. Maximilian Kolbe Church in Konin – interior view. Source: <https://maksymiliankolbe.com/storage/Gallery/1656306434-ed9bbb241719a4db526e047f55315ed4.jpg>

St. Maximilian's Church is an example of conscious sacred design in the spirit of late modernism – architecture that speaks through form, light, and structure rather than decoration. Although less well-known than some of the city's other buildings, this structure represents high design quality and can be an interesting stop on an alternative architectural tour of Greater Poland.

The next suggested stop on the route is Kalisz – one of the oldest cities in Poland, located in the south-eastern part of Greater Poland, on the Prosna River, about 120 km from Poznań. With a population of nearly 95,000, it is an important administrative, cultural and educational centre of the region. In Kalisz, I recommend a visit to the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross – a modern, distinctive building from the 1980s, which is considered one of the most characteristic examples of modernist sacred architecture in this part of Greater Poland.

The Church of Divine Mercy in Kalisz, designed by Jerzy Kuźmienka⁸ and Andrzej Fajans⁹ in 1957, but not built until 1983–1993, is considered one of the most characteristic examples of sacred modernism in southern Greater Poland. Its recognisable, expressive form is based on a circular plan and clearly refers to the idea of liturgical centrality, fitting in with the post-conciliar reorganisation of sacred space.

The building is characterised by a dynamic, geometric shape – with a dominant dome set on a drum and a clearly marked, slender tower, which serves as a vertical accent in the urban landscape. The church also stands out for its modern approach to materials – the structure is based on reinforced concrete supports, and the entire building is constructed

of concrete, brick and prefabricated elements, without the use of classic details or historical decorations (Fig. 7, 8). The interior is complemented by contemporary sculptures and symbolic stained-glass windows. A special architectural accent is the external form of the dome – cut diagonally, giving the building a sense of movement and somewhat reminiscent of futuristic structures (Fig. 9).

The form of the temple refers to cosmic symbolism and the idea of unity of the community of believers around the altar. The interior space has been designed as a single-space rotunda with the altar located in the centre. This allows for the direct participation of the entire liturgical community. The light colours of the interior and the abundant glazing in the upper part of the walls ensure that the space is illuminated by light coming through the large stained-glass windows, which deepens the spiritual experience of the space.

The Church of Divine Mercy in Kalisz is not only an example of formal courage in the design of sacred buildings at the end of the communist era in Poland, but also an expression of the spiritual and artistic explorations of that time, combining modern architectural language with functional liturgical organisation and the local urban context.

Ostrów Wielkopolski is the next town on the proposed route, located in the southern part of Greater Poland, about 110 km south-east of Poznań. It has a population of over 70,000 and is an important industrial, educational and transport centre in the region. In this town, it is worth stopping at the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross – an unusual building from the 1980s.

⁸ Jerzy Kuźmienka (born 3 May 1944 in Bydgoszcz) – Polish architect, designer of numerous public and religious buildings, mainly associated with the Greater Poland region. A graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology (1969), in the 1970s and 1980s he worked at the Municipal Construction Design Office in Kalisz. He designed churches in Kalisz, Turek, Opatówek and Brzeziny.

⁹ Andrzej Fajans (born in 1932 in Warsaw, died on 25 January 2005 in the same city) – Polish architect, sculptor and stage

designer, representative of the modernist movement, associated with sacred and functional architecture. A graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology. Co-creator of designs for churches, educational and exhibition facilities, known for his pursuit of the synthesis of the arts and the integration of sculpture with architecture. He collaborated with Jerzy Kuźmienka on projects in southern Greater Poland.



Figure 7. Church of Divine Mercy in Kalisz – front view. Source: https://kulturaupodstaw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/swiatowa_architektura_w_kaliszu_wojciech_hildebrandt3.jpg



Figure 8. Church of Divine Mercy in Kalisz – side view from above. Source: https://kaldron.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/DJI_20240912133829_0276_D.jpg



Figure 9. Church of Divine Mercy in Kalisz – interior view. Source: <https://aamroczek.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/q4x1316-hdr2.jpg>

The Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Ostrów Wielkopolski, also known as the “Church with Three Crosses”, is one of the most unusual and symbolic religious buildings of the communist era in southern Greater Poland. Built between 1983 and 1988 according to a design by Aleksander Holas, the building was constructed under special political and spatial circumstances, which had a decisive influence on its architectural form. At the end of the 1970s, the rapidly growing number of parishioners of St. Anthony of Padua in Ostrów Wielkopolski prompted the authorities to seek permission to build a new church. However, the authorities of the Polish People's Republic did not grant permission for the construction of the church, allegedly due to the proximity of a military airport. In response to this blockade, the parish priest, Father

Tadeusz Szmyt, applied to the authorities for permission to build a funeral home, which, according to the documentation, was lacking in the town. The design was approved, and construction of the building with an “alternative” function began in 1978.

This origin is directly reflected in the shape of the church, which does not reveal its sacred character from the outside. The building has a low, horizontal structure with a gable roof and no traditional dominant features such as a tower or belfry. The main structure resembles an exhibition pavilion or cultural centre – it is compact, massive, and devoid of ornamental details. The only clear indication of the building's religious function are the three metal crosses above the entrance – a strong sacred symbol with which the entire temple is identified (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Ostrów Wielkopolski – exterior view. Source: http://zbawiciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/IMG_64991.jpg

The interior of the church is also subject to the principle of economy and modesty of form, which fits in with both the style of late modernism and the economic and ideological realities of the 1980s. The nave has been designed as a single space with a simple layout and access to daylight through long, rhythmic glazing. The main altar is located on a raised platform in the central part of the liturgical space (Fig. 11). The interior design remains consistently minimalist. There are no elaborate decorations, and the materials used – raw

concrete, brick and wood – remain almost unprocessed. It is architecture that speaks the language of simplicity and sincerity, in keeping with the spirit of late modernism and the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. At the same time, the interior retains its intimacy and focus, thanks to which, despite its originally 'disguised' identity, it now serves a sacred function in a fully-fledged manner, deeply rooted in the experience of the local community.



Figure 11. Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Ostrów Wielkopolski – interior view. Source: <https://www.opiekun.kalisz.pl/media/images/publications/2020/01/dsc10471.jpg>

The Church of the Three Crosses remains a testament to an era in which the need for spirituality and community had to be expressed through cautious, hidden, yet distinctive architecture. It is an example of how an architectural design can become not only a liturgical space, but also a testimony to social determination and creative resistance against the system.

This is where the proposed one-day tour of the gems of modernist religious architecture in Greater Poland ends. For those looking for additional experiences and ready for a slightly longer trip, we recommend one more site – the Collegiate Church of Our Lady Help of Christians in Piła, located some distance from the others, but equally interesting.

This church is one of the most important and recognisable sacred buildings of post-war modernism in northern Greater Poland. Designed by Stanisław Boron in the late 1970s, it was not completed until 1984–1994, in conditions that were not easy for church investments. The structure of the temple, built of reinforced concrete and red brick, was conceived as a distinctive symbol of the modern sacred – dynamic, open and decidedly different from traditional basilica churches.

A characteristic feature of the building is its tall, soaring tower topped with a cross, which dominates the surrounding buildings

and serves as a sacred landmark in the urban space (Fig. 12). The facades of the building are devoid of decorative details, which emphasises the modernist character of the design (Fig. 13). The austerity of the materials – brick and concrete – is softened by the rhythm of vertical divisions, rounded roof lines and the use of glazing, which allows daylight to enter the interior. Contemporary stained glass windows and sculptural elements of the liturgical decor also play a special role.

The architectural design of the temple is based on a fan-shaped plan, which supports the central organisation of the liturgical space. The interior is built on the principle of an amphitheatre – the altar is located in the centre of the composition, and the radially arranged benches and sloping floor ensure that all participants in the liturgy have a good view and a communal experience of the celebration (Fig. 14). This space – open, bright, without divisions or side aisles – corresponds to the post-conciliar idea of the Church as a participating community.

The church in Piła not only responded to the growing pastoral needs of the newly established parish, but also became a manifestation of a new approach to sacred architecture in the late communist era, combining modern form, liturgical functionality and strong roots in the local urban fabric.



Figure 12. Collegiate Church of Our Lady Help of Christians in Piła – aerial view. Source: https://www.diecezjakoszalin.pl/files/img_parafie_100_m/20090423230355.jpg



Figure 13. Collegiate Church of Our Lady Help of Christians in Piła – front view. Source: <https://www.mapofpoland.pl/zdjecia-59851/Kosciol-p-w-NMP-Wspomozenia-Wiernych.jpg>



Figure 14. Collegiate Church of Our Lady Help of Christians in Piła – interior view. Source: <https://v.wpimg.pl/Mi0xLmpwYghRGjpeXwxvHRJCbGQZVWFLRVp2T19Gf1EAAGMeGRIPDF0cIgQAHiEIHREhDBcSPkdHCC8JHlk9BR9KfF9EWH1YH0phXF4dPQ4SBQ>

5. Conclusion

Developing an example of a tourist route showcasing lesser-known yet significant sacred realisations of Greater Poland's modernism carries substantial potential for the development of smaller urban centres in the region, particularly in the context of cultural tourism. Cities such as Gniezno, Konin, Ostrów Wielkopolski, Kalisz and Piła – today most frequently visited by enthusiasts of medieval architecture – could thus attract an entirely new group of visitors: a younger generation of tourists interested in twentieth-century architecture, its social context, underlying ideas, technological and economic constraints, and its original spatial solutions.

It is worth recognising that modernist churches, although long undervalued, are increasingly becoming the subject of rediscovery – both by researchers and architectural enthusiasts. Their aesthetics, material rawness, formal boldness and liturgical innovation make them a strong narrative axis for an alternative tourist route. In contrast to standard itineraries centred on the chronological history of styles, this proposal makes it possible to view twentieth-century heritage as an autonomous and valuable part of the cultural landscape of Greater Poland. Instead of treating these buildings as marginal “add-ons” to sightseeing — visited incidentally or in passing — they should be incorporated into the mainstream tourist offer of the region. The proposed route, symbolically titled *Concrete Revelations*, not only presents an important chapter in the history of art and architecture but may also serve as an impetus for the socio-cultural revitalisation of smaller towns.

The proposal presented above does not constitute a complete thematic route project –

it lacks essential components such as tourist services infrastructure, service points along the route, or appropriate signage and visual identification (Mikos von Rohrscheidt, 2008). This, however, was not the aim of the present study. The intention was rather to propose a route concept which, if necessary, may be expanded and professionally developed, for instance in cooperation with the local governments of the municipalities through which it passes. Such initiatives may prove attractive even from a long-term perspective, serving as a means to develop local tourism capital by utilising less obvious, niche yet strongly identity-forming features of the region. As Bukowska and Kruczek (2015) observe, well-managed cultural routes can effectively contribute to the economic revitalisation of the areas they traverse. When presented with a coherent offer – encompassing performances, concerts or lectures – the tourist experiences not only entertainment but also an engaging cultural narrative. Meanwhile, the towns along the route gain momentum for development – both through the creation of new jobs and the support of local entrepreneurship, as well as the strengthening of residents' bonds with their region.

Viewed in this light, cultural tourism becomes not only a tool for heritage promotion but also a space where the past encounters modernity. The modernist churches included in the proposed route have the potential to function not only as places of religious contemplation, but also as inspiring reference points for reflection on art, history and regional identity.

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