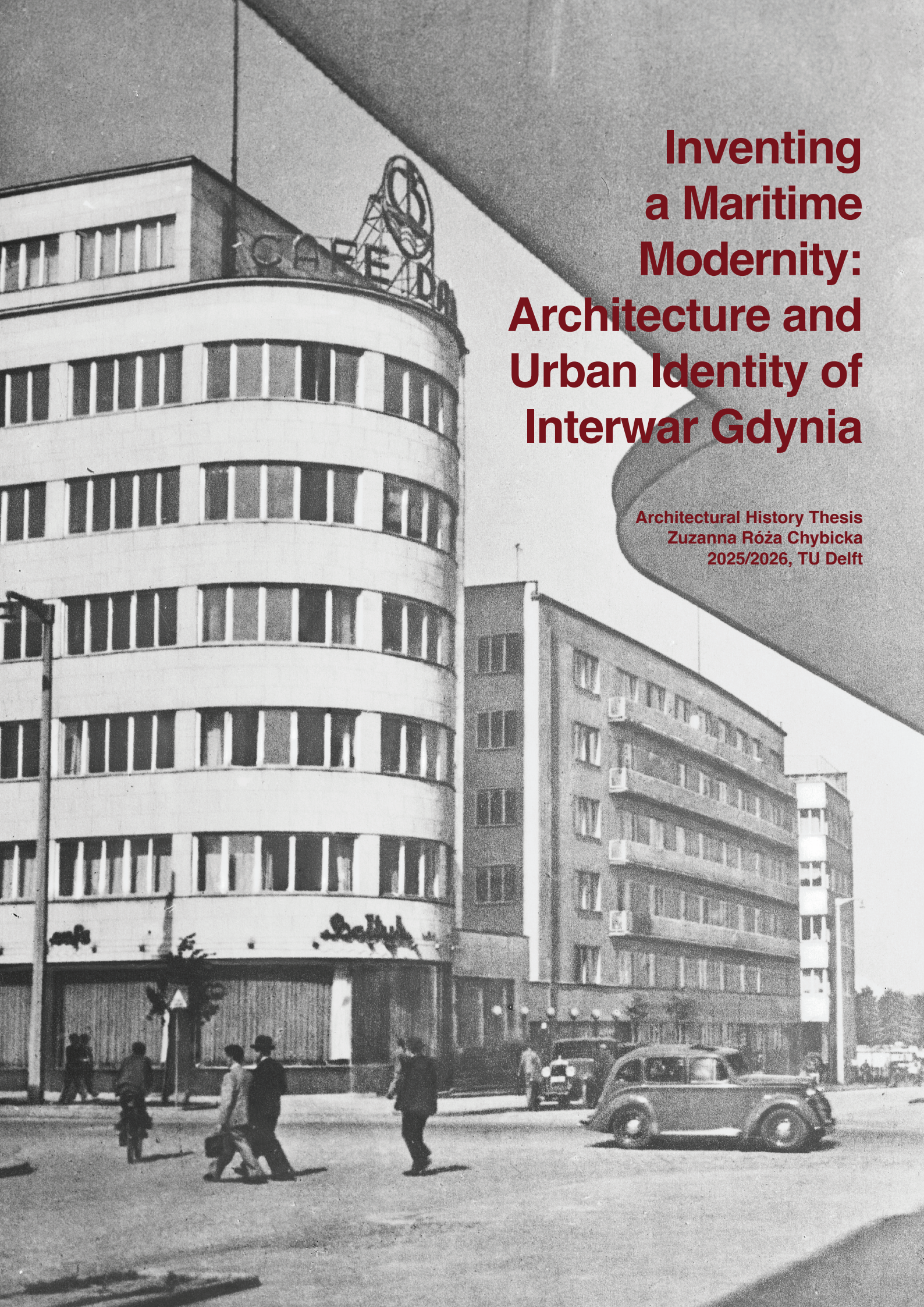


Inventing a Maritime Modernity: Architecture and Urban Identity of Interwar Gdynia

Architectural History Thesis
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2025/2026, TU Delft

Abstract

The study examines the interwar modernist architecture of Gdynia as a coherent visual and symbolic project, shaped by political ambitions and national maritime aspirations. Developed rapidly after the First World War, the city was conceived almost entirely under the influence of modernism, not only as a functional port, but also as an expression of Polish modernity, sovereignty, and reestablished access to the sea. While previous studies focus on the particularity of growth from a small village to a national transportation hub, or on the architectural design of individual buildings, this paper argues that the architecture should be studied as a unified expression of maritime identity operating across different scales.

The study focuses on the civilian architecture in the city: public buildings, apartment houses, and villas, as it was within these structures that maritime modernism entered everyday urban life. Through a combination of historical research and photographic analysis, the study examines how nautical references were translated into architectural form through elements such as rounded corners, horizontal window bands, terraces, and structural analogies to shipbuilding.

The analysis shows that the maritime modernist architecture of Gdynia should not be seen merely as a stylistic approach, but rather as a coherent image-making strategy that embeds symbolic associations with the sea in urban life. Seen as Poland's "window to the world", Gdynia contributed to the construction of modern national identity, highlighting the country's future-oriented maritime mindset and standing in sharp contrast to the historically layered cultural development of nearby Gdańsk.

Keywords

Gdynia, maritime modernism, interwar architecture, urban identity, nautical motifs, port city development

Cover Image
ZUS Building, 1932-1939.
Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe

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“In Gdynia, brick and cement ships are being built on land!”

Henryk Chudziński,
***Domy, ludzie, architekci: satyra i coś więcej*, 1937**

Within little more than a decade, Gdynia transformed from a small fishing village on the Baltic coast into a city of striking ambition and symbolic power. Dubbed a “city from the sea and dreams” in interwar discourse, it was conceived not merely as a port, but as a visible statement of Poland’s modernity, sovereignty, and maritime aspirations. Its streets and buildings, with façades evoking the sleek lines of ocean liners, horizontal bands of windows, and rounded corners, made the city itself resemble a fleet frozen in concrete and steel. In Gdynia, architecture was not simply functional; it was a medium through which ideas of progress, mobility, and national identity were imagined and made tangible.

Beneath the city's façades, Gdynia's residential and public architecture reveals the careful translation of maritime imagery into everyday urban life. While the port infrastructure constituted the economic foundation of the development, this study concentrates on the civilian built environment: apartment houses in the city center, public and administrative buildings, and private villas in residential districts. It is within these structures, rather than in docks, warehouses, or industrial installations, that maritime modernism entered everyday urban life. The choice of buildings for the analysis was based on their significance to the urban fabric and their clear display of maritime references. Rather than focusing on a single building type, the study examines a range of representative cases across scales to identify recurring formal strategies and shared visual tendencies.

Existing studies have tended to focus either on the particularity of the city's rapid construction and its development from a small village or on a detailed analysis of individual buildings. While these approaches have provided valuable insights into the origins and formal qualities of Gdynia's architecture, they overlook the broader coherence of the development as a unified visual and symbolic project. In particular, they rarely address the extent to which the built environment functioned as a deliberate political statement, nor how maritime imagery operated as a consistent architectural expression of the city's emerging identity as a modern port.

The relationship between form, symbolism, and urban identity is examined through a combination of historical research and photographic analysis. The study analyzes how the buildings' massing, horizontality, rounded corners, terraces, and carefully articulated facades echoed the visual language of ships and ocean liners. Such features were not merely stylistic choices; they served as symbols of maritime orientation. Through recurring elements- from streamlined silhouettes to balustrades recalling deck railings- nautical associations became embedded in everyday residential and public architecture, transforming individual buildings into components of a broader urban image. Literature studies provide the political and economic framework that shaped Gdynia's rapid development, while photographic documentation enables a detailed study of façades, massing, and recurring architectural features. Rather than isolating individual decorative elements, the study traces how nautical references were translated into built structures and how they operated across different building types, contributing to the coherent architectural language that defined the character of interwar Gdynia.

This architectural language also operated within a broader regional landscape shaped by the presence of nearby Gdańsk. It structured how the new city positioned itself in relation to an established historic center. While Gdańsk's urban fabric had developed gradually over centuries, reflecting various political and cultural influences, Gdynia emerged within a compressed historical moment. The coherence of the city's plan, rapid construction of residential and administrative buildings, and the consistent adoption of modernist principles conveyed an image of intentionality and contemporaneity. In this sense, Gdynia appeared forward-looking; it embodied presence and projected the future, rather than referencing the past.

Placed within broader discussions of the geography of modernism, Gdynia demonstrates how modernist-specific political priorities and economic conditions reshaped architecture. The urgency of maritime development, state investment, and demographic expansion influenced both the scale and character of construction. Modernism here was not simply imported as an aesthetic program, but integrated into a concrete project of urban formation. As a result, the city emerged as distinctly modern in its organization and expression, yet firmly grounded in the local coastal, economic, and geopolitical circumstances that had made its development possible.

Inventing Maritime Modernity and Urban Identity

Cities are not only built, but they are also imagined into existence. In Gdynia, a city that arose from the sea, that imagination took architectural form, as maritime modernism became the medium through which political aspiration and urban identity were materialized.

After the First World War, Poland regained access to the Baltic Sea; however, the city of Gdańsk, a historic port, was established as a Free City, which implied that the newly independent state could not fully control or secure its maritime trade (Orchowska-Smolińska, 2016). The need for a new port was becoming increasingly pressing as Poland developed its industrial infrastructure and required a seaport to export the coal mined in Silesia. It became particularly visible during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, when dock workers in Gdańsk blocked the delivery of weapons to the Polish army. The government decided to construct a new port adjacent to Gdańsk but entirely within Polish territory, from where the country can secure its own trade. From these political and economic circumstances emerged Gdynia- a port city conceived and built almost entirely under the influence of modernist ideas.

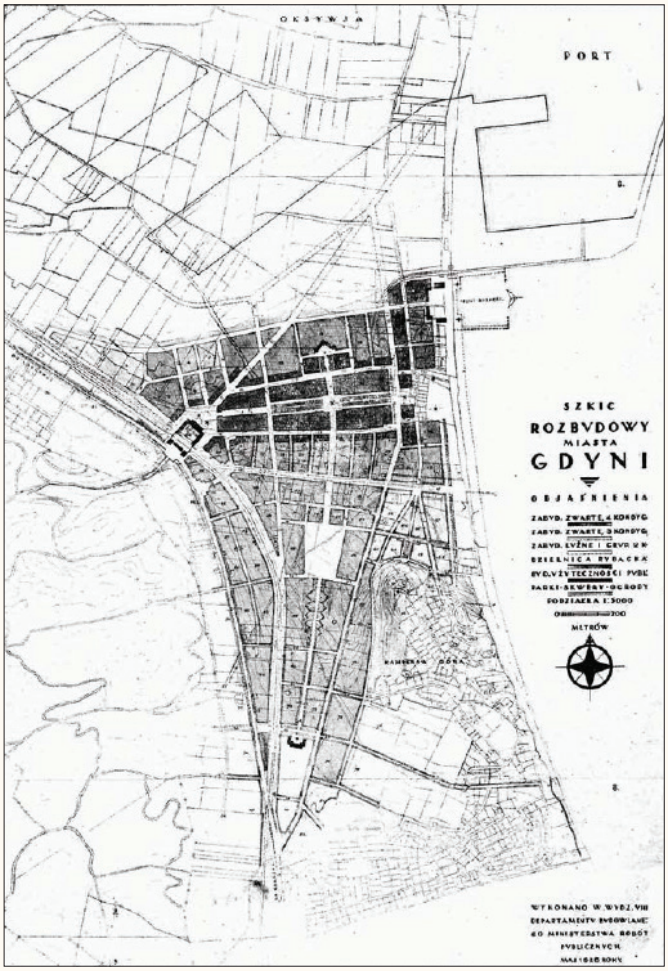


Figure 1.
Urban plan of Gdynia and Seaport, by Roman Feliński and Adam Kuncewicz, 1926. Source: *Architektura i Budownictwo II*, 1926, nr 2, p.12

Rapid Development

Only a year after the signing of the Versailles Treaty, when Poland's access to the Baltic Sea was secured, the Polish government delegated an engineer, Tadeusz Wenda, to identify the most suitable site for the new seaport. Based on the analysis, he stated that the plain between the village of Gdynia and Oksywa offers the best perspectives for the development of the port. The study was followed by the act of building the port, adopted by parliament in 1922. The first urban plan for Gdynia was designed by Roman Feliński and Adam Kuncewicz in 1926, updated by Kuncewicz's second plan in 1928. Originally a small fishing village of a few hundred residents, Gdynia was planned as a major transportation and industrial hub, a symbol of Polish economic transformation, necessitating rapid, large-scale development. The plan assumed the creation of a city directly adjacent to the port territory, with axes radiating from the railway station, pointing towards the sea. The main axis was designed to connect the city's railway station to the seaport station, symbolically highlighting the city's maritime identity. The village's existing country roads were reproduced almost unchanged in the urban plan, forming the core of the city center's new transportation system. In the plan, urbanists

applied modernist principles of functional zoning by clearly dividing the city's representative center, housing areas for the port's workers closer to the industrial infrastructure, and the port itself in the north (Lewicki, 2009). The buildings in the center were arranged into quarters, with arteries between them wide enough to provide adequate lighting and ventilation for the apartments. The area's representative character was highlighted by the height differences among the buildings, with four-story edifices flanking the main axis and three-story buildings marking the core of the new development. A different approach was applied to the single-housing residential district on the Kamienna Góra hill in the south of the city, right on the coast, where narrower streets were shaped more organically, and the land was divided into smaller plots.

The city's urban plan was subordinated to the port's infrastructure in the north, which, in the original plan, included a fishing port, a commercial port, and a naval port. With the gradual development of the port and its expansion to the south, the city could not be fully realized as originally assumed. The plan to base the layout of Gdynia on axes radiating from the railway station was abandoned, with the city's core organically moved farther south.

Poland's economic situation and lack of funding led to delays in developing port infrastructure and made it impossible for the country to buy plots for urban quarters. This resulted in the uncontrolled purchase of land from Kashubian farmers, who were selling their arable land for the planned development of Gdynia. The city's authorities managed to control the marking out of new streets, but they had no influence over the order in which the plots were built; new buildings appeared at random, often among the still-plowed fields (Piątek, 2022, pp. 66-68).

Figure 2.
Kashubian sowing grain with modern apartment blocks in the background, Ernest Raulin, 1932-1936. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Symbolic Project

Beyond functional considerations, the city was also intended to serve as a symbolic project: a visible manifestation of Poland's transition toward industrialization and modernization, and a declaration of its full political and cultural independence. From its earliest stages, the project was presented as a Polish window to the world, *"a widely used metaphor, which even still today is associated with Gdynia"* (Grzechnik, 2022), a gateway after years of oppression. The media showed the port and city construction as an effort of the whole nation, united to build a better tomorrow and secure its future. Therefore, the focus was on the future, while the hardships of the city's first years and poor living conditions during the development were seen as only a transitional stage toward greater prosperity.

With this future-oriented mindset, the city

was envisioned not only as a major military and trade hub but also as a training center for personnel in the maritime economy (Macikowski, 2017). The first step in achieving this goal was the relocation of the State Maritime School from Tczew to Gdynia in 1930.

In Gdynia, people were looking for a new beginning. The city was attracting numerous newcomers seeking jobs in the developing port. From 1,200 residents in 1926, the city's population exceeded 75,000 ten years later, surpassing the forecasts by 10,000. Coming from different regions and after years under foreign empires, Gdynia was a place to unite them as a community and build a common future. The visual language of the city, therefore, needed to create a neutral ground to integrate such a heterogeneous, constantly growing group of new residents.

Contrasting Gdańsk

"Gdańsk is still today, as it was said in Poland as early as the 16th century, the eye with which the Polish Crown looks at the world, but it is difficult to see with one eye, so it is better to look at the world with two."

Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski,
Deputy Prime Minister of Poland (1935-1939)

In Gdańsk, influenced by the Flemish architecture in the Middle Ages, in the times of the Hanseatic League, after decades of being a part of the Kingdom of Prussia, from the end of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century, and its establishment as a Free City after the First World War, German influences were strongly visible in the city's architecture. With tight economic ties to the German Reich in the interwar period, tendencies in Gdańsk's architecture mirrored those in Berlin and the port city of Hamburg, importing modernist ideas and brick expressionism across the Vistula (Macikowski, 2017).

In contrast to the historically layered and multicultural port city of Gdańsk, Gdynia was imagined as a new, distinctly Polish city that needed to be expressed in its own stylistic language, which, however, was not uniform from the very beginning. From the rural houses, reminiscent of when Gdynia was still a village, through the architecture of the sea resort and classicizing forms that refer to Polish manor houses, to the use of naval motifs in modernist buildings, the architects sought to embed the spirit of modern Poland in the new maritime context.

The first attempts to create a new, modern visual language for Gdynia architecture referenced historical styles, Classicism, and, particularly, Baroque, which was identified with Polishness, in contrast to Gothic, associated with German traditions (Piątek, 2022). The implementation of these detached influences served a political objective of cultural unification after years of foreign rule (Hirsch et al., 2019), mirroring historical references to central Poland. The new development also rejected any rooting in the cultural context of Kashubia, creating the city as fully isolated from its context.

International Influences

The architectural language of Gdynia changed over time, abandoning its historical references and turning to international trends of its time. Probably the first manifestations of modern functionalist development in Gdynia appeared in the port itself, as various stevedoring facilities located next to the wharves and on the piers (Hirsch et al., 2019). The adaptation of modernism to such a context was not only an expression of modernity but also had an economic justification. The abandonment of historical ornamentation, the simplification of the visual language of façades, and the use of reinforced-concrete structures with brick infill made construction faster and cheaper.

To design the new city, young graduates from different Polish universities with diverse backgrounds were often employed. Coming from Technical Universities in Warsaw, Lviv, and the neighboring Gdańsk (Technische Hochschule Danzig), they brought a fascination with European avant-garde trends to Gdynia. The inspirations for the streamlined shapes, which were associated at the time with cars, airplanes, and ocean liners, can be found especially in the works of the German architect Erich Mendelsohn (Sołtysik, 2009). The influence of his work found particularly fertile ground in Gdynia, where the buildings' rounded corners took on symbolic meaning, evoking the city's maritime character.

Architecture in Gdynia, however, was not only an imitation of Western trends; it was rather an active adaptation, in which nautical references were translated into a coherent visual language. The synthesis of modernist principles and maritime influences created a unique example of modernism outside of the "Western core" of the style.

Maritime Forms in Architecture

The city has not only been subordinated to the port and lived off it, but has also constituted its continuation. The ships seen at the docks have been incorporated into the urban fabric as public buildings and apartment houses. The symbolic connection to the water that gave life to the city has been a clear visual sign of the country's aspiration for a maritime identity.

Sołtysik (2009) distinguishes two modernist periods in Gdynia's architecture: first, Art Déco and Classicizing Modernism, and subsequently, Functionalism and Constructivism. It was the latter variation that gave Gdynia its unique maritime character and has been commonly associated with the city.

Public Buildings

Public buildings can be seen as a guide to the visual language of the whole city; their architecture has a crucial impact on the direction of development. In Gdynia, public institutions scattered around the city center constituted the core of urban life: from the port buildings and banks to the market halls.

One of the city's icons, the former ZUS (Social Insurance Institution) building, designed by Roman Piotrowski in 1934 and built between 1935 and 1936, demonstrates how maritime imagery was incorporated into the architecture of administrative institutions. Located on 10 Lutego Street, the axis leading toward the Southern Pier, the building's composition reinforces the visual and symbolic connection between the city and the sea. Its L-shaped form consists of two juxtaposed bodies: a seven-story cuboid and a five-story elongated part, terminated by a rounded corner that highlights the front of the building and points towards the sea. The windows have been arranged in wide horizontal strips, regularly interrupted by light sandstone infills, evoking the schematic layout of ocean liners' windows. Following the curvature of the corner, these bands emphasize the building's streamlined character and evoke the horizontality typical of ship design.

A similar approach of contrasting the cuboid with the rounded form was used in the Polish Sailor's House, located on the Southern Pier. Designed by Bohdan Damięcki and Tadeusz Sieczkowski, and built between 1938 and 1939, only a year before the outbreak of the Second World War, it has never served its intended function as the center of Polish sailing. In this case, maritime references are expressed more explicitly through the differentiation of the building's elevations. The south façade, oriented toward the marina, reflects nautical influences, adopting a rounded form with continuous horizontal glazing, while the northern elevation remains more restrained, combining cuboid forms. This contrast can symbolize the threshold between water and land, connecting the port and the city. The rounded sea-facing part, combined with the superstructure and canopy, evokes the form of a ship's captain's bridge. Additionally, the regular arrangement of windows and long balconies along the south side recalls the decks of ocean liners, translating the spatial organization of passenger ships into architectural form.

The City's Market Halls, designed by Jerzy Müller and Stefan Reychman, and opened in 1937, represent a more subtle maritime reference. Located between the city and the port, the complex served as an important hub for distributing goods connected to the maritime economy, including fish. From the very beginning, it was the subject of numerous press publications due to its modern layout- separated meat-and-dairy, green-grocery, and fish sections.

The complex was designed as a holistic project, from the urban and architectural form to the interiors and modernist details, such as the clock and sign placed on the gable wall of the main hall. While it primarily reflects modernist structural rationality, its architectural expression can also be associated with naval construction. The parabolic shape of the main hall's roof evokes the form of an inverted boat, while the supporting steel trusses, spaced at regular intervals, resemble the frames of a ship's structure. Even though the maritime reference in this case is subtler than in the previous examples, these analogies link the building's structural logic with shipbuilding techniques, integrating maritime associations into a utilitarian public building connected with the distribution of port-related goods.

However, the degree of direct reference varies among these examples; they demonstrate how maritime forms were translated into architectural form within Gdynia's public buildings. Through streamlined compositions, horizontal window bands, rounded corners, and structural analogies to ship construction, these buildings established the city's nautical architectural vocabulary. At the same time, they became landmarks for future generations of Gdynia, standing out among the regular blocks of apartment houses.

Apartment Houses

The apartment houses of Gdynia extended the maritime architectural vocabulary from public landmarks into the city's residential fabric. Within the regular urban blocks of the center, nautical references were particularly evident in the articulation of corners and façades, creating a cohesive visual connection among the port, public



Figure 3.
Former ZUS Building, 2025.
Source: Photo by the author



Figure 4.
Ships, breakwater and lighthouses at the entrance to the port, 1930-1938 [detail].
Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Figure 5.
Polish Sailor's House, 2025.
Source: Photo by the author



Figure 6.
The tugboat Ursus in the temporary port at the wooden pier, 1928. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Figure 7.
Stanisław Pręczkowski Apartment House, 2025.
Source: Photo by the author



Figure 8.
Fish unloading at the Polish Quay; the ŻK vessel and barrels of herring, 1933 [detail].
Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Figure 9.
Bankowiec, 2025. Source: Photo by the author

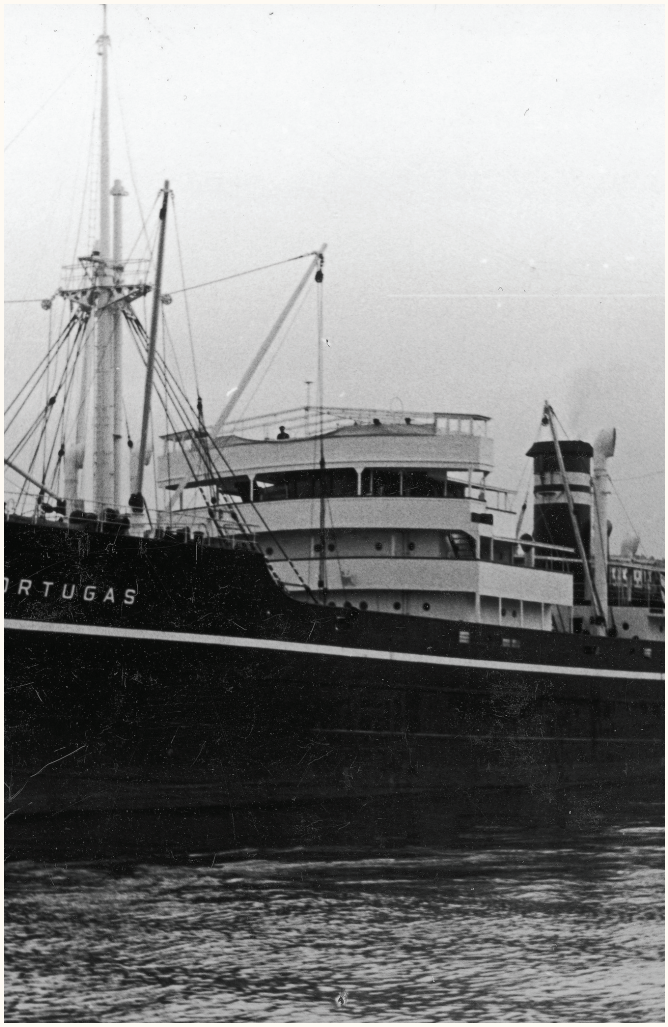


Figure 10.
Tortugas merchant ship, 1935 [detail]. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Figure 11.
Villa “Astrea”, 2025. Source: Photo by the author



Figure 12.
Crane number 11 and ship in port, 1935. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Figure 13.
"Opolanka" House, 2025.
Source: Photo by the author



Figure 14.
The passenger ship Piłsudski in a ceremonial flag display in the port of Gdynia, 1935 [detail].
Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe

architecture, and everyday living spaces.

Similar to the public buildings, some apartment houses adopted nautical motifs by juxtaposing cuboidal and rounded shapes, echoing the massing of ships. The Stanisław Pręczkowski Apartment House, located on Kościuszko Square, at the entrance to the Southern Pier, was one of the first buildings in which clear ship references were introduced. Designed by Tadeusz Juliusz Jędrzejewski in 1928, it features a cuboid shape with an abruptly retracted corner, one story higher, adjacent to a cylindrical turret. This superstructure, commonly used in Gdynia, emphasized by the metal balustrades of the rounded balconies, evokes the form of a ship's captain's bridge. On the lower side wings, windows create horizontal bands articulated with the darker color of the plaster, in contrast to the higher corner, where they were arranged in vertical strips, highlighting the change in height.

A comparable motif appears in the Bankowiec, the Residential House of the Pension Fund of the Employees of the National Development Bank, designed by Stanisław Ziołowski and built in three stages between 1935 and 1939. The building is situated diagonally to the former ZUS building, but, in contrast, it does not highlight the corner with a rounded shape; instead, it features a strong cuboid mass, emphasized with two additional stories set back in a stepped manner and contrasted with a semicircular turret one story higher. This arrangement evokes the massing of the ships' upper decks, which are usually formed additively. Likewise, on ocean liners, the façades are flat, with horizontal strips only occasionally interrupted by loggias, enforcing the static character of the form.

A different interpretation of maritime imagery is evident in the Antoni Ogończyk-Bloch and Leon Mazalon Apartment House, designed by Leon Mazalon with Stefan Koziński and built in 1937. Here, the nautical inspiration is expressed not through direct references to ship forms, but through an abstraction of the sea itself. The rounded corner of the building, which marks the intersection of the city's main arteries, is articulated by the fully glazed winter gardens- at that time, an extraordinary case of luxurious housing. Together with the eastern façade, it creates an expressive, wavy, S-shape. The motif of waves continues in the curved balconies of the southern elevation, introducing movement to the moderate façade. In this case, maritime inspiration operates at a more symbolic level, referencing the dynamic qualities of water rather than the structural language of ocean liners.

Villas

The maritime architectural language of Gdynia was not limited to large-scale buildings or the city center; nautical references were also incorporated into villa architecture. In these residential buildings, maritime inspirations appeared both in architectural details and in the shaping of volumes. A relatively simple functional program of the villas and their spatial autonomy provided modernist architects with greater freedom to experiment with form and create almost "free-standing sculptures" (Sołtysik, 2015).

An interesting example is Villa "Astrea", designed in 1932 by Wacław Tomaszewski for Julian Rummel, a shipbuilding engineer and advocate of the construction of the port in Gdynia, and his family. The connection to the sea was integral to the owners' daily life and therefore had to be reflected in the villa as well. The architect who, after the Second World War, initiated the establishment of the Department of Naval Architecture at the Gdańsk University of Technology, in this case, incorporated maritime motifs primarily in the building's details rather than in its overall form. The flagpole, often found in the interior single-family housing in Gdynia, attached to the corner of the building, or the metal balcony railings, clearly refer to ships' masts and railings, translating nautical elements into domestic architecture. Located on Kamienna Góra Hill and overlooking the port, the villa also established a symbolic relationship with the sea, resembling a vessel anchored above the harbor.

A different interpretation of maritime imagery appears in the nearby "Opolanka" House, designed by Włodzimierz Prochaska and Tadeusz Jędrzejewski and built in two stages between 1931 and 1939. Here, nautical references are expressed more directly through the articulation of the façade. Long horizontal bands of darker plaster extend into circular corner balconies, creating the impression of galleries wrapping around the building and recalling the circulation decks of ocean liners. The rounded corners further reinforce the streamlined character of the form, while the emphasis on horizontal elements strengthens the association with ship architecture.

Conclusion

Modernist architecture of Gdynia has been developed through an intentional process of creating a coherent visual language, building an extraordinary image of Polish modernity. In the maritime-inspired forms, architects expressed the city's great aspirations to become the Polish window to the world, employing nautical motifs as a clear reference to the country's inseparable bond with the sea. The adoption of a new stylistic language and the abandonment of any historical references to the local context served a political objective: to manifest the region's Polishness after years of foreign rule. In contrast to the architectural traditions of Gdańsk, modernist architecture in Gdynia was intended to express modernity and progress, referencing international trends of the time. The architecture, therefore, became one of the main expressions of political ambitions.

While modernism in Gdynia first appeared in the port, it was public and housing developments that brought the new style and maritime motifs into the city and embedded them in the city's character. The representative buildings of Gdynia often employed more explicit nautical references to ocean liners and ship structures, while residential architecture rendered these motifs in subtler forms and details. Rounded corners, horizontal window bands, balconies resembling decks, and structural analogies to ship construction became recurring elements across building types. Through this consistent use of maritime references, architects embedded the sea's presence in both its monumental landmarks and everyday living spaces.

This study, therefore, argues that the modernist architecture of Gdynia should not be understood merely as a collection of individual design solutions or as an adoption of international stylistic tendencies, but rather as a coherent and intentional expression of the country's political and cultural aspirations. The recurrence of maritime motifs across different building scales and types reveals a deliberate strategy of image-making, in which architecture functioned as a tool for building a new national identity rooted in access to the sea. In this sense, the built environment of Gdynia operated not only as a response to functional and economic demands but also as a spatial manifestation of ideology.

By reading the buildings collectively, rather than in isolation, Gdynia emerges not simply as a functional port city, but as a vision of modernity. Its architecture not only accommodated rapid growth but also shaped how the city was perceived and imagined, projecting a dynamic connection to the wider world. In this sense, the city can be seen as an architectural narrative, in which form, symbolism, and urban planning produced a future-oriented identity. Rather than deriving meaning from historical continuity, Gdynia's architecture defined a new beginning, in which the sea was not only an economic resource but a central element in the cultural and ideological construction of the city itself.

Acknowledgements

The idea of this topic arose from many inspiring architectural walks organized by Gdynia's Modernism Trail (Gdyński Szlak Modernizmu).

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Cover Image
Stanisław Pręczkowski Apartment House, 1934 [detail]. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe

