

NOTES ON THE SENATE



SENATE
OF THE REPUBLIC
OF POLAND

The Senate Debating Chamber

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When the senators elected to the Senate in June 1989 in the first free elections for fifty years arrived in parliament, they had to be provided with a place where they could work. They were given the easternmost wing of the Sejm complex designed by Professor Bohdan Pniewski in late forties. However, it did not have a large room where the Senate could hold its debates, so the Senate met in alternation with the Sejm in the latter's debating chamber, and later – for more than a year and a half – in the Hall of Columns.



General view of the debating chamber of the Senate (photo by K. Czerwińska)

In 1990, the architects Andrzej and Barbara Kaliszewski and Bohdan Napieralski presented a reconstruction design for the first floor of the Senate building. The building alteration work lasted 14 months. Its external elevations remained the same, because the architects did not want them to clash with the interior architecture of other parts of the building. They decided to use solutions in the spirit of Bohdan Pniewski's designs.

The Senate Debating Chamber

THE SENATE'S PRESENT DEBATING CHAMBER was created by joining three conference rooms, thus obtaining an area of 220 square metres. It was not an easy task to fit a chairman's table, a rostrum, 100 amphitheatre seats for the senators, and about 40 places for people taking part in the session as guests or for various official reasons into such a confined space. The chamber's designation created additional problems, given the shortage of space. A new plafond ceiling with a prominent semicircular cornice had to be constructed to neutralize the dimensions of the rectangular chamber, which was twice as long as it was broad. Most of the wiring for the lighting, air-conditioning and other installations was concealed behind the plafond. Fire regulations required a second evacuation route, so an additional staircase was built.

The colour scheme harmonizes with that of Professor Pniewski, used in all the Sejm interiors, with its dominant combination of white, black and grey. There are white volutes of Carrera marble at the entrance to the chamber, similar to the marble used by Pniewski.

The Senators sit facing a wall with huge windows along its entire length, filled with the green of the old trees on the Vistula River escarpment. During debates, however, the slate-blue curtains with their undulating pattern of metal stripes have to be drawn. It would be hard for Senators to sit for hours with the light in their eyes as they watched the rostrum and the chairman's table in front of the windows. Artificial light is also needed because of the television cameras. Four mirrors with silvery candelabras make the chamber look wider, and add an aesthetic touch. The mirrors are in fact panes of glass, behind which the technical services work, making sound recordings and operating the hall's sound amplification and lighting systems.



Hall and staircase (photo by A. Iwaszkiewicz, T. Wierzejski)

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Above the presidium table, against the background of a curtain, hangs the Polish national coat of arms and the Marshal's staff, which was designed by the architects for the first democratically elected Upper House as a gift by the Guild of Artistic Crafts. The Marshal chairing the debate sits at the table together with the Senate secretaries. They assist the Marshal, keeping a list of speakers and taking minutes of the sittings. Below the presidium and the rostrum, there is a table for the staff of the Senate Chancellery. This is where the shorthand writers and employees of the Legislative Office and Plenary Sittings Unit work, and where employees of the Information Technology Office operate the electronic voting system.

The small size of the interior made it necessary to limit the number of seats reserved for members of the government, experts, journalists and the public. They have a dozen or so chairs in the corners of the room opposite the presidium. There is a special place for the President, with the state flag and a kilim bearing an embroidered silver eagle copied from the pre-war standard of the President of the Polish Republic hanging above it.

EVERY SENATOR HAS HIS OR HER OWN SEAT, with its brass nameplate. Each desk has a microphone, enabling senators to ask a short question or speak without leaving their places. Voting is carried out with modern equipment. Every senator has a voting card. To vote with this card, a senator must insert it in the slot in his or her desk. Buttons correspond to the various voting options: for, against or abstention. With this electronic system, there is no need to count a quorum, because the number of senators present is always known. The voting results are displayed on two illuminated electronic boards above the doors.

THE AREA AROUND THE DEBATING CHAMBER has been partially altered, too. The hall, with its very effective spiral staircase designed by Professor Bohdan Pniewski, was left intact. It now serves as a lobby during breaks in debates.

On the right-hand side of the hall, there is the Office and secretariat of the Marshal of the Senate and the room of the head of the Marshal's Office. There is a large reception room adjoining the debating chamber. On the left-hand side of the hall, there is a foyer with armchairs. During breaks in debates, senators can relax here, have a coffee, discuss different issues and meet journalists. Portraits of all the Senate Marshals since 1922 hang on the foyer walls.

A newly constructed staircase leads down from the foyer, through rooms where experts of the Legislative office and other service staff are on-call during debates, to the Senate's Chancellery offices on the lower floors of the building.



Voting cards
(photo by M. Józefaciuk)

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PLAN OF THE SENATE DEBATING CHAMBER

1. ROSTRUM
2. PRESIDIUM
3. SECRETARIAT
4. CHAIR OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND
5. SENATORS' SEATS
6. SEATS FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND FOREIGN GUESTS
7. SEATS FOR THE PRESS AND THE PUBLIC
8. LEGISLATIVE OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLERY OF THE SENATE
9. STAFF OF THE CHANCELLERY OF THE SENATE
10. SEATS FOR THE HEAD OF THE CHANCELLERY OF THE SENATE AND OFFICE HEADS

