

International Congresses of Modern Architecture CIAM.

Architects, Events and Works through the Lens of Szymon Syrkus (1935–1939)

ABSTRACT

In 2022, glass negatives taken in 1935–1939 by Szymon Syrkus – one of the leaders of the Polish interwar architectural avant-garde, were found at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology. As it was possible to determine, among the approximately eighty surviving negatives, more than twenty document the course and effects of the construction of three residential buildings, which were designed and completed in 1937–1939/1943 in Warsaw in whole or in part by Szymon and Helena Syrkus. A dozen or so photographs were taken in 1938 on the occasion of private, sightseeing and holiday trips of the Syrkus family and friends to Czersk and the vicinity of Kielce. However, the largest collection, comprising about forty negatives, consists largely of photographs published here for the first time, documenting the activities of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in the period of preparations for the Fifth CIAM Congress in Paris, which lasted from 1935 to 1937. The collection of negatives concerning the activities of CIAM is complemented by individual photographs documenting works of modernist architecture, which S. Syrkus visited in the years 1937–1939 on the occasion of his other official trips abroad. In 1937 he went to Budapest for the first meeting of the so-called Eastern Group of CIAM (CIAM-Ost), bringing together CIAM members from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and in the summer of 1939 to Stockholm for the 17th Congress of the International Federation for Housing and Urban Planning (IFHTP). The article, against the broader background of Szymon Syrkus' activity as a member and activist of CIAM since 1928, discusses documented in his photographs the works of architecture, places and participants of formal and backstage meetings that took place in July 1935 in Amsterdam and in September 1936 in La Sarraz in Switzerland, as part of the work of the so-called CIRPAC, i.e. the International Committee for the Implementation of Problems of Contemporary Architecture (a body of CIAM that brought together members of its board and delegates of individual national groups) and in 1937 during the Fifth Congress of CIAM in Paris, as well as during Syrkus's business trips to Hungary in 1937 and Sweden in 1939.

Keywords: International Congress of Contemporary Architecture CIAM, Szymon Syrkus

INTRODUCTION

Photographs from the years 1935–1939 were uncovered at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology in 2022. Until then, they had been completely unknown to date. Most probably they were taken by Szymon Syrkus—one of the leaders of Poland's interwar Avant-Garde architecture. As of 1928 he was also an active member of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne – CIAM). It has been established that from among the approximately eighty surviving glass plate negatives, over twenty document three Warsaw residential buildings both under construction and when finished. These buildings were in whole or part designed and built by Szymon and Helena Syrkus over the years 1937–1939/1943.¹ Over a dozen photographs were made in 1938. They were private tourist and vacation pictures of trips made by the Syrkuses with their family and friends to Czersk and around Kielce. However, the largest set, encompassing about forty negatives, is made up of never before published photographs documenting the activities of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) over the period from 1935 to 1937, including preparations for the 5th CIAM Congress in Paris. This part of the collection is supplemented by pictures taken by Syrkus during one of his official foreign trips in 1937 to Hungary as a part of the CIAM Eastern Group and in 1939 as the delegate of the Polish Housing Reform Association (PTRM) to Sweden.

The objective of this article is to stimulate a discussion on the broader background of the activities of Szymon Syrkus as an active member of CIAM starting with the year 1928 and crowned by his photographs from the years 1935–1939 of works of interwar Modern architecture as well as of the places and participants of formal and informal CIAM meetings that took place in Amsterdam during July of 1935 as well as in 1937 during the proceedings of the 5th CIAM Congress in Paris. They also portray the activities of Syrkus in September of 1936 at La Sarraz in Switzerland as a member actively participating in the work of the International Committee for the Resolution of Problems in Contemporary Architecture (Comité International pour la Réalisation des Problèmes d'Architecture Contemporaine – CIRPAC), a body of CIAM engaging members of its Board and delegates of the individual groups of countries as well as the outcomes of several official trips in 1937 to Hungary (CIAM-Ost) and in 1939 to Switzerland.

THE ACTIVATES OF SZYMON SYRKUS IN CIAM OVER THE YEARS 1928–1934

In 1928 Szymon Syrkus (1893–1964) and Józef Szanajca (1902–1939) were asked by Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968), the Secretary General of CIAM, to represent Poland in that organization and, at the same time, to organize the Polish group of CIAM. That was July of 1928, two weeks after the signing into force of the inauguration of the activities of CIAM—i.e. the La Sarraz Declaration.² Invited by Prof Karl Moser (1860–1936), the Chairman

¹ The negatives are preserved at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology and date from 1938–1939. They were taken by Szymon Syrkus and show the Zagajski and Tauman tenement house at 71 Złota Street, the Heyman house at 7 Barcicka Street, and Piotr Bergman's luxury apartment building at 40/42 Belwederska Street.

² Syrkus, S. (1929). II Międzynarodowy Kongres Architektury Nowoczesnej [2nd International Congress of Modern Architecture]. *Mieszkanie, Dom, Osiedle* [Dwelling, House, Housing Estate], 6(2), 31–32.

of CIAM, Szymon Syrkus took part, for the first time, in the CIRPAC meeting in Basel in February of 1929 as the official delegate of Poland. That meeting was mainly devoted to developing a plan for the 2nd CIAM Congress in Frankfurt. Delegates from ten European countries, under the leadership of Karl Moser and Siegfried Giedion,³ participated. It is worth noting that it was thanks to this trip to Basil that Syrkus, accompanied by his wife Helena Syrkus (1900–1982), not only met Le Corbusier (1887–1965) in person, but also saw several of his projects with his own eyes, including the unfinished Villa Savoye in Poissy.⁴

In November of that same year, Szymon Syrkus took part in the 2nd CIAM Congress in Frankfurt am Main together with his wife Helena. He was the Polish delegate and was accompanied by Józef Szanajca, as his associate, and Teodor Toeplitz (1875–1937), who albeit present unofficially de facto headed the Polish delegation.⁵ The Congress was devoted to housing, specifically to the smallest dwellings and their mass production.⁶ It was there that the Polish group presented designs developed for Warsaw and Gdynia housing cooperatives as well as for the Łódź Workers’ Colony in Polesie Konstantnowskie.⁷

One year later, in November of 1930, Szymon Syrkus took part in the 3rd CIAM Congress in Brussels.⁸ It was under the leadership of Cornelis van Eesteren (1897–1988), the new Chairman of CIAM. Work on formulating principles for shaping a functional city was launched on the basis of Dutch experience.⁹ It was also at the Brussels Congress that Syrkus made his first public address. He delivered a team paper entitled ‘Le probleme d’habitation en Pologne [Housing Problems in Poland] within the framework of the ‘Tiny Dwelling Days.’ According to his wife Helena, it was well received by the international community.¹⁰ It may be added that she, too, had her debut as a rapporteur presenting, in the name of the architects of Praesens, designs for the Warsaw Housing Cooperative

³ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 75–77.

⁴ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 75, 79–83.

⁵ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 86.

⁶ Syrkus, S. (1930). II Międzynarodowy Kongres Architektury Nowoczesnej: Frankfurt n/Menem, October 24–26, 1929 [2nd International Congress of Modern Architecture in Frankfurt am Main, October 24–26, 1929]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 2, pp. 27–30; Architectural exhibition in Frankfurt am Main. (1929). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 7(3), p. 32.

⁷ Syrkus, S. (1930). II Międzynarodowy Kongres Architektury Nowoczesnej. Frankfurt n/Menem [2nd International Congress of Modern Architecture in Frankfurt am Main], October 24–26, 1929. *Dom Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 2, 27–30. Compare also Syrkus, S. (1929). *Architectural Exhibition in Frankfurt am Main. Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 7(3), 32.

⁸ Syrkus, S. (1931). III Międzynarodowy Kongres Architektury Nowoczesnej: Brussels, November 25–30, 1930 [3rd International Congress of Modern Architecture]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 2, pp. 24–26.

⁹ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 59. Compare also Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 122–123.

¹⁰ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 108–109.

(WSM) housing estate in Rakowiec and plans for an eight-story residential building designed for the Polish Steel Mill Syndicate (SPH) by Stanisław Hempel (1892–1954).¹¹

In June of 1931 Szymon Syrkus took part in the Berlin meeting of members of the CIAM Presidium and the delegates of the nine countries forming CIRPAC. The topic of discussion was the guidelines and questionnaire developed by the Dutch group as headed by Cornelis van Eesteren entitled ‘The Functional City: Analytic Studies.’ Materials were proposed as a basis for preparing uniform graphic panels depicting questions relating to the redevelopment and expansion of thirty–three selected cities. They were intended for presentation at the 4th CIAM Congress planned for Moscow.¹²

It should be added that it was during the discussions in Berlin that differences of opinion made their appearance for the first time in the bosom of the CIAM. These differences pitted those in favor of limiting work to individual studies relating to specific cities—a view supported by the pragmatic Dutch, Swiss and Germans—against proponents of concentrating on research to develop a general theory of the ‘Functional City.’ The Syrkuses preferred the latter. It should be noted that as time passed, the latter view also found favour with both Le Corbusier and his colleagues and the Spaniard Josep Lluís Sert (1902–1983) as well as with Ernest Weissman (1903–1985), the delegate from Yugoslavia.¹³

The only significant event in which Szymon and Helena Syrkus did not take part prior to 1935 was the organizing convention of a CIRPAC in March of 1932 in Barcelona. That was the locus of activity of one of the most vigorous CIAM national groups that was headed by Josep Lluís Sert and Josep Torres Clavé (1906–1939)—the Group of Catalan Artists and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture (GATCPAC).¹⁴

When at the end of March of 1933 it turned out that the organizing of the 4th Congress in Moscow will not be possible, representatives of the top management of CIAM, including Syrkus and his wife, met urgently in April in Paris and decided that the 4th CIAM Congress will take place on July 29 – August 13 of 1933 in part on the decks of the ship Patris II during its cruise from Marseille to Piraeus and back and in part in Athens. Fifteen national groups took part in the Congress. This included the group from Poland, which was made up of the Praesens group and the ‘architectural’ couples: Helena and Szymon Syrkus, Barbara and Stanisław Brukowski, and Anatolia and Roman Piotrowski.¹⁵

¹¹ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 112.

¹² Compare with Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, pp. 61–62; Syrkus, S. (1931). Międzynarodowe Kongresy Architektury Nowoczesnej [International Congresses of Modern Architecture]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 7, pp. 27–28; and Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 130–131.

¹³ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 64. Compare also Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 158–159, 179–180.

¹⁴ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 66. Compare also Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 132–133..

¹⁵ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 134–135.

Syrkus described in detail the course and results of the 4th Congress on the pages of the *Architektura i Budownictwo* [Architecture and Building] periodical.¹⁶ For this reason they shall not be reiterated here. However, it is worth remembering that the Polish delegates were very active at the Congress. They took part in the work of four of the eight Congress Commissions as well as in the development of final conclusions and resolutions.¹⁷ It was at the review exhibition of the plans for thirty-three cities that Syrkus reported on the work of the architects of the Praesens group: panels picturing life, work, leisure, and traffic within the limits of Warsaw and the schematics of these functions within the region.¹⁸ He gave a lecture in Athens on ‘The Functional Wall: Experiences from Recent Years and Designs for the Year 1935.’ For their part, Barbara and Stanisław Brukowski gave a lecture on matters relating to dwellings for both manual labourers and white-collar workers¹⁹ during the return cruise.

A successive meeting of CIRPAC took place in May of 1934 at the London seat of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). This meeting was important for several reasons. Firstly, in the face of the developments in the USSR and Nazi Germany it was then decided that CIAM should take a neutral position with respect to current political events. Secondly, the program and venue for the 5th Congress was discussed. Thirdly, after familiarizing themselves with the designs for a Functional Warsaw as developed by Szymon Syrkus and Jan Olaf Chmielewski (1895–1974), who represented Poland, and the design for Barcelona developed by the Spanish representatives under the leadership of Josep Lluís Sert. The prominent participants in the meeting decided that urban plans developed by national groups for the 5th Congress must be considered in the context of general regional plans.²⁰ To a great extent, this was an achievement of the Polish delegation.

THE WORK OF SZYMON SYRKUS OVER THE YEARS 1935–1937 IN THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE 5TH CIAM CONGRESS

The CIRPAC meeting in Amsterdam (June 1935). The first photographs preserved in the collections of the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology were made by Szymon Syrkus in June of 1935 during the CIRPAC convention in Amsterdam. The organization’s leadership, preserved in the photographs by Szymon Syrkus over the course of the plenary meetings, includes Cornelis van Eesteren, the President of CIAM, his deputy Walter Gropius (1883–1969), who delivered the introductory paper, and Victor Bourgeois (1897–1962) as well as Sigfried Giedion, the Secretary General (Fig. 1). Syrkus’

¹⁶ Syrkus, S. (1933). Informacje o IV Międzynarodowym Kongresie Architektury Nowoczesnej [Information on the 4th International Congress of Modern Architecture]. *Architektura i Budownictwo* [Architecture and Building], 8, pp. 246–254.

¹⁷ Compare with Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 85.

¹⁸ Syrkus, S. (1933). Informacje o IV Międzynarodowym Kongresie Architektury Nowoczesnej [Information on the 4th International Congress of Modern Architecture]. *Architektura i Budownictwo* [Architecture and Building], 8, p. 247. Compare also Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 78.

¹⁹ Syrkus, S. (1933). Informacje o IV Międzynarodowym Kongresie Architektury Nowoczesnej [Information on the 4th International Congress of Modern Architecture]. *Architektura i Budownictwo* [Architecture and Building], 8, pp. 252–253. Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, pp. 94–95.

²⁰ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, pp. 94–95.

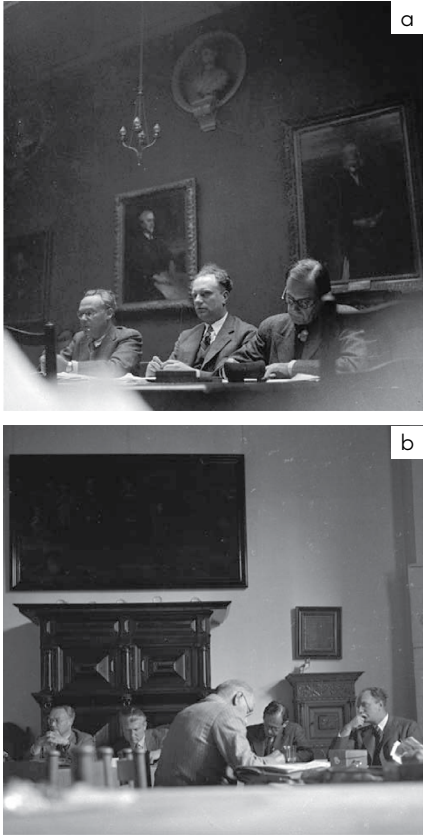


Fig. 1. Amsterdam, Netherlands, CIRPAC meeting, June 1935. Members of the Plenary Bureau: a) from left: CIAM Secretary General Sigfried Giedion and CIAM Vice-Presidents Victor Bourgeois and Walter Gropius; b) from left: CIAM Secretary General Sigfried Giedion, CIAM President Cornelis van Eesteren, an unidentified person, and CIAM Vice-Presidents Walter Gropius and Victor Bourgeois; photo: S. Syrkus; source: Scientific Collection of the Department of Polish Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Warsaw University of Technology, hereinafter ZAP WAPW collection.



Fig. 2. Amsterdam, Netherlands, CIRPAC meeting, June 1935. Secretaries of the plenary sessions, with Helena Syrkus second from left; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.



Fig. 3. a–b) Amsterdam, Netherlands, CIRPAC meeting, June 1935. Delegates of CIAM national groups during informal discussions; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.



Fig. 4. Amsterdam, Netherlands, CIRPAC meeting, June 1935. CIAM delegates on a tour of the Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam, designed by Brinkman and Van der Vlugt with the participation of Mart Stam, 1925–1931; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.

pictures also show the CIRPAC secretaries, among them Helena Syrkus—invaluable translator, editor, typist, and proofreader.²¹ From about 1933, she became something of an ‘unofficial member of the CIAM Secretariat’ (Fig. 2).²² Szymon Syrkus also made a record of the participants of the behind-the-scenes meetings. It was during those meetings that discussions encompassed the preparing of the ‘Functional City’ publication and the venue and dates of the next Congress, which at the time was still planned for the spring of 1936 in some inexpensive location in Central Europe. Also discussed were its leading topics. It was ultimately decided that there would be four: regional planning, urban planning, the reorganization of urban complexes, and building codes. Szymon Syrkus, Josep Lluís Sert, Rudolf Steiger (1900–1982), and Wells Coates (1885–1958) were assigned responsibility for them (Fig. 3a–b).²³

For the sake of order it should be recalled that the Amsterdam meeting was accompanied by the ‘Housing, Work, Street Traffic, and Recreation in the Contemporary City’ exhibition at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum—June 1–23. Presented there were thirty-two of the thirty-three panels depicting American and European cities, including Warsaw, that were prepared in a uniform scale and graphic treatment by sixteen national groups at the 4th CIAM Congress in 1933.²⁴

²¹ Tołwiński, S. (1970). *Wspomnienia 1895–1939*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 426.

²² Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 80.

²³ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 103.

²⁴ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 140. Compare also Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 99.

The Amsterdam CIRPAC meeting also provided Dutch architects with an opportunity to show their latest projects. Being in Amsterdam, the delegates visited several buildings including the Cineac motion picture theatre (1934) and the Montessori school (1933–1936) as well as the Hotel Gooiland in Hilversum (1934–1935), the Parklaan residential block (1931–1933), the Bergpolder balcony-accessed block (1932–1934), and the Van Nelle factory in Rotterdam (1925–1931) as a part of a study trip. That last mentioned building was designed as a fragment of a future functional city by the Brinkman and Van Vlugt Design Studio with the collaboration of Mart Stam (1899–1986).²⁵ It was photographically documented by Szymon Syrkus (Fig. 4).

The series of negatives from the Amsterdam meeting concludes with a photograph in which Syrkus preserved the parting of his wife Helena with Ramona Longas (1900–1985), the life companion of Josep Lluís Sert, as well as Carola Giedion-Weicker (1893–1979), the wife of Sigfried Giedion, an art historian and author of numerous articles on contemporary painting, sculpture, and poetry (Fig. 5).

The CIRPAC meeting at the castle in La Sarraz (September, 1936). The successive documentary photographs made by Syrkus depict the expanded CIRPAC convention that took place in September of 1936 at the historical castle in La Sarraz, Switzerland, the property of Helene de Mandrot (1867–1948). That was also where CIAM was constituted in June of 1928 (Fig. 6a–b). In this case, in as much as during the first Congress barely twenty architects from eight countries²⁶ took part, about fifty from eleven countries

²⁵ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, pp. 99–101.

²⁶ Frampton, K. (2002). Foreword. In E. Mumford, *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. XII.



Fig. 5. Amsterdam, Netherlands, CIRPAC meeting, June 1935. From left: Ramona Longas, Helena Syrkus, and Carola Giedion-Weicker [?]; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.



Fig. 7. La Sarraz, Switzerland, CIRPAC meeting, September 1936: a) members of the Bureau in plenary session, from left: CIAM President Cornelis van Eesteren, Secretary General Sigfried Giedion, and Vice-President Walter Gropius; b) CIRPAC secretaries, with Helena Syrkus on the right; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.

arrived at La Sarraz in 1936, including Van Eesteren, Gropius, and Giedion. Poland was represented by Szymon and Helena Syrkus.

Plenary sessions primarily concerned with the program for the 5th CIAM Congress planned for July of 1937 in Paris²⁷ took place in a huge vaulted castle chamber made available by Helene de Mandrot. The individual commissions and secretariat operated in the 'secluded' alcoves and gardens of the castle (Fig. 7). Since, as noted by Helena Syrkus, the autumn of that year was exceptionally 'sunny and warm,' the most-heated discussions were conducted during long strolls²⁸ both around the castle and in its picturesque surroundings. The photographs taken by Syrkus show this perfectly. In addition to participants in the meeting and members of the CIAM Presidium photographed in the castle interiors, several other participants were recorded. Among them was Josep Torres Clavé of Barcelona, the 'indefatigable and full of energy and faith' delegate from the Catalan GATEPAC Group who, counting on the help of colleagues from CIAM, flew to La Sarraz from war-torn Spain²⁹ on the last day of CIRPAC deliberations. It was together with him that Syrkus preserved the Dutch representatives—Mart Stam, the 'promoter of 'New Frankfurt'' who together with Ernst May (1886–1970) spent several years in the Soviet Union and returned to the Netherlands in 1935, his colleague from Rotterdam,

²⁷ Syrkus, H., & Syrkus, S. (1936). Convention of the delegates for the International Congress of Modern Architects in La Sarraz. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 10–11, pp. 74–75.

²⁸ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 180.

²⁹ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 181–182.



Fig. 6. La Sarraz, Switzerland, CIRPAC meeting, September 1936, Hélène de Mandrot's château and its surroundings; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.



Fig. 8. La Sarraz, Switzerland, CIRPAC meeting, September 1936: a) Josep Torres Clavé; b) from left: Mart Stam, Josep Torres Clavé, Flora Crawford-Steiger, and Benjamin Merkelbach; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection

Benjamin Merkelbach (1901–1961) and Flora Crawford–Steiger (1899–1991), the wife of Rudolf Steiger, a Swiss architect, furniture designer, and sculptor (Fig. 8).

The meeting of the Eastern Group of CIAM (CIAM–Ost) in Budapest (January–February, 1937). Successive surviving photographs were taken in January of 1937 during the Syrkuses’ stay in Budapest for the first meeting of the regional working group—the Eastern Group (CIAM–Ost)—that emerged within CIAM at the start of 1937 thanks to the initiative of Czechoslovak and Hungarian architects. It was created by CIAM members from Central and Eastern European countries who identified the necessity of close contacts and collaboration in solving problems that are particular to this part of Europe. Initially, they were represented by architects from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Poland and subsequently also from Greece and probably Romania. Budapest was selected as the seat of the CIAM–Ost Secretariat with Farkas Molnár (1897–1945), Hungarian architect, painter, essayist, and graphic artist, as its head.³⁰

The Eastern Group of CIAM, facing an increasingly complex political situation in the Europe of 1937, only managed to meet three times. Its first meeting took place at the turn of January and February in Budapest,³¹ the second at the turn of April and May in Czechoslovakia’s Brno and Žilina. The third and the last that we are aware of was held in June on the Greek island of Mykonos.³² We also know that the aim of discussions centring on rural building and ‘agrarianization’ involved the group’s plans to meet again in Athens in May of 1938.³³ Most probably this did not happen, however.

Faced with numerous reservations regarding the initiative to establish what was known as CIAM–Ost, especially on the part of French and Italian CIAM members who were of the view that the activities of this group are not so much aimed at architectural and aesthetic matters as rather social and political ones, Sigfried Giedion, the CIAM Secretary General, took part in the Budapest meeting.³⁴ In addition to him, also present were representatives of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Poland, including the Syrkuses.³⁵

In light of the fact that at that time it was the local specifics that found their way into the interests of the Hungarian group where matters relating to the reorganization

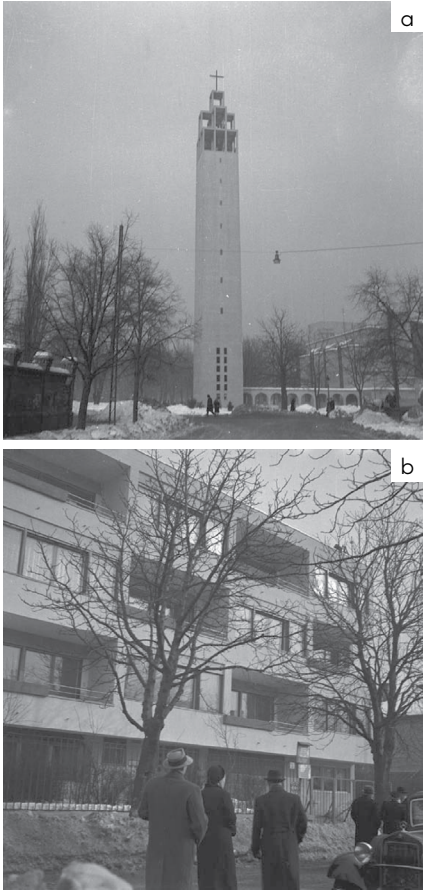


Fig. 9. Budapest, Hungary, meeting of the CIAM Eastern Group (CIAM–Ost), January–February 1937: a) bell tower of the Franciscan church and monastery in the Pasarét district of Buda, designed by Gyula Rimanóczy, 1937; b) CIAM–Ost delegates visiting an unidentified residential building, ca. 1937; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.

and development of rural land and its regional building³⁶ were questions that were particularly stressed in the final recommendations of the Budapest meeting. Members of CIAM–Ost hoped this would attract the attention of other CIAM members to the fact that contemporary spatial and housing planning should not exclusively be concerned with problems facing big cities, but also the planning of rural lands and communities, which according to CIRPAC ‘should also be undertaken [...] diligently and exactly.’³⁷

As was usually the case with CIAM conventions, an important element of their programs was always visiting the latest architectural projects. Thanks to the surviving photographs taken by Syrkus, we know that the participants in the Budapest meeting visited the Pasarét housing estate as designed by Gyula Rimanóczy (1903–1958) and the Modern Franciscan monastery and church with their complementary square encompassing a bus terminal and stores completed in 1937.³⁸ They also visited the Modern villa designed by Géze Radó³⁹ and the multi-family three-story residential building that current research has, unfortunately, not managed to identify (Fig. 9).

The CIAM–Ost meeting in Brno and Žilina (April–May, 1937). It should be noted that the Syrkuses were present at the Czechoslovak meetings in Brno and Žilina. The meetings were held at the turn of April and May of 1937. All in all, about seventeen delegates took part, among them Helene de Mandrot.⁴⁰ Although the surviving collection lacks photographs documenting that meeting, the Czechoslovak hosts should be mentioned. Among them were designers of Modern buildings in Brno and Žilina. These designers were already ‘known throughout the world’ and included Bohuslav Fuchs, Jindrich Kumposta, and Josef Polášek. However, the principal intention at that time was the presentation of achievements in the realm of ‘urbanism’ and regional planning. Of particular interest were the regional plans for Žilina and Hodonina as well as the mountainous districts⁴¹ that, in their view, required special trans–national coordination in planning works among Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland.⁴²

The 5th CIAM Congress in Paris (June–July, 1937). A successive event documented in the photographs of Szymon Syrkus was the 5th CIAM Congress in Paris.⁴³ According to

³⁰ Z działalności organów CIAM: CIRPAC [The activities of the bodies of CIAM: CIRPAC]. (1938). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 56. Compare also Bericht über die CIAM-Konferenz in Budapest [Report on the CIAM Conference in Budapest]. (1937). *Tér és Forma* [Space and Form], 2–3, p. 58.

³¹ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Members of the PTRM on April 20, 1939: Program of Work of the PTRM for the Year 1939. (1939). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6, p. 39.

³² Kohlrausch, M. (2019). *Brokers of modernity: East Central Europe and the rise of modernist architecture, 1910–1950*. Leuven University Press, p. 115.

³³ Z działalności organów CIAM: CIRPAC [The activities of the bodies of CIAM: CIRPAC]. (1938). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 56. Compare also Bericht über die CIAM-Konferenz in Budapest [Report on the CIAM Conference in Budapest]. (1937). *Tér és Forma* [Space and Form], 2–3, p. 58.

³⁴ Kohlrausch, M. (2019). *Brokers of modernity: East Central Europe and the rise of modernist architecture, 1910–1950*. Leuven University Press, p. 118.

³⁵ Cirpac-konferencia Budapestén [The Budapest CIRPAC Conference]. (1937). *Tér és Forma* [Space and Form], 2–3, p. 48.

³⁶ Z działalności organów CIAM: Grupa Węgierska [The activities of the bodies of CIAM: The Hungarian Group]. (1938). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, pp. 69–70.

³⁷ Bericht über die CIAM-Konferenz in Budapest [Report on the CIAM Conference in Budapest]. (1937). *Tér és Forma* [Space and Form], 2–3, p. 58.

³⁸ Budapest uncovered: Bauhaus in Budapest. (2019, June 30). *Funzine*. <https://funzine.hu/en/2019/06/30/goodapest-en-2/budapest-uncovered-bauhaus-in-budapest/>

³⁹ Offbeat Budapest. (2025). *100 unique buildings in Budapest*. <https://www.offbeatbudapest.com/budapest-city-guide/best-architecture-highlights/>

⁴⁰ Compare with Ritoók, P., & Sebestyén, Á. A. (2018). Communicating ‘space and form?’: The history and impact of the journal *Tér és Forma* as the Hungarian pipeline of modernism. *Docomomo Journal*, 59, p. 23.

⁴¹ Z działalności organów CIAM: Grupa Czechosłowacka [The activities of the bodies of CIAM: The Czechoslovak Group]. (1938). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 60.

⁴² Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 185.

⁴³ V Międzynarodowy Kongres Architektury Nowoczesnej w Paryżu: Przebieg Kongresu, rezolucje [5th International Congress of Modern Architecture in Paris: Congress program and resolutions]. (1938). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 9.



Fig. 10. Paris, France, Fifth CIAM Congress, June–July 1937. Participants of the Fifth CIAM Congress resting “on the banks of the Marne”: a) Le Corbusier; b) from left: Carola Giedion-Welcker [?], Hélène de Mandrot, and Le Corbusier; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.

Helene Syrkus, it was the ‘apogee of CIAM activity.’⁴⁴ The Congress was held in June–July of 1937 in the IENA room, made available to CIAM by the Board of the ‘Art and Technology’ World Exhibition that opened in May in Paris. It should be added that almost in parallel—June 28–July 5—was the date of the meeting of the 4th International Congress of Architects,⁴⁵ while July 5–13 saw the deliberations of the unification congress of the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP)⁴⁶ in which about one thousand delegates took part, including many from Poland. Among these were representatives of the Polish Society for Housing Reform (PTRM).

The 5th CIAM Congress was devoted to ‘matters of housing and holidays within the broad reach of cities and their regions, with special attention of the rural countryside’ (Logis et Loisirs: Villes et campagne).⁴⁷ It was within the framework of the Polish group that Stanisław Tołwiński (1895–1969) and Helena and Szymon Syrkus took part. The former presented one of four program papers—‘Zastosowanie zasad ogólnych do regionów wsi’ [Applying general principles in rural regions], which was supplemented by a presentation entitled ‘Rural urbanism’ by Norbert Bézard, a French farmer.

⁴⁴ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 185.

⁴⁵ Leykam, M. (1937). Przebieg dwóch kongresów [The deliberations of two congresses]. *Komunikat SARP* [Communiqué of the Association of Polish Architects], 9, pp. 4–6.

⁴⁶ Sprawa połączenia międzynarodowych organizacji mieszkaniowych [The case for unifying international housing organizations]. (1937). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 9–10, p. 50. Compare also Międzynarodowy Kongres Mieszkaniowy i Urbanistyczny w Paryżu, July 5–13 [International Congress for Housing and Town Planning in Paris, July 5–13]. (1937). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 2–3, pp. 36–37; and Leykam, M. (1937). Przebieg dwóch kongresów [The deliberations of two congresses]. *Komunikat SARP* [Communiqué of the Association of Polish Architects], 9, pp. 4–6.

⁴⁷ Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 182.



Fig. 11. Paris, France, Fifth CIAM Congress, June–July 1937. Participants of the Fifth CIAM Congress resting “on the banks of the Marne”: a) Le Corbusier; b) from left: Carola Giedion-Welcker [?], Hélène de Mandrot, and Le Corbusier; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.

An attraction of the 5th CIAM Congress was without a doubt Le Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux [Pavilion of New Times] as designed by Le Corbusier and located on the ‘Expo u Porte Maillot’⁴⁸ supplementary land. It was de facto a rather modest albeit in a way exceptional tent in which, according to Le Corbusier, ‘enormous photographic, graphic, and textual material’⁴⁹ was represented. In the view of S. Tołwiński it presented not only architecture and urban planning, but primarily the ‘social myth of New Times’ (Fig. 10a).⁵⁰

After seeing the ‘New Times’ pavilion, the Polish delegates were given a personal guided tour by Le Corbusier himself.⁵¹ It was perhaps then that Szymon Syrkus took the photographs that have been preserved by the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology. Among them, four pictures show Le Corbusier during his address. His ‘living word,’ as maintained by Helena Syrkus, had magical power: ‘Fostering complete endorsement among some while supplying others with the impetus for fierce polemics. It was impossible to listen to the speech with indifference’ (Fig. 10b).⁵²

⁴⁸ Hahl, N. G. (1938). Rozmowa z Le Corbusierem [An interview with Le Corbusier]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Hahl, N. G. (1938). Rozmowa z Le Corbusierem [An interview with Le Corbusier]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 45. Compare also Tołwiński, S. (1938). Pawilon Nowych Czasów na Wystawie Światowej w Paryżu [The Pavilion of New Times at the International Exhibition in Paris]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, pp. 43–44; and Tołwiński, S. (1938). Pawilon Nowych Czasów [The New Times Pavilion]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, pp. 49–55.

⁵⁰ Tołwiński, S. (1938). Pawilon Nowych Czasów [The New Times Pavilion]. *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6–7, p. 43.

⁵¹ Tołwiński, S. (1970). *Wspomnienia 1895–1939*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 428.

⁵² Syrkus, H. (1976). *Ku idei osiedla społecznego* [Towards the concept of a social housing estate]. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 66.

According to S. Tołwiński, Le Corbusier was ‘exceptionally, suggestively wise and aware of the potential inherent in modern technology and its revolutionary character, opening a road to the total reconstruction of Man’s environment.’⁵³ It was within the framework of the presented section of the collection that there were also photographs probably taken during the discussions and meetings of Congress participants ‘out in the fresh spring air on the banks of the Marne on the outskirts of the city.’ On them one can see a relaxed Le Corbusier as well as Helene de Mandrot, seen as well as mentioned several times, something of a guardian spirit for CIAM. She was a woman educated in the arts who in 1920 inherited a significant fortune from her deceased husband, including the mentioned castle in La Sarraz. She generously supported the activities of CIAM up to 1939 (Fig. 11a–b).⁵⁴

The 17th International Congress of the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP) in Stockholm (July 1939). The last of the preserved photographs documenting the organizational efforts of Szymon Syrkus are from the year 1939. They record a trip with Stanisław Tołwiński and Juliusz Żakowski (1893–1970) in their role as delegates of the Polish Housing Reform Association (PTRM) to Stockholm for the 17th International Congress of the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP),⁵⁵ already mentioned and unjustly underappreciated in research into interwar Modernism. Currently however, it is being seen as the de facto most important and most influential platform for the international discourse and the dissemination of new concepts in the realm of the residential architecture and urban culture during the interwar period. Its program is said to have served CIAM as inspiration.⁵⁶

In connection with the 17th IFHTP Congress held in Stockholm, which intended to discuss such topics as matters of the decentralization of residential policy and regional planning,⁵⁷ the PTRM had already developed and forwarded its answers to a questionnaire on the ‘Organization of Regional Plans’ and ‘Local Traffic’ to the organizers in the spring of 1939. Also planned was the preparing of other required reports and what was known as voices in the discussion.⁵⁸

Much points to the fact that PTRM delegates, at least those belonging to CIAM—i.e., Szymon Syrkus and Stanisław Tołwiński—intended to treat their participation at the Stockholm Congress purely as a formality. Approximately one thousand delegates



Fig. 12. a–b) Stockholm, Sweden, Congress of the International Federation for Housing and Urban Planning (IFHTP), July 1939. Unidentified apartment building in Visby [?]; photo: S. Syrkus; source: ZAP WAPW collection.



Fig. 13. Warsaw, Poland. Szymon Syrkus against the background of the ruins of the Old Town Square, 1945 [?]; source: ZAP WAPW collection.

registered for that Congress.⁵⁹ In spite of having submitted a paper for it,⁶⁰ Syrkus wrote to Van Eesteren, the CIAM head, that his and Tołwiński’s stay in Stockholm will be devoted to ‘mainly the practical study of significant matters rather than meetings’ and that they will complete the tasks entrusted by CIAM regarding which both were ‘ready to do everything [...] to complete them.’⁶¹

Ultimately, Syrkus was very pleased with the trip to Stockholm, especially the promotion of ‘the real work of CIAM.’ He maintained that thanks to Fred Forbát (1897–1972), a Hungarian permanently residing in Sweden as of 1938, he, together with Tołwiński, was successful in finally overcoming the ‘unfavourable atmosphere,’ regarding CIAM and even in convincing the Swedes to organize the next CIAM meeting in their country.⁶²

Unfortunately, at this point in the research it is not known which Swedish housing estates the PTRM delegates visited as a part of tours provided by the Congress as well as individually. The photographic collection found at the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology contains only negatives of a Modern, unidentified five-story residential building described as Visby (Gotland?) (Fig. 12a–b).

After Syrkus and Tołwiński spent time in Sweden, during their return they subsequently visited ‘achievements of Modern urban planning and architecture.’⁶³ They visited Finland as well as Tallinn and Wilno [Vilnius] on their way back to Warsaw. Zurich hosted a meeting of CIRPAC in parallel in an atmosphere of the growing threat of war. It was devoted to the finalizing of preparations for the 6th CIAM Congress planned for September 12–16, 1939 in Liege. The outbreak of World War II made it impossible to hold the Congress.⁶⁴

SUMMARY

The above-discussed activities of Szymon Syrkus as an activist and representative of Poland’s interwar avant-garde architecture in CIAM as of 1928 were disrupted by the outbreak of World War II. The architect was arrested in 1942 and found himself in the German Auschwitz concentration camp. He returned to Warsaw from captivity in August of 1945 and immediately became involved in the reconstruction of the capital and the building of new housing estates (Fig. 13). As the Polish CIAM delegate in May of 1947 he took part in the CIRPAC preparatory meeting in Zurich for the first time after the war. It was also his last time. That meeting was devoted to the organization of the 6th CIAM Congress, cancelled in September of 1939, and now planned for September of 1947 in

⁵³ Tołwiński, S. (1970). *Wspomnienia 1895–1939*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 422.

⁵⁴ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 130.

⁵⁵ Compare with Minutes of the General Assembly of Members of the PTRM of April 20, 1939: PTRM Program for the Year 1939. (1939). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6, p. 39.

⁵⁶ Among others, compare with Geertse, M. (2015). Cross-border country planning dialogue in interwar Europe. *SAGE Open*, 5(3), pp. 1–13.

⁵⁷ García González, M. C., & Guerrero, S. (2014). The National Federation of Town Planning and Housing, 1939–1954: A network for town planners and architects in Franco’s Spain. *Journal of Urban History*, 40(6), n.p.

⁵⁸ Minutes of the General Assembly of Members of the PTRM of April 20, 1939: PTRM Program for the Year 1939. (1939). *Dom, Osiedle, Mieszkanie* [House, Housing Estate, Dwelling], 6, pp. 33, 39.

⁵⁹ Geertse, M. (2015). *Defining the universal city: The International Federation for Housing and Town Planning and transnational planning dialogue, 1913–1945*. Globe, p. 172.

⁶⁰ Tołwiński, S. (1970). *Wspomnienia 1895–1939*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 471.

⁶¹ Compare with Syrkus, H., & Syrkus, S. (1939, June 30). Letter to Friedy Fluck and Cornelis van Eesteren. In A. Kędziorek, K. Uchowicz, & M. Wirkus (Eds.), *Archipelag CIAM: Listy Heleny Syrkus* [CIAM archipelago: The letters of Helena Syrkus] (pp. 94–97). Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki.

⁶² Compare with Syrkus, H., & Syrkus, S. (1939, August 1). Letter to Friedy Fluck and Cornelis van Eesteren. In A. Kędziorek, K. Uchowicz, & M. Wirkus (Eds.), *Archipelag CIAM: Listy Heleny Syrkus* [CIAM archipelago: The letters of Helena Syrkus] (pp. 104–105). Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki.

⁶³ Tołwiński, S. (1970). *Wspomnienia 1895–1939*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 472.

⁶⁴ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, pp. 168–169.

Bridgewater, United Kingdom.⁶⁵ It was during this meeting that the decision was taken to entrust his wife, Helena Syrkus, with the function of Vice–President of CIAM,⁶⁶ a function she filled until 1954, when she began to represent the community of Polish architects at the CIAM forum, this time alone, without the participation of her husband Szymon Syrkus.

⁶⁵ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, pp. 168–169.

⁶⁶ Mumford, E. (2002). *The CIAM discourse on urbanism, 1928–1960*. MIT Press, p. 173.

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