

Approach to the Protection of Valuable Modern Architecture in Poland – Outline of the Problem

Marcin Gawlicki
Warsaw - Gdańsk, Poland
Tomasz Błyskosz
Gdańsk, Poland

The need for an effective model of protecting Modern Architecture of historical value becomes increasingly urgent. This is caused by rapid and deep political and economic transformation, which significantly influences the shape of cultural space in Poland. Well-considered activities are necessary if the unfavourable trends and phenomena that have been taking place for several years are to be reversed. A constantly raised question - which is more important: heritage or development? – does not have to mean underrating either of these aspects. It must be strongly stressed, however, that development must not harm the cultural values of historical sites and buildings. Obviously, any historical space has undergone various kinds of transformation and modification, but these natural changes cannot be an excuse for ill-considered activities causing irreversible damage to cultural environment. Therefore, it

1. Former villa of barrister Edmund Kaźmierczak in Katowice, dated 1930, designed by T. Michejda (an example of steel frame construction for single-family housing) in the Modernist Architecture Heritage Route of the Silesian Region. Photo by A. Syska, the Silesian Centre for Cultural Heritage in Katowice.





2. The Wrocław Centennial Hall, Photo by W. Stępień

is still necessary for institutions responsible for spatial management, at both central and local level, to seek a balance and harmonious relations between the protection of the values of Modern Architecture and the inevitable development. Owners and users of historical buildings must be aware of the fact that cultural heritage, including indisputable values of the 20th century Modernist works, may become an important factor of development, and this should be an essential element of the preservation system. A good example to follow is the activities recently undertaken in the Silesian Region. In Katowice, a project called "Silesian Province - Modern Architecture Route" was developed in order to highlight the exceptional values of the architecture created in the province between 1918 and 1939. The Route will also have informative and educational functions, thus becoming a factor stimulating the growth of tourism¹.

Similarly, the fact that the Centennial Hall in Wrocław, a fundamental work of Modern Architecture, has been inscribed on the UNESCO

World Heritage List² is a great opportunity for the promotion of the place, thus generating dynamic growth as well as creating a chance for professional conservation work³.

Preservation of national heritage, perceived in its symbolic aspect as an important element of the identity of the place, becomes a typical commercial product, to use popular marketing language. The word "commodity" used in reference to historic buildings and monuments, although still a little shocking, means that they are accessible to the consumer, i.e. the public.

Market economy transformation and progressive globalisation require constant evolution in the philosophy of cultural heritage protection, of which Modernist buildings are one of the youngest, yet distinctive, part. Created in the previous century, they reflect the turning points in the history of arts and artistic ideas that took shape in the first half of the 20th century. However, it is generally believed that, partly due to their young age, they do not deserve notice,

1. The project is being developed by the Silesian Centre for Cultural Heritage in Katowice, while the Department of Regional Promotion, Tourism and Sports of the Marshal's Office of the Silesian Province will be in charge of its implementation.

2. Hall was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List on 13 July 2006. It is the first Polish Modernist building included in the list.

3. In October 2007, the winning design was decided for the expansion of the Hall by tourist-supporting commercial premises.

preservation and care, except a few examples. This is hardly surprising, the more so as even professional conservators find it difficult to choose the country's most valuable twentieth-century buildings. However, as time goes on, the distance to Modernism and its architecture is growing; an old, clear and unwritten though binding dividing line marked by WWII is now becoming insufficient. Another stage in the development of contemporary architecture is emerging, starting in 1989, which in Poland is a political milestone. As a result, the area of studies is expanding, which means a larger number of buildings that should be subject to appropriate forms of legal protection.

knowledge of the value and the importance of particular buildings and groups of buildings to a given community, region or country. Therefore, the main problem area in the protection and care of Modern Movement monuments is the proper identification and definition of the resource, which must then be evaluated on the basis of uniform and intelligible criteria. This is not an easy task, because such detailed evaluation has never been done before, while construction date has always been and remains one of the most important criteria. Functionalism, Expressionism, Constructivism and very subtle differences between them are not always taken into consideration. Meanwhile, the more recent



3. Gate No 2 of the Gdańsk Shipyard (together with square Plac Solidarności, the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers, the adjacent wall and the BHP Hall) listed on 6 December 1999. Photo by D. Hryszkiewicz, Provincial Heritage Board (ROBiDZ) in Gdańsk

In this context, protection of cultural values of Modern Architecture becomes a priority. In the meantime, the implementation of suitable conservation measures and the outlining of necessary fields of activities encounter a number of serious difficulties. To begin with, we face the problem of lack of proper identification of historical resources, as well as the need to define precise and coherent criteria for selecting the most valuable buildings for full protection and care.

If protection and care of historical buildings are to be effective, they must be based on a solid

the buildings, the more numerous those fit for analysis will be. At the same time, at the beginning of the 21st century, more and more requests are made for the care of outstanding post-1945 structures and their recognition – according to the definition included in the spatial and local planning legislation – as cultural goods of modernity.

What criteria for selection should be accepted then? What should protection policy be based on? Undoubtedly, the present assessment of artistic values of Modernism should be widened



4. 'Oliwia' Arena in Gdańsk built in 1972 as designed by Prof. M. Gintowt (where the 1st Congress of NSZZ "Solidarność" was held between 26 September and 7 October 1981). *Land Use Planning of the City of Gdańsk* describes the Arena as heritage of contemporary culture (which, however does not prevent screening its façade with trashy and garish advertisements)

by such issues as innovation, the application of unconventional architectural solutions, elements characteristic of the style of buildings at a particular time, compositional values and architectural integrity, i.e. cohesion of the components: structure, fittings, plan, forms and detail.

The next step should be an assessment of the historical value (together with scientific

evaluation), because it refers to the documenting of an important chapter in the history of architecture. However, the assessment should be perceived in a wider context, as it will also evaluate the uniqueness and universal values. Then the context of world architecture emerges... and another question arises: Was Modern Architecture in Poland only a background

5. *The centre of Gdynia, listed in September 2007. Photo by W. Stępień*



for what was built in Europe at the time? Are there, apart from the Wrocław Centennial Hall, any outstanding Modernist buildings or areas in Poland of European or global significance? So how to assess the spatial phenomenon of Gdynia, where Modernist buildings form the very heart of the city?⁴ Was a unique, Polish or local, or perhaps regional variety of Modern Architecture created?

We should note that quite often once a building has been described by researchers as a valuable document of its time, it is automatically believed it should obtain full protection – something that, at least in theory, can be achieved if the building is listed in the register of historical monuments. In practice, though, such protection is most commonly extended to buildings endangered by current investment plans. And there is little consolation in saying that it has always been like this. For example, the reason why the office building of the former insurance institution in Gdynia was listed in 1972 was its user's plan to build a top floor extension to get more office space. This example sets a precedent, because it was a relatively young building that was listed, whose designer was still alive⁵.

At present, concepts of protecting all Modernist structures, though theoretically justified, in practice would mean that hundreds of buildings would have to be listed in a short time, which is absolutely unrealistic at the moment, considering the existing structure of the provincial monument preservation offices [*Poland is divided into 16 provinces, also called voivodeships – translator's note*]. Now it is necessary to work out suitable legal framework that would make it possible to recognize a pool of Modern Architecture, which will result in its proper protection. Therefore, it is a priority to assess all the identified Modernist artefacts in Poland according to uniform and coherent criteria. Although some attempts have been made⁶, there are still no clear criteria for



6 Former White-collar Personnel Insurance Company building in Gdynia (currently owned by Polish Ocean Lines). Photo by T. Błyskosz, ROBiDZ in Gdańsk

identifying a given structure as suitable for protection. Larger-scale protective measures should be initiated by selecting the most valuable buildings of unquestionable universal values, according to common criteria, identical throughout the country. At the moment, it is extremely difficult to estimate how many such buildings exist, since work on the issue has only just started. It is very urgent to evaluate the works of Modern Architecture, specify a range of protected areas and identify buildings that absolutely need protection, as well as to define its form and the institutions responsible for it.

Meanwhile, we often encounter rule-of-thumb decisions recognising a building as historical primarily on grounds of the time of its construction. If a building does not have any significant values apart from its age, it is entered into municipal records of monuments. The buildings that, according to the law, "have historical, artistic or scientific values", are listed in the register of monuments. These terms, particularly in reference to many works of Modernist and contemporary architecture, are most imprecise, leaving a lot to interpretation. Decisions on whether or not a given building should be regarded as historical are often made under pressure from the local community, or subjectively, depending on the decision-maker's education, competence and expertise. Sometimes, buildings are listed "at random", because otherwise a building in question would not get any other form of legal protection.

4. It must be noted at this point that the centre of Gdynia was listed as a historical monument (21 September 2007), which was possible owing to the new protection of historical buildings legislation (Journal of Law No 162, Entry 1568 with subsequent amendments).

5. The office building of the former White-collar Personnel Insurance Company (later ZUS – Social Insurance Company, after 1945 – Polish Ocean Lines) constructed in 1935-36 was designed by architect Roman Piotrowski (b. 21 January 1895, ob. 17 December 1988).

6. On 13 June 2005, the Warsaw Branch of SARP (Polish Architects Association) organised a seminar on the preservation of treasures of contemporary culture. As a result, a list of criteria for defining contemporary cultural treasures was drawn up.



8. *The Wrocław Centennial Hall – the dome seen from the inside. Photo by M. Gawlicki*

As a result, Polish national register of historical buildings is inconsistent and incoherent, still excluding many representative and most valuable examples of Modern Architecture.

One of the difficulties in providing effective protection for Modern Architecture is the lack of coherent legal regulation. The essential form of protection, i.e. listing, refers to a set which by definition should include the most valuable historical buildings in a given area. The register is created on the basis of decisions of the provincial preservation officer, and this is the reason why listed buildings vary so much from province to province. Therefore, statistics of entries do not reflect a real picture of protected sites. The decision of the Polish president, taking the form of an ordinance and recognising a building as a Monument of History, is still a matter of prestige rather than real protection. The Wrocław Centennial Hall is the first twentieth-century work of architecture to have been entered into this exclusive list back in 2005. However this was connected with the World Heritage List application that was being prepared at the time.

Municipal councils are extremely reluctant

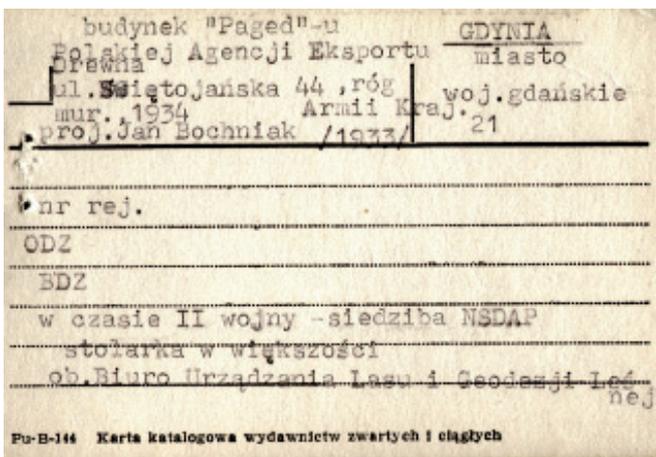
to establish cultural parks – another form of legal protection of historical sites – due to the severe limitations on investment it entails. The experience



7. *Garrison Church in Gdynia, erected in 1935-1939, as designed by M. Lalewicz (consecrated in 1939, during WWII it was used as a military depot, after 1945 used as a warehouse by the leather industry, returned to the Roman Catholic Church in 1981, since 1993 – a garrison church, not listed as a historical object). Photo by T. Blyskosz, ROBiDZ in Gdańsk.*

so far suggests necessary amendments to the regulation, whereby establishment of cultural parks becomes the prerogative of the provincial or central administration. However, provisions included in the local development plan still remain one of the fundamental forms of protecting Modernist heritage. Unfortunately, the wording of planning documents is frequently too general,

and the mayors to run the national, provincial and municipal records of historical structures, respectively. Address files have been kept in Poland since 1977. They consist of a set of index cards containing basic information about a structure: its location, relevant authorities and records held so far. These files are of auxiliary and informative character.



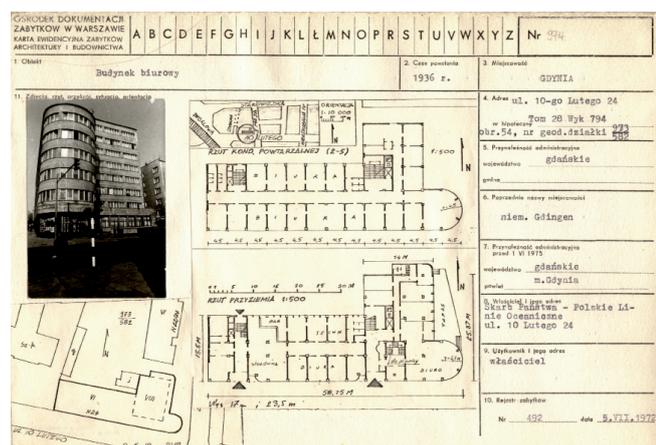
9. & 10. An index card – the face and a photograph of a building (usually a couple of photographs were appended) stuck on the reverse side. Photo from the ROBIDZ Archives in Gdańsk

usually referring to urban structures rather than individual buildings. It is really an exception if they make reference to historical architectural details such as woodwork, plaster, or furnishings. Lack of local development plan – not infrequent in Poland – makes this type of protection impossible. Thus, in practice, recording a building creates limited possibilities of putting it under basic legal care.

Documentation is a very important field of activities related to comprehensive protection of Modern Architecture. Under the present monument protection and care legislation, it is the responsibility of the Conservator General, provincial monument preservation officers,

Since 1976 records, containing more information, have been kept in the form of the so-called "white index cards". They replaced "green index cards" which had been used since 1950s. Their relatively large size allows for storing a number of detailed information about a building, such as materials used for construction, description of its shape or furnishing and also its history, present condition, and suggestions for most urgent conservation works.

The index cards were supposed to be universal. Depending on the nature of the described object, their contents may be extended by adding an unlimited number of new cards. It should be noted, however, that due to the ambiguous wording of the existing secondary legislation⁷, there is too much elbowroom in the way historical objects are filed. And while we are on the subject of recording, we also have to mention the DCOMOMO fiche. This card



7. Ordinance of the Minister of Culture of 14th May, 2004 on keeping National, Provincial and Municipal Registers of Historical Objects and a national list of historical artefacts that were stolen or unlawfully taken abroad (Journal of Law No 124, item. 1035).

11. The face of the so called "white card". Photo from ROBIDZ Archives in Gdańsk

contains, in particular, information about the building, the urban area or layout; history of construction; a contextual description of the site; a general evaluation with regard to what makes the building innovative, and a bibliography.

Statistics from the Pomeranian Province show the situation of listed Modern Architecture resources, compared with other historical buildings. The register of historical structures run by the provincial monument preservation officer contains over 1,700 preservation orders covering more than 2,700 historical sites. Only 27 are (a mere 1%) are Modernist structures, and most of them – 22 – are in Gdynia.⁸ These data clearly show how much documentation, particularly fundamental registration work providing the fundamental form of protection, i.e. listing, is still in arrears (cf. Table 1). Recording other forms of protection, particularly those based on the provisions of local plans, is extremely difficult for lack of relevant statistics.

Interesting conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of listing dates of Modernist buildings and the records kept. The first structure, i.e.

8. As for September 2007.

the office building of the former White-Collar Personnel Insurance Company in Gdynia, was listed⁹ as early as on the 5 July, 1972. Half of the other buildings were listed in the 1980s, and the other half during the last two decades.

The slow-down in listing activity was not caused by sluggishness or lack of interest in this type of historical objects, but due to the irksome and time-consuming administrative procedures that had to be followed by the provincial monument preservation officer. Production of white index cards necessary for recognising a structure as a historical object encountered similar problems (cf. Fig. 2). Lack of funds was another, sometimes insurmountable obstacle. The first set of address index cards was produced in 1982 and 1983. When the position of municipal monument preservation officer was created in Gdynia in late 2000, steps were taken to record all the historical objects located within the city area. In 2008, the Municipal Records of historical structures in Gdynia were completed, containing more than 800 structures, i.e. twice as many as

9. Basic registration, however, in the form of an index card, was done as late as in 1983, and the white index card was produced in 1984.

12. A grain silo in Gdynia, built in 1935-37, as designed by engineer Michał Paszkowski and architect Bolesław Szmit (listed on 6 April, 1990). Photo by M. Gawlicki



we have had so far. It must be noted, however, that this undisputed success in producing a basic information layer for Gdynia historical structures is unique. It does not change the fact that recording the full set of historical structures is the first step towards efficient protection.

One of the most important elements of developing the policy of monument protection is, therefore, the improvement in the recording process, based particularly upon new technologies. The system of registration and documentation of historical structures, worked out and implemented by the National Heritage Board of Poland (KOBiDZ) deserves particular attention. This is a set of databases created together with all the provincial heritage boards which also uses a GIS system. This will make it possible in the future to store within a single system all the data referring not only to historical buildings as such, but also to all the phenomena related to them, conservation processes and

possible threats. It is worth mentioning here that some steps have recently been taken to develop a national policy for the protection of Modernist structures. These activities will be supported, among others, by an advisory committee for the protection of Modern Architecture in Poland, appointed by the KOBiDZ Director.¹⁰ The first steps taken concern a method of recording and analysing information on national Modern Architecture heritage in Poland.

Let us hope that within the next few years attempts to put the legal system of Modernist structure protection into working order, together with full recognition of the heritage and its evaluation according to coherent criteria, will bring some measurable effects and grant better protection to the most valuable architecture of Polish Modernism.

10. By order of the KOBiDZ Director of 12th Sept., 2007.

Location	Modern historical structures		
	Listed	Recorded as monuments	
		White cards	Index cards
Gdynia	22	31	346
Sopot	2	3	11
Hel	1	1	1
Lębork	1	1	1
Starogard Gdański	1	1	23
Wejherowo		6	36
Tczew			26
Jurata			25
Gdańsk			15
Kartuzy			6
Jastarnia			5
Bytów			3
Puck			3
Gniew			1
Władysławowo			1
Subtotal:	27	43	496
Total:		496	

Table 1: Modernist historical buildings in Pomeranian Province – September 2007

Structures	Listed	Recorded as monuments		Unrecorded (mentioned in literature)
		White cards	Index cards	
Quantity	22	31	346	66
Total	412			

Table 2: Registration status of Modernist structures in Gdynia – September 2007

Marcin Gawlicki, Ph.D.,
head of National Heritage Board of Poland (KOBiDZ)
lectures at Gdańsk University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture
research interests: architectural monuments – conservation and studies;
post-WWII reconstruction of Gdańsk
e-mail: info@kobidz.pl

Tomasz Błyskosz, MSc.,
head of Regional Heritage Board of Poland (ROBiDZ)
research interests: documentation and records of historical objects and sites,
protection of panoramas of historical towns and cities
e-mail: robidz.gdansk@kobidz.pl