

Modernist Housing from the Late 1920s and Early 1930s in Sopot

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When discussing housing from the late 1920s and early 1930s in Sopot and Gdynia, we should first realize that in spite of being neighbours, each city's architectural landscape is completely different. This has been caused by several factors, the most important of which is the different function of the two architectural ensembles and the scale and time when their most intensive development took place. One of the other main reasons for this difference was the post-World War I geopolitical situation, whereby Sopot and Gdynia belonged to two different countries.

Whereas in the early 1920s Sopot's urban fabric was already developed and the town was visited by thousands of spa-goers every year, Gdynia was just a fishing village with a small bathing beach. This is why the 1920s and 1930s were a key period for Gdynia's transformation into a modern city,¹ whereas for Sopot this was a time of "supplementing" the existing urban structure and looking for new areas for housing development.

The architectural landscape in Sopot and Gdynia until the mid-1920s

On the wave of the growing popularity of sea bathing, the first bath house was opened on the beach in Sopot in 1823. However, it was only when the Gdańsk - Koszalin railway line was completed in 1870 and due to the economic boom following Prussia's victory in its war with France that the development of the bathing resort began to pick up speed². All the town's most prestigious buildings were built in the first years of the 20th century and almost all of them were designed by City Architect, Paul Puchmüller. Educated in Berlin,³ he was influenced by the architecture which was typical of the time in Germany and East Prussia, distinguished by its combination of historicist ornamentation with vernacular motifs,⁴ tall ceramic roofs, asymmetry of building structures and a romantic, often almost fairy-tale-like, composition of the façades. This stylistic convention was used not only in public buildings, but also in villas, townhouses and tenement housing, boarding houses and hotels. This picturesque historicist architecture still remains Sopot's trademark today. Most of the development included two- and three-storey villas, with four-storey townhouses built along the main roads.

1. Gdynia's urban development and architecture are discussed in a book by Maria Sołtysik (see Sołtysik M., *Gdynia, miasto dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. Urbanistyka i Architektura*, Warsaw 1993).

2. Stankiewicz J. *Rozwój przestrzenny Sopotu do końca XIX wieku* [in:] "Rocznik Sopocki 1976," Sopot 1976, pp. 33-66.

3. Nawrocki K., *Paul Puchmüller - architekt, który przemienił Sopot w miasto* [in:] *Architektura sopocka przelomu wieków XIX i XX. Paul Puchmüller-architekt, który przemienił Sopot w miasto (1875-1942)*, Sopot 2008, pp. 7-16.

4. Sołtysik M., "Malowniczy" zmiernik epoki, czyli problem stylu w architekturze około roku 1900 [in:] *Architektura sopocka przelomu wieków XIX i XX. Budowniczy Carl Kupperschmitt 1847-1915*, Sopot 2003, pp. 7-8.

In Gdynia, the construction boom took place some thirty years later than in Sopot. Until 1920, Gdynia was a typical rural settlement. The need to build a harbour and its hinterland led to the city's intensive development, which began with manor house style villas in Kamienna Góra and an ensemble of still rather historicist tenement houses in the city centre.

Moderate modernism in Sopot and Gdynia

In the 1920s, influenced by the modernist ideas that had been trickling into Sopot, the ornamentation of its façades became simpler. Much like in Gdynia, which was being built up from scratch, Sopot also had examples of modernised classicism next to buildings designed in the historicist vein. In the late 1920s, several Art Deco style buildings appeared in Sopot. The most interesting example of this style is the house built for the Evangelical congregation in 3 Maja 36 (Fig. 1). This multi-family house was designed in 1928 by Adolf Bielefeldt, one of Sopot's most accomplished architects. Each of the three storeys has eight apartments with two small rooms, a kitchen and a vestibule. Across from the staircase were shared toilets for the entire storey. The compact structure on an elongated rectangular plan is covered with a tall hip roof. On the axis of the western façade, Bielefeldt designed a portal with geometrical features. Sequences of narrow triangular breaks - five at the both frontal and

1. House for the Evangelical congregation, 3 Maja 36, Sopot, architect: Adolf Bielefeldt, 1928. Photo by A. Narczewska





2. Multi-family house, Krótka 1, Sopot, probably designed by Adolf Bielefeldt, ca. 1932: a. frontal façade; b. rear façade. Photo by A. Narczewska

rear façades and two each on the side add variety to the façade⁵.

Similar forms were also used in Gdynia at the time, for example in the house for PKP (Polish Railway) officials built in Podjazd 2-4-6 in ca. 1930.⁶

Because Sopot was more cosy and less insistent on stateliness and grandeur in the 1920s, it has few examples of verticalism, a form of moderate modernism very popular in Gdynia. One of the few examples of this style in Sopot is the house on the corner of Polna and Łokietka streets built in two stages in 1928-1929.

The housing development in Sopot at the time was heavily influenced by the local tradition, which was already developed and highly distinct. Architects would, on the one hand, refer to this tradition and, on the other, try to introduce more modern detail. An example of a building straddled between tradition and modernity is the nine-family house in Krótka 1, most likely built in 1932 and designed by Adolf Bielefeldt. The structure on a rectangular plan has a tall ceramic hip roof. The main feature of the front façade is its centrally situated entrance section with a prominent brick finish. The windows have ceramic frames contrasting with the light plasterwork of the façade. On the garden side, the façade is flanked by semi-circular breaks with strip glazing. On each floor the architect designed two 2-room flats with a kitchen, a bathroom and a veranda and a single 1-room flat with service space. The building has remained unchanged except for the partial replacement of the windows, unfortunately their original divisions have not been preserved (Fig. 2).

5. State Archive Gdańsk, Gdynia Branch, City of Sopot Files, file No. 2/2139.

6. Sołtysik M., *Gdynia, miasto dwudziestolecia międzywojennego...* op. cit., p. 210.

Housing ensembles in Sopot

After World War I, pauperisation was commonplace, which caused a growth in the demand for inexpensive housing with modest facilities. Housing co-operatives began to operate in both Sopot and Gdynia in the second half of the 1920s.⁷ Whereas the housing co-ops in Gdynia were the most active in the 1930s, in Sopot housing they completed a number of housing projects as early as in the second half of the 1920s.⁸

Many such ensembles were designed by the already mentioned Adolf Bielefeldt. In 1926 a complex of five semi-detached houses was completed in Langiewicza Street, and over the next three years the following projects came to fruition in the following order: an ensemble of three buildings in Reja Street, a housing ensemble in Kasprowicza Street and finally the largest of them all, a small estate in the area of Malczewskiego and Chodowieckiego streets. In 1930-1932, an entire complex of terraced houses was built along Architektów Street.⁹ All these ensembles have an understated and simply expressed architectural form. The two-storey structures are covered with tall gable roofs. Mostly with brick finish, the façades are detail-less, except for brick frieze boards and simple geometrical portals.

The housing in Książąt Pomorskich Street was developed in a different way. It was designed in 1928 by Wilhelm Werner, who was also the investor. The C-shaped layout consisted of three buildings connected at a right angle by two link structures with gateways underneath. Such an arrangement formed a large courtyard from the street-side (Fig. 3).

7. For more on Gdynia's housing co-operatives, consult the already mentioned book by Maria Sołtysik, *Gdynia, miasto dwudziestolecia międzywojennego...* op. cit., pp. 144-145 and a book by Małgorzata Rozbicka, *Małe mieszkanie z ogrodem w tle w teorii i praktyce popularnego budownictwa mieszkaniowego w międzywojennej Polsce*, Warsaw 2007, p. 264.

8. In Sopot, development projects were carried out by the following co-ops: "Gemeinnützigen Baugenossenschaft zu Danzig", "Gemeinnützigen Mittel-standische Baugenossenschaft. Danzig. Zoppot", "Volkssiedlung zu Danzig" and "Zoppoter Bürgerheimstätten".

9. Szymański W., *Architekt Adolf Bielefeldt. Działalność na terenie Gdańska i Sopotu*, [in:] *Architekt Adolf Bielefeldt 1876-1934*, publ. Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Gdańska, Muzeum Sopotu, Gdańsk 2003.

3. Multi-family housing ensemble, Książąt Pomorskich 13-23, Sopot, architect: Wilhelm Werner, 1928: a. view from the courtyard; b. gateway. Photo by A. Narczewska





4. Seven-segment housing block, Sobieskiego 57-67, 3 Maja 22-26, Architect: Wilhelm Werner, 1930-1931:
a. and b. corner segment. Photo by A. Narczewska



The houses had three storeys, two staircases and were covered with tall hip roofs. Every flat had three rooms, a kitchen, a servant's room and a bathroom. Two small shops were designed on the ground floor.¹⁰ The only variety in the façades included the staircase breaks, the rectangular portals and the different coloured plasterwork in the widow strips in the corners and the breaks. Part of the ensemble has been renovated in recent years but with an unsatisfactory result.

Wilhelm Werner also designed a seven-segment housing block on the corner of Sobieskiego and 3 Maja streets upon commission from a housing co-operative. This flat-roofed building was built in two stages. The design of the first four segments from the north side is dated 31 May 1930, while the design of the second part of the layout comes from early 1931. The building has three residential storeys and one 2-metre high, set-back attic storey.

Every segment on the Sobieskiego Street side is flanked by two-level brick verandas. The remarkably intriguing asymmetrical solution in the corner segment adds to the variety of the structure. Its composition is based on a combination of the four-storey break which towers over the whole structure with the set-back lower corner section which is rounded and filled with balconies (Fig. 4). This aerodynamic corner solution, the only one of its kind in Sopot, refers to the same modernist style as the Streamline Moderne, which had a very strong impact on Gdynia's cityscape. Gdynia's first building with curved forms was built in 1928 at Skwer Kościuszki 10/12. This style had been present in Gdynia's architecture both in the early and

10. State Archive Gdańsk, Gdynia Branch, City of Sopot Files, file No. 2/2523, 2/2415, 2/2357.



5. Multi-family building complex, ul. Książąt Pomorskich 9, Kazimierza Wielkiego 8-10, architects: E. Wronka & O. Kempe, 1927. Photo by A. Narczewska

the mature stage of functionalism.¹¹ The staircases of the Sopot ensemble in Sobieskiego Street get extra lighting from "thermometer-type" vertical windows. This is the most "Gdynia-like" building in Sopot. Its structure has remained unchanged, but the replacement of most of the windows without preserving their original divisions, materials, and in the upper storey also the shape, and the refurbishment of individual segments in various colours negatively impacted the architectural appeal of this extraordinary ensemble.

The area of Książąt Pomorskich and Kazimierza Wielkiego streets was the site of intensified development in the second part of the 1920s. The ensemble of two multi-family houses erected in 1927 and designed by E. Wronka & O. Kempe is especially noteworthy among the buildings from that period. At the time, it was frequent for the architects themselves to also be the investors in a project. This was the case here. The smaller building was designed for six families with a single staircase, the other one consists of two six-family segments (Fig. 5). Both have only small flats, consisting of two rooms with a bathroom and kitchen. In contrast, the buildings' architecture introduced a number of intriguing visual solutions that had never been seen in Sopot before, including the combination of different brick textures, which produced a highly original and dignified façade outline, and introduction of rectangular offset portals.¹² Behind the stepped gables are tall gable roofs, while the rear façades were designed with equal care as those in the front. Fortunately, the entire ensemble is preserved in a rather good condition, except for the regrettable loft extensions.

Five years later, another three-segment, two-storey corner building, also designed by E. Wronka & O. Kempe, was built on the other side of the intersection.¹³ The two

11. Sołtysik M., *Na styku dwóch epok. Architektura gdyńskich kamieni*, Gdynia 2003, pp. 133, 182-183.

12. Ceramic façades with equally interesting textures were used in two multi-family buildings at Berka Joselewicza 17 and 19, from about 1929.

13. State Archive Gdańsk, Gdynia Branch, City of Sopot Files, file No. 2/2304.

6. Multi-family house, Książąt Pomorskich 12-14, Kazimierza Wielkiego 9, Sopot, architects: E. Wronka & O. Kempe, 1932
Photo by A. Narczewska





7. Architect Ottmar Kempe's house, ul. Abrahama 38, Sopot, 1930: a. Abraham Street façade; b. Mickiewicz Street façade. Photo by A. Narczewska

outermost segments, placed at an obtuse angle to each other, each had six two-room flats with a bathroom and kitchen, while the middle segment had three three-room flats and a staircase. The rather understated brickwork façades are completely devoid of detail. The slight setting-back of the central section and the extra lighting provided by corner windows is a certain distinguishing feature of this composition (Fig. 6). This building has also had its attic converted for dwelling purposes, which deformed its structure by vertical extension.

Mature modernism in Sopot

The building tradition that had developed at the turn of the 20th century had the greatest impact on Sopot's housing from the late 1920s and early 1930s. There are, however, two buildings with modernist forms that stand out among the town's architecture of the time.

The first of these buildings is the 1930 house of architect

8. Multi-family house, Wybickiego 12/14: a. loggias in the frontal façade, b. balconies on the gable façade. Photo by A. Narczewska



Ottmar Kempe, co-owner of the Erich Wronka & Ottmar Kempe design and construction company, which operated in Sopot in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ The plot where the architect decided to design and build his house was at the corner of Mickiewiczza and Abrahama streets. The building has a flat roof and its shape is based on an asymmetrical combination of two cuboids reminiscent of the cubist variety of functionalism (Fig. 7). Adjoining the lower, one-storey part is a brick veranda which turns into a terrace on the upper storey. The basement had utility rooms and a garage. The ground floor was designed for a drawing room, a dining room, kitchen with pantry, a large vestibule, bathroom and a backdoor to leading to the garden. The bedroom, children's room, servant's room and dressing room were on the first floor. The staircase has extra lighting through an intriguingly shaped window. The building has survived practically unchanged, only the window openings in the attic have been enlarged.

The other extraordinary building whose structure reflects modernist trends in architecture is the multi-family house in Wybickiego 12/14 (Fig. 8). It was most likely built in the first half of the 1930s. The building's blueprint has not survived so it is impossible to determine the architect or the exact construction date. The two-floor building on an elongated rectangular plan has a flat roof. A six-axial, flat break in the middle part had an additional storey, probably an attic, window strips. The façade's chief element is a centrally-placed two-axial break with loggias. The windows of both staircases are arranged vertically in "thermometer" style.

Closing remarks

The presented examples of Sopot's architecture show that its 1920s and 1930s development was focused mainly on meeting rational housing needs. The apartment sizes were reduced, while the construction of single and multi-family villas ceased almost completely.

What is distinct about Sopot's residential architecture in the late 1920s and the 1930s?

Most noteworthy is the combination of uncomplicated, very traditional structures with the understated and modern detail in the façades. The roofs had no turrets or dormer windows, without the form which had been ingrained in the cityscape. The ability to become part of the existing architectural environment without recourse to explicit solutions and historicist citations should also be a lesson to today's architects.

14. State Archive Gdańsk, Gdynia Branch, City of Sopot Files, file No. 2/1871.

