

The crown completing the titanic work. **Design for the Maritime Basilica in Gdynia**

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It is somewhat paradoxical that the design for a building which was never erected, the Maritime Basilica, is among the most popular components of the iconography associated with Gdynia in the interwar period. Both its fascinating forms and its complex historical and ideological context make this church an element of the modernist architecture of Gdynia that is certainly worth mentioning.

The idea of an emblematic ceremonial temple for the newly-established township is alleged to have been expressed for the first time by the social activist and entrepreneur Juliusz Rummel in 1924 in a letter to Bishop Stanisław Okoniewski.¹ The hierarch considered the thought excellent; the name "Maritime Basilica" was probably proposed by him. In 1928 the First Sea-Bathing Association (Pierwsze Towarzystwo Kąpielni Morskich) donated the building plot at Kamienna Góra. Although the verdict in the contest for the design was settled in December of the following year, no design was assigned for construction.² The second contest was arranged by the Association for the Construction of the Roman Catholic Maritime Basilica, established in 1932; Bohdan Pniewski's design was selected as a result of this contest in mid-1933. The cornerstone was ceremonially laid on 1 July 1934 during the celebrations of the Sea Festival.³ Actual construction works did not begin, however, and in 1937 it was decided to change the location: the church was to be included in the ceremonial Maritime Forum designed at the South Pier. The outbreak of the war put an end to the scheme.

Pniewski designed a three-nave basilica with a reinforced concrete frame. An elongated body narrowing upwards by step-like storeys, crowned by three identical towers with tall spires placed above the main nave, was a characteristic element of the outline of the church (Fig. 1). The façades articulated with the rhythm of dense lesenes were to have a sandstone or clinker facing. A sculpture with the Virgin Mary donated by an English captain was to be mounted above the main entrance.⁴ The arrangement of the interior was to a large extent determined by the church's purpose, which included ceremonies attended by a large number of notables; a huge, partially raised chancel extending over almost 3/7 of the length of the main nave was envisaged as a result (Fig. 2). The naves, covered with cross vaults, were to be divided by expressive "stalactite" piers; a stylised blind arcade frieze can be discerned in the sketchily marked articulation. The interior was to have alabaster facing.⁵

An article concerning the Basilica, published just before the war, began as follows: "Never in the course of centuries

[...] had our ancestors dreamt of events on the Baltic shore taking this turn; no-one before us could have envisaged a colossal Polish port, the construction of which has been witnessed by our contemporaries".⁶ These words aptly express not only the economic significance of Gdynia and Pomerania at that time, but also one of the most important themes in the Polish geo-political thought during the two interwar decades. The "towards-the-sea" orientation of the Polish political elites is exceptional when compared to other countries of Central Europe.⁷ Maritime propaganda was, as a result, very vigorous indeed: the dynamic Maritime and Colonial League was established in 1930, the Sea Festival began to be celebrated in 1932.

The flourishing of the port was seen as an act of historical justice, a retribution for the centuries of obstacles in its access to the sea which Poland had to overcome. In Stefan Żeromski's novel *Wiatr od morza* (Wind from the Sea, 1922), a little church at Oksywie which "many a wind had scourged" over the ages was a metaphor for the Polish presence on the Baltic shore.

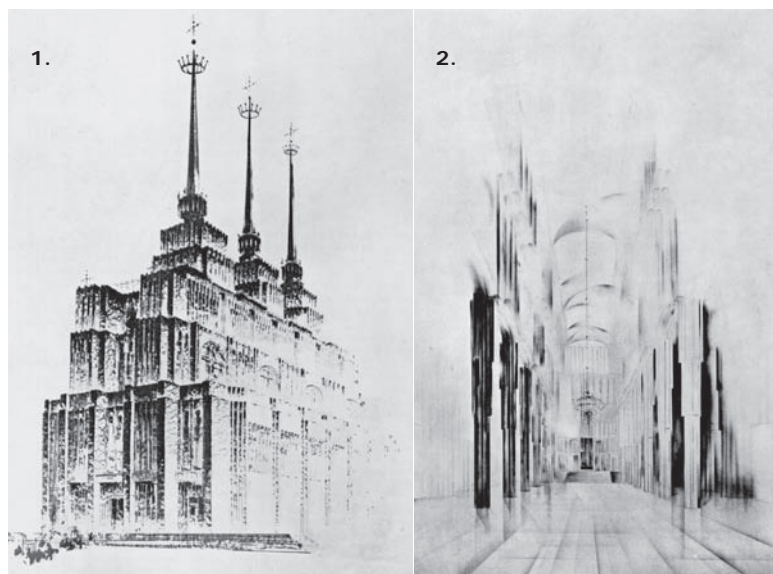
The Maritime Basilica was therefore intended to embody the modernness and prosperousness of contemporary Poland and at the same time to emphasise the "age-old" Polish presence in the Baltic region. Its very name, the Maritime

6. Wachowiak Andrzej, *Bazylika w Gdyni – dzieło polskich rąk i ducha*, [in:] *Monografia Wielkiego Pomorza i Gdyni. Z okazji 20-lecia powrotu ziemi pomorskiej do macierzy*, Lwów, 1939, p. 90.

7. Troebst Stefan, *Intermarium and Wedding to the Sea: Politics of History and Mental Mapping in East Central Europe*, "European Review of History", 10, 2003, No. 2, pp. 293-321.

1. Axonometric drawing of the Maritime Basilica (from *Bazylika Morska, Gdynia, 1934*)

2. Interior of the Maritime Basilica (from *Bazylika Morska, Gdynia, 1934*)



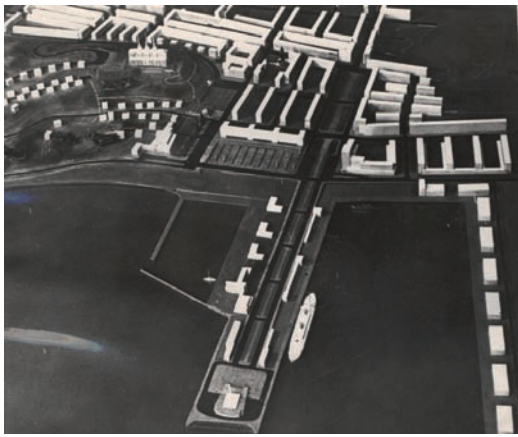
1. *Pomnik odzyskania morza*, "Latarnia Morska" 1934, No. 13, p. 2.

2. W.M., *Bazylika morska*, "Kurier Warszawski", 1929, No. 341, evening edition, p. 8, *Konkurs na projekt Bazyliki Morskiej w Gdyni*, "Architektura i Budownictwo", 1930, No. 3, p. 120.

3. "Kurier Warszawski", 1933, No. 179, morning edition, p. 4.

4. Wachowiak Andrzej, *Bazylika Morska*, "Latarnia Morska", 1934, No. 2, p. 7.

5. *Budowa Bazyliki Morskiej w Gdyni*, "Latarnia Morska", 1934, No. 10, p. 2.



3. Project of the Premier District in Gdynia, early version with Maritime Basilica located at the top of Kamieńna Góra, 1937 (Muzeum Miasta Gdyni)

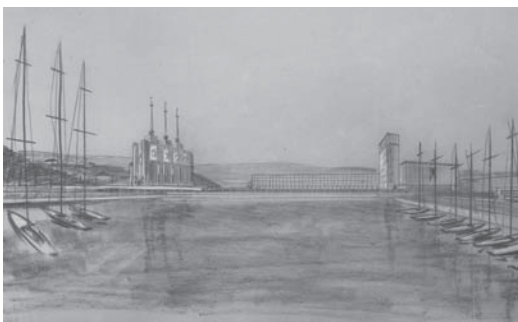
Basilica, was fraught with overtones of prestige and aspiration; it indicated that the church would be of special rank, clearly linking Catholicism with the idea of "Maritime Poland". This association was further accentuated by the ancient Marian title used in its appellation: its patroness was Our Lady Star of the Sea.

A masterpiece that would satisfy such expectations was not easy to create. The style that dominated church architecture during the first decade of the Second Republic was National Romanticism, which evoked architectural forms typical to provincial Poland. This convention was deemed unacceptable for the most monumental structures, which instead still referred to academic Revivalism (the Katowice cathedral) or, more rarely, to Modernism (the church of St. Roch in Białystok). The issue of an architectural form appropriate for a modern church was thrown into sharp relief by the first contest for the Temple of Divine Providence (concluded in 1930), which was to be the Polish state's chief official church. The church hierarchs pronounced designs related to Modernism to be empty of "the essence of church tradition in the Catholic spirit"; similar places of worship were accused of resembling factories, market halls or railway stations.⁸ The aesthetic traditionalism of the clergy was hardly acceptable to the architects. The situation was improved only when the second contest, concluded in 1931, was won by Bohdan Pniewski. Lauded by architects, critics and church dignitaries alike, this design launched Pniewski's stellar career.⁹ Much of its conciliatory formula can be discerned also in the design for the Maritime Basilica. The overall scheme of the proportion and arrangement of solids refers to the lines of American skyscrapers, made popular by the suggestive drawings of Hugh Ferriss; this was Pniewski's fundamental artistic conception for the Basilica. The dense, "razor-like" texture of the building may also have an American origin. The Basilica's Modernism was evident also in the consistent exposure of the skeleton construction, expressed by geometric stylisation in most of the interior. Pniewski coupled modern elements with elements that lent themselves to simple symbolic explanations: a church / ship with three spires for its masts (the motto of Paris, *fluctuat nec mergitur*, was often used in reference to the church) brought to mind Poland, then consolidating its three partitioned lands. The Gothic slenderness of the proportions of the interior, vast rosette windows and cross vaults evoked medieval associations so dear to the hearts of the church hierarchs.

It seems that the Gothic references in the Basilica may have also had a regional significance: the Northern Gothic tradition was recognised in the interwar period in the

8. Kakowski Aleksander, *Czego chce episkopat od architektów budujących kościoły?*, "Wiadomości Archidiecezjalne Warszawskie", 1931, No. 4, pp. 199-202.

9. On Pniewski see: Czapelski Marek, *Bohdan Pniewski. Warszawski architekt XX wieku*, Warsaw, 2008.



4. Project of the Premier District in Gdynia, later version with Maritime Basilica located at the South Pier, 1938 (Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, 1-U-1181-1)

Polish Pomerania as an old local element.¹⁰ Proximity of the splendid Gothic churches of Gdańsk may have been especially important. The Basilica, while easily recognisable as a Modernist building, would concurrently be Gdynia's "substitute historical monument". Yet it must be noted that the similarity of the Basilica's spire towers to a building that would most probably be very objectionable as its formal ancestor, the Admiralty in St. Petersburg, went unnoticed at that time.

The critics were enthusiastic, the Basilica was proclaimed to be "the crown completing the titanic work of constructing the port", postcards and contribution receipts popularised its image; and yet the start of the construction works was getting delayed. This, in fact, seemed a recurrent problem, because the design for the Temple of Divine Providence met with the same fate. This is because the vast construction enterprises of the period of the so-called Sanation – when after Marshal Piłsudski's successful coup d'état in May 1926 the power was in the hands of his adherents – were arranged without reckoning with the financial capability of the state, and public collections could never accumulate sufficient funds. Prospects for the construction of both churches improve ca. 1937–1938 when, after the death of Marshal Piłsudski, the post-May camp initiated the program of constructing showy districts intended to visually express and elevate the "spirit of the nation". Churches were to be their important element; this may be interpreted as the desire to incorporate the "religious moment" to the programme of "national brawn", as the poet Antoni Słonimski's ironic expression might be translated.

Integration of the church into the Forum at the South Pier meant that the idea of having the dominating feature of a temple above a city (similar to, for instance, the Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseilles) had to be abandoned in favour of a more complex spatial and functional solution (Fig. 3, 4).¹¹ A plaza open to the sea was to be located on the shore, with its southern frontage created by the Basilica, which positioned on a seven-metre-high platform and fronting the sea. On the north side, the plaza was closed by an Italianate building of the city hall with a freestanding tower. Proximity of the marina made the church-as-a-ship metaphor more literal. The new spatial composition broadened the range of historical references as well: the allusion to Piazza di San Marco in Venice is easily discernible (it had actually been proposed as the model for this district of Gdynia by Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski; besides, Pniewski was fascinated by Venetian architecture throughout his life), and the open water front can be associated with the Piazzetta.¹² In contemporary Poland, this evocation of the heart of the Serenissima had a very clear ideological meaning; after all, the ceremonial marriage of the state to the sea in 1920 had already been compared to the Venetian celebration of the *Sposalizio del mar*, the city's annual espousals to the sea.¹³ Italian references were additionally justified by the fact that Gdynia became a twin to Littoria (today Latina), a town established on the Pontine Marshes in Mussolini's time.¹⁴

Jan Parandowski's often quoted observation that "Poland lies on the shore of the Mediterranean" can be referred to the ceremonial district of Gdynia, too (although in this case it would be more precise to speak of the shore of the Adriatic).¹⁵ The Maritime Forum with the Maritime Basilica confirms the existence of an interesting idiom of ceremonial architecture and urban planning that was peculiar to Poland in the 1930s and quite different from the German and Soviet examples.

10. Chmielarska Barbara, Łoś Władysław, *Tradycja klasyczna i gotycka w architekturze Torunia czasów II Rzeczypospolitej*, [in:] *Sztuka i historia. Materiały sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Kraków, listopad 1988*, Warsaw, 1992, pp. 373-386.

11. Sołtyś Maria, *Gdynia. Miasto dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, Warsaw, 1993, pp. 294-305.

12. Polkowski Bolesław, *Sylwetka przyszłej Gdyni*, "Morze", 1937, No. 10, pp. 22, 23, Chudziński Henryk, *Forum i bazylika. Odbitka z "Kurier Bałtyckiego"*, Gdynia, 1938, p. 6.

13. Davies Norman, *Polish National Mythologies*, [in:] *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. by G. Hoskings, G. Schöpfung, New York, 1997, pp. 141-57.

14. Rusak Jarosław, *Gdynia - Littoria (Latina). Zapomniana karta polskiej współpracy i przyjaźni*, "Rocznik Gdyniński", 16, 2003, pp. 79-82.

15. Parandowski Jan, *Polska leży nad Morzem Śródziemnym*, "Arkady", 5, 1935, No. 5, pp. 113-114.