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Authenticity of Architectural Heritage in a Rebuilt City. Comments to Vaclav Havel's Impression after His Visit in Gdansk in 2005

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Abstract. There is no doubt that authenticity is a cardinal feature of architectural heritage and should be protected in the same way as historical and cultural value of monuments or their integrity. Sometimes, one decides to reconstruct a destroyed historical building due to important emotional, scientific, artistic or political reasons (e.g. the Zwinger Palace in Dresden or the Royal Castle in Warsaw). However, the solution which should be an unusual exception too frequently becomes a common and unnecessary practice in contradiction to the sense of architectural conservation. Moreover, a significant part of the society accepts this kind of action and mistakenly believes that copies of historical buildings are originals. Vaclav Havel, the former Czech president and the Nobel Prize winner, gave some consideration to this issue during his last journey to Gdańsk in 2005. With a dilettante casualness, contrary to the modern principles of conservation, Havel concluded that not the authenticity, but beauty/aesthetic value of monuments would matter to common people. In this paper, we try to confront his remarks with the main issues concerning the rebuilding of Gdańsk after the Second World War, especially the partial protection of the city's historical plan and the socialist transformation of allegedly reconstructed burgher houses. We also outline the sad circumstances which led to the post-war annihilation of many survived historical houses in Gdańsk and show how they were ultimately replaced with the neo-historical façades. Moreover, we try to provoke reflection on this matter among people (including some architects) living in the era of "liquid modernity".

1. Introduction

Rebuilding of Gdansk after Second World War was an amazing architectural and social phenomenon. Polish population was settled in a burnt ruins of Gdansk, which had played significant role in rough Polish-German relationship before its destruction, and in spite of ambivalent feelings people started re-erecting the city. In the 1940s' the fates of Gdansk were uncertain. Some representatives of the new Polish authorities (e.g. prof. W. Czerny) decided to preserve the most important monuments, the other, however, were quite sceptic for protection of "Prussian heritage". Many aspects of those dilemmas were described by architects and town-planners who had been participating in the rebuilding works since the late 1940s [1-4]. That discussion revived after the political and economic transformation of post-communist Poland in the 1990's [5-8]. Around the year 2000, some of influent local artists and writers published a few papers on the affirmation of "old, good, Gdansk/Danzig-style" instead of modernism [9-11]. They suggested that architectural imitations would be better way to protect the character of the historical centre of Gdansk. Their point of view was unintentionally supported by

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Nobel-prize winner Vaclav Havel, who visited Gdansk in August 2005. After his visit, V. Havel wrote the following brief note in his memoirs:
By the way, respect for their own heroic history and the sacrifices they have made has given the Poles a kind of enthusiasm for building and reconstruction. It's not just that all of Warsaw's Old Town, the whole of Gdansk, a large part of Łódź, and other places that were totally destroyed by bombs have been completely rebuilt. The most important reconstructed city centers are exact replicas of the original structures. In our country many would turn their noses up at this, but in Poland everyone understood this was the correct thing to do. And they were right: in a hundred years it won't matter a bit whether a particular house in Gdansk was built two hundred years earlier or later. After all, even Czechs can no longer distinguish between Gothic and the pseudo-Gothic. [12]

In this paper, Havel's remarks were confronted with the main issues concerning the rebuilding of Gdańsk after the Second World War.

2. Historical background

Between 1454 and 1793, Gdańsk (Danzig) was the largest town and fortress within the borders of the Polish Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita* – "the Republic"), as well as an exceptional political creation. Its economic power and status were similar to that of a sovereign republic [13].

The political contract forming the basis for the marriage of Gdańsk, or a centre of the post-Teutonic Prussia (Between 1309–1466, it was a part of the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia; since 1466 called "the Royal Prussia"), and the Polish Crown brought tremendous economic benefits to the town. Gdańsk virtually monopolized the whole maritime trade of the Polish Commonwealth, became independent from the Hanseatic League as well as reached a position of the potentate in the European grain trade. Despite sharp cultural, religious and national differences between ethnically and culturally German, Protestant Gdańsk and Catholic Poland – resulting rather in dislike than affinity – their symbiotic and mutually loyal, pragmatic relationships were profitable for both sides until the second half of the 18th c.

After the fall of "the Republic" (1793–1795), the city, together with the whole territory of the Polish province called "the Royal Prussia", became a part of the Kingdom of Prussia and, after 1871, a part of the German Empire. In 1939, the Free City of Gdańsk (1920–1939) was incorporated into the Third Reich. In the spring of 1945, the whole, so far practically untouched, urban complex of Gdańsk was turned into a sea of ruins. [14]
The year 1945 meant not only the destruction of the historical urban (architectural) structure, but also the annihilation of Gdańsk as an original social and cultural formation.

The devastated and depopulated area was re-settled by Polish settlers coming from various parts of the pre-war Poland, who had their various ethnical and cultural traditions, mostly completely different from North European Protestants' way of life. (Gdańsk suffered the same fate as Königsberg in Preussen, Stettin (Szczecin), Breslau (Wrocław) and Polish Lwów (Lviv), though in the last case, the urban structure and historical architecture have fortunately survived). [15]

Polish perception of Gdańsk was of a somewhat schizophrenic nature. In „the Republic's" time, the city was regarded with pride, though its real strangeness provoked distrust. (Though the inhabitants of Danzig seemed to have viewed the mutual relations in a similar way … .) As a result of the fall of Poland, from the end of the 18th c., a natural process of the political and national integration of the inhabitants of Danzig with the Prussian (or German) State steadily developed there towards the extreme nationalism which reached its climax in the enthusiasm of 1939. This – subsequently – led to justified Polish resentments, resulting after 1945 in the common negligence and even the destruction of some material remains of German presence in Gdańsk, or in the destruction of the survived products of Gdańsk culture [11, 14].

At the same time, after 1945, the "recovered" town and its culture triggered Polish fascination by having its source in Polish national, romantic mythology (then supported by the official communist propaganda), constructing its vision of Gdańsk as a wonderful city, wholly loyal to "the Crown" and

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inhabited by inhabitants without ethnicity, who were in a mysterious way transformed into "the bloody Prussians" and whose German roots had to be therefore passed over or reduced in favour of free from bad associations Netherlandish motifs.

On this background, the decision of the new Polish authorities to rebuild the historical centre of Gdańsk in its "historical" form proved the good sense of the social need for the city's presence in the new Polish reality. However, in no way may we talk about a conscious attachment to the physical shape and cultural heritage of the city because Gdańsk was then a simply unknown place to most Poles. [7, 11, 16-18]

So, this is why the mythologisation of Gdańsk has resulted in hopeless efforts of the settlers to attach themselves to the local cultural tradition, and then to naive attempts to reproduce the local architectural forms.

The historical core of Gdańsk, or the area enclosed with the ring of the 17th c. fortifications, consisted of the Right Town (Główne Miasto, *Rechtstadt*), located on the west bank of the Motława River, the Old Town (Stare Miasto, *Altstadt*), located to the north, the Suburb (Stare Przedmieście, *Vorstadt*) located to the south, the Granary Island (Wyspa Spichrzów, *Speicher Insel*). They were completely and densely covered with a tissue of historical buildings of mostly medieval origin. Other areas, such as e.g. the Lower Town (Dolne Miasto*, Nieder Stadt*) and the old suburb Long Garden (Długie Ogrody, *Langgarten*), situated on the east bank of the Motława River, were of less importance. The buildings here were newer and many plots were never developed.

3. The assumptions and practice of rebuilding

The notion of *rebuilding* means extensive repair of a severely damaged (ruined), yet still existing, building. In architectural conservation, *rebuilding* can be associated or is sometimes identified with the term *reintegration*, which means a recovery of the compositional integrity of a building (or a complex). It should not be confused with the term *restoration*, which means conservation repair which is to *"revive the original concept or legibility of the object"* [19], nor should it be replaced with the term *"reconstruction"*, which means the replacement of a non-existing (e.g. completely ruined, razed to the ground) historical building with its exact, well-documented, copy on its site. The reconstruction of a non-existing piece of a building may obviously be a part of its rebuilding.

Though the exact circumstances of the political decision enabling the rebuilding process still seem to be rather obscure, the discussion on its sense started in Polish intellectual circles in the spring of 1945 and was held until the end of the last century. The first concept behind the rebuilding project concerning historical centre of Gdańsk was made almost at the same time in 1945, and the rules of the rebuilding were changing and were formulated in the 1950s. [2, 3, 7, 8]

- ***The street network*** was almost fully preserved in the area of the Right Town. The Old Town and the destroyed areas of the Suburb were to be transformed to a considerable degree.
- ***The burgher houses*** were to be rebuilt in their historical form, which should be understood as rebuilding the façades or street elevations rather than a full reconstruction of every building.

Houses forming the basic architectural structure of Gdańsk represented the type of the *"hanseatic burgher house"*, commonly used (with local variations) from the Netherlands to Livonia. They were situated on square, long plots (approx. 5.0 x 25.0 up to 8.0 x 40.0 m). The plans of the buildings were longish, divided into three sections. The buildings occupied usually about a half of a plot and they had usually 4–5 levels and an attic. The most characteristic room of the house was an approx. 5.0 m high *"great entrance hall"*, accessible from a large, raised front terrace, which was adjacent to the street. The three (or two) axial façades with big windows were topped with decorative gables. The rear part of the plot was usually occupied by large annexes, so the yards were small and sometimes the plots were even entirely developed.

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Figure 1. Ulica Długa *(Langgasse)* during rebuilding (Collection of the Faculty of Architecture, Gdansk University of Technology, ca. 1950).

The architectural costume of the façades changed over time; primary gothic forms were covered by later decorations from the late Renaissance to the 19th century historicism. Similarly, the structure of the buildings underwent permanent transformations from single family houses to tenement houses, so in the 20th c. only some of them seemed to have preserved their original arrangement of rooms. Sometimes, two bordering buildings were joined into a bigger one. After 1868, most of the fine front terraces were demolished. All this brought about inevitable loss of monumental and artistic value of historical buildings. Ultimately, at the beginning of the 20th c., transformations went so far that the town represented a rather chaotic picture of an eclectic creation. In order to prevent further deformations and deterioration of the quality of burgher houses, the city made efforts to promote architectural patterns as well as carried out the restoration of façades lasting until the 1940s. [20, 21].

Unfortunately, in 1945 the most precious parts of the town together with the Right Town sustained devastation reaching 90 per cent of buildings on the area of approx. 1.2 sq. km, though the real degree of destruction of individual historical buildings has never been, and will never be, known. In the face of such a mass destruction, the principle of "reconstruction" had to be restricted only to the area of the Right Town. [8, 22]

Moreover, in accordance with newly-realised ideas of socialism, the Right Town (similar to the Old Town and the Suburb) was to be, and finally was, rebuilt as a "working-class housing estate". This caused total rejection of the original, historical principle of individual property, then an individual house located on an individual plot. It resulted in the construction of a new urban structure; single burgher houses were in fact replaced with long blocks of flats divided into segments approximately corresponding to the divisions of historical plots and covered with a screen of individual façades; with a bit of surrealistic effect created by some "doorless" ones.

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Figure 2. Ulica Długa *(Langgasse)* at present (G. Bukal, 2014)

Another consequence was the reduction of the length of buildings (e.g. approx. 22 m), now turned into a width (or depth, approx. 13 m) of the block of flats, and only two buildings were rebuilt in their full length.

Since the ruined annexes were not to be rebuilt, the initial, densely developed, closed urban blocks divided into private spaces were replaced with modern opened blocks with large, empty, public (or rather nobody's) yard inside. Only a few public buildings were situated among the new blocks.

In spite of the war damages caused by artillery fire and the resulting blaze, a great number of buildings survived as worse or better preserved ruins. Some of them collapsed during winter storms at the turn of 1945 and 1946; some came crushing down because of poor condition, and some were demolished intentionally because of the threat they had posed, or in order to facilitate the construction works, or accidentally in various circumstances. The stonework from such demolished houses was frequently relocated and thus survived. However, the intentional demolition covered almost all gothic walls dividing the houses, all vaults above basements and all survived annexes.

The rebuilding of Gdańsk was not a conservation project, so the governmental funds were earmarked mainly for the construction (= rebuilding), and not conservation of the existing buildings. This conditioned a grim situation of the quite well preserved historical buildings, the "dark number" of which was carelessly used and then later steadily demolished, along with architectural details and historical fittings. This continues in fact also today, though for other reasons.

The rebuilding was diversified [2, 3, 7, 8]. Despite the common and enthusiastic use of the word "reconstruction", we may assume that the real (and probably unknown) number of reconstructed façades was only a small percentage of the whole. It is actually possible because of the number of

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buildings (just in the Right Town there were more than 1000 houses), lack of accurate documentation, shortage of professionals (conservation architects, architectural historians, well-qualified craftsmen and other co-workers), and generally working in haste, in the situation of the post-war poverty and confusion. In the event of the lack of documentation showing older, historical stages of buildings, they were – if possible – reconstructed in their newer, eclectic forms. Relocations of the façades (though rather the stonework) were a common practice, which caused numerous errors made in re-composition. Also, the designing of pseudo-historical or slightly stylised modern buildings was commonly practiced. The façades of that type were sometimes encrusted with original details transferred from elsewhere.

In some cases, even though an appropriate documentation for reconstruction was available, the reconstruction had never been carried out.

The décor of the façades was of different sort and value: carefully made reconstructions, individual neo-historical stylisations and contemporary (modern) artistic concepts typical of the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, with the use of various colours and textures, as well as monotonous surfaces of grey plaster without any decorations.

Since the "rebuilding" of Gdańsk has been continued for long decades, the largest and most interesting group of buildings, built in place of the non-existing historical burgher houses, are newly-designed buildings with façades of various forms of different aesthetic quality. As such, we can distinguish:

- individual façades representing local type of socialist realism's official style; these were modern buildings covered with lavishly decorated, modernised, neo-renaissance façades;
- schematic façades inspired by baroque or neo-classical patterns. Their usually good proportions and well-copied modernised details compensate for the shortage of individualism. They give a general appearance of the streets;
- façades of buildings designed in the contemporary architectural styles – from modernism to post-modernism, and later fashions;
- pseudo-reconstructions from 1980–1990s, which reflect contemporary tendencies to Disneyfication of social and urban space.

To summarize, we may say that most façades were contemporary architectural creations, sometimes partial reconstructions and sometimes creations with reused original spoils. However, their quality was diversified – from well-made reconstructions, or individual designs, to stencilled copies or poor neo-historical variations. It seems to be certain that the wide range of works stretched over decades and, combined with the nature of the work process in conditions of permanent shortage and shoddiness of production typical of real socialism, inevitably led to the deterioration of the quality of the architecture.

The survived burgher houses found themselves beyond the reach of interests of the authorities and state-owned investors, and seem to have been frequently perceived as a hindrance to achieve the objective.

Historical public edifices, such as town hall and churches, were usually at least severely damaged. They were rebuilt and at the same time restored in general conformity with modern principles of conservation. In some cases, their parts (e.g. vaults, roofs, tops of towers) had to be reconstructed. Most attention was paid to this group of buildings. A separate and especially difficult problem was the restoration of their interiors because the loss of and damage to fittings and furnishings caused by fire were extremely hard here. [6, 8]

Unlike stately edifices or religious buildings restored with paradoxical full blessing of the communist governments, the historical granaries (or ruins) dated sometimes back to the 15th c. were absolutely neglected and their few still existing remnants are waiting for the supposedly inevitable "ultimate solution".

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Figure 3. Ulica Chlebnicka *(Brotbänken Gasse)* before 1945 (Collection of the Faculty of Architecture, Gdansk University of Technology). At the left is the façade of the English House (Dom Angielski, *Englisches Haus*).

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Figure 4. Ulica Chlebnicka *(Brotbänken Gasse)* at present (G. Bukal, 2014). Of note are the reconstructed façades at the right.

Fortifications. More than eighty per cent of the impressive ring of bastioned fortifications constructed in the 16th and 17th c. was razed to the ground at the turn of the 19th and 20th c. The

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remnants survived the cataclysm of 1945 in contrast with the remnants of medieval defensive walls, literally sunk in the a sea of historical buildings. They were mostly ruined and then rebuilt and sometimes needlessly or even bizarrely "reconstructed" (e.g. some towers, water gates) in order to create historical frames for the rebuilt urban complex. It sounds like a bad joke that one of a few survivors, the almost intact medieval Trump Tower (sic!, Baszta pod Zrębem, *Trumpfturm*), ultimately collapsed in 1982 as a result of many years of neglect …

4. Conclusion

With hindsight, it has to be stated that the decision to rebuild Gdańsk in the historical spirit was the right path to take, even though the rebuilding was not a conservation aimed at the protection or resurrection of the past, but a political action undertaken to demonstrate Polish entitlement to the recovered land. After all – was there any better alternative?

It is astonishing that it was really possible in a devastated country with socialist economy. The greatest value of the undertaking was that it has recovered the city for the cultural landscape of Europe, which was possible owing to a large scale of the operation, plainly visible on the example of street elevations (façades). However, the scale, or perhaps the totality of the rebuilding, has brought not only the expected result of more or less reliable historical forms, but also irreparable loss of survived walls, vaults or details, or the authentic fabric, which by definition should be subject to architectural conservation. Similarly, to other wartime destroyed towns, Gdańsk lost its unique atmosphere or age value in the blaze of 1945. Its dispersed remnants can hardly be found today, yet we can discover authentic spoils sunk in the mass of fifty-year-old walls. Despite its neo-historical façade, the Right Town is only a fifty-year-old creation of social realism dated from the 1950s. It is, however, an undeniable monument of architecture, urban planning and architectural conservation of that period.

The above mentioned issues concerning the rebuilding of Gdańsk after the Second World War also help us to better understand Vaclav Havel's comments [12]. The President of Czech Republic, who is well-known for taking care of the renovation of Hradčany, did not have detailed knowledge about Gdańsk's Main Town, but only the information that "the city was raised from ruins". Being aware of the limitations imposed by professional conversation, Havel concluded that the rebuilding of the city was probably the best solution, and the issue of the monuments' authenticity may not be significant for future generations. This last statement may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, Havel's opinion stems from his acceptance of renovation activities carried out in Gdańsk. On the other hand, Havel's reflection concerns the wider issue of diversified awareness pertaining to the value of monuments in the society and among specialists. It is undisputable that a nation may only protect its cultural heritage if it is aware of it. Whereas the example of Gdańsk shows that most of the society pays more attention to finery than to the essence of monuments. Truth – the term forming the basis of all scientific or academic investigations – becomes arbitrary ("changeable") or just liquid.

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