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pioneer of world
architecture

[1910-1950]

ROAD FROM POLAND
TO THE UNITED NATIONS



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Table of contents

6 | Childhood and youth

8 | Studies in Warsaw and first success

15 | Participation in the Underground Movement

19 | Work in the USA

30 | References



Maciej Nowicki (UN Photo Library)



“If time had allowed his genius to spread its wings in full, this poet–philosopher of form would have influenced the whole course of architecture as profoundly as he inspired his friends”.

– Eero Saarinen on Maciej Nowicki. Many Polish architects were successful abroad, but only few were recognised as masters of their craft and pioneers of world architecture.

One of the outstanding artists whose achievements and ideas had a huge impact on the shape of world architecture was Maciej Nowicki (also known as Matthew Nowicki). He showed above–average artistic talent in his youth, and his architectural sense developed during his studies at the Warsaw Polytechnic. After obtaining his diploma in 1936, he began to achieve major success in architectural competitions in Poland and abroad. During the Second World War, Nowicki became involved in underground activities and served in the Home Army. After the War, he went to the United States as a delegate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he settled and where his architectural talent was fully revealed. Nowicki taught at a number of universities and was part of the team designing the United Nations headquarters in New York. He was also the author of the avant–garde design of an arena in Raleigh, North Carolina. In 1950, he began to work on an architectural plan for the Indian city of Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the completion of his innovative project. For Nowicki died a tragic death in a plane crash caused by an engine fire in the Libyan Desert in August 1950.

Due to the fact that Nowicki stayed in the United States without the permission of the communist authorities,

information about his life, work and achievements was suppressed in Poland for many years. However, he deserves to be remembered, as he was one of the most outstanding Polish architects of the 20th century. In the opinion of many, including Lewis Mumford, an undisputed authority in the field of American urban planning, he combined the unique creative talent and commitment of Le Corbusier with Frank Lloyd Wright's organic sensibility.

Childhood and youth

Maciej Nowicki was born on 26 June 1910 in Chita, Zabaykalsky Krai, in the borderland between Siberia and China. At that time, Poland was not to be found on the map of the world, and Poles lived under German, Austrian and Russian rule. Maciej was born into a family with patriotic traditions. His father Zygmunt (1867–1941) graduated in law from the universities in St. Petersburg and Odessa. At that time, he was already involved in the activities of Polish secret organisations such as *Czynna Obrona Kraju* and *Grupa Braci*. Then, he worked as a judge in Turkestan, Sakhalin, and Vladivostok from 1902. During this time, he promoted the establishment of Polish cultural and educational organisations among Poles working in Russia. He was forced to resign from public service for helping to organise a strike among Polish workers mining gold on the Amgun River. As a result, he worked as a lawyer, and from 1909 he was the head of the legal department of the Amur Railway based in Chita. In 1905, Zygmunt married Filipina (or Antonina) Filipowicz, who was also involved in underground activities.

After Maciej had been born, the family decided to return to their homeland. In 1911, Zygmunt Nowicki bought a small estate in Słomniczki near Kraków, where they settled.

This was where little Maciej was able to observe his father's patriotic activities at local and national level. Among other things, Zygmunt Nowicki founded, the Polish Education Society in Słomniki, as well as a library, reading room, and day care centre for children. From 1916, he was a member of the Polish Military Organisation, a clandestine organisation operating mainly in the Russian partition, the objective of which was the regaining of independence by Poland. Zygmunt Nowicki was also a member of the Central People's Committee. In 1917, he was appointed President of the District Court in Kielce by the Department of Justice of the Regency Council. After Poland had indeed regained its independence, he worked for the Ministry of Justice, before transferring to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1920. Zygmunt Nowicki co-organised the Polish Consulate in Chicago and was the first Polish Consul in the United States, with jurisdiction over 26 states. He returned to Poland in 1922, when he became a Senator. He sat in the upper house of the Polish Parliament for one term, i.e. until 1927.

Maciej Nowicki went to Chicago with his father and, although only 10 years old at the time, his two-year stay in the United States had a major impact on him. As Tadeusz Barucki pointed out, Nowicki had the opportunity not only to see and experience a new world or learn English but also to attend drawing classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received his first award for his work. He was also able to see the American metropolis and observe new trends in architecture, especially projects by

outstanding American architects: Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Maciej Nowicki attended public school, but he was also taught at home by the well-known Polish poet and novelist, Barbara Stefania Kossuth, who worked at the Polish Consulate. As he showed outstanding artistic skills, after his return to Poland in 1922, apart from attending the Stefan Batory Lower Secondary School, he continued artistic studies at the Wojciech Gerson School of Fine Arts (Academy of Fine Arts from 1932) and, then, at the Ludwika Mehofferowa Free School of Painting and Drawing in Kraków. Then, he moved to Kraków, where in 1928, he passed the *Matura* exam. After that, Maciej went on to study at the Faculty of Architecture at Warsaw Polytechnic.

Studies in Warsaw and first success

Nowicki's concepts and views during his studies were strongly influenced by Prof. Rudolf Świerczyński; in fact, Nowicki became his assistant after a while. He helped him design, e.g., the buildings of *Bank Gospodarstwa Komunalnego* and the Patent Office in Warsaw. During his studies, Nowicki was also very interested in posters. Their designs revealed his above-average talent. He designed many of them together with his fellow student Stanisława Sandecka, who became his wife in 1938.

Designing posters consumed a lot of Nowicki's time; for this reason, his father, who wanted to encourage him to focus on architectural studies, persuaded him to design the family house in the district of Bielany, Warsaw.



Stanisława Sandecka,
Maciej Nowicki, Young
Architecture Ball, 1934
(Poster Museum
in Wilanów)



Stanisława Sandecka,
Maciej Nowicki, 2nd
Meeting of Polish
Youth from Abroad,
1935 (Poster Museum
in Wilanów)



Young Maciej Nowicki (North Carolina State University Libraries)

At the time, the architectural ideas of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, also known as Le Corbusier, were extremely popular. This French architect of Swiss descent revolutionised the approach to architecture and set new trends in Modernism. As Tadeusz Barucki pointed out, despite having spent several months training in Le Corbusier's Studio in Paris, Nowicki did not fully succumb to his influence; even if his design of the family house was reminiscent of the French architect.

Nowicki leaned towards Auguste Perret's architecture, which can be seen in the design of the Physical Education Centre of the "Orzeł" Sports Club in Warsaw (1938–1939, together with Zbigniew Karpiński). Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Nowicki, together with other architects, also designed the Tourist House in Augustów (1938–1939). The building stands out among other tourist facilities due to its harmonious architecture blending perfectly with the surrounding nature.



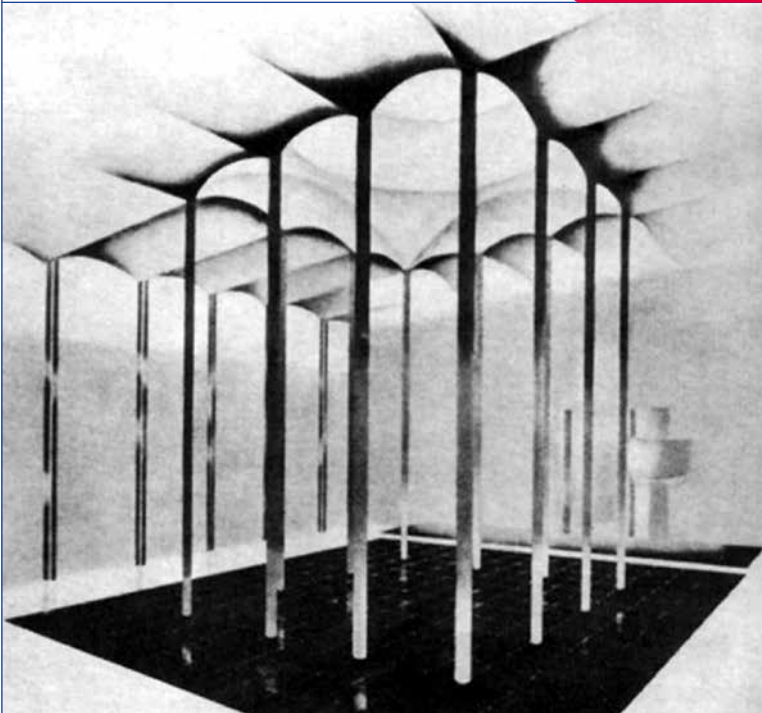
The Nowicki family house in Warsaw – present day. First design by Maciej Nowicki from the beginning of the 1930s. The house was rebuilt after 1945, and its original features were lost in the process. (photo: Tadeusz Barucki)





Tourist House in Augustów, 1938-1939 (now: the Hetman Inn) designed by Maciej Nowicki, Stanisława Sandecka-Nowicka, Aleksander Kodelski and Władysław Stokowski (photo: Witia/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0 PL)

During his studies and after graduation in 1936, Nowicki travelled a great deal, e.g. to Brazil, France, Italy, and Greece, which enabled him to keep abreast of new trends in world architecture. It was also during this time that he began to achieve his first successes in architectural competitions, for which he prepared projects with other architects. The most important designs include the mosque in Warsaw (1936), the building of the Voivodeship Office in Łódź, the spa house in Druskininkai (1938), and the Polish Pavilion for the World Exhibition in New York (1939). He also designed exhibition stands and shop interiors, among which the Warsaw-based *Telimena*, the first boutique in Poland, is worth mentioning.



Competition design for the mosque in Warsaw, 1936
(T. Barucki, *Maciej Nowicki*, Warsaw 1986)

Participation in the Underground Movement

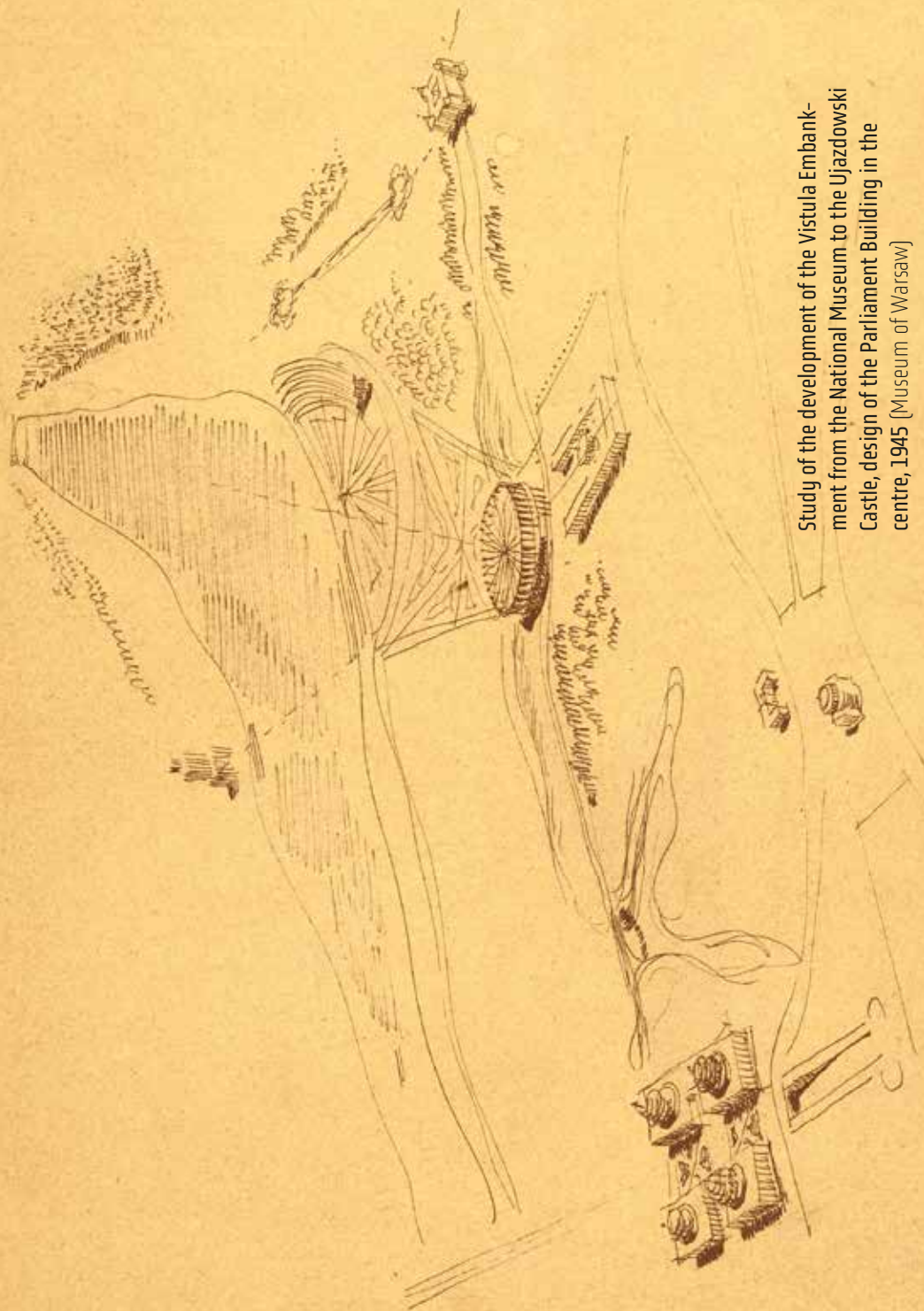
Nowicki's promising career was halted by the outbreak of the Second World War. First, on 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland; and on 17 September 1939, Soviet troops crossed the eastern border of the Second Polish Republic. Nowicki was called up into the Army and fought against German invaders as an anti-aircraft Artillery Officer. Despite the military defeat, Poles did not lay down their arms, and soon various underground organisations began to emerge in the German-occupied areas; and the official political and social life went underground. Nowicki continued to design and work at the Building School, where he taught architecture against the occupying forces' orders. Despite the fact that the Faculty of Architecture at Warsaw Polytechnic was closed down by Germans, Nowicki gave clandestine classes. After the death of Prof. Świerczyński, he took the Chair of Design. He also taught at the School for Draughtswomen working in the construction industry.

He was involved in armed underground activities (aka "Nowina") and served in the Home Army, which was formed on 14 February 1942 as a result of the renaming of the Union of Armed Struggle. Nowicki was a soldier in the 7th District "Obroża" (Warsaw district) of the Warsaw Area of the Home Army. It should be noted that the Home Army was not an ordinary underground organisation, but a worldwide phenomenon, thanks to its comprehensive activities and extensive structures. Above all, it was an armed division of the Polish Underground State, a well-organised structure of a political and military nature on the entire territory

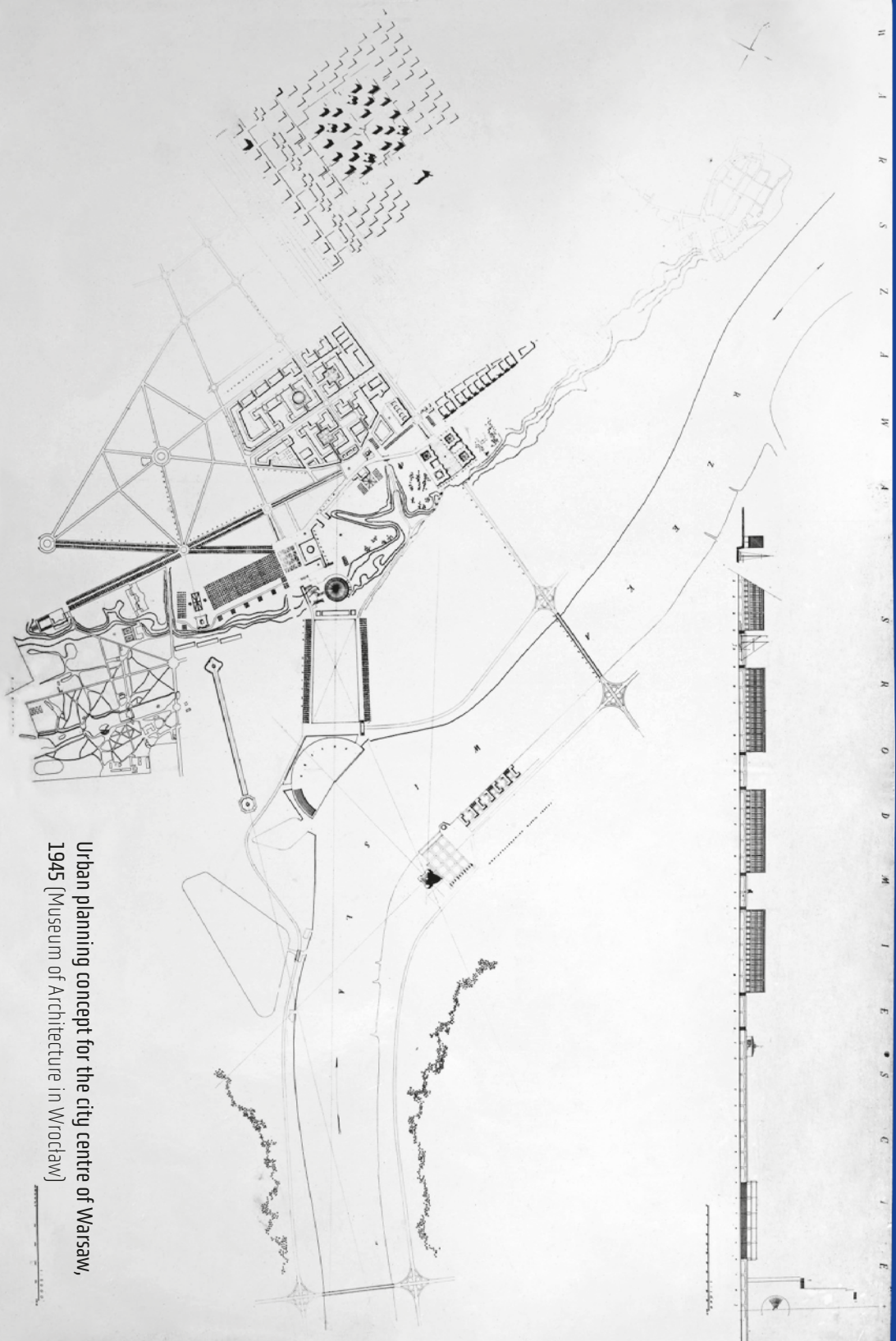
of the Second Polish Republic. The Home Army was also a phenomenon because of the role it played in society. It was a voluntary organisation embracing various generations of Poles, people from different political and social backgrounds. It was also the largest military organisation of the Polish Underground Movement, with between 250,000 and 380,000 soldiers by the end of the Second World War. As a result, the Home Army was that War's best organised underground army.

Apart from being directly involved in the structures of the Home Army, Nowicki also used his artistic skills for patriotic purposes. For example, he designed the banner for the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade, which was formed in the United Kingdom. The banner was consecrated secretly on 3 November 1942 in the Canonesses' Church in Warsaw, but was not transported via "air bridge", i.e. by plane, to the United Kingdom until 1944. The banner travelled by the same plane as parts of German V-1 rockets captured for the Allies in a daring operation carried out by the Home Army. On 15 June 1944, in Cupar, Scotland, the banner was presented to the commander of the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade: Major General Stanisław Sosabowski.

During the Warsaw Uprising, Nowicki was a Liaison Officer [in the rank of Second Lieutenant] of the "Kampinos" Group of the Home Army. During his underground activities in the Kampinos Forest, he came across the Centre for Blind and Visually Impaired People in Laski. He designed several buildings for the Centre, but only the gatehouse was built. Nowicki sent a mock-up of the chapel from the United States. Meanwhile, after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, he and his students found themselves in the Podhale region.

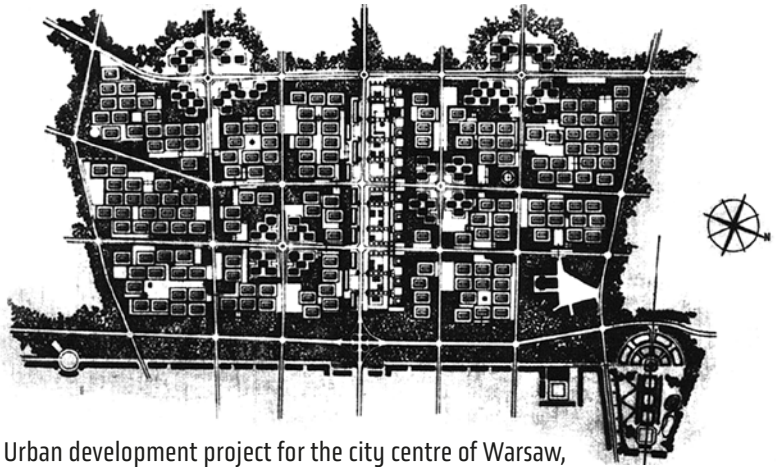


Study of the development of the Vistula Embankment from the National Museum to the Ujazdowski Castle, design of the Parliament Building in the centre, 1945 (Museum of Warsaw)



Urban planning concept for the city centre of Warsaw,
1945 (Museum of Architecture in Wrocław)

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



Urban development project for the city centre of Warsaw, 1945 (T. Barucki, *Maciej Nowicki*, Warszawa 1986)

He opened a studio in Zakopane, where he developed his concepts for rebuilding Warsaw. After his return to the capital city, Nowicki became involved in the activities of the Architectural Discussion Studio, which was part of the Capital Reconstruction Office. His proposals for the reconstruction of Warsaw were very innovative, but difficult to implement in a completely destroyed city. At this point, it is worth mentioning, for example, his design of a new Parliament Building, and his ideas for developing the centre of Warsaw. At that time, Nowicki also published quite a lot, e.g., in the “Skarpa Warszawska” weekly magazine.

Work in the USA

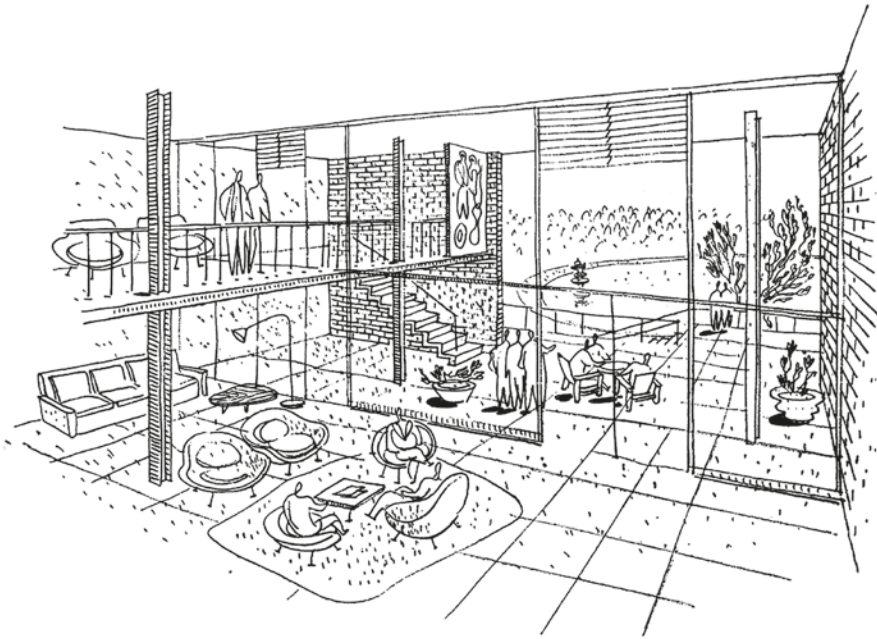
At the end of 1945, Maciej Nowicki moved with his family to the United States, where he started working in the Polish diplomatic mission as a Cultural Attaché. The communist authorities valued his American experience and language skills and expected him to promote the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. For this purpose, he helped to prepare

the “Warsaw Accuses” exhibition in New York, which showed the scale of destruction of the Polish capital and the brutality of German invaders.

When the United Nations decided to build the UN headquarters in New York, Nowicki was appointed as a Polish consultant for the project. This allowed him to work with world-famous architects such as Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Sven Markelius. At the time, Nowicki and his wife were expecting their second child and, because of this, the family made the difficult decision to stay in the United States. As a result, the architect was criticised, and his name disappeared from public life in Poland for many years.

The decision to stay in the United States also had serious professional consequences for Nowicki. Although he was properly qualified to practise his profession in Poland, in the United States he had to meet a number of strict regulations and hold a licence. Therefore, to be able to design, Nowicki had to cooperate with other architects. This proved to be fruitful, as new acquaintances enabled him to fully demonstrate his craftsmanship and unconventional approach to architecture. The most noteworthy examples include his cooperation on the design of a new supermarket in California (1950), with a roof suspended on only four supports; and his collaboration with the prominent American architect Eero Saarinen, with whom Nowicki created a design for Brandeis University (1949).

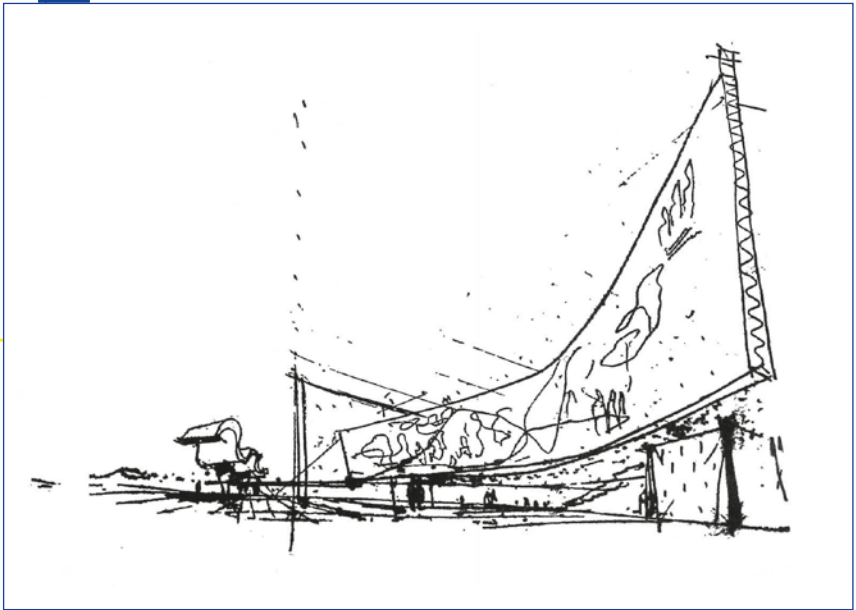
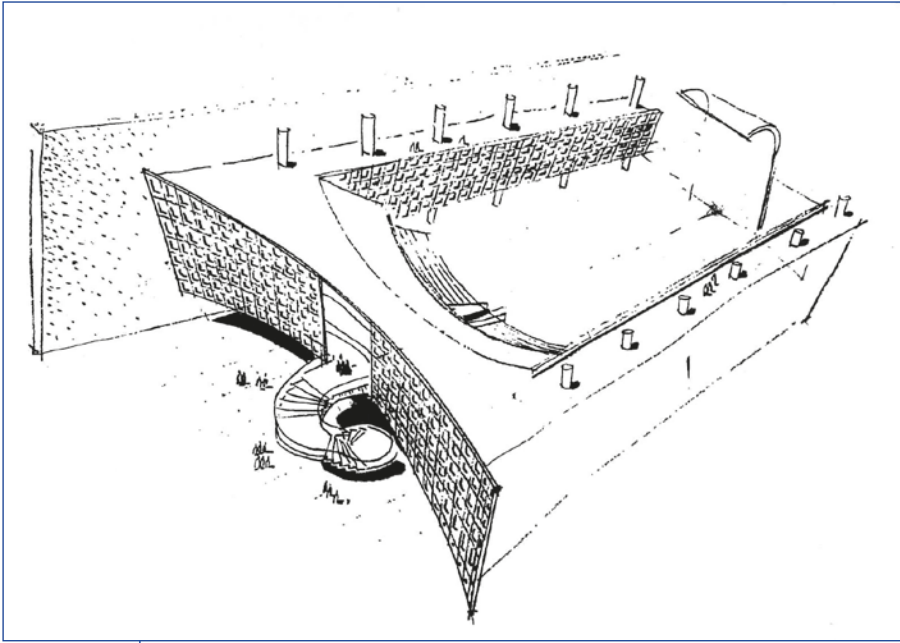
Nowicki divided his time between designing and teaching. Initially, he taught off and on at various institutions, including the Pratt Institute in New York. In 1948, he took over at the Department of Architecture at North Carolina



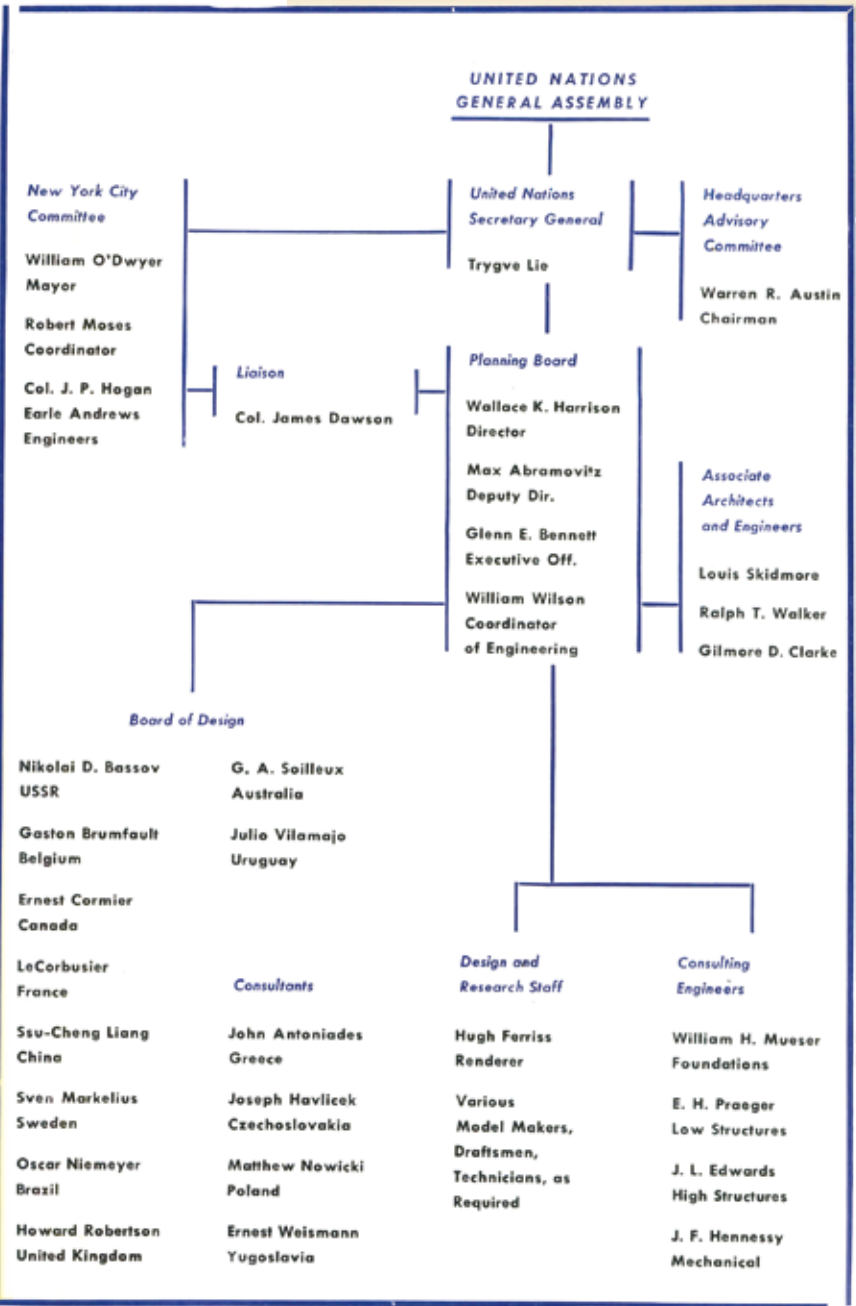
Brandeis University design, 1949 (*A Foundation For Learning: Planning the Campus of Brandeis University, Waltham 1949*)



Maciej Nowicki (first from the right) with a group of architects working on the construction of the UN headquarters in New York, 1947 (UN Photo Library)



Sketches of the United Nations headquarters in New York by Maciej Nowicki, 1947 ("Architectural Record" 1954, vol. 115, no. 6, p. 149)



United Nations Headquarters
Planning Commission

Diagram showing the UN Headquarters Planning Commission
(„Architectural Record“ 1947, vol. 101, no. 4, p. 75)

State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, NC, where he and his wife developed an innovative curriculum for architecture students. This was also where Nowicki's most important work was created – together with William Henley Deitrick, he designed the sports and entertainment hall now called the Dorton Arena. The hall is also known under the name of *Paroboleum*, which refers to its innovative design. It consists of two intersecting parabolic arches between which the roof is suspended on steel cables. As Tadeusz Barucki pointed out, the concept of the hall completely departed from the previously used ancient principle of column and architrave, i.e. a vertical column supporting the corresponding system of horizontal beams. Marta A. Urbańska added that this was the world's first parabolic hyperboloid, which was a prototype for the halls by Kenzō Tange and Eero Saarinen.

Nowicki did not live to see the implementation of the project, but co-designers William Henley Deitrick and Fred Severud did their best to ensure that his vision was preserved in the construction of the hall. The work was completed in 1953 and received widespread acclaim from professionals – it won the AIA (American Institute of Architects) award for the best architectural work. Meanwhile, in 1972, the Paroboleum was included in the list of legally protected sites due to its architectural value. It is worth noting that, thanks to this project, Nowicki went down in the history of modern architecture and became an inspiration for many other designers such as Frei Otto, who designed the Olympic Stadium in Munich. In fact, after the *Paroboleum* had been constructed *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, one of the most important architecture magazines in the world, called Maciej Nowicki “a pioneer of architecture of the second half of the 20th century”.



The Parableum (now: Dorton Arena), a sports and entertainment hall designed by Maciej Nowicki. The co-authors of the project, which was implemented in 1953, were William Henley Deitrick and Fred Severud (State Archives of North Carolina)

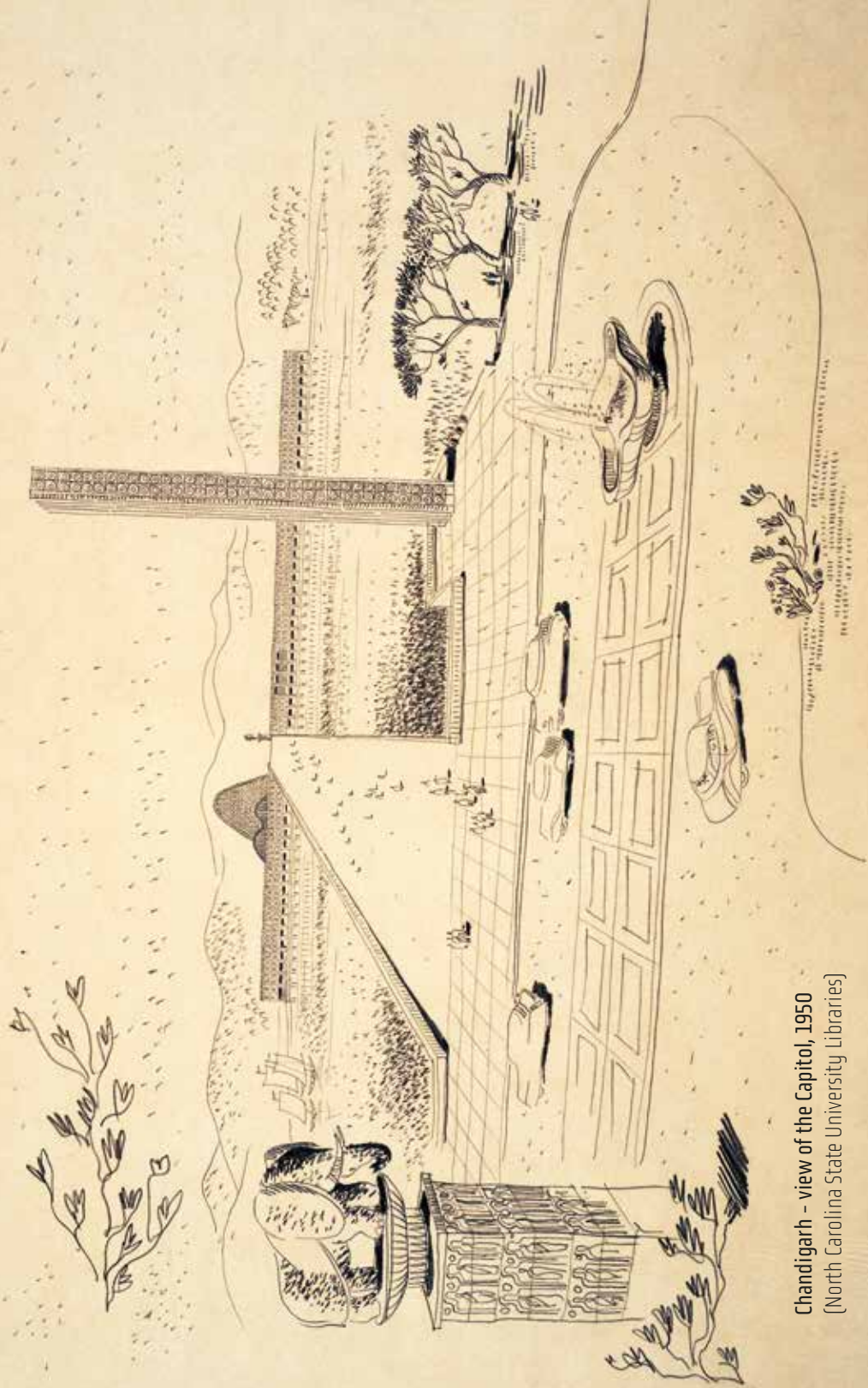


The Parableum, interior view (photo: Tadeusz Barucki)

Nowicki's unconventional approach to architecture made him famous in the world of designers; as a result, he could expect a lot of cooperation offers. A particular offer came from Albert Mayer, a developer and urban planner who was commissioned by the Indian Government to develop a concept for the building of a city of the future in Chandigarh, capital of Punjab. This was quite a challenge, as architects are rarely given the opportunity to prepare plans for an entire city from scratch. However, Nowicki was extremely talented, had a vision, and accepted the offer. In the first half of 1950, together with Mayer, he worked on the guidelines for the plan and architecture of the city. Then, at the end of June and beginning of July, the two men arrived in India and set about developing the project. During this time, Nowicki prepared approx. 100 drawings, mainly accurate perspective sketches. However, he had to settle professional matters in Raleigh. And on his way back to the United States, he died tragically in a plane crash on 31 August 1950. After his death, the Chandigarh construction project was continued by Le Corbusier according to Nowicki's vision; but today some Indian architects claim that Nowicki's vision would have stood the test of time better than the project implemented by the French architect.

Stanisława Sandecka-Nowicka began her academic career at the University of Pennsylvania [UPenn] in 1951. In 1963, she became the first female professor of architecture in the USA. She also taught at the North Carolina State University and the University of Southern California [UCP]. She retired in 1977.

Due to political censorship, in communist-ruled Poland, Nowicki's name was suppressed for a long time. Press



Chandigarh - view of the Capitol, 1950
(North Carolina State University Libraries)

Airliner Crash in Egypt Kills 55; 23 of the Victims Were Americans

By The Associated Press.

DIST EL ASHRAFF, Egypt, Aug. 31—A Trans World Airlines Constellation crashed and burned in the desert sands on the western edge of the Nile Delta today. All fifty-five persons aboard perished. Twenty-three Americans and an Egyptian film star were among them.

The four-engine land airliner miles north of a village of 1000 rim of the Wadi el Natrun, 500 yards from the Nile, crashed miles over

[A United Press correspondent reported that the plane had smashed into a narrow-gauge railway in hitting the ground and had plowed up a considerable stretch of track.]

A dozen nations were represented among the forty-eight passengers.

Prominent among the Americans

Weather

cloudy with little rain. Temperatures in the 70's.

Published 1879

Member Associated Press

Raleigh, North Carolina

EVENING Hours

THE RALEIGH

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Raleighian Victim Of Crash As Egyptian Airliner Falls

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Matthew Nowicki, acting head of the State College School of Design and Department of Architecture, was among the 55 presumed killed in the crash of a TWA Constellation near Cairo, Egypt, Thursday.

Nowicki, nationally-known architect and designer-consultant to the United Nations, was returning from India, where he had been at work on a special project of designing a capital city for the new Punjab Province of India, when the crash occurred.

He was a native of Poland, his father having been the Polish Consul-General in Chicago from 1921 to 1925. He studied at the Chicago Art Institute and was graduated from the Technological Institute of Warsaw in 1936.

On Aug. 31, (INS)—All 55 aboard a Trans-World Constellation, including 23 Americans, a maharajah, two U.S. senators from India and a film star, perished today when the New York plane crashed and burned in the Egyptian

A Cairo announced no survivors found in the wreckage as located burned after an aerial search for the plane of the four-engine, Capt. Walton B. Alden, Pa., made a ring-around check with Farouk outside Cairo.

Wreckage of the plane, which the Cairo-Bomb leg of its search near the tiny mud-brick village of Alay Barred.

Officials said there was no life visible in the burned remains of the plane or among the wreckage scattered in the area. Survivors aboard the ill-fated plane.

Nowicki joined the State College faculty in 1948. Before coming to State, he was a member of the faculty at the Trans Institute in New York City. In 1948 he was a Polish delegate on the United Nations Headquarters Committee working on the selection of a permanent UN headquarters.

Last year Nowicki teamed with Architect William Henry Dietrich of Raleigh to design the new Raleigh Country Clubhouse, which has received national attention.

Surviving are his widow, Mrs. Stanislawas Sandecka Nowicki, who was also on the college staff as a visiting assistant professor in the School of Design, and two sons—Paul, 8, and Peter, 5, who was born last April.

The Nowicki family resides at 1817 North Smallwood Drive.

When informed of Nowicki's death, Chancellor J. W. Hester of the North Carolina State College expressed his and the institution's "deep regret" and said the architectural educator would be "greatly missed in the School of Design at the State College." Chancellor Hester's personal





Air crash near Cairo on 31 August 1950, in which Maciej Nowicki was killed
(public domain, Aviation Safety Network)

releases relating to Maciej Nowicki appeared in 1956 after de-Stalinisation and “the Thaw”. In 1961, the Warsaw Branch of the Association of Polish Architects (SARP) hosted the first exhibition dedicated to his works. However, it was Tadeusz Barucki, the author of two biographical publications on Nowicki, who reintroduced Nowicki to Poles. Marta A. Urbańska also played a major role in the promotion of his works by dedicating her doctoral dissertation and several articles to Nowicki. However, according to her, the extremely talented Nowicki, “an architect for architects”, remains unknown to many. His symbolic grave is located in the Wawrzyszewski Cemetery in Warsaw.

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Reviewed by [dr hab. Sebastian Ligarski](#)

Translation [GROY Translations Sp. z o.o.](#)

Proofreading [James R.A. Richards](#)

Graphic design and typesetting [Sylwia Szafrńska](#)

Printed and bound by

[Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne i Drukarnia w Sandomierzu](#)

[ul. Żeromskiego 4, 27-600 Sandomierz](#)

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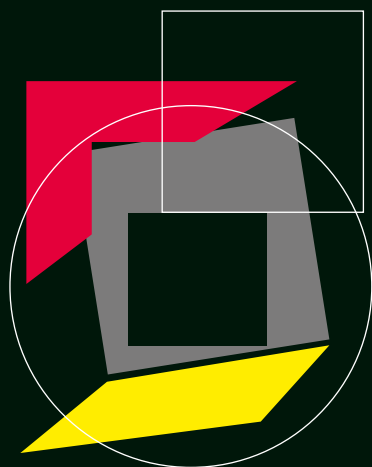
ISBN 978-83-8229-640-2 [print]

ISBN 978-83-8229-641-9 [pdf]

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