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Architectural Symbols of a City - Case Study

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Abstract. The identity of a city is understood as a collection of individual features, which give the city its individual character and distinguish it from other places; it undoubtedly constitutes a cultural value, which should be cherished. A city is made special thanks to its geographical location, landscape values, urban layout and – architecture. In the case of Sopot – a spa located on the Bay of Gdansk, the mosaic of the above-mentioned features has created a unique image of a seaside resort. Sopot architecture is distinguished by a complex of buildings dating back to the turn of the 20th century, which is the largest one in the country. The architecture of the city is dominated by eclectic influences, mainly Neo-gothic and Art-Nouveau, as well as early modernism; it is also possible to find examples of holiday architecture, with characteristic wooden verandas. The identity of a city and its image is not always permanent and unchanging in time. In the case of Sopot, only 5% of the existing buildings were damaged during the Second World War. However, the most important ones, characteristic for the city and located in its representative part, were destroyed. The war was followed by a period of economic stagnation and isolation from the free world, which lasted for almost 45 years. At that time there were no comprehensive revitalisation projects for this prestigious area of the city. The buildings constructed in the 1960s did not create an architecturally and spatially coherent urban tissue. The situation changed in 1989, when Poland regained its sovereignty. Since that time numerous investment projects have been carried out in Sopot, including the prestigious ones, located in the representative part of the city. This paper has been devoted to Sopot architecture – both historic and modern, the dominating architectural trends and the issues connected with the coexistence of "the old and the new". The buildings characteristic for the city, historic and modern ones, which constituted (or constitute at present) important landmarks in the urban area, and which were (or still are) the city symbols, have been analysed. Unfortunately, some of the buildings constructed over the last 25 years in the representative part of the city are not consistent with its unique character. The decisions made by investors, architects, city authorities and the monument preservation office may have serious negative effects; they may cause degradation of urban space and, as a result, harm its image. In the summary of this paper possible dangers connected with realising investments in the most important city locations, the ones with historic context, have been indicated, and recommendations aimed at elimination of such dangers have been presented. The priority – particularly in cities with an established, unique image – should be to ensure that architectural and cultural heritage is preserved, while new architecture should speak with modern language and introduce new values to its historic surroundings.

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1. Introduction

Today's image of Sopot, with its urban layout and architectural expression, was formed between the 1850s and 1930s. The individual character of the city was created thanks to its geographical location and landscape values – the natural boundaries of Sopot are delineated on one side by the sea shore, and on the other side by forests (today the Landscape Park), while the area of the city is characterised by varied terrain. Natural landscape values have contributed to the creation of a unique urban setting, which is supplemented by architecture with historic features and decorative façade design. The architecture of the city is dominated by eclecticism and historicising styles (mainly Neo-gothic and Neoclassicism), while the influence of Art-Nouveau can be found in architectonic details. Today the architecture of Sopot constitutes a complex of buildings characteristic for the Northern European seaside resorts from the turn of the 20th century, which is the largest one in the country. This, together with landscape values, creates a unique image and strong identity of the city [1].

2. The identity of a city and its image

The identity of a city and its image is not always permanent and unchanging in time. In the case of Sopot, only 5% of the existing buildings were damaged during the Second World War. However, the most important ones, characteristic for the city and located in its representative part, i.e. in the so-called Lower Sopot, the district which stretches along the beach, were destroyed. The Spa House together with the casino, as well as the two representative hotels – the Metropol and the Wenninghof were burnt down. Sopot was a seaside spa and was visited by guests who, apart from taking baths and enjoying different treatments, were also gambling. The reputation of the casino went far beyond the city boundaries; there were stories about lost fortunes and suicides committed by the profligates in the depths of the Bay of Gdansk. Despite the war destruction, some of the public utilities, such as the balneological centre, the Grand Hotel and the pier, have survived in the seaside part of the city. All of them are still functioning today and constitute important landmarks in the city space (figure 1, 2).

Figure 1. Historic architecture of the city, illustrated by public utility buildings: the balneological centre (left) and the Grand Hotel (right)

Some other buildings which contribute to the character of the city, namely the Neo-gothic churches and housing districts with representative historic tenement houses, located around the central part of Sopot, have also been preserved. The war was followed by a period of economic stagnation and isolation from the free world, which lasted for almost 45 years. At that time there were no comprehensive revitalisation projects for this prestigious area of the city [2]. The buildings which were constructed in the 1960s did not create an architecturally and spatially coherent urban tissue. The situation changed in 1989, when Poland regained its sovereignty. Since the 1990s numerous investment projects located in the representative part of the city have been carried out. Despite these new investments, the identity of the city is still created by the historic architecture from the turn of the 20th century. The identity of a city and its image – these two expressions are sometimes used interchangeably, yet they are not synonymous [3]. The identity of a city is defined by a number of elements (features), and a city may have only one identity. In contrast, there is no single image of a

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city – an image may be a projection of certain elements of the same identity. An image is created by recording pictures and transforming them in human consciousness; every person may build a slightly different image of the same reality. However, the sum of reflections made by a number of observers usually renders the image of a given reality more objective. In the case of Sopot, the image of the city is not homogeneous. The housing districts, which did not suffer during the war, have retained their character, and investment activities carried out in these districts consist in renovations and modernisations, while the image of the district remains unchanged [4]. The situation is different in the central part of the city. Due to the war damage and neglect in the years 1945-1989, a lot of new investments of various scope have been carried out in this part of the city, starting from in-fills supplementing the street frontage, to larger concepts, addressing whole city quarters. How do these currently realised investments fit into the character of the city, what kind of image do they create? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to analyse the modern architecture of Sopot, based on the buildings characteristic for the city, which were constructed in its representative part and reflect various stylistic trends.

3. Contemporary architecture of the city

The identity of Sopot is composed of a few factors: its location with access to the sea on one side and forests bordering the city on the other side, varied terrain, green areas with old trees, as well as historic architecture with interesting, sometimes fancy forms and wealth of detail. And it is this architecture of a Northern European seaside resort from the turn of the 20th century, with its strong and established image, which constituted a psychological barrier for architects working in Sopot in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century. The architects were afraid to employ modern language of design and chose historicism or post-modernism which, as derivatives of eclecticism, were supposed to fit better into the existing context of historic architecture and thus constituted a less risky design path. It was only later (in the second decade of the 21st century) that the realised projects began to use the language of modern architecture, leaving contemporary traces in the city space.

3.1. Historicism and post-modernism

Historicising architecture imitates historical forms, hence it is difficult to perceive it as fully creative and original. Its advantage is a high-quality design technique, translated in project realisation into good architectonic detail and good sense of scale, thanks to which a new building can exist in the historic context of its surroundings. Despite the fact that historicism continues the tradition of a given place, its greatest fault is lack of connection with the time when a building was constructed. A chance observer may find it difficult to differentiate between a historicising building and an original one (in this case a building dating back to the 19th century), and succumb to an illusion that they commune with a real thing – as may happen in the case of the Rezydent hotel in Sopot, despite the fact that its architecture, saturated with detail and wealth of form is, to a certain extent, an over-interpretation of historical forms (figure 2).

Figure 2. Historicising architecture of the Rezydent hotel (in the foreground) against the background of historic buildings dating back to the turn of the 20th century

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Post-modernism, like historicism, is another architectural trend which derives from eclecticism. The main feature which distinguishes post-modernism from historicism is creative interpretation of historical models – interpretation, not imitation. Post-modernistic architecture is creative; while drawing from historical forms, its aim is to transform them in an original, modern way. Post-modernistic architecture and its unique character is connected with architectonic detail. The detail, which is the result of the artistic vision of an author, creates post-modernistic architecture – the architectonic form usually remains traditional. Despite the fact that post-modernism practically did not appear as a prevailing trend at the turn of the 20th century, buildings of different sizes, representing this trend, have been constructed in Sopot. In Bohaterow Monte Cassino street, which is the main pedestrian precinct in the representative part of the city, two buildings were constructed as infills in the existing street frontage. Both of them respect the scale of their surroundings (they relate to the scale and division proportions of a historic tenement house), and constitute examples of balanced post-modernism, with characteristic, original, post-modernistic detail. Today both buildings integrate well with the historic context of the city dating back to the turn of the 20th century (figure 3).

Figure 3. Examples of post-modernism buildings in the street frontage; the apartment building Three Graces (left) and the department store Monte (right)

The biggest investment realised in Sopot during the last decade is the Haffner Centre, completed in 2010. It is a complex of public utility buildings, which includes restaurants, cinemas, galleries, a conference centre, a hotel and shops – with the total area exceeding 50 thousand square metres. The investment was realised within the so-called public-private partnership, established by the city (the investment site), a bank (financing) and a developer (design and realisation). Due to its location in the representative part of the city – destroyed in 1945 – the Haffner Centre constitutes today the new heart of Sopot, yet its rhythm shows symptoms of illness. Post-modernistic features are clearly visible in the architecture of the complex, but the employed architectonic details are simplified, repetitive and, as such, are not a good example of creative post-modernism.

It could even be argued that they are a pastiche of historical styles. Critical opinions concern not only the architecture, but also the quality of materials which were used. This quality, taking into consideration the rank of the place, should be the best, and is merely average. Due to the above, the new city centre does not have a distinctive image, while its unoriginal and reproductive architecture is no match for the historic architecture of the city. It is particularly visible when we compare the architecture of the original Spa House built in 1910 and its contemporary pseudo-historic version constructed in 2010 [5] (figure 4).

Another problematic issue is the scale of the concept, which covers the entire central part of the city. This, together with its architecture, which is a simplified version of historic buildings, may result in transforming Sopot from a cosy place with unique character into a commercial spa, a destination for mass tourism.

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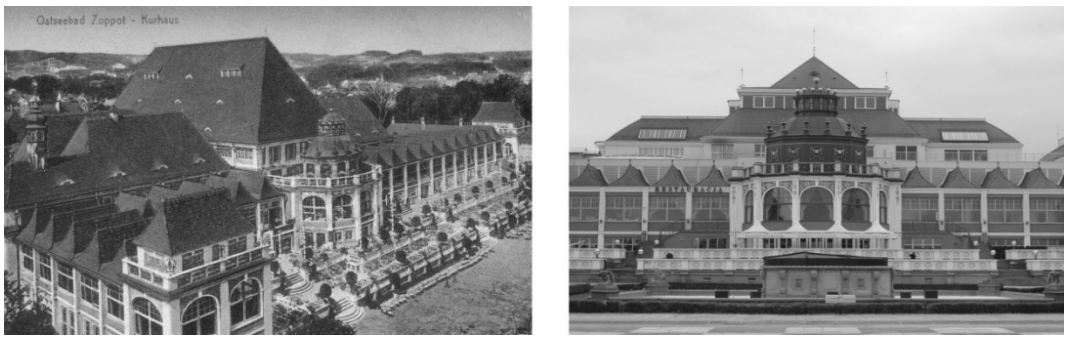

Figure 4. The Spa house in Sopot; building from 1910, destroyed in 1945 (left), photo from the collection of the Sopot Museum, and contemporary architecture from 2010, imitating the historic original – only fragments of the rotunda (in the foreground) remained from the original building

3.2. Modern architecture and its trends

The modern architecture of Sopot, which lacks clear references to historical styles, is represented by a few buildings. The Bayjonn Hotel, constructed at the same time as the Haffner Centre described above, does not represent any defined stylistic trend. It is a modern and original expression of the architect. Its individual architectural idea (the curved façade of the building, application of modern shape of bay windows, using non-standard materials on the façade), proper scale and proportions of the façade, interesting details (a canopied terrace on the ground floor, visible elements of mechanical ventilation), as well as high quality of the materials used, result in a building with valuable architecture, which integrates well with the context of its surroundings (despite its stylistic distinctiveness) and is connected with the time of its construction.

Another important example of contemporary architecture in Sopot is the railway station complex, completed in 2016. It is the second important investment in the city (next to the Haffner Centre), which was realised with participation of the public-private partnership. In this case, as opposed to the Haffner Centre in Lower Sopot, the obtained result is not a failure. The architecture of the complex draws from the spirit of modernism; in the part located along the railway tracks it is modernism with industrial characteristics, while the part facing the city (the hotel building) loses its strong character and relates to new modernism. Strong, minimalistic form of the railway station building located next to the railway tracks, maintained in dark colours (the patinated copper siding of the façades) changes into a more gentle, sculptural, white form of the hotel near the exit to the city. The example of Sopot railway station shows that modern stylistics (differentiated depending on the context of its surroundings) may co-exist with historic architecture, neither trying to dominate it, nor constituting solely the background for it (figure 5).

Figure 5. Contemporary architecture in Sopot; the Bayjonn hotel (left) and the new train station with the hotel building in the foreground (right)

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3.3. Meanders of architecture

The so-called Crooked House is a characteristic building, constructed in 2004 and located in the frontage of Bohaterow Monte Cassino street - the main pedestrian precinct. The inspiration for this project were the works of a famous Polish artist – Jan Marcin Szancer, who was an illustrator of books for children [6]. Szancer's illustrations are magical, full of mystery and romanticism. The Crooked House does not possess any of these features – it is solely an architectural joke – despite the fact that it was constructed with the use of good-quality materials and has a certain charm. It should be located in an amusement park and not in the main street of a seaside spa with established identity, connected with the heritage of historic architecture from the turn of the 20th century. Like in the case of the Haffner Centre, the Crooked House may contribute to lowering the rank of Sopot – a cosy spa with unique character, which is currently being transformed into a popular, colourful and noisy place, similar to many others which can be found on the coast (figure 6).

Figure 6. Today's architectural symbol of the city – an architectural joke, the so-called Crooked House in the street frontage

4. The architecture of the city and its symbols

The representative examples of architecture from the last quarter of the century, which are mentioned above, constitute today a part of the city image. Have they integrated with the historic context of their surroundings?

There is no doubt that some of the above-mentioned buildings have found their place in the historic city structure. Among them there is the historicising Rezydent hotel, which relates perfectly to its surroundings and constitutes an important element of the urban layout in the upper section of Bohaterow Monte Cassino street – the main pedestrian precinct. Two post-modernistic buildings (the department store Monte and the apartment building Three Graces) have also fitted into the city landscape, adding new value to the architecture dating back to the turn of the 20th century. The buildings mentioned in other parts of the article, representing the trend of modern architecture without historical references, also show that it is possible to find a place for a successful contemporary creation in a historic tissue. To sum up, it can be stated that buildings representing various architectural trends like historicism, post-modernism, as well as examples of individual creations within the trend of contemporary architecture can succeed in finding their place in the context of historic architecture, dating back to the turn of the 20th century. This conclusion, however, does not concern all the realisations discussed here. It leaves out the Haffner Centre and the Crooked House – two buildings important for the image of the city, located in its most representative places, which did not contribute any new values to the cultural and architectural heritage of Sopot.

What is the city architecture like today, then? Which of the buildings is Sopot associated with? Several historic buildings, located in the representative part of the city and, consequently, easily recognisable, can aspire to be regarded as symbols of the city. Among them are: the balneological centre, the Grand Hotel and the wooden pier, which is one of the longest piers in Europe. However, the investments connected with construction of the Haffner Centre, have changed the city skyline seen

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from the water. The Sopot waterfront is dominated today by new post-modernistic, or rather pseudo-historic, buildings, such as the new Spa House and the Sheraton Hotel. The historic Grand Hotel has lost its symbolic meaning (in the 1980s it was the icon of the city, mentioned in songs and shown in films); while the balneological centre has been dominated by the form of the new spa centre. The Sopot pier is still a recognisable city landmark. However, in connection with the Haffner Centre buildings (the Spa House, as well as the pavilions flanking the entrance onto the pier) it has also changed its old character and is currently dominated by the aesthetics of the Haffner Centre. So what is the architectural symbol of the city today? When the word "Sopot" is entered into the Internet browser, the first result obtained is a photograph of the Crooked House. Looking through postcards displayed in kiosks and at post offices, we can also observe that the dominating image is that of the Crooked House. Today the Crooked House is also the most photographed place in Sopot and, as such, has become the architectural symbol of the city.

Cities are always associated with their most important architectural landmarks. Sopot – the most recognisable seaside spa in Poland – is symbolised today by architectural kitsch. It influences the current image of the city and may have serious consequences in future. The identity of a city is also created by people – both its inhabitants and visitors. In the second half of the 20th century Sopot was regularly visited by actors, artists and writers, who often chose it as their place of residence. It resulted from the unique atmosphere of the city, which was a cosy place, conducive to creative work, peaceful relaxation and unhurried pace of life. The change in the image of Lower Sopot (the Haffner Centre, the Crooked House) has already influenced the way in which the city is perceived. The artistic life of the spa, connected for decades with art and culture, is being replaced today by noisy entertainment for mass tourists, who do not expect any aesthetic or intellectual experiences. If this trend is not a temporary one, it may mean that the city is slowly beginning to change its long-established identity.

5. Conclusions

Caring about the preservation of architectural and cultural heritage should be a priority, particularly in cities with an established, unique image, and it seems that architects are aware of it. However, there are still architectural designs which consist in reproducing, copying or making imitations of historic buildings, as well as projects which are realised without understanding or respect shown to the context of a given place. Investors, as well as local government authorities and monument protection communities participate in creating the city space, yet without doubt the main role is that of architects. It is extremely important that architects understand specific features, characteristic for the existing city tissue. To understand the context of a given place should constitute the main guideline in the search for design solutions. It may consist in saving the spatial layout of the place or in the introduction of a new architectural forms (e.g. modernisation, maintenance or contemporary creation), but it should always be done with respect shown to the local context of the place. Respect for historic surroundings in connection with contemporary language of design should be the optimal artistic path, creating new values within the city space and enriching its identity. In cities with an established image connected with the heritage of historic architecture, new architecture should not be subjected to stylistic limitations. Theoretically, restrictions might help to preserve the cohesion of a given place, but at the same time would limit the possibilities of imaginative architectural creations and result in architecture which is adjusted to its surroundings in a superficial way; architecture which does not reflect either the time when it was created, or the current level of cultural and technical development.

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