

Towards Modernity. The Operations of the Free City of Gdańsk's Construction Office in 1927–1933

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In March 1928 Martin Kießling, who for one year was administering the operations of the Free City (then Freie Stadt Danzig) of Gdańsk's Construction Office, moved to Berlin to become the Director of the Construction Department in the Finance Ministry. A year spent by him in Gdańsk by the Motława River may seem to be a short period; however, the effects of his operations and their impact turned out to be very important for the history of Gdańsk architecture¹. Let us have a closer look at this period.

Upon coming to Gdańsk in March 1927, Kießling immediately started to act.² One of the first tasks undertaken by him was the change of the architectural design of the folk school for girls and boys in Pestalozzi Street in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz. His predecessor, Friedrich Fischer, used to prepare many designs – it was during his term of office that a town plan for this part of Wrzeszcz had been created. The plan included also a schematic design of a "double" school with a huge hipped roof. Its traditional form was designed by the Construction Office. The whole structure was drawn back from the street frontage, forming a small square in front of the school, surrounded on both sides by the building's lower wings.

In cooperation with Albert Krüger, his closest co-worker, Kießling prepared a modified version of the school

design, keeping its location and the small square in front of it.³ Two schools had a common gymnasium and a hall located on the ground and the first floor in the central part of the building. Spacious classrooms, offices, and workrooms were arranged along wide corridors. In Kießling's design the building had a flat roof and big windows. The interior part of the development, at the school back, was destined for a school garden and sports facilities not only for students, but also for people from the neighbourhood. The construction was completed in 1929.

The school design prepared by Kießling and Krüger refers to historic motifs, strongly simplified and modernized, both in composition and in individual elements. Covering the building façade with facing brick was another nod towards traditional building practice so characteristic of the Northern Europe. No facing on the ground floor of the side wings made of reinforced concrete contrasted by texture and colour with the rest of the building.

Despite its modern architectural design, the school in Pestalozzi Street did not stir as many controversies as the next Kießling's project. Some even emphasized that the school building well matched the surrounding developments and from the town planning point of view was a good solution.⁴ Such opinion resulted probably from the use of

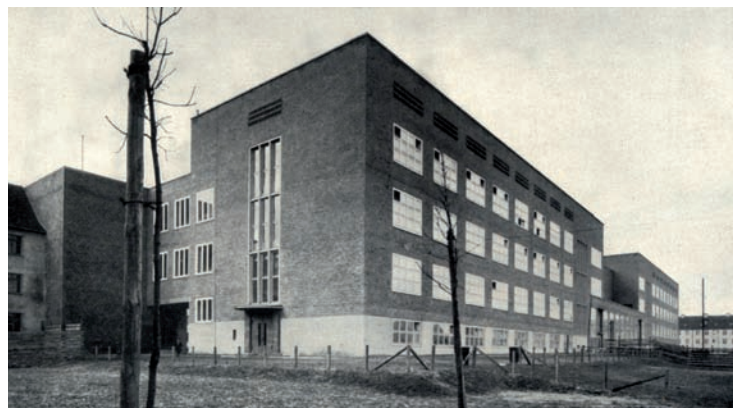
1. Before coming to Gdańsk, Kießling (1879–1944), a graduate of the Technical University of Charlottenburg, worked in the railway administration and performed tasks in various cities, Frankfurt (Oder) and Cologne among others (see: Zalewski Paul, Szczukowski Anita, Dubbeldam Pieter Martijn, *Johannes Martin Kießling (1879–1944)*, the film is an effect of the research project performed at the Viadrina University, 2012 – www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nR4u9ZC0u4, retrieved on 08.02.2013). Kießling's appointment to the position in Gdańsk was reported in *Zum Stadtbaurat in Danzig*, "Deutsche Bauzeitung", 61, 1927, No. 11, p. 112; *Als Stadtbaurat von Danzig*, "Deutsche Bauzeitung", 61, 1927, No. 21 (12 III), p. 192.

2. Kießling's works in Gdańsk were recounted among others by: Romero Andreas, *Baugeschichte als Auftrag. Karl Gruber: Architekt, Lehrer, Zeichner. Eine Biographie* (Schriften des Deutschen Architekturmuseums zur Architekturgeschichte und Architekturtheorie), Braunschweig 1990, pp. 103–110; Barylewska-Szymańska Ewa, Szymański Wojciech, *Nowoczesna architektura w Wolnym Mieście Gdańsku w latach 20. i 30. XX w.* [in:] *Niechciane dziedzictwo. Różne oblicza architektury nowoczesnej w Gdańsku i Sopocie*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia w Gdańsku, Agnieszka Wołodźko (ed.), Gdańsk 2005, pp. 14–16; Pusback Brite, *Stadt als Heimat. Die Danziger Denkmalpflege zwischen 1933 und 1939*, Köln, Weimar, Wien 2006, pp. 203–209; Bernhardt Katja, *Modern oder historisch? Architekturtheorie und "Stadt" in Danzig (Gdańsk) um 1930*, "Kritische Berichte", 35, 2007, H. 1, pp. 47–61; id., *Die „Wiederherstellung des alten Stadtbildes“*. *Architektur und Erinnerungskultur in der Freien Stadt Danzig*, [in:] *Erinnerungskultur und Regionalgeschichte*, Hg. Harald Schmid, München 2009, p. 109–128 (particularly pp. 111–114, 122–124); Rojek Karina, *Tradycja versus nowoczesność. Polemika na temat przyszłej architektury Gdańska (1927–1928)* [in:] „Porta Aurea. Rocznik Instytutu Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego”, 7/8, 2009, pp. 382–395; id., *Martin Kiessling. Gdańskie realizacje architekta* [in:] *Trwałość? Użyteczność? Piękno? Architektura dwudziestego wieku w Polsce*, Agnieszka Zabłocka-Kos (ed.), Wrocław 2011, pp. 39–43 (without references); Friedrich Jacek, *Tożsamość peryferii. Nowoczesność i tradycjonalizm w architekturze Wolnego Miasta Gdańska* [in:] *Architektura Skoczowa, Śląska i Pomorza 1918–1939*, Andrzej Szczerski (ed.), Warszawa 2011, pp. 192, 202, 210.

3. Kießling's preliminary project was significantly simplified by Krüger (Mankowski H., *Die Pestalozzischule in Danzig-Langfuhr*, "Ostdeutsche Bauzeitung", 27, 1929, No. 57, pp. 420–421. Kießling Martin, *Neue Baugedanken im alten Danzig*, "Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung", 49, 1929, No. 43, pp. 695–698. The school project has been described by Karina Rojek (see: Rojek Karina, *Martin Kiessling...*, op. cit., pp. 40–41).

4. *Die größten Bauten im neuen Danzig*, "Danziger Neueste Nachrichten", 36, 1929, No. 92, Beilage Bauen und Wohnen (20. IV).

1. *School in Pestalozzi Street, Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz, 1929 – view from the sport field, by Martin Kießling, Neue Baugedanken im alten Danzig*, "Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung", 49, 1929, No. 43, no page number





2. Helena Lange School, Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz, 1929 – general view, by Martin Kießling, *Neue Baugedanken im alten Danzig*, "Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung", 49, 1929, No. 43, no page number

bricks on the building façade, as well as timeless arcades on the ground floor and unpretentious sculptural decorations.

However, the second school designed by Kießling and Krüger was to become for many years a symbol of modern Gdańsk architecture and the subject of many discussions and criticism. The Helena Lange School for Girls was located in Wrzeszcz, in the newly set out street (now Hallera Avenue). Its construction was completed in 1929.⁵

The architects nearly completely abandoned traditional solutions in this design. Maybe the school location – different from that of the school in Pestalozzi Street, deprived of any architectural context – made it possible to erect a building in so modern form. It is composed of simple geometric solids enlivened by the rhythm of windows that reflect internal functional divisions and form an attractive and well-thought-of wholeness, additionally emphasized by the plaster colours: white with yellow and black stripes.⁶ The main entrance is accented by an arcade supported by three pillars – and it is the only element referring to historic solutions. The construction technology making use of a steel skeleton frame was a novelty on the Gdańsk building market. During the school official opening in October 1929 Hugo Althoff,⁷ a senator of the Free City of Gdańsk responsible for building policy among others, stressed that the Helena Lange School for Girls was an example of good implementation of new concepts and requirements for school institutions.⁸

Kießling and Krüger also designed some houses forming the northern frontage of Kościuszki Street in Wrzeszcz (from Legionów Street towards the railway).⁹

Kießling's next initiative in the Construction Office referred to another part of the city planned to be developed, i.e. the region at the end of Długie Ogrody Street. It was to become a hallmark of Gdańsk for all the visitors coming to

5. Kießling Martin, *Neue Baugedanken...*, op. cit., pp. 695–698, M[ankowski] [H.], *Zwei moderne Schulhäuser in Danzig*, "Ostdeutsche Bauzeitung", 28, 1930, No. 13, pp. 120–121. See also Barylewska-Szymańska Ewa, Szymański Wojciech, *Nowoczesna architektura...*, op. cit., pp. 15–16; Rojek Karina, *Martin Kiessling...*, op. cit., pp. 41–42.

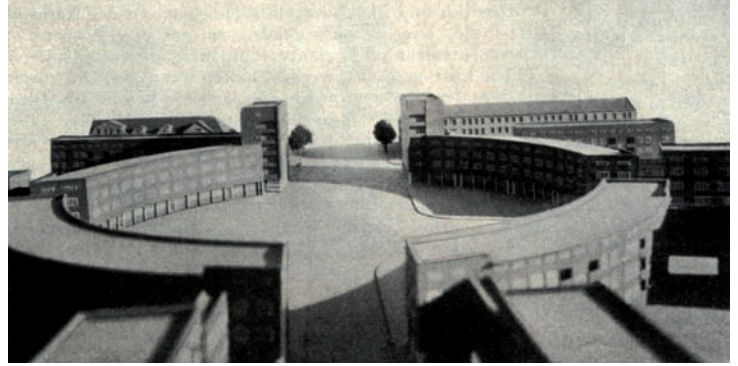
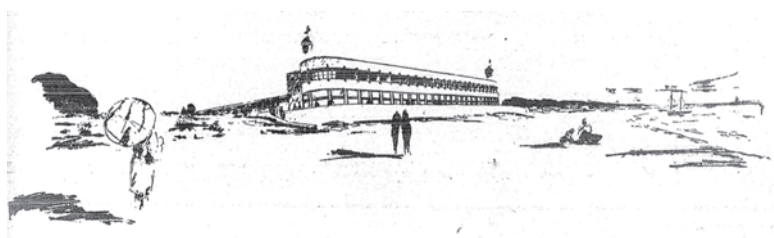
6. Arch. Dub, *Akcja budowlano-mieszkańcowa w Gdańsku. Osiedla we Wrzeszczu (Langfuhr) i Schilditz*, "Architektura i Budownictwo", 7, 1931, No. 11, p. 404.

7. Rozmarynowska Katarzyna, *Z działalności i twórczości architekta Hugo Althoffa – senatora Wolnego Miasta Gdańska w latach 1928–1933* [in:] *100-lecie nowoczesnej urbanistyki w Gdańsku*, Małgorzata Postawka, Piotr Lorens (eds.), Gdańsk 2009, pp. 64–68.

8. *Einweihung der Helene-Lange-Schule*, "Danziger Neueste Nachrichten", 36, 1929, No. 241, 1. Beilage (14. X).

9. Kießling Martin, *Neue Baugedanken...*, op. cit., pp. 694–695.

4. Spa house design in Gdańsk-Stogi, 1928, *Das projektierte Kurhaus in Heubude*, "Danziger Zeitung", 71, 1928, No. 99 (8 IV)



3. Architectural model of the plaza in front of Gdańsk's Długie Ogrody Gate, 1929, by Martin Kießling, *Neue Baugedanken im alten Danzig*, "Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung", 49, 1929, No. 43, p. 704

the city from the Żuławy direction. Kießling planned a round plaza surrounded by modern housing developments. In his project a historic Długie Ogrody Gate was to be demolished, as it disagreed with the plaza plan. The City Senate promoted Kießling's concept and in February 1928 the Gate demolition was accepted and seemed to be decided. The construction works were to start soon.¹⁰ However, the Historic Monument Council chaired by professor Otto Kloeppel from the Technical University of the Free City of Gdańsk categorically opposed the idea of the Gate demolition.

At the same time the Walter & Fleck company that had its seat in Długa Street in the city historic centre planned to build on several plots a new department store. Moritz Ernst Lesser, an architect from Berlin, presented a design of a modern commercial building. Kießling, who also dealt with historic monuments preservation, was of the opinion that changes in Gdańsk historic centre were unavoidable and that they would have a beneficial impact on stirring economic growth and enlivening Długa Street. According to him, Długa Street should keep its character of the city commercial centre, while side streets should become a preserved area of historic monuments. That is why he supported that idea of erecting a modern department store, although at the same time was aware that it would probably be impossible to carry out this task.¹¹

Another project prepared in the Construction Office under the management of Kießling, at the turn of 1927 and 1928, has been overlooked so far. A complex of spa buildings integrated with the green nature around was planned to be constructed in Gdańsk-Stogi. A spa house situated on the view corridor at the seaside promenade was to be the central part of this development. Although it was quite unusual, the newspapers praised modern solutions adopted in the project. It was emphasized that the building was well-matched to the surrounding landscape with the beach, the dunes and the forest. The building designed on a projection similar to the ellipse was to house a restaurant and a café on the ground floor and hotel rooms on the upper floors. Plain, plastered (maybe white) façade was to be divided by two rows of big windows. The roof was to be flat. Works were planned to begin in summer 1928.¹²

It must also be stressed that during Kießling's stay in Gdańsk an intense discussion was conducted between advocates of modern architecture and the architecture referring to the historic past. The main opponents here were Kießling and above-mentioned Kloeppel who represented the scholar circles and the Historic Monument Council.¹³

10. Ibidem, pp. 703–704.

11. *Die alte Stadt und der neue Mensch. Oberbaurat Kießling spricht über die Neugestaltung des Danziger Stadtbildes. Feindschaft dem gestern. Die neue Form. Mut zu schöpferischer Tat*, "Danziger Volksstimme", 19, 1928, No. 27, 1. Beilage (1 II); Kießling Martin, *Neue Baugedanken...*, op. cit., pp. 701–702.

12. *Das projektierte Kurhaus in Heubude*, "Danziger Zeitung", 71, 1928, No. 99 (8 IV).

13. The analysis of the discussion conducted at that time – see: Romero Andreas, *Baugeschichte als Auftrag...*, op. cit., pp. 103–110; Barylewska-Szymańska Ewa, Szymański Wojciech, *Nowoczesna architektura...*, op. cit., pp. 25–28; Rojek Karina, *Tradycja versus nowoczesność...*, op. cit., pp. 383–393; Bernhardt Katja, *Modern...*, op. cit., pp. 47–61; id., *Die Wiederherstellung...*, pp. 111–114; Friedrich Jacek, *Tożsamość peryferii...*, op. cit., pp. 178–180.

Shortly after his lecture at the Technical University of the Free City of Gdańsk in March 1928, that constituted a kind of manifesto and a recapitulation of his works in Gdańsk¹⁴, Kießling left the city. Upon his departure he was perceived as a fighter for modern architecture. When summing up Kießling's short stay in Gdańsk, *Danziger Volksstimme* journalist included among his merits openness to new trends in architecture and their adoption in Gdańsk. He also mentioned Kießling's successful projects, mainly two modern school buildings and the design of the plaza at the end of Długie Ogrody Street.¹⁵ However, for architects presenting traditional stance Kießling remained a negative figure for a long time after he left the city.

In the years following Kießling's departure the school buildings designed by him were finished; however the historic gate was not demolished and thus the representative plaza was not made, either. Neither the modern department store in Długa Street, nor the spa developments in Stogi in its form prepared in 1928 by the Construction Office were constructed.

Kießling's activities in Gdańsk and the discussions about his works conducted at that time have already been studied by researchers, but the activities of the Construction Office after Kießling's departure have not been analyzed so far. That why it is worth having a closer look at the activities of Kießling's colleagues in the period from March 1928 to May 1933 (when the City's government was taken over by the local Nazi Party). Most buildings designed at that time by the Construction Office were modern in character. It was partly the influence of above-mentioned Hugo Althoff who in April 1929 became a senator of the Free City of Gdańsk and was responsible, among others, for town planning and house building. In him Gdańsk acquired another – although not so radical – supporter of modern architecture. As a graduate of the Technical University of Gdańsk, Althoff had professional links with Erfurt, Malbork, Frankfurt (Oder), and directly before coming to Gdańsk was a manager of the construction administration in Wrocław.¹⁶ At that time he cooperated on preparing a Werkbund exhibition.¹⁷

Some former Kießling's co-workers, Albert Krüger among them, were still employed in the Construction Office.¹⁸

Among important investments performed at the turn of the 1930s were the new buildings of the Children's Hospital and the Internal Diseases Department of the Municipal Hospital in Wrzeszcz designed by Krüger. For a long time before the Municipal Hospital had problems with a too small number of places for a growing population of Gdańsk inhabitants. The technical state of some hospital buildings was really poor and that is why new investments were really necessary. The Children's Hospital was erected in 1929. It was a modern L-shaped cubic edifice constructed of reinforced concrete, with vast surfaces of windows, plastered façade, and a flat roof. Patients could breathe fresh air on balconies and a big terrace on the roof. Spacious and full of light rooms for patients were situated mainly in the southern part of the building. They were painted bright colours and fitted with colourful furniture and textiles. The corridors were wide and treatment rooms were equipped with modern devices. The hospital fulfilled the newest sanitary requirements. Opinions about the building were very positive; press reviews emphasized "calm concision and the beauty of forms".¹⁹

14. *Die alte Stadt und der neue Mensch. Oberbaurat Kießling spricht...*

15. *Pläne, die er hinterläßt. Eine Unterredung mit Oberbaurat Kießling. Das Problem der Stadterweiterung*, "Danziger Volksstimme", 19, 1928, No. 41, 1. Beiblatt (17. II).

16. Rozmarynowska Katarzyna, *Z działalności...*, op. cit., pp. 62–64.

17. Urbanik Jadwiga, *WUWA. 1929–2009. Wrocławska wystawa Werkbundu*, Wrocław 2009, p. 122.

18. In 1929 Kießling said that Schröder, a government construction councillor who cooperated with him in Gdańsk, moved to Kottbus where he became a municipal construction councillor (Kießling Martin, *Neue Baugedanken...*, op. cit., p. 704).

19. *Sie kann sich sehen lassen*, "Danziger Volksstimme", 20, 1929, No. 143, 1. Beiblatt (22. VI).



5. *The Children's and Internal Diseases Wards of the Municipal Hospital in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz, 1929, 1931 – general view, by Albert Krüger, Krankenhäuser. Städtisches Krankenhaus in Danzig. Erweiterung der "Inneren Abteilung", "Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung vereinigt mit Zeitschrift für Bauwesen", 52, 1932, No. 50/51, p. 589–593*

The Internal Diseases Department designed by Krüger in cooperation with Hans Riechert was also modern in its shape. The building completed in 1931 also had a cubic form, vast window surfaces, a flat roof, and a terrace. The interiors fulfilled all the requirements for modern hospital buildings.²⁰

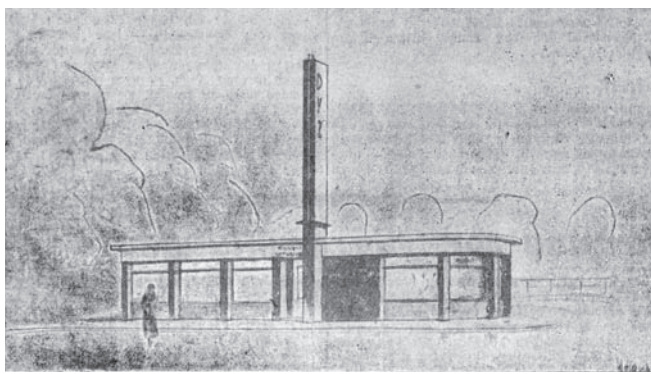
Other projects developed in the Construction Office also referred to health protection. These were designs of sanatoria for children to be built within the limits of the Free City of Gdańsk. A sanatorium for about 80 children was built in Zaskoczyn in 1929–1930 according to a preliminary design of Krüger and a detailed design of Riechert. The complex consisted of a two-storey principal block with three avant-corps on the courtyard side and a lower side wing separating the courtyard from the road. On the south there was a roofed hall for patients resting on folding beds.²¹

20. Krüger Albert, *Krankenhäuser. Städtisches Krankenhaus in Danzig. Erweiterung der "Inneren Abteilung", "Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung vereinigt mit Zeitschrift für Bauwesen", 52, 1932, No. 50/51, pp. 589–593.*

21. Barylewska-Szymańska Ewa, Szymański Wojciech, *Nowoczesna architektura...*, op. cit., pp. 17–18.

6. *Evangelical School in Gdańsk-Oliwa, 1930 – view of the new wing. Photo by Andrzej Mikliński, 2012*





7. Design of the Tourist Services Centre, 1931, *Hier könnte die Verkehrszentrale wohnen!*, "Danziger Sonntags-Zeitung", 2, 1931, No. 18 (3 III)

There was also a project to build a sanatorium for children near Stegna. The preliminary plans were prepared in 1929 by Krüger, while tender design was made by Hans Meier, an architect from Gdańsk. The building was composed of simple solids matching and penetrating each other. Flat roofs were to fulfil the function of terraces. An open-work gallery adjacent to the building was to be a place for patients to rest.²²

The children's sanatorium in Orlinki designed by the same architects in 1930 was also modern in form. Krüger prepared a preliminary concept, while Meier developed detailed designs, including interior decoration and furnishing plans.²³ The sanatorium for children in Stutthof was another modern project. It was developed by a district architect Fritz Keller in 1929.

School projects carried out after Kießling's departure were not so spectacular. Two existing schools were extended. According to the wish of the institution manager, the Protestant school in Oliwa acquired a new part designed by Krüger in cooperation with Riechert. It housed seven new classrooms, workrooms and sanitary facilities.²⁴ The principal block with vast surfaces of windows ended the view corridor of the street.

The project of extending the school in Gdańsk-Stogi was prepared in the Construction Office probably in 1930, as at that time the issue was discussed there. A new wing with flat roof was to be linked with the old part on the level of the first storey.

22. *Das geplante Kindererholungsheim bei Steegen*, "Danziger Neueste Nachrichten", 36, 1929, No. 184, 1 Beilage, (8. VIII).

23. *Erholungsstätten für Danziger Kinder*, "Danziger Neueste Nachrichten", 37, 1930, No. 121, 2. Beilage, (24. V).

24. *Glückliche architektonische Lösung*, "Danziger Volksstimme", 21, 1930, No. 250, 1. Beiblatt (25. X).

8. Design of the department store in Długa Street in Gdańsk, 1928, from the collections of the Herder Institute in Marburg



A completely new school was built in Brętowo (at that time outside city limits). A cubic building covered by a flat roof housed four spacious, well-ventilated and lit with sunlight classrooms with modern fittings and equipment.²⁵

New school extensions in Gdańsk-Stogi and Oliwa had brick façades referring to the already existing buildings they were annexed to. The school in Brętowo was also to be covered by brick facing. Maybe the Office's decision resulted not only from the need to conform to the local architectural tradition, but also from negative opinions about the white painted façade of the Helena Lange School.

In 1931 Erich Volmar who cooperated with the Construction Office prepared a design of the Tourist Services Centre. It was to be in the shape of a long one-storey pavilion with a semi-circular ending, big windows and a brick façade, covered by a flat roof. A high, cubic, lit element with an advertisement board was to be placed on one side of the building's front. The building was to house tourist services offices, a small conference room, sanitary facilities, and the Centre offices. The object was planned to be built near St. Elżbieta Bastion.²⁶ Despite the support for this idea expressed by senator Althoff, eventually, the project was not performed.

The construction of an indoor swimming pool was discussed in Gdańsk for several dozen years; however, due to financial conditions, the plans were many times put aside. In the interwar period the idea returned again and the object location was selected several times. When Kießling stayed in Gdańsk the schematic designs prepared outside the Construction Office were discussed. In 1929 Albert Krüger developed his own design. He travelled to Germany in order to study similar investments. According to his concept, the object was to be situated opposite the Police Headquarters in Okopowa Street. The building was to house a 25 m long swimming pool, massage rooms, changing rooms, physician's offices, and sanitary facilities. The object was to be a long, cubic building with big surfaces of regularly placed windows and a flat roof where a garden and a place for outdoor exercises were to be arranged.²⁷ For two more years the plans to build the swimming pool seemed to be quite real (even the location was changed); however, finally the economic crisis made the authorities abandon the idea.

Modern forms can also be observed in objects connected with technical infrastructure and designed in the Construction Office at that time: the main building of Gdańsk-Zaspa Wastewater Treatment Plant, the pump station in Gdańsk-Brzeźno, or the Municipal Power Plant transformer station.

Kießling's stay in Gdańsk, although lasting only for one year, definitely proved to be the most interesting period of the Gdansk architecture in the Free City of Gdańsk times. Among the successes of this period we count the preparation of the designs of two modern school buildings, a representative plaza at the end of Długie Ogrody Street, and a spa house in Gdańsk-Stogi. It was also the time of spirited discussions about architectural forms conducted by the director of the Construction Office and the local academic circles and architects. An interest in modern architecture initiated by Kießling remained quite strong and had a profound impact on all the projects prepared in the Construction Office till 1933. While architects preparing their projects outside the Construction Office, particularly those designing housing developments, still remained under the influence of traditional trends in architecture.

25. *Eine moderne Dorfschule*, "Danziger Volksstimme", 21, 1930, No. 24 (29. I).

26. *Hier könnte die Verkehrszentrale wohnen!*, "Danziger Sonntags-Zeitung", 2, 1931, No. 18 (3. III).

27. *Der Plan ist fertig*, "Danziger Volksstimme", 20, 1929, No. 125, Beiblatt (1. VI).