

## Between Two Poles

**Aleksander Buriak**  
*Kharkov, Ukraine*

It is virtually impossible to present a theoretically reliable image of Gdynia's architecture of the 1920s and 1930s by perceiving it from the point of view of the 'pure' doctrine of Modernism. In my personal opinion, the historical perspective is distorted if in studying architecture between the two great wars, both in general terms and in the case of Gdynia, we concentrate our research on the myths of the so-called Modern Movement. After all, during an unbiased examination, we are going to see, apart from many functionalist examples, numerous structures with Art Déco features.

### **Problems with the style of the 1920s and 1930s**

Art Déco was the heart of the period between the World Wars both in the USA and in Europe – it was the architecture of 'the silent majority'. Modern Movement and Art Déco grew on the same professional experience (late Art Nouveau in architecture) and on the same artistic background (early avant-garde in fine arts). Art Déco was inspired by the same sources as the Modern Movement, i.e. a treasure box of formal 'inventions' of Modern artistic movements. However, noisy doctrinaires, masters of Modern Movement, and then historians of the 20th century architecture failed to recognise Art Déco nearly till the end of 1970s. While Modern Movement included in its arsenal of artistic media the most ascetic and most doctrinaire examples of abstract art (architectons of Malewicz, neoplasticism of Mondrian and van Doesburg, counter-relief of Tatlin, and prouns of Lisicki), Art Déco casually enjoyed new decorative

possibilities, creating more and more modern links between 'abstraction' and 'figurativeness' – pure geometry and ornament.

Art Déco distinctly preferred symmetry to asymmetry, as compared to manifesto Modernism. It also applied stylised architectural orders and historical motifs on a large scale. This can be seen in sometimes abundant decorative details emerging on all the functional elements of the building – walls, windows, plafonds, lighting elements, and also in sculpture and painting.

Even a superficial examination of Gdynia architecture of the 1920s and 1930s reveals in many buildings elements of artistic expression characteristic of Art Déco: it is often included in their general Modern composition, however this is not always the case.

The conclusion drawn from the analysis says that the 1920s and 1930s in architecture and interior design in Gdynia oscillate between early Modernism and Art Déco, i.e., two stylistic and methodological poles.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, even after WWII, when the political environment imposed upon Polish architecture a shift towards the so-called 'social realism', architecture more frequently resembled moderate forms of Art Déco than the Soviet stylistics of "heritage domestication."

---

1. In 1920s and 1930s this situation was quite typical; similar phenomena can be spotted in seemingly constructivist architecture of Kharkov, the then capital of Ukraine (Bouryak A.P., Kraizer I.I., *Between Constructivism and Art Déco. Stylistic Attribution of the Dzerzhinski Square (presently Freedom Square [ploshchad Svobody]) in Kharkov.*, [in:] *Heritage in Risk. Preservation of 20th Century Architecture and World Heritage*. Proceedings of scientific conference, Moscow 2006, pp. 49-51



1. Interiors of Gdynia Railway Station. Photo by the author



2. Façade of the Navy Headquarters. Photo by the author

### Representative buildings

Public representative buildings, important and renowned, are the most obvious examples of Art Déco. These include the building of the railway station, constructed in 1923-1926, most probably the earliest example of Art Déco in Gdynia. Its composition with signs of 'national Romanticism' consists of side pavilions resembling the wings of Polish gentry manor houses and a central projection of church-like silhouette. After WWII, in 1950-1954, the station was replaced by a much bigger building, nominally in the style of 'social realism,' however I regard this structure as the latest relic of Art Déco built in this town.<sup>2</sup> Behind the main façade of the station in the style of modernised classicism we can find interiors bearing strong resemblance to the mid-1930s Art Déco. We can see the whole collection of stylish forms and details, such as dynamic spaces, round pillars, characteristic plafonds with complex profiling and lights hidden behind shallow cornice, lamps standing on consoles, wrought iron ornamental banisters, etc. (Fig. 1).

Most of the examples of this style can be found among the buildings constructed for maritime administration. Chronologically, the building of Maritime Office was the first (A. Ballendstedt, 1927). We can see small glazing in the upper door and window casings (the remains of Art Nouveau) and expressionist-modelled turret over the main entrance. Then there are the buildings of the Maritime School (currently Gdynia Maritime University) and the Seaman's House (*Dom Marynarza*, currently the Fisherman's House (*Dom Rybaka*), designed in similar style.

2. Stylistic features of both railway stations in Gdynia and their links with the Art Déco style were analysed by Maria Jolanta Sołtysik in her paper delivered during the conference in Gdańsk in 2006, also published in the post-conference materials in her essay on constructing the railway station. Cf. Sołtysik Maria Jolanta, *Dworzec kolejowy w Gdyni – czyli modernista w nowej sytuacji* [in:] *Aktualne problemy konserwatorskie Gdańska. Modernizm powojenny (1946-65)*, Gdańsk 2006/07, pp. 75, 77 and 78.

The list of examples of the most ornamental public buildings ends with the western wing of the Navy Headquarters (Fig. 2)<sup>3</sup>, where the façades are composed of strongly stylised Gothic motifs. The most vivid example of Gdynia's Art Déco was supposed to be the Basilica of the Sea (designed by B. Pniewski, 1934, but never built)<sup>4</sup>, bearing strange resemblance to a three-masted ship and a powerful electrical turbine. More reserved and yet 'modern' in its details is the sacred complex at Wzgórze Św. Maksymiliana. Of all the other public buildings, the District Court bears clear characteristic features of Art Déco; symmetrical in its layout, with many elaborate details in its interiors and partially preserved historical furniture (Fig. 3-5).

3. The presence of Art Déco stylistic forms in the architectural designs of both, the Maritime Office building and the former Pol-steam building (now the western wing of the Navy Headquarters at 44, Waszyngtona), as well as in the Maritime School (now Gdynia Maritime University) was also discussed by Maria Jolanta Sołtysik in her guidebook to Gdynia historical buildings: *Gdynia, miasto nowoczesne, miasto zabytkowe*, Gdynia 2005, pp 6, 7 and 12.

4. Sołtysik Maria, *Gdynia, miasto dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. Urbanistyka i architektura*, Warsaw 1993, pp. 369-370

3. The District Court building. Photo by the author





4. Interiors of the District Court building. Photo by the author



5. Benches inside the District Court building. Photo by the author

### Office buildings

The pride of Gdynia before WWII, i.e. its modernist administration and business buildings manifest their Art Déco features to a lesser extent. However, even this typological group presents undoubtedly some kinship with this style. Gdynia's Modernism as such seems to be more artistic than dogmatic, so it imbeds other stylistic elements into the tissue of architectural work of art.

The set of compositional forms, quite distant from the so-called 'functional truth', applied in office architecture, is vast enough. It consists of rhythmically repeated shapes, transforming the building into something like a huge three-dimensional ornament, dynamic cuboids 'suprematically' pushed together, linked with symmetry in their formation of spatial model, the detail of their façade in *streamline moderne* style (Fig. 6), composition accentuating elements of 'technostyle', and favoured by Art Déco details, textures, offsets, and grooved plasterwork surfaces.



6. Tenement house at 89, Świętojańska and 2, I Armii Wojska Polskiego. Photo by the author

### Tenement houses

Housing architecture shows similar tendencies, although in a more reserved way. Art Déco-like features are demonstrated mainly in the shapes of corner buildings (Fig. 7) which expand the possibilities lying in artistic expression. We can notice here some reflection of pan-European evolution of the architecture created between the world wars, starting with expressionistic trends in the first half of 1920s up to the already-mentioned *streamline moderne* in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The buildings have compositional elements and decoration characteristic of moderate Art Déco: austere symmetry of the whole structure and streamlined balconies. The balconies are decorated with steel balustrades with refined, decorative, even ornamental grillwork. The entrance to the building is often highlighted by offsets, creating a sort of perspective portal (Fig. 8), decorated with textured plasterwork. This form is represented by a very pretty building 'Opolanka' in Kamienna Góra.

7. The Hundsdorff tenement house. Photo by the author



## Villas

The cubistic style of early Modernism is definitively predominant in the architecture of Gdynia's exclusive residential districts, Kamienna Góra in particular. Beside grey, cuboidal volumes you can randomly find villas stylised to gentry manor houses or Palladian residences. Art Déco influences take the form of the nice and pretty inconsistencies in Gdynia Modernism, mainly in decorative details as if not matching the rest, such as beautiful balconies and stairs.

And it is in Kamienna Góra where you can find a true gem of Gdynia Art Déco which is a magnificent exception to the rule (Fig. 9): it is a two-storey building with a steep roof. Its composition reconciles motifs of British Art Nouveau and Wright's 'prairie houses', roof tiles, bricks, rubblework walls, and flat reinforced-concrete cornices: a mix bonded together with the spirit of Art Déco into an impeccable stylistic whole.

8. A stone portal at 59, Świętojańska.  
Photo by the author



## Conclusions

Recognition of an obvious fact of stylistic complexity of Gdynia architecture of the 1920s and 1930s has significant methodological consequences for the contents and modes of further research on Gdynia heritage between the world wars. It also opens a wide scope for activities not only related to documentation and stylistic attribution of historical buildings as such, but also connected with identification of sources of artistic inspiration for Tri-city architecture of the time and channels of translation of Modern art trends, i.e. Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism, etc. against the background of international links of the Polish art of the 2nd Polish Republic (between WWI and WWII).

9. Villa at 14, Korzeniowskiego. Photo by the author



### Aleksander P. Buriak, PhD

Head of the Architectural Fundamentals Department  
at Kharkov State Technical University of Construction and Architecture (Ukraine)  
Professional interests: methodology of architectural and urban development design and education of  
architects, history of Modernism in Ukraine  
e-mail: bouryak@habitat.corn.ua