

Faces of Modernism in European Urban Planning of the First Three Decades of the 20th Century – Example of Wrocław

Wanda Kononowicz
Wrocław, Poland

The last decade of the 19th and the first of the 20th centuries mark a breakthrough in European urban planning. It was then that the process matured of the rise of modern urban planning, which integrates technical, social, hygienic and aesthetic aspects. This stage, defined by Françoise Choay¹ as *urbanism*, meant an *a-priori* application of the new planning order, while the preceding “disorder” was thoroughly rejected. Preceded by the phase of *pre-urbanism*, it was deeply rooted in the 19th century and the theoretical visions of social thinkers of the epoch.

Pre-urbanist thinking went along two opposing currents: progressive, inspired by the revolutionary vision of social and technical progress (Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Etienne Cabet), and culturalistic, more nostalgic in form, inspired by the vision of spiritual revival and the need for aesthetic experiences in the society (John Ruskin, William Morris). Władysław Czerny saw the dichotomy in terms of *formal* versus *functional* reaction to the condition of the 19th-century city².

During the urbanist phase, both currents continued, yet severed from their ideological roots. The first generation of urban planners includes Arturo Soria y Mata and Tony Garnier from the progressivist current, and Camillo Sitte and Sir Raymond Unwin from the culturalist one. A special place is taken by Ebenezer Howard’s

garden city, rooted in both currents, yet with the prevalence of the latter. Between the two World Wars, the progressivist model – with its rationality, standardisation, hygiene and zoning – was particularly strongly advocated by *Bauhaus*, Le Corbusier and the rational CIAM architects. It was also developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. The culturalistic model, with its limitation of urban units and focus on the aesthetics of the plan, was followed chiefly in the Anglo-Saxon world before and after WWII, prompting the construction of the New Towns³.

Between the two wars in Europe, there were two rival methods of large city development: through territorial expansion or through satellites. This was reflected in urban planning congresses, contests and exhibitions. The results of the competition for Greater Berlin development (1910), representing the former of the two methods, were the beginning of “comprehensive city planning on totally new principles,” which Julius Posener called *Gesamtplanung*, as opposed to *Gesamtordnung* meaning “overall regulation” or “putting in order”⁴. The method, providing for the division of the city into functional zones, green wedges (Fig. 1) and insular location of peripheral housing estates, was strengthened by Karl Scheffler’s book⁵ dealing with the achievements of the Berlin contest. It was followed by Max Berg in Wrocław, who in his capacity of the city architect (1908-1925), gave direction to the city growth for many years to come. The measure

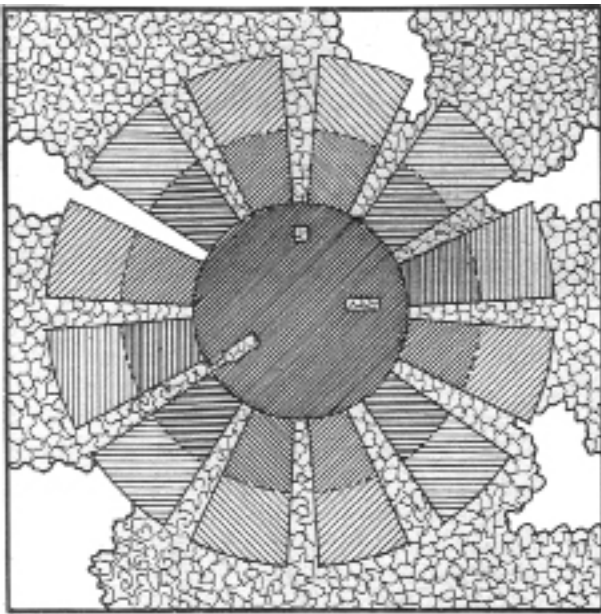
1. Choay Françoise, *The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century*, New York 1969, pp. 10, 97-108; Kononowicz Wanda, *Wybrane zagadnienia urbanistyczne wielkich miast i osiedli mieszkaniowych w zachodniej Europie od połowy XIX wieku do drugiej wojny światowej*, „Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki”, vol. LIII, 1/2008, pp. 3-4.

2. Czerny Władysław, *Architektura zespołów osiedleńczych*, Warszawa 1972, pp. 57-58.

3. Choay Françoise, *op. cit.*, p. 110; Kononowicz Wanda, *Wybrane...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

4. Posener Julius, *Berlin auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Architektur. Das Zeitalter Wilhelms II.* München 1979, p. 240.

5. Scheffler Karl, *Die Architektur der Großstadt*, Berlin 1913.



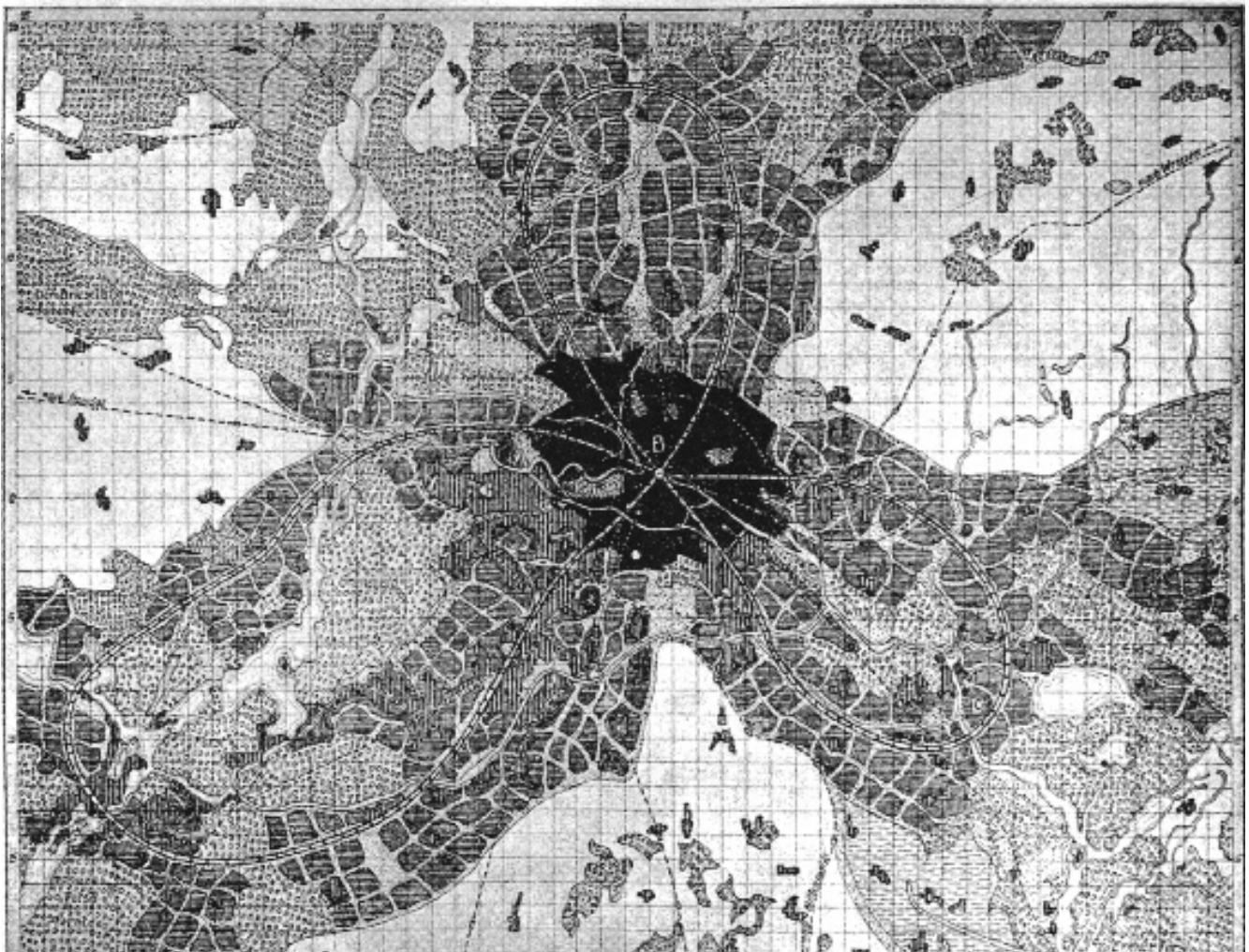
1. The radial system of urban development. Source: „Der Städtebau“ 19 (1922)

of Berg’s commitment to the issues of the Berlin competition is the fact that he prepared a plan for Berlin, even though he had not formally entered for the contest. (Fig. 2).

Wrocław of the first three decades of the 20th century offers an ample review of Modernist planning solutions, both in the scale of the city as well as the scale of housing estates, reflecting the most recent European ideas and urban planning experiences of the day.

The notion “Modernism” – containing the root “modern” – refers to modernity that rejects the past, especially the most recent past. In urban planning, the equivalent of Modernism is Urbanism, which was a critical reaction to the uncontrollable expansion of the 19th-century city. It was blank rejection of the status quo, without attempting to put it in order. Modern Architecture, especially when it comes to housing estates, must be seen in its multitude of aspects. Modernist housing estates flourished in the 1920s, with model examples of garden or linear settlements in Berlin, Frankfurt (am Mein), Karlsruhe or Rotterdam, yet the term “modernistic” can rightfully be applied to the humane tenement developments for the working class, erected at the turn of the centuries in Berlin, like the *Wohnhof* by Alfred Messel and Albert Gessner, or the *Wohnstrasse* by Paul Moebes. The areas inside a block of houses were left green, with no annexes, and the backyard elevations could be as decorative as the façades. The common denominator here are sunlight, fresh air, verdure, modest price and the social aspect. Excellent counterparts of these settlements in Wrocław can be found in the form of the first design for the city gasworks housing colony at Tarnogaj (1904), never actually built, or the no longer existing part of

2. Design for Greater Berlin development by arch. Max Berg 1910. Source: „Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau“, 1938



Chemiczna street (formerly Bauschulstrasse) by M. Berg (1910). The term "modernistic" is something that the garden suburb of *Hampstead* (Unwin, 1907) certainly deserves. It was a point of reference for numerous garden settlements, including examples from Wrocław presented below. It has to be said that the first heralds of the Modern Movement in urban planning of Wrocław or its suburbs were of a purely formal nature and appeared in the mid 1890s. These were picturesque suburb development plans for: "Południowe" (1895), "Szczepińskie" (1896), "Piaskowe" and "Odrzańskie" (1896, 1905), designed by city architect for urban planning Alfred von Scholtz and engineer Alfred Frühwirth, and clearly showing the influence of Camill Sitte's aesthetic doctrine, while definitely rejecting the geometrical tradition of the period of regulation. Also the designs for Borek II (1897) and Zalesie (1901), which shortly after being designed found themselves within the boundaries of Wrocław, were very picturesque.

Ebenezer Howard's concept of garden city, born at the onset of the 20th century, resulted in the movement for garden-cities not only in Britain, but on the continent as well. In Germany, after the establishment of *Deutsche Gartenstadtgesellschaft* (1902), many were actually built, the first one being the *Werkbund-sponsored Hellerau* near Dresden (1907). In Wrocław, the idea gained the support of Max Berg and the first suburban garden-cities of Biskupin (I) and Karłowice⁶ were started in 1911 – during his term in office. The first design for Biskupin (1908) however, prepared by Conrad Helbig, was a romantic villa neighbourhood with a housing function only, and was nothing like the autarchic Howardian prototype. The semantically more versatile garden city of Karłowice, designed by the government architect Paul Schmitthenner, was like a small town with a marketplace, yet it was too close to Wrocław to develop independently, soon becoming a dormitory suburb. Schmitthenner, who later designed the garden city of Staaken near Berlin, even temporarily settled down in Karłowice, to have a better insight into the construction performed by *Eigenheim-Baugesellschaft für Deutschland m.b.H.-Breslau*. He cooperated with Gustav Wolf, who later co-designed Księżę Małe – the first rational suburb in Wrocław built in the spirit of *Neues Bauen*. Schmitthenner's ambition was to maintain high artistic level of project designs, as demonstrated by the presence of such luminaries of architecture as Hermann Muthesius or Hans Poelzig in the jury of the contest for the market square in Karłowice (1913). Brochów,

developing rapidly in connection with the major marshalling yard established there in 1896, is also becoming a garden city at the time. The redevelopment of Brochów and other suburban locations near Wrocław was presented during the first eastern-Germany exhibition in Poznań, 1911, by the Association of Wrocław Suburbs. Max Berg recommended that the ring of the nearest suburbs, like Karłowice, Różanka, Osobowice, Biskupin and others be incorporated into Wrocław. More distant locations, like Sobótka, Oborniki, Trzebnica and Leśnica, he suggested, should be bought out by Wrocław or linked with it by way of adequate legislation on local government associations. Together with Paul Heim, he made an urban plan for Sobótka in 1911. The idea of decentralising Wrocław, following Ebenezer Howard's model, was taken up by Ernst May in his design for the city with satellites (1925). In accordance with this concept, the *Gartenstadt Pawelwitz Siedlungsgesellschaft* cooperative built a garden city of Pawłowice to the design of F. W. Reinsch (1927). This is a clear evidence of how powerful the idea of garden cities was between the two great wars.

The period of the Weimar Republic was most significant for the development of housing in Wrocław, bringing many interesting solutions of European dimension. This was a great period for the cooperative housing in Germany in general. The large-scale new housing estates put up in Berlin, Frankfurt (am Main) and other cities, with their hygienic, functional, technical, social, economic and aesthetic aspects, were a model to follow by other European states. The greatest names in the erection of housing estates included Bruno Taut, Martin Wagner, Ernst May and Walter Gropius.

Wrocław took a significant part in shaping the positive image of housing in Germany of the period. Among those who made a great contribution to the development of housing, were designers like Theo Effenberger, Paul Heim, Albert Kempter, Hans Thomasa, Hermann Wahlich, Gustav Wolf and Heinrich Lauterbach, as well as those, who because of their position, influenced the housing policies and the development of the city – Max Berg, Hugo Althoff and Fritz Behrendt.

After World War I, Wrocław, with its poorest housing situation when compared with other German cities, decided to tackle the housing problems, despite the economic constraints. As early as 1919, cooperative settlements began to rise in the suburbs, with simple, functional houses containing standard small flats with gardens, for the wide public. These were not known in Wrocław, even though in other parts of the Reich they had already been built by public housing societies before the war. The

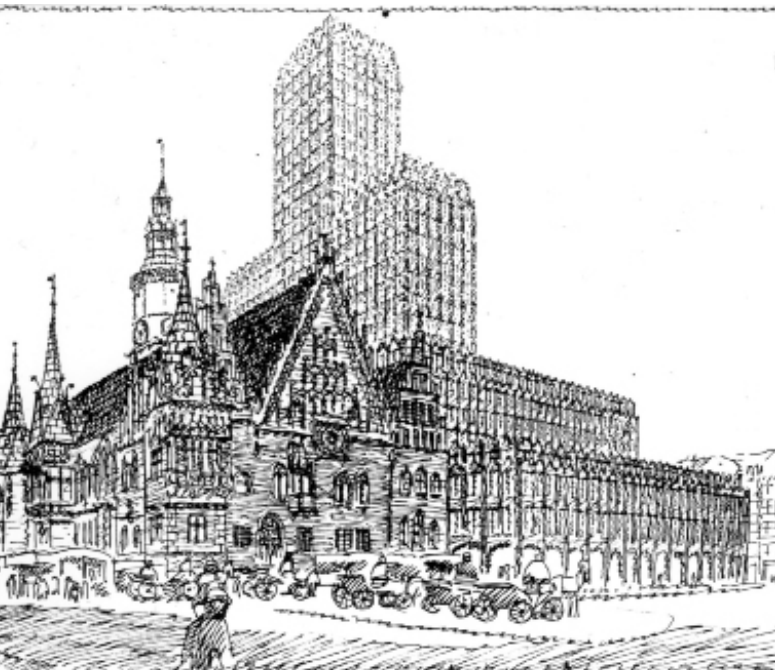
6. Kononowicz Wanda, *Wrocław. Kierunki rozwoju urbanistycznego w okresie międzywojennym*. Wrocław 1997, pp. 21-25.



3. Design for central Wroclaw redevelopment (1919-1924), architects M. Berg, R. Konwiarz, L. Moshamer. Source: *Siedlung und Stadtplanung in Schlesien, H. 1 (Breslau), Breslau 1926*

first such settlement (11 hectares, 208 flats), sponsored by the city authorities, was built in Tarnogaj for the gasworks employees. The initiative was then taken by housing settlement cooperatives and public housing societies. The largest and most efficient such organisations were *Siedlungsgesellschaft Breslau AG, Gemeinnützige Siedlungsgenossenschaft Eigenheim Eichborngarten in Breslau Gräbschen*, and the *Schlesische Heimstätte* cooperative society, managed in 1919-1925 by Ernst May. The cooperative specialised in building estates of small apartments, mostly in the municipalities situated near Wroclaw and all across Lower Silesia.

4. Design for a tower block in the Market Square, arch. M. Berg, 1920. Source: „*Ostdeutsche Bauzeitung*“ (18) 1920



The course of development of housing estates in Wroclaw was outlined by Max Berg, whose planning vision provided for three city zones⁷. The insular-shaped housing estates, situated in the outskirts of the city and covered in greenery, were meant to create the dwelling zone - *Wohnstadt*⁸. The other zones were the *City* - the district of commerce and employment - and the *Monumentalstadt* - the district of culture, with museums, churches, the university, etc. Berg's activities reflected the Berlin competition not only by zoning, but also by giving the city centre an air of modern metropolitan city, with the fashionable high-rise buildings. In this context, we might refer to Bruno Schmitz's design for the downtown Berlin contest (1910), Le Corbusier's "Contemporary City" (1922) and *Voisin* for Paris (1925), or Ludwig Hilberseimer's plan for a city of tall buildings (1924). Berg also tried to transform the city centre by filling it with massive office towers, situated in large squares and alongside river banks, where they would not reduce daylight admission of the neighbourhood; he did not even spare the Old Town Market (Figs. 3 & 4).

An important planning event for the city was the competition for the Greater Wroclaw development plan (1921-1922). Its results laid the foundations of the master plan prepared in

7. Berg Max, *Zukünftige Baukunst in Breslau als Ausdruck zukünftigen Kultur*, [in:] *Deutschlands Städtebau*, Berlin 1921, pp. 28-41.

8. The first, unsuccessful attempt to locate a housing settlement in the outskirts was made by Berg himself before WWI. It was the plan for Grabiszyn (1912), which anticipated the functional solutions of the 1920s; cf. Kononowicz Wanda, *Wroclaw. Kierunki... op. cit., p. 77.*



5. Masterplan for Wrocław 1924, arch. F. Behrendt. Source: W. Kononowicz, Wrocław. Kierunki rozwoju urbanistycznego w okresie międzywojennym, Wrocław 1997

1924 by the City Development Bureau, headed by Fritz Behrendt. The master plan (Fig. 5) was the first comprehensive, modern planning document, which gave ground for the expansion of city boundaries, eventually taking place in 1928. Former suburban municipalities totalling ca. 13 thousand hectares were incorporated into Wrocław, making it more than three times larger than before (from 4,960 to 17,465 hectares). Locating housing settlements in the outskirts, common to most competition entries, was sustained in the master plan and was continued by subsequent city architects for the newly incorporated areas. Appropriate development of housing was secured by new building regulations drafted by Otto Berger (1926).

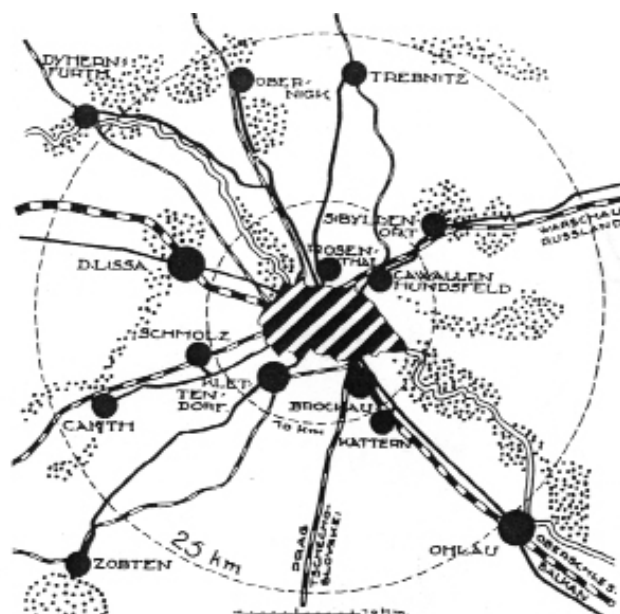
Modern planning covered the city not only within its boundaries, but in regional scale. In the mid 1920s, there were two opposing concepts of how Wrocław should be linked to the region. The first one, devised by Ernst May (Fig. 6), provided for decentralisation of Wrocław by a system of satellite towns (1925), like in E. Howard's model developed by R. Unwin⁹. The territorial and demographic limitation of Wrocław and its satellites (50-100 thousand inhabitants) within a 30-kilometre radius would give easy access to the food supply belt and the recreational area. The other concept (Fig. 7), by Adolf Rading, favoured the development of settlement belts along transport routes linking important industrial

centres within a 60-kilometre radius. This solution was in anticipation of Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus's concept of Functional Warsaw (1934), highly valued in Europe.

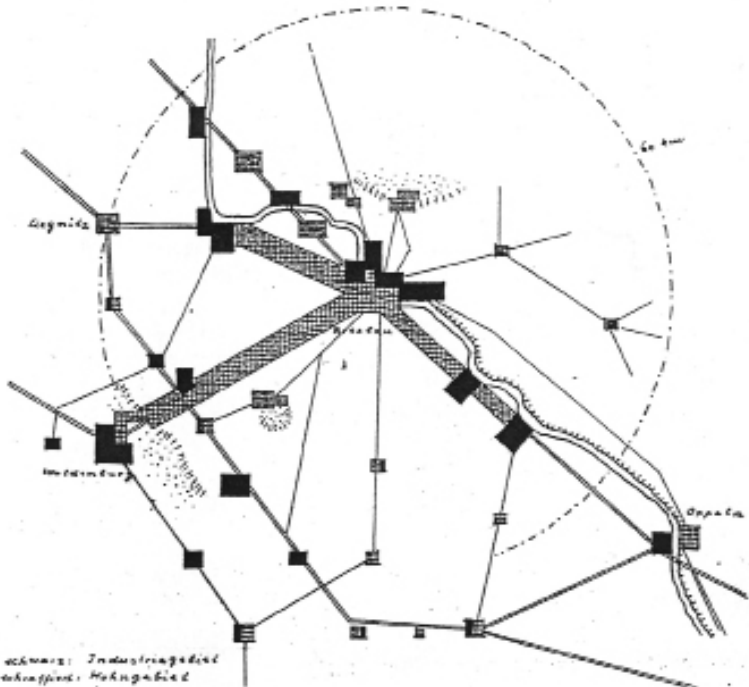
When the composition of the plan, the type of houses and the solutions for green areas are taken into consideration, housing estates in Wrocław of the Weimar Republic period can be divided into 3 basic categories: 1. "garden settlements", 2. "rationalised block settlements", 3. rational linear type settlements.

Garden settlements, built in Wrocław till

6. Wrocław linked to the region by a system of satellites, arch. E. May, 1925. Source: Bachmann, May E., Denkschrift des Landeskreises Breslau, Breslau, 1925



9. The concept of developing Wrocław by means of satellite towns was presented during the International Urban Planning Congress in Amsterdam (1924).



7. Wrocław linked to the region by bands of residential housing, connecting industrial centres, arch. A. Rad- ing, 1924. Source: „Schlesisches Heim”, 1924

about 1926, made a reference to the tradition of English garden suburbs. The principles of composition, laid down by Raymond Unwin in the first decade of the 20th century – when *Hampstead* was being built – were still alive in the 1920s in Europe. The characteristics of the composition of these settlements are:

- extensive development of houses surrounded by gardens;
- the whole of the project composed in a comprehensive way – with distinct centre of the composition, axis and major buildings;
- distinct “boundaries” and “gateways” of the settlement;
- picturesque, small areas in local planning units, like the “garden courtyards.”

In Wrocław, this group is duly represented by Sępolno (*Zimpel*) in the east, Popowice (*Pöpelwitz*) in the west and Grabiszyn (*Eichborngarten*) in the south-west of the city.

Sępolno – a typical “*Flachbausiedlung*” of low-rise, two-storey houses, was built in

8. Garden settlement of Grabiszyn (formerly *Eichborngarten*), arch. P. Heim, 1919. Archive photo 1926



1919-1935 by *Siedlungsgesellschaft Breslau* and partly by the *Hemstätte* cooperative, to the designs of Hermann Wahlich and Paul Heim. The 100-hectare estate was to contain 2.2 thousand flats for 10-12 thousand inhabitants. The quiet, gable-roof houses for one, two, four or more families, built either as detached or row houses, contained flats of 50-125 square metres. Each flat had a garden assigned to it, that could range from 80 to 500 square metres. The central element of the estate plan was an elongated, five-hectare green, with a school at its eastern end and an Evangelical church at the western ends. There was also a Roman-Catholic church, a social institution (*Wohlfartshaus*) and shops. Apart from Wahlich and Heim, many other architects were involved in designing the houses: Albert Kempter, Hans Thomas, Paul Häusler, Fritz and Paul Roder, Heinrich Busmann, Wilhelm Brix, Hugo Althoff, Max Schirmer and others¹⁰.

The Popowice settlement, no longer existing, was built between 1919 and 1927 by *Siedlungsgesellschaft Breslau*, and partly by the *Schlesische Heimstätte* cooperative, to the design of Theo Effenberger. Eighteen hundred flats for 8 thousand people were built on a 47-hectare estate. The houses gradually decreased in height – from multi-occupied, four- and five-storey city houses forming a screen on the side of the main access road, to simple two-storey, gable-roof houses in the central part of the estate. The houses for two, four or eight families contained 50-90 square metre flats of 2 or 3 rooms. Each flat had a garden assigned to it, that could range from 80 to 300 square metres. Inside the estate, a church and a school were erected in a spacious, green square. The architects involved in designing the houses were Theo Effenberger, Hans Thomas, Richard Gaze, Erich Grau and Ludwig Moshamer.

The Grabiszyn settlement (*Eichborngarten*, Fig. 8) was built in 1919-1925 by the *Eichborngarten* cooperative, which in mid-1920s also built houses in the market square of Karłowice and a large, linear-type garden settlement Biskupin II. *Eichborngarten*, like Biskupin II, was designed by Heim and Kempter, who screened cottage-type houses and their gardens with modern, high-rise, multi-occupied houses alongside the street. Eight hundred apartments for 3 thousand people were built on a 30-hectare estate. The settlement had a school, a Roman-Catholic church, the house of the evangelical commune and shops¹¹.

10. Kononowicz Wanda, *Z problemów urbanistyki dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. Osiedle ogrodowe Sępolno we Wrocławiu*, [in:] „Roczniki Sztuki Śląskiej”, vol. XV, Wrocław, 1991, pp. 59 - 91.

11. B.a. *10 Jahre 1919-1929 Gemeinnützige Siedlungsgenossenschaft Eigenheim Eichborngarten e.G.m.b.H.*

Garden settlements are related to the name of Ernst May, who designed, among others, Wojszyce, Złotniki and Ołtaszyn. Wojszyce – never actually built – was a satellite settlement envisaged in the 1922 contest for Greater Wrocław development. Złotniki, the construction of which started in 1919 in the western outskirts of Wrocław, was the largest urban development project of the *Schlesische Landgesellschaft* cooperative, never completed to the original design. Seven-hundred and fifty cottage-type houses had been planned on a 350-hectare estate, while the centre of the picturesque plan was to accommodate a market square with a town hall, department stores, two schools, the Community Hall and a water tower. Only a small part of May's design was actually completed, containing Rajska street ending in the west with a semicircular green square (Plac Kaliski). The remainder of the settlement was built in the 1930s, yet Heinrich Knipping's design reduced the programme both in form and in content. The little settlement of inexpensive, uniform houses along Strączkowa street at Ołtaszyn (formerly Lindenstraße - Naehrichsiedlung), built in 1921 for farm workers and designed by Ernst May, is something people find charming even today¹².

The second group are „rationalised block settlements,” usually located within the 19th-century street network, with green common yards without annexes and with modern apartments that meet hygienic standards. They were erected in Wrocław from 1925 onwards. The most representative of the group, albeit only its fragments have survived till today, is Szczepin (formerly *Westend*). It was designed



9. Block settlement of Szczepin (formerly *Westend*), arch. Th. Effenberger, 1927. Archive photo 1929. Source: „Architektus” 1(19) 2006

by Theo Effenberger (Fig. 9) and built by *Siedlungsgesellschaft Breslau* in 1925-1929. Some of the buildings were designed by architects Heinrich Lauterbach as well as Richard and Paul Ehrlich. The settlement was composed of blocks of compact-frontage red-brick-faced houses, three to five stories high, in the form of expressionistic Modernism, and was the first in Wrocław to have a district heating system¹³.

The third group are rational linear-type settlements (*Zeilenbau*), of multi-occupied houses, several stories high, with flat roofs and common green yards. They first emerged in 1928, when the city of Wrocław expanded, and include *Księżę Małe* (*Klein Tschansch*) and *Pilczyce* (*Pilsnitz*) – both designed by Paul Heim and Albert Kempter and built by *Siedlungsgesellschaft*

12. Kononowicz Wanda, *Ołtaszyn i Sępólno – dwa osiedla wrocławskie okresu międzywojennego*, [in:] *Ten Wspaniały Wrocławski Modernizm*, Wrocław 1998, pp. 114-132.

13. Kononowicz Wanda, *Między tradycją a nowoczesnością. Przyczynek do rozwoju racjonalnych form budownictwa mieszkaniowego we Wrocławiu w latach 1874-1930*, „Architektus” 1(19)2006, pp.19-30.

10. Linear-type settlement of *Księżę Małe* (formerly *Klein Tschansch*), architects P. Heim, A. Kempter, 1928. Source: *Architektura Wrocławia*, vol.2, *Urbanistyka*, Wrocław 1995



Breslau (Fig. 10). They were a response to the search of a budget minimum flat, conducted by the *Reichsforschungsgesellschaft für Wirtschaftlichkeit im Bau- und Wohnungswesen* (RWBW). The experimental settlement of the WUWA exhibition (*Wohnung und Werkraum* - 1929) built at the same time was also supposed to respond to the search of new building materials and technologies, suitable for the climate of Lower Silesia.¹⁴ The Księżę Małe settlement, built in less than a year, was a testing ground, where the exact sizes of the flats – 40, 50 and 70 square metres – were pre-determined by the RWBW. The people involved in designing the houses were Hans Thomas, Rudolf Sack and Gustav Wolf – the latter an activist of the Rfg forum. It is interesting to note that the design for Księżę Małe was completed 3 months before the contest for *Dammerstock* in Karlsruhe – a textbook example of a linear-type settlement – was announced. For reasons of economy, the flats had no bathrooms, so a laundry and a bathhouse were arranged in the district-heating boiler house¹⁵.

14. Urbanik Jadwiga, *Wrocławska wystawa Werkbundu WUWA 1929*, Wrocław 2002

15. Kononowicz Wanda, *Ewolucja osiedla mieszkaniowego we Wrocławiu okresu Republiki Weimarskiej - Księżę Małe*, [in:] *Architektura Wrocławia vol. 2 - Urbanistyka do roku 1945*, ed. J. Rozpędowski, Wrocław, 1995, pp. 445-478.

The search for the „minimum” flat resulted in the construction of a small settlement in Złotostocka street at Tarnogaj (1930), to the award-winning design by Hans Thomas. The Pilczyce settlement for 13 thousand inhabitants was meant to become the largest linear-type settlement in the *Neues Bauen* spirit. It was supposed to have a full programme of services; a church, a school, shops and a bathing beach. However, the original design from 1929 underwent subsequent adjustments, as the Great Crisis unfolded putting an end to the Weimar Republic. Only a small portion of the original design was actually completed.

Modern Movement in urban planning took various forms and shades, also varying in scale and scope, according to the changing development stages and conditions. It could be seen in a multitude of aspects – formal, aesthetic, technical, hygienic and functional. Modernism in urban planning meant not only a modern, comprehensive planning of the city in the regional context, but also the planning of mass-produced settlements of functional, healthy and inexpensive flats for the bulk consumer.

Wanda Kononowicz, professor of architecture

Wrocław University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Institute of History of Architecture, Art and Technology

research interests: history and theory of urban planning in 19th- and 20th-century Wrocław

e-mail: wanda.kononowicz@pwr.wroc.pl