

THE CONSERVATION OF WORKING-CLASS BUILDINGS IN GDANSK

I would like to introduce you to the problem of what I would qualify as the "architecture of the proletariat".

In what does this problem consist? There is effectively to be found no small number of these ancient but modest dwellings which for many years failed to arouse any interest on the part of professionals; for architecture historians such buildings did not embody enough of the traditional forms belonging to art history, and for the ethnographers they were not near enough to "folk art". Those who use — or rather inhabit — them today very justifiably complain of their miscellaneous disadvantages; most of them have no modern conveniences (such as central heating, baths, etc.). And, finally, they have been, and continue to be, the first buildings to fall victim to the various renovation schemes decided on by the authorities in charge of architecture and town-planning.

On the basis of my own experience I would like to give a brief account of the problems relating to these last-remaining illustrations of the architectural traditions of the proletariat of former days by citing a few examples from the area of the Polish eastern seaboard port of Gdansk.

In old Gdansk one finds only the handsome houses of the rich merchants and other rich burghers. The members of the lower classes of society — day-labourers, unemployed and other unfortunate persons — made their homes in modest buildings on the outskirts of the town or hidden away inside courtyards.

Proletarian homes housing one single family were extremely rare. The earliest known example, a small half-timbered house, probably built before the end of the 16th century, is remarkable for having survived the ravages of time and the destruction caused by the last world war. The typical proletarian building was the long two-storey structure of standard design housing several families which was built by a charitable institution or to be rented as tenements. Unfortunately almost all these old houses were burned down in 1945, as was also this fine half-timbered house dating from the first half of the 18th century.

There has, however, survived one single house of

the balcony type, probably dating from the early 17th century, near the Franciscan church. This was formerly the most frequent version, in Gdansk, of what were known as the *Kanzelhäuser*.

In the parts of the town least damaged by the war one finds a few more recent standard two-storey houses of the kind built for the workers in the 19th century when the town was becoming industrialized. Here is a specimen of a half-timbered house in the lower town, built in the first half of the 19th century to house workers from an arms factory which was the earliest modern factory in Gdansk. A similar house dating from the second half of the 19th century, built for dock-workers, is to be found in the harbour district. It is divided up into small units each containing a room with kitchen; a staircase leads to similar small dwellings on the floor above.

Outside the fortifications, where space was a great deal more plentiful, houses tended to be simple low structures with one storey only. In the harbour area there still stands a working-class house which is the oldest of the type in Gdansk, surrounded by later 18th- and 19th-century buildings. Its outside walls are "block-built", i. e. entirely of wooden beams with no bricks. It is divided into four small dwellings. The form of the gable and of the attic window have been borrowed from the regular architectural tradition.

We must not forget the magnificent and extremely ancient traditions of Gdansk as regards hydraulically-powered industrial installations. Here I must draw attention to one of the more important works of this type — a properly engineered canal thirteen kilometres long dug in the 14th century, or perhaps as early as the 13th, whose waters set in motion several of the town's watermills, including the famous Great Mill of the Middle Ages.

The physical features of the areas bordering on Gdansk are such that natural hydraulic power was available for industrial purposes without there being any need for engineering devices. As far back as the Middle Ages the many streams which flowed down from the boulder-clay hills were used not merely for fishing but also to drive watermills. Along these water-courses there gradually

grew up mill buildings, farm outbuildings and also the summer residences of the rich burghers and the nobility.

Ever since the 13th century the Cistercian abbey at Oliva about 10 kilometres north of Gdansk had possessed outstanding importance. Between the 16th and 18th centuries a very busy industrial centre grew up there, with 23 flour-mills, forges, paper-mills, saw-mills, powder-mills and other hydraulically-powered works. Over and above those built by the Cistercians, various other buildings and installations were put up and exploited by the burghers and the nobility. Near all these industrial buildings there grew up small colonies of workers to provide the necessary labour, and these houses were still perfectly preserved at the beginning of the twentieth century. For the most part they were built of brick or half-timbered and were typical working-class accommodation — long, single-storey buildings divided up into several small dwellings, which are today absolutely unsuitable for living in without complete interior modernization. Also in the Oliva area, but along the seashore in the immediate neighbourhood of the seaside resort, there have survived the characteristic narrow village streets and the fishermen's cottages of the ancient fishing village of Jelitkovo.

To the north of Oliva lies the famous and most picturesque watering-place of Sopot, famous for its international song festival. The story of the traditional founding of Sopot goes back to the early Middle Ages. As recently as the beginning of the 19th century there was nothing in the area except the mansions of the nobility and, on the coast, a humble fishing village. The last remaining fishermen's cottages are still, most surprisingly, visible today among the newer buildings. With the progressive conversion of the ancient town first into a spa and later into a bigger resort for patients taking the waters, the former fishermen's cottages were turned into small boarding houses, and provided, among other things, with decorative wooden verandahs. These verandahs are also typical features of the later big two-storey boarding houses and the other buildings put up for letting to summer visitors. Sometimes when I wander through the picturesque streets of Sopot I am reminded of the magnificent old Bulgarian houses of Veliko Turnovo, Tryavna and Koprivshitsa*.

*I would like to take the opportunity, in connection with Sopot, of pointing out that in my opinion and that of a number of my colleagues it would be extremely useful if there could be a conference on the problems relating to the older watering places. The Polish conservationists would be very pleased to help organize such a conference.

The need to conserve and protect old working-class houses was realized years ago, but met with complete lack of understanding on the part of our art historians, architects, conservation specialists and — above all — our authorities. In the course of the development of the urban complex of Gdansk in these last ten years hundreds of them have disappeared.

During the last four years or so there has been growing awareness of the fact that these modest buildings do not merely illustrate the different stages in the historical development of the town or possess very considerable value from the point of view of the history of society and culture but can also, on the aesthetic level, be considered as important factors in architectural and urban planning. Even the difficult problems connected with the use and restoration of these buildings — most of which are in a very poor and dilapidated condition — are now very realistically seen to be capable of solution.

It is now two whole years since the wholesale demolition of these houses was suspended. At the same time, historical and architectural research, as well as surveying, has been in progress.

In the course of our recent attempts to protect these old working-class houses there have emerged three main methods of approach, which we will now describe:

1. The first of these concerns the larger complexes, whose historical, urban, architectural and townscape value and value as formal compositions are unquestionable. Such, for example, is the ancient part of Oliva, where the authorities themselves have finally abandoned the modernization of the layout of several streets and the building of further unsightly masses of concrete living accommodation. Externally the old houses remain unaltered and may subsequently be restored. Their interiors on the contrary, are mostly being entirely modernized and either turned back into dwellings or rendered suitable for some other purpose. The size and style of the new buildings now planned must be subordinated to those of the old ones.

It is doubtless true that in Sopot the large-scale destruction of the townscape has gone much further, but at least we would like to give the area of the town centre the same protection as ancient Oliva. Two weeks ago we won — and very probably our victory was final — our two-year battle against the project to erect four further twelve-storey blocks of flats on the edge of the old centre of Sopot. Unfortunately the first of the series of five had already been put up a couple of years earlier.

2. The second approach concerns the smaller complexes and the isolated buildings which can be adapted *in situ*. As an example I would mention the old village of Orunia — today a southern suburb of Gdansk — which lies along the old canal referred to above. In addition to a few small dwellings Orunia still possesses, among other things, an 18th-century inn and a forge of the same period with bellows. Both buildings are now lived in. And here we come to the best-preserved and oldest of the working-class housing estates built by charitable foundations in Gdansk-Wrzeszcz (late 19th century); in my opinion it could very easily be modernized and be used once again as living accommodation. There is a rhythm in the division of each of the buildings in the identical series into small units which has unquestionable architectural and townscape merits.

Naturally in the area to which this second general approach applies one cannot strictly abide by the principle that the original townscape must be protected throughout. For example, one must permit the building of new and broader streets in the neighbourhood of the protected area, or of high buildings.

3. The third group covers those workers' houses whose further survival is conditional on their removal elsewhere, for example, the abovementioned houses of the harbour area in Gdansk. At Oliva

work is in progress on an open-air museum, or rather a conservation sector. Even before the Second World War a small open-air museum had been planned there, and at that time what is today the last surviving typical Dutch land-reclamation windmill was moved from the low-lying area in the delta of the Vistula to the former abbey garden at Oliva. Today the project for the Oliva conservation sector has as its starting point the surviving historic complex of working-class houses, a forge and an old mill building. The most interesting workers' houses form the urban area of Gdansk which can no longer be preserved *in situ* can be removed to this sector. Only a part of the buildings preserved there will actually be museum exhibits; several of the workers' houses and mill buildings will serve a variety of cultural or other purposes and may, for example, be turned into artists' studios or possibly be lived in.

The idea of protecting old working-class houses is now acquiring progressively wider acceptance, partly because in these days when inhuman, uniform and colossal reinforced concrete blocks are being increasingly put up its implementation can preserve something of the authentic character and individual and human feeling of our towns, our threatened landscape and our cultural environment.

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RESUME

Les longs bâtiments à un seul niveau, typiques de l'habitat ouvrier ancien à Gdansk, ont été pour la plupart détruit durant la seconde guerre mondiale. On en conserve pourtant encore quelques uns, ainsi qu'un bâtiment à galerie du XVIIème siècle, quelques maisons à un étage du XIXème siècle — témoins de l'industrialisation de la ville — ainsi que des maisons datant de la deuxième moitié du XIXème siècle, à deux étages avec un logement à chaque niveau.

En dehors de la ville, on trouve des bâtiments locatifs à un seul étage, dont le plus ancien date de la fin du XVIIIème siècle.

Aux environs de Gdansk, les conditions géographiques ont favorisé la construction de moulins hydrauliques (XIIème et XIIIème siècles), de forges, de scieries, etc. . . Autour de ces installations ont rapidement surgi quelques petites agglomérations ouvrières, conservées jusqu'au XXème siècle.

L'utilité de sauvegarder ces constructions ouvrières et industrielles — documents historiques et éléments importants dans l'architecture et l'urbanisme de cette région — n'a été comprise que ces dernières années. Les problèmes que posent la conservation et l'utilisation de ces bâtiments sont faciles à résoudre. En Pologne, trois éventualités se présentent pour la sauvegarde d'un patrimoine de ce type:

1. Ensembles importants, d'un intérêt primordial quant à l'histoire, l'architecture ou l'urbanisme, etc. . . On conserve et l'on restaure les façades des bâtiments tandis que l'intérieur est modernisé et adapté à de nouvelles fonctions (habitat ou autres).

*2. Ensembles plus petits et bâtiments isolés dont l'adaptation *in situ* est possible. Leur conservation ne pose pas de problème, mais la sauvegarde de leur environnement n'est pas obligatoire.*

3. Habitations ouvrières, destinées à d'autres fins.