

Gdynia, a Polish modern movement city built from scratch

Extended Abstract of the Dissertation in order to obtain the Master Degree In Architecture

Gabriela Kaja Kuleczko

Supervisor: Prof. Ana Cristina Dos Santos Tostões

Instituto Superior Técnico

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Abstract

Gdynia, a Polish city, founded in the 1920s, was designed from scratch in accordance with the modernist trends prevailing at that time. In addition to its importance, as a port city, which was to contribute to the strengthening of Poland's economic and political relations in Europe, it had great social significance. Gdynia was a symbol of the reviving Maritime Poland and a promise of a modern, independent state.

The city was established as a center servicing the state port in the place of the former settlement. Before it reached the shape of a modern movement marine center, it had to undergo many transformations.

One of the main topics of the work of Gdynia urban planners in the interwar period, was the Representative District, which was the heart of the city. In the 1930s, the discussion about the shape of the district was lively, which gave rise to the idea of announcing a competition for its design. The competition provided many interesting ideas for planning the city, which were later used in its final project.

The main purpose of this Master's thesis is to examine the circumstances of the establishment of the city of Gdynia and to analyze its development and spatial plans in the interwar period. These studies also take into account the international models, that turned out to be an inspiration for the emerging Polish city.

Keywords: Gdynia, Modern Movement, Interwar architecture, Maritime Poland.

Introduction

Modern movement for the world architecture was the time when new era dawned. It was a trend which significantly influenced the process of shaping doctrines and ideas connected with spatial planning and architecture in cities. The current rapidly spread across the world, both as an international trend, and in its regional versions and started developing in cities of Europe, both Americas, Asia and Africa. The most important centers of the modern movement style were established in France as well as in Holland and Belgium. In a few cities, however, it was possible to build in the spirit of the avant-garde of modern movement, entire downtowns and key public buildings, as it was in Polish city Gdynia. In fact, these innovative ideas have left their mark on the shape of the Polish port city and influenced its appearance and structure, making Gdynia the cradle of Polish modern movement.

After regaining independence in 1918 and 123 years of captivity, the Poles faced the task of rebuilding their country. One of the most urgent problems facing the reviving country was to rebuild the rank of the state by restoring its importance in the international arena. Achieving this goal was to be guided by the idea of building an independent Polish port, that would become the “capital” of the new Maritime Poland. Gdynia has become a new port center. Because of its significance for the country, it was a symbol of dreams and a gateway to the world for the whole nation.

Since the birth of the city coincided with the birth of modern movement in the world, the ideologies and beliefs promoted by the contemporary creators of this current, have left their mark in both the architecture and urban planning of the city. Particularly noteworthy is the city center (downtown), which is an interesting example of applying the assumptions of modernist urban planning. In individual parts of this Polish city built from scratch, we can recognize the inspiration of the architectural work of Western architects and urban planners from that period. The fruits of their work appeared in a special way in the creation of the city of Gdynia, constituting for it, as a source of wealth of urban and architectural solutions worth imitating.

Methodology

Research on this master's practice would never take place if not study materials, needed to make a thesis, to apply the topic and to analyze the case of Gdynia. Therefore, the invaluable sources were the archives of the Library of the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Gdańsk University of Technology, the archives of the City Library in Gdynia, the archives of the Museum of the City of Gdynia and the collections of the Film Center in Gdynia.

Equally fruitful results in acquiring knowledge were brought by reading Polish architectural magazines of the interwar period, publications of Gdynia architects, historians and monument conservators, as well as walking tours of the city, which helped to understand the place and feel its spirit.

Study Case

Rise of the city and its national significance

Analyzing the history of the city, we can verify the claim, that Gdynia was a modernization project, which in the future will fundamentally change only Poland. To appreciate the significance of the Gdynia experiment, it should be emphasized that by contemporary people it was perceived as an opportunity for the development of the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe. Gdynia was to play the role of a "gate to the world" not only for Poland, but also for the whole region and become a stimulus to its modern development (Szczerski, 2010).

Gdynia was a unique example of the fulfillment of the hope of the modern era. It was a place where modernization turned out to be not a utopian project, but a reality created every day. In order to properly appreciate the importance of Gdynia, it should be emphasized that as the city grew, it ceased to be important not only for Poland and began to be an important economic center on an international scale. Plans for further expansion began to build up around the city and the port, and, as a consequence, the construction of a new geopolitical system, in which Poland could play the role of the most important player in "New Europe". Emphasizing the significance of this fragment of Gdynia's history, we can see what great hopes were associated with its development, and at the same time how much the twenty-year period turned out to be a "golden age" of modernization in Central and Eastern Europe, when plans for a radical rebuilding of the world were outlined and an ambitious attempt to implement them was begun (Szczerski, 2010).

Urban transformations

Secondly, after historical and cultural aspects, the master's thesis attempted to analyze the city's development in urban terms. Collections of architectural magazines from the 1920s and 1930s, containing plans and detailed drawings of emerging districts and buildings, gave a picture of how interwar urban planners approached the city development problem. The first major transformations of the fishing village followed the establishment of the Versailles Treaty.

Pursuant to the Versailles Treaty, signed in June 1919, Gdynia found itself within the small coastal belt granted to Poland, 147 km long, of which 74 km were in the Hel Peninsula. This fragment in the west was limited by the Piaśnica river, and on the east it bordered on Gdańsk, in a place where the Swelinia stream flows into the Gdańsk Bay. The entire coastal area, not counting small villages, was poorly developed in relation to the needs of the newly created state.

As a result of the Polish-German conflict and restrictions related to the use of the port of Gdańsk, there were activities aimed at building an independent Polish port.

On March 30, 1920, the Ministry of Military Affairs approved the sketchy design of engineer Tadeusz Wenda regarding the construction of a temporary war port and a fishing harbor near Gdynia. The first construction works began in 1920. It was not until September 23, 1922, the parliament passed the act on the construction of the port at Gdynia, giving it the legal basis for existence. A small seaport was planned, however, anticipating its further expansion in the future.

The rapid pace of the expansion of the port forced Gdynia to develop as an urban center and had a huge impact on its urban shape. In 1925, the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Development of the City of Gdynia was established, its task was to coordinate activities in individual departments. Based on the expected development of the port, it was determined how the city will develop. In fact, when Gdynia received city rights in 1926, the construction of the city accelerated rapidly.

Initially, the number of people living in the city's administrative borders was about 6,000. However, as early as in 1925, it was predicted that the number of residents would increase to at least 60,000. This plan became the basis for the implementation of the city's first urban plans. A whole set of design arrangements was initiated, which would allow the construction of a city from the very beginning; the later maritime capital of the Second Polish Republic. The idea of establishing a port city from Gdynia appeared a few years earlier. However, it took 5 years for the port plan to be drawn up in 1920 to be able to obtain a design study. The first step to creating the design system of the nascent city was the announcement of a competition for its layout (Kienzler, 2014).

The inspiration for Gdynia first urban plans became the article "A contribution to the development of the city plan" by Julian Rummel, an amateur urbanist and a leading representative of the Maritime and River League. His essay, (Rummel, 1925) which was an indication for planners

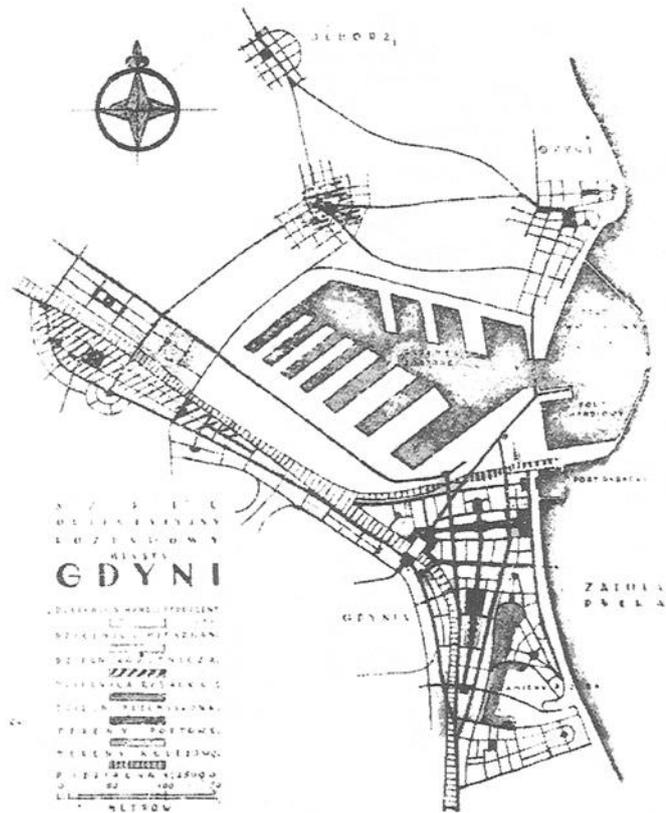


Figure 1 | An outline sketch of the expansion of the city of Gdynia made by Roman Feliński and Adam Kuncewicz (1925 – 1926)

Source: Sołtysik M. J. – Gdynia. Miasto dwudziestolecia (...), 1993, [adapted]

undertaking work on Gdynia, included an offer to deploy the main elements of the functional structure of Gdynia.

In July 1925, the Gdynia Extension Committee was created, whose task was to bring about the city development plans and ensure their implementation. Initially, it was still planned to draw up plans by announcing the competition (Sołtysik, 1993).

One of the first activities of the appointed committee was to start work on the project of the target functional and spatial structure of the city. As a result, the so-called *Orientation sketch of the construction of Gdynia* was created (Sołtysik, 1993). Unfortunately, the sketch had many drawbacks, and therefore work on the city plan was continued.

In subsequent years, plans to expand the city were constantly being worked on. However, it should be remembered that its main function was the port. The concepts of building the port changed equally dynamically, which affected the layout of the rest of the city. As a result of new arrangements for the construction of the port and its railway facilities, the assumptions contained in the *Sketch of the expansion of the city of Gdynia* in 1925 have become obsolete. In 1927 new town development projects were undertaken, this time under the direction of architect Adam Kuncewicz.

In August 1928. A detailed development plan for the southern part of the city center was approved by the Ministry of Public Works. The whole city center had already detailed plans and construction activities started.

In 1935, a new, modified general plan of the city was completed. In 1936, a competition for the layout of the Southern Pier and the adjacent areas was announced. Based on the results of this competition, design work was subsequently undertaken to shape the representative district. In March 1935, *Plan of the buildings of the city of Gdynia* was accepted by the Interministerial Commission. Program studies were conducted by a team of architects headed by Stanisław Filipkowski.

Representative district

In 1936, the center of Gdynia, its representative part, was finally taken up by writing a nationwide competition for "The layout of the Southern Pier and the Nautical Center in the port and city of Gdynia". The Representative District has been an important point and object of special interest since the beginning of creating plans for Gdynia. Downtown development proposals, have accompanied the city plans, being developed at every stage. Emphasis was placed on the development of the Gdynia coast, hence the most important buildings and areas were to be as close as possible to the sea. This idea became one of the foundations of the future Representative District.

In 1931, plans to create the center of Gdynia again began. They were associated with the construction of the Southern Pier, which was to be a compensation for the city for the lost areas. In 1936, a competition for the urban and architectural solution of the Southern Pier and adjacent areas, and for the sketch project of the Sailing Center, was announced. The purpose of the urban project was to plan a fragment of the port and city in such a way, as to harmonize utility buildings at sports pools, an adjacent part of the city of representative and walking nature, with a sailing sport center. This task was of particular importance, given that the fragment of the city of Gdynia subject to design was in the immediate vicinity of the sea. Its artistic shape had a direct impact on the impression that the city of Gdynia, had on those arriving from the sea. (*Architektura i Budownictwo*, 1936).

In total, 25 works were submitted..The following guidelines were used to assess works qualified for further consideration. It was decided to evaluate urban projects according to the solutions in terms of: communication, main division of land, urban complex work (coordinating the functioning of individual complexes), relation with the city, implementation values.

Despite the awarding of selected works, none of the projects met the architects' expectations. The plans did not meet the assumptions required by the selection board and none of the submitted ideas could fully serve as a model for the new development of the district. Due to the unsatisfactory, low ratings of the jury, the jury decided to compile the best elements of selected works and based on them, create a new, refined, comprehensive concept of the representative district.

In order to undertake further work on the project, the jury invited selected teams to cooperate. however, it was stated that one of the winners should be selected for the detailed development of the Sailing Center. Finally, further work was entrusted to the Government Commissariat in cooperation with the winners of the competition. The project, corrected and ready for implementation, was to be ready in the same year.

Despite the selection of the winning project in the competition, its assumptions were never fully realized. The concept has undergone many modifications introduced by a team from the Government Studio's Design Studio headed by Stanisław Filipkowski.

Although the final conceptual design of the Representative District was ready, it was necessary to draw up executive plans for building the entire area. Unfortunately, as a result of the outbreak of war in 1939, these plans were implemented only to a small extent. When the German troops entered Poland, the representative district consisted of only two raw buildings on the Southern Pier - the Marine Station and the Polish Sailor's House.

Foreign inspirations and analogies

Gdynia would not have been shaped had it not been for the achievements of Western culture and their considerable influence on young Polish architects. Since the birth of the city coincided with the period of the creation of modernist trends, both in architecture and in the development of the city plan one can see strong analogies to the project solutions proposed at that time in the world.

Speaking of great urban ideas that have had a significant impact on the shaping of the new city of Gdynia, we must begin by discussing the role of the Garden City concept, created in the last years of the nineteenth century, and its author was Ebenezer Howard. (Osborn, 1965).

Garden cities were designed almost everywhere, where Western civilization reached (Hall, 1996). In the 20th century, the idea dreamed up by Howard became widespread in Poland, although it was of a completely different nature from the one originally founded. It gained its popularity with the exhibition organized in 1912 under the slogan "Architecture and Interiors in the Garden Surroundings".

In 1909, the Delegation for Town-Gardens was founded by the propagator of this idea in Poland - a hygienist physician from Płock, doctor Władysław Dobrzyński. Dobrzyński's friendship with Howard resulted in the first investments of this type in Poland - in Mazovia. In 1920, the planning of the Garden City, Kamienna Góra, which is today a luxurious district of Gdynia, began.

Naturally, the idea of creating the Gdynia district was not an accurate reflection of Howard's nineteenth-century, utopian vision. Their goals were a response to other urban problems, embedded in slightly different realities. Gdynia was a city built from scratch, so its architects did not have to bother to solve the problems of a complex, already existing city with a historical past. Kamienna Góra was a more luxurious vision of the residential district for the wealthy people. A kind of essence of the Howard concept used in the project of a nascent city.

Subsequent years, urban planning and transformation, changing trends and needs, as well as their real implementation, verified the validity of the discussed inspirations.

The architectural face of interwar Gdynia was shaped to a large extent by the ideas and stylistics of modernism. The undoubted reason for this phenomenon was the fact that the birth of the city coincided with the period of the birth of modern movement stream. It was a style for which the basic ideological category was modernity, which was treated as the highest value. In this context, Gdynia was also seen. The very idea of its construction was steeped in the spirit of modernity - the idea of a new and modern city. These slogans found a wide resonance and contributed to the subsequent development of the phenomenon, which is referred to as "Gdynia Modernism".

European modernism began to permeate Gdynia in the late 1920s. Just like it happened all over Europe, modernism entered Gdynia in two significantly different varieties - moderate and avant-garde. The former included Art Déco, expressionism and classicizing modernism, while the latter included functionalism (also known as international style) and constructivism.

When debating the influence of Western patterns, of the modern movement, on the urban and architectural shape of interwar Gdynia, special attention should be paid to a document that changed the fate of contemporary urban planning - the Athens Charter of 1933.

In the plan proposed by Stanisław Filipkowski from 1935, we can find even more analogies to the guidelines suggested by the CIAM and the establishment of the Athens Charter.

An interesting aspect of the research undertaken while writing this master's thesis was the comparison of Gdynia with the Jewish city of Tel Aviv. Surprisingly, as cities, geographically distant and from other cultures, they can have so much in common.

Conclusions

Gdynia is an example of a city built from scratch, according to the general assumptions proposed at the beginning of the 20th century, by modern movement artists in the field of architecture.

This master's thesis explains how important for Poland was the creation of this initially small urban center. Gdynia, as a port city, proved to be extremely important for building international relations, owing to which Poland was to develop economically and strengthen its political position in Europe. As a symbol of reviving maritime traditions, it had social significance, because it supported the rebuilding of morals among the nation, giving hope for a stable, strong country and improving living conditions in it.

The case of Gdynia showed how the most important maritime center for the whole country, could arise from a small, insignificant coastal village. Among many attempts to build the city from scratch in history, the example of Gdynia deserves a special place. The birth of the city was a response to the aggressive policy of neighboring Germany, which suggests that even in a situation of political oppression, there may be conditions for creating a world-class urban work.

To achieve this status, however, the city plan underwent breakneck transformations for many years. Starting with suggestions and visions of Julian Rummel, through the projects of Roman Feliński and Adam Kuncewicz, finally closing with the work of Stanisław Filipkowski. Each of the above creators brought their own fresh look at the planned city. Each stage was necessary for the final formation of the city.

The phenomenon of this city and what distinguishes it from most others is the fact, that it was created from scratch. Although in the history of urban planning, especially its last 100 years, there were several such assumptions, Gdynia retains its unique character. The most similarities can be found in the case of the Jewish Tel Aviv, whose history is very similar to that of Gdynia, which makes the two cities have a kind of bond.

To sum up, the case of Gdynia is an interesting basis for discussions on Polish modern movement, the birth of a new city, urban transformation or hopes placed in a tiny village, which was to transform into the maritime center of Western Europe. The research carried out in this master's thesis helps to understand the history and the complex path of the city's creation, and to appreciate its uniqueness.

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