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Gdynia Modernist City Centre as a UNESCO World Urban Heritage

Abstract

The subject of this article is the Modernist Centre of Gdynia as a UNESCO World Heritage urban site. The study was undertaken as part of the application to inscribe Gdynia City Centre on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The aim of the research conducted by the author between 2022 and 2025 was to assess the significance of this complex in the history of global urban planning and architecture, and in particular to formulate and document a statement regarding its Outstanding Universal Value, identify its main attributes, and propose criteria for its inscription on the List. The study was carried out using a historical-comparative method, based on both the relevant literature and the author's own analytical research. The findings indicate that Gdynia Modernist City Centre is an outstanding example of a downtown area built from scratch in the interwar period, illustrating the fundamental changes that this era brought to Modernism. This provides the basis for its nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List under Criterion IV as an outstanding illustration of a significant stage in human history.

Key words: UNESCO, Gdynia, City Centre, Modernism, urban heritage

Introduction

The urban complex of Gdynia City Centre took shape in the 1920s and 1930s, that is during the formative phase of Modernism. This period brought about fundamental changes in the fields of urban planning and architecture, a fact that is particularly evident in Gdynia. In recognition of the historical value of the spatial layout of its City Centre, the complex was listed in the register of monuments in 2007; in 2015 it was granted the status of a Historic Monument (Rozporządzenie Prezydenta RP... 2015), and in 2019 the city began efforts to have it inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

At the same time as the UNESCO World Heritage Committee accepted Gdynia's preliminary nomination onto the "tentative list"¹, work began at Gdynia City Council on

preparing a comprehensive application for inscription². In July 2022, the author of this article was invited to collaborate on this research, in order to give the work a new direction and intensity³. The final nomination was submitted in February 2023 in the form of a comprehensive application entitled "Gdynia Early Modernist City Centre. Nomination Dossier" (Sołtysik, Hirsch and Stępa 2023) and sent to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Paris, where, in July 2025, following the provision of additional information, it received a positive assessment⁴.

² Initially, until July 2022, the work was carried out in collaboration with the Bartlett School of Architecture in London.

³ The Head of the Heritage Protection Department, dr Marek Stępa, oversaw the entire project at Gdynia City Council, and a team from the Municipal Conservator's Office in Gdynia, led by dr hab. Robert Hirsch, also took part in the work. The results of the research were verified by the Committee for World Cultural Heritage in Poland at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, receiving substantive approval from that institution in 2023.

⁴ Since the nomination was submitted in 2023, two additional annexes to the application have been prepared with the author's involvement in response to questions and comments from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and sent to Paris: one in October 2024 and the other

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¹ Gdynia was added to the "waiting list", known as the "Tentative List", on 26 October 2019, following a nomination entitled "Modernist Centre of Gdynia – the example of building an integrated community".



Fig. 1. The boundaries of the Gdynia Historic Monument, and at the same time the area proposed for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List (source: Rozporządzenie Prezydenta RP... 2015, app. 2)

Il. 1. Granice gdyńskiego Pomnika Historii, a jednocześnie terenu proponowanego do wpisu na listę UNESCO (źródło: Rozporządzenie Prezydenta RP... 2015, załącznik 2)

The article presents a part of the research results contained in this application, carried out by the author between 2022 and 2025. The main objective was to establish the significance of Gdynia's City Centre in the history of global urban planning and architecture, and in particular to formulate a statement of Outstanding Universal Value of the complex, to present its attributes and to propose criteria for inclusion on the World Heritage List. The territorial scope of the work was the City Centre within the boundaries of the Historic Monument (Fig. 1), and the time frame covered the entire history of Gdynia, with particular emphasis on the interwar period. The text below presents the results of the research solely with regard to urban planning issues, as expanding it to include architectural issues would exceed the scope of this article.

The research hypothesis was that the Centre of Gdynia is an outstanding example of a city centre built from scratch in the interwar period, illustrating the significant changes that this period brought to the history of Modernism. The research was conducted using a historical-comparative method, based both on the relevant literature and on the author's own analytical studies.

in February 2025 (Hirsch et al. 2024; 2025). In July 2025 the complete set of materials received a "referral" (i.e., a positive) assessment at the Committee meeting held in Paris from 6 to 16 July 2025, with a recommendation to make some further corrections and a suggestion that the nominated site be named "Gdynia Modernist City Centre" (World Heritage Committee 2025, 379). The third addendum, in response to these comments, which changed the name of the site and corrected the boundaries of its buffer zone, was sent to the World Heritage Committee in Paris in February 2026. A final decision on whether Gdynia will be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List is expected in July 2026.

The article presents three main aspects of the value of Gdynia's City Centre to the world's urban heritage: firstly, the city's layout as an illustration of the leading urban planning ideas of the early 20th century; secondly, an innovative approach to the layout of the City Centre, which combines a traditional street-and-square structure with modernist drive to improve housing conditions; and thirdly, Gdynia's maritime *genius loci* and its influence on shaping the city's identity.

State of research

The first analyses of Gdynia's layout were undertaken as early as the 1930s by the very authors of its urban plans – Adam Kuncewicz (1933, 3–14) and Roman Feliński (1935, 185–196). Subsequently, Stanisław Filipkowski, the designer of the city's Grand District (Representational District), presented the final concept for the district within the context of the City Centre's development (Filipkowski 1938). In the post-war period, there was no academic research into the urban planning and architecture of Gdynia⁵, and the first studies on this subject did not appear until after 1989. The author of this article was the first to address this issue, analysing it comprehensively with regard to the City Centre and the port, as well as the individual districts of Gdynia (Sołtysik 1993). She expanded on this topic in her next book, analysing the spatial form of Gdynia's apartment houses and their evolution (Sołtysik 2003). Problems related to the preservation of the historic city layout were described by Hirsch (2016), whilst the development and architecture of the port were presented by Anna Orchowska (2023). In addition, a number of specific issues concerning Gdynia's urban planning have been published in a monograph series entitled *Modernism in Europe, Modernism in Gdynia*, published every two years since 1997 by Gdynia City Council in collaboration with the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology. However, the issue of the city's spatial value as a World Heritage site has not yet been addressed in any publications.

The general plan of Gdynia and the leading ideas in early 20th-century European urban planning as a formative phase of Modernism

The first urban plan for Gdynia was drawn up at the Ministry of Public Works in Warsaw in May 1926. It was a joint work of two prominent architects and urban planners of interwar Poland, who have already been mentioned – Roman Feliński (1886–1953) and Adam Kuncewicz (1893–1945)⁶. The plan they produced was presented in

⁵ The single-volume monograph *Dzieje Gdyni* [The History of Gdynia], edited by Roman Wapiński and published in 1980 (Wapiński 1980), does not address this topic, and the chapter "Powstanie i rozwój miasta" [The Founding and Development of the City] by Mieczysław Widernik contains unverified information regarding Gdynia's plans, such as the statement concerning the first plan from 1926, which states that: *The development plan did not provide for building zones that would regulate the size and purpose of the buildings to be erected* (Widernik 1980, 75).

⁶ Feliński was a figure of particular distinction in both urban planning and architecture. He went down in history as the author of over

two parts: the “Indicative Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia”, which included a general layout of the entire city on a scale of 1:25,000, and in the “Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia”, drawn up mainly for the City Centre on a scale of 1:5,000⁷. Feliński – as he himself emphasised – was the originator of the entire project (Feliński 1935, 185) and, as head of Department VIII at the Ministry of Public Works, oversaw the work on it until mid-1926. Kuncewicz, on the other hand, was the direct executor of this work. Between 1927 and 1928, he also made adjustments to the original layout of the City Centre, necessitated by the port’s expansion southwards, which had not been foreseen at the outset⁸.

Despite these adjustments, the main principles guiding the design of the entire urban complex of Gdynia remained largely unchanged. These principles served as clear evidence that the authors of the plan were not only fully aware of the ideas that were shaping European urban planning at the time, but also implemented them into their practice. In the general plan of Gdynia, Feliński and Kuncewicz tackled and ingeniously resolved one of the fundamental problems of 20th-century urban planning – the problem of improving housing conditions in the city. The very issue of improving housing conditions was, in fact, the driving force behind the whole Modernist Movement, whilst also serving as the foundation of a new era: the era of Modernism. In terms of urban planning, three groundbreaking ideas from the early 20th century were of particular significance to that process: the concept of the “Garden City”, the concept of the “Industrial City” and the concept of zoning the city. The vivid influence of these three ideas can be seen in the plans for Gdynia and its City Centre.

The concept of the “Garden City”. It was developed by the English urban planner and social reformer Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928) and first published in 1898, and again in 1902 (Howard 1902). Its main aim was to infuse the city with greenery and relieve pressure on its centre, the so-called

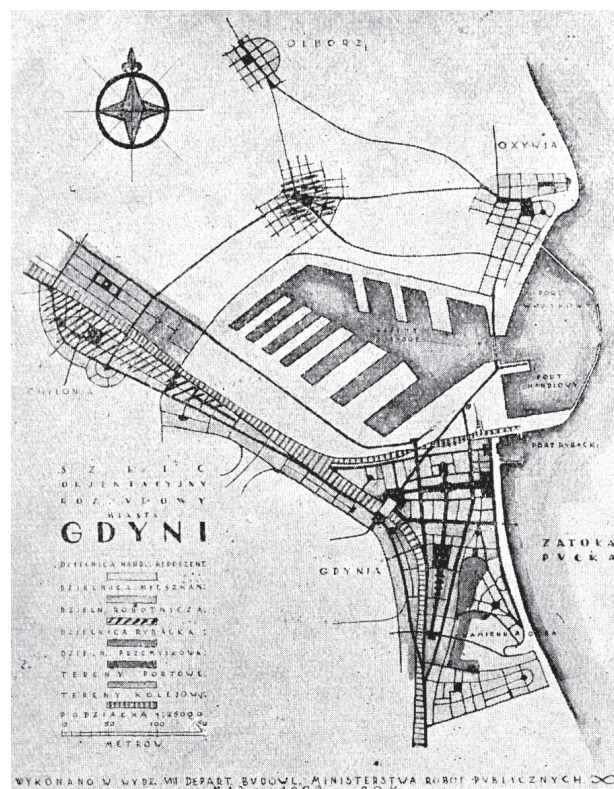


Fig. 2. “Indicative Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia”, showing the satellite layout of districts in relation to the city centre, 1926 (source: Feliński 1935, 186)

II. 2. „Szkic orientacyjny rozbudowy miasta Gdyni” z satelitarnym układem dzielnic względem Śródmieścia, 1926 (źródło: Feliński 1935, 186)

“Central City”, through a network of satellite “Garden Cities”, separated from it by green belts. This idea inspired the “Indicative Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia” (1926), as a general urban plan for the city (Fig. 2).

In this plan, the influence of the “Garden City” concept is most visible in the relationship between the City Centre and the residential suburbs, situated as satellite settlements around the central area and the new port. These suburbs – which Feliński referred to as “satellite estates” (Feliński 1935, 188) – were situated on the sites of former rural settlements near Gdynia: Oksywie, Obłuże, Chylonia and Kamienna Góra, separating them from the centre by forested, agricultural or parkland areas. As a result, the Centre of Gdynia was to develop not in a concentric and continuous manner, like the centres of old towns, but alongside extensive green spaces. This principle remains evident in the city’s structure to this day.

The concept of the “Industrial City”, published in 1917 by French architect Tony Garnier (1869–1948) (Garnier 1917), was the first design for a modern city in which the very central element was formed by a large industrial complex (Pawłowski 1972). Garnier outlined how this complex should be situated in relation to the city centre, the residential areas and the main transport routes. These recommendations had a significant influence on the general urban plan of Gdynia.

Feliński and Kuncewicz situated Gdynia’s industrial areas away from the City Centre, near the port, along road and rail

a dozen outstanding architectural projects and under his leadership at the Ministry of Public Works in Warsaw, several dozen town development plans were drawn up between 1919 and 1926. He was also the author of three books on urban planning, including one of the first textbooks in Poland in this field, entitled *Budowa miast z ilustracjami i planami miast* [Urban development with illustrations and city maps] (1916) and published numerous articles on this subject (Lewicki 2007, 13, 14). Kuncewicz, meanwhile, worked with Feliński at the Ministry of Public Works in 1925–1926, and later, until 1931, served as a senior assistant at the Department of Polish Architecture within the Faculty of Architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology (*Warszawska Szkoła Architektury 1915–1965* [Warsaw School of Architecture 1915–1965] 1967, 263), and as a researcher into the history of urban planning, he was the author of two books: *Plany przeglądowe miast polskich* [Overview Plans of Polish Cities] (1929) and *Zasady sporządzania planów zabudowania* [Principles of Drawing Up Development Plans] (1937).

⁷ The originals of these urban plans have not survived to the present day, and we know them only from publications by Feliński (1935, 186, 187, 190, 191) and Kuncewicz (1933, 5, 6).

⁸ Originally, the port plans had envisaged the construction of only two outer piers, but as a result of the coal boom, their number was increased to four, extending much further south and blocking direct access to the sea for the city centre. Kuncewicz had to take this situation into account in his detailed plans. He also continued his work on the master plan for Gdynia, leading to its approval in 1931 (Sołtysik 1993).

routes, anticipating their further development northwards towards the planned industrial canal (Fig. 3). This location was fully in line with the principles of the Garnier's plan of "Une cité industrielle", meaning that Gdynia's industrial district: a) constituted a separate spatial and functional structure within the layout, b) was set apart from the City Centre and most residential districts, c) was conveniently connected by transport links to the entire complex, d) had close access to

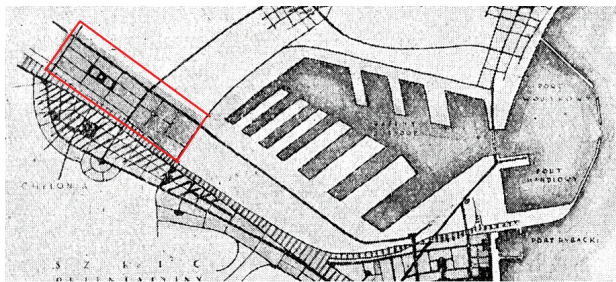


Fig. 3. The proposed location of Gdynia's industrial district in 1926. The red colour coding was introduced for the sake of this article (source: Feliński 1935, 186)

Il. 3. Projektowana w 1926 r. lokalizacja dzielnicy przemysłowej Gdyni. Czerwonym, na potrzeby artykułu, oznaczono zasięg dzielnicy (źródło: Feliński 1935, 186)



M. B. P. PROJ. ARCH. ADAM KUNCEWICZ. OGÓLNE KIER. ARCH. ROMAN FELIŃSKI.

PLAN SITUACYJNY ZABUDOWY M. GDYNIA.

Fig. 4. "Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia", 1926. The plan's legend includes a list of the building zones (source: Feliński 1935, 187)

Il. 4. „Szkic rozbudowy miasta Gdyni”, 1926 r. W legendzie planu zamieszczono wykaz stref budowlanych (źródło: Feliński 1935, 187)

water and port basins. It should be emphasised that to this day, this area remains the industrial heart of Gdynia.

The concept of zoning the city. The urban planner who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries popularised and widely implemented the concept of zoning the city was German architect Hermann Joseph Stübben (1845–1936). His urban planning projects for many European cities, including Berlin, Dortmund, Düsseldorf and Cologne, introduced a division of the city into specific building zones (construction zones), which regulated the permissible height and type of development. From then on, this method became one of the main tools of modern urban planning.

All the plans drawn up for Gdynia during the interwar period were zoning plans. The "Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia", drawn up by Feliński and Kuncewicz in 1926 envisaged three types of development: compact four-storey, compact three-storey, and loose, grouped two-storey (Fig. 4). Kuncewicz's detailed development plans from 1927–1928 and his general plan from 1928–1930 added a further zone to the City Centre, comprising five storeys (up to 18 m) (Sołtysik 1993, 122, 149). These provisions were codified and supplemented by the local police and building regulations for Gdynia, published in 1931 (Ogłoszenie Wojewody Pomorskiego 1931)⁹. However, the new master plan of 1936 introduced a sixth building zone along the principal downtown thoroughfares, with a height of six storeys and 22 m (Sołtysik 2003, 52)¹⁰.

The main planning principle of Gdynia's City Centre: urban tradition combined with modernist ideas

The question of how best to shape the urban structure of a modern city centre was a fundamental issue for Gdynia. This challenge was unprecedented in early 20th-century Europe, for although numerous housing estates were being built here at the time, the construction of an entire city centre from scratch lacked both precedent and established modernist models.

The designers of Gdynia's City Centre decided to adopt an innovative concept that, on the one hand, continued the European tradition of compact, street-facing development, and on the other hand was thoroughly modernised and ensured a high standard of living. It was based on three main, structurally interlinked elements: a modern street, a modern urban block and a modern apartment house.

A modern approach to street design. Feliński and Kuncewicz decided, first and foremost, that the City Centre would be shaped around a traditional grid of streets and squares, filled with multi-storey residential and commercial buildings forming compact frontages. In this regard, they wished to continue the traditional approach to shaping

⁹ In addition to the number of storeys and building height for each zone, the local building regulations for Gdynia also specify the building coverage of the plot and the possibility of locating single-storey out-buildings at the rear of the plot.

¹⁰ The tradition of strict zoning in the construction sector persisted in Gdynia's city centre until the 1970s, when it was abandoned and permission was granted to erect isolated high-rise buildings there.

Fig. 5. One of the main streets of Gdynia, 10 Lutego Street in 1936
(source: M.J. Sołtysik's archive)

Il. 5. Jedna z głównych ulic Gdyni, ul. 10 Lutego w 1936 r.
(źródło: archiwum M.J. Sołtysik)



the city centre, one that has long been rooted in European urban planning and ensures its clear communication and a broad range of functions. In Gdynia's City Centre, buildings were to be situated strictly within the street regulating lines – the front building lines – forming rows of houses with ground floors designated for services. Public buildings were also situated along these lines, although particularly prominent locations were chosen for them. The designers of Gdynia's City Centre did not, therefore, follow the path proposed by extremely avant-garde architectural visionaries such as Le Corbusier, or architects associated with the Bauhaus School, who rejected the compact urban development of the city and moved away from the street layout¹¹.

At the same time, however, Gdynia's streets were intended to be modern – wide, allowing light and air to reach the buildings (Sołtysik 2003, 52), and equipped with water mains, sewerage and street lighting. The width of the streets ranged from 15–18 m to 24–28 m¹², and these dimensions also determined the maximum height of the buildings that could be constructed along them. The central part of each street was occupied by the roadway, separated by kerbs from the five- or six-metre-wide pavements running on either side. Rows of trees were planted along the pavements to improve hygiene, aesthetics and comfort

(Fig. 5)¹³. For the most part, the roadways in Gdynia's City Centre were entirely paved with cobblestones, although the widest ones already had two types of surfaces – the modern asphalt in the middle, devoted mainly for cars, and the cobblestones at the sides, devoted mainly for horse-drawn carriages. Two thoroughfares held a special place in Gdynia's street grid: the 87-metre-wide Kościuszko Square and the 45-metre-wide Piłsudski Avenue¹⁴ – which served as scenic routes offering views of the sea.

A modern concept of the urban block. The street layout is inextricably linked to the urban block. In 19th-century European cities, urban blocks were deep, ranging from 170 to as much as 250 metres. They were divided into deep building plots, which were later almost entirely built up with a front house and tall side and rear residential wings (residential outbuildings), clustered around small, poorly ventilated courtyards, known as “well-courtyards”. This type of development had a bad reputation and was the main reason behind the attempts by modernists to improve housing. Such an attempt was undertaken and successfully implemented in Gdynia.

The first indications of what the urban blocks in Gdynia's City Centre were to look like were presented by its designers in 1926, in one of the axonometric views (Fig. 6) appended to the “Outline of the Expansion of the City of Gdynia”. It is clear from the plan that the urban blocks of the City Centre were to consist of compact perimeter development with front-facing houses on all four sides, whilst the interior of each block was designed as an open space, completely free of buildings, forming a spacious courtyard filled with greenery. This was intended to radically improve housing conditions.

¹¹ Le Corbusier's utopian design for the City of Tomorrow (*Ville Contemporaine*), featuring skyscrapers and apartment blocks loosely situated amidst greenery and bypassing traditional streets, dates from 1922. A similar concept of loosely arranged blocks was also proposed in the 1920s by architects from the Bauhaus and other avant-garde European groups.

¹² A width of 15 m was specified for smaller streets in the city centre, such as Mściwoja, Pułaskiego, Szkolna, Słowackiego, Żeromskiego and Zygmunta Augusta. Streets such as Abrahama, Batorego, Bema, Kilińskiego, 3 Maja and Żeromskiego were 18 m wide. Major thoroughfares were 24 m wide (such as Świętojańska and Władysława IV streets) and 28 m wide (such as 10 Lutego and Dworcowa streets). The main thoroughfare – Śląska Street – was 35 m wide and was situated on the western side of the railway tracks, outside the immediate city centre and beyond the boundaries of this study.

¹³ This was the norm in Gdynia's city centre, and there was only one exception – on Bema Street, where front gardens were created in front of houses without ground-floor retail premises.

¹⁴ Piłsudski Avenue lies outside the boundaries of the Historic Monument, and therefore also outside the area proposed for inclusion on the UNESCO List, although it is within its immediate buffer zone.

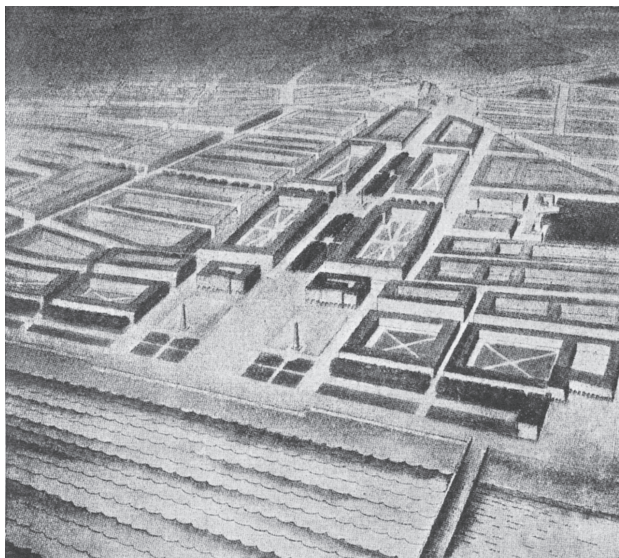


Fig. 6. Concept for the urban blocks in the 1926 city centre's plan of Gdynia, characterised by frontage build-up with spacious internal courtyards (source: Feliński 1935, 190)

Il. 6. Koncepcja kwartałów urbanistycznych w planie centrum Gdyni z 1926 r., tworzonej przez zabudowę obrzeżną z obszernymi wewnętrznymi dziedzińcami (źródło: Feliński 1935, 190)

An important element of the concept of the Gdynia's urban block was, in fact, the rear building line (back development line), which buildings were not permitted to cross. Feliński wrote about this as early as 1916: *Even when maintaining multi-storey tenement blocks, it is possible to achieve a significant improvement in housing conditions by establishing a rear building line for them and by prohibiting the construction of courtyard buildings. In this way, instead of the existing individual small courtyards of the houses, all the courtyards would merge into one large whole, into one large garden protected from street dust* (1916, 59, 60).

Kunciewicz, who continued work on the plans for the Centre of Gdynia after 1926, retained this concept (Kunciewicz 1933). Due to the reduction in the area of the City Centre caused by the expansion of the port, the urban blocks he designed were to be even shallower than in the original plan. They were generally between 60 and 90 m deep, which, with a length of 250 to 300 m, resulted in the shape of elongated rectangles. Their key feature was a defined rear building line, running 20 m from the front line (Fig. 7). The entire remaining interior was designated as a courtyard¹⁵, with the intention of combining this open space into a single green courtyard. Unfortunately, in practice this did not always succeed¹⁶; nevertheless, the Gdynia quarter represented a modern solution, incorporating the modernist principles of access to light and greenery.

¹⁵ Although, in practice, these inner courtyards often featured utility and service buildings (such as garages), these were single-storey structures, sometimes of a temporary nature.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, in this case too, the reality often differed, a fact criticised by Feliński, who wrote: *The interiors of the blocks are beginning to be divided into small, individual courtyards – just like in old towns* (Feliński 1935, 192).

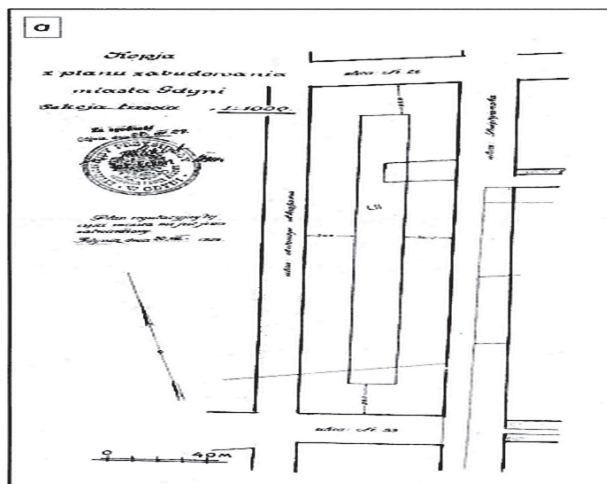


Fig. 7. An example of an urban block from the detailed plan for Gdynia city centre, 1927–1928 (source: Akta Świętojańska 50, photo by M.J. Sołtysik)

Il. 7. Przykład kwartału urbanistycznego w planie szczegółowym Śródmieścia Gdyni z lat 1927–1928 (źródło: Akta Świętojańska 50, fot. M.J. Sołtysik)

A modern concept for the apartment house. The area of Gdynia's City Centre had been almost entirely private land since the pre-urban period, remaining in the ownership of former rural landowners. Hence, quite naturally, the designers of the City Centre chose the private townhouse – the tenement house – as the basic form for the new development. However, the Gdynia tenement houses were to differ significantly from the 19th-century tenement houses that formed a dense network of tall residential outbuildings. The urban blocks designed by Feliński and Kunciewicz led to the elimination of this type of development. The solution they adopted became the basis for the development in Gdynia of a new type of downtown houses – apartment houses without residential outbuildings.

These were thoroughly modern and hygienic houses, offering very good living conditions. They consisted solely of a front building of several storeys, with no multi-storey side or rear residential wings and without the small “well-courtyards”. The height of this building could not exceed the width of the street, and its rear faced the big inner courtyard of the urban block. The “shallow”, open-plan layout of the buildings ensured ample access to light and air from both sides – the front and the rear (Fig. 8). All of them had bright, property ventilated flats, with full amenities and access to the city's infrastructure. At the same time, in the traditional manner, private owners set aside the ground floors of their houses for commercial use, which ensured the wide range of functions essential in the City Centre.

Gdynia's maritime genius loci and the ethos of a Modernist city: the concept of a City Centre facing the sea

Although the concept of *genius loci* in relation to architecture was only coined and popularised by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979) in the second half of the 20th century,

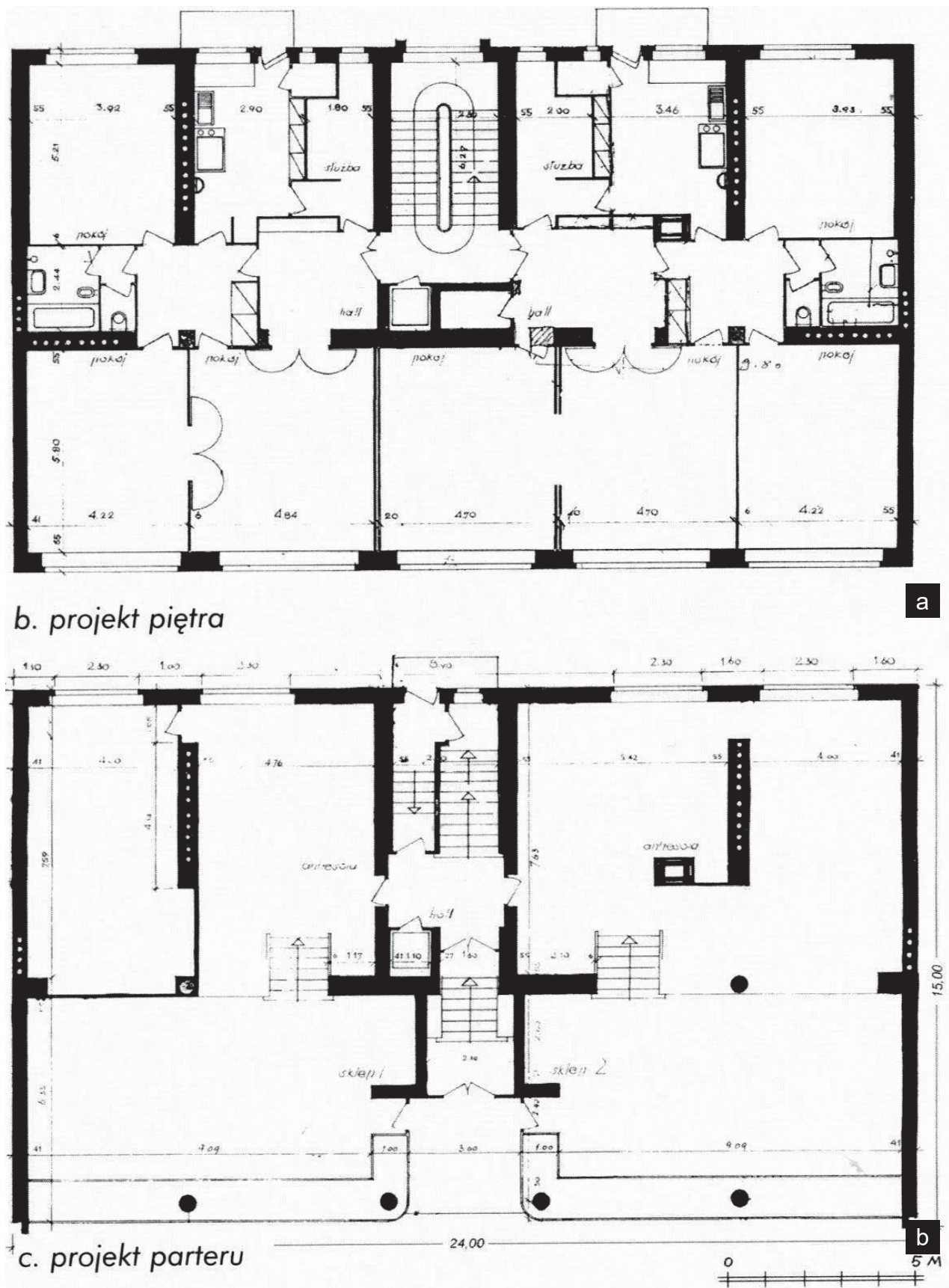


Fig. 8. An example of the layout of a Gdynia apartment house from the 1930s:

a) upper floors for residential use, b) ground floor for shops
(source: Akta Świętojańska 3, photo by M.J. Sołtysik)

II. 8. Przykładowy plan gdyńskiej kamienicy bezoficynowej z lat trzydziestych XX w.:

a) piętra przeznaczone na mieszkania, b) parter ze sklepami
(źródło: Akta Świętojańska 3, fot. M.J. Sołtysik)

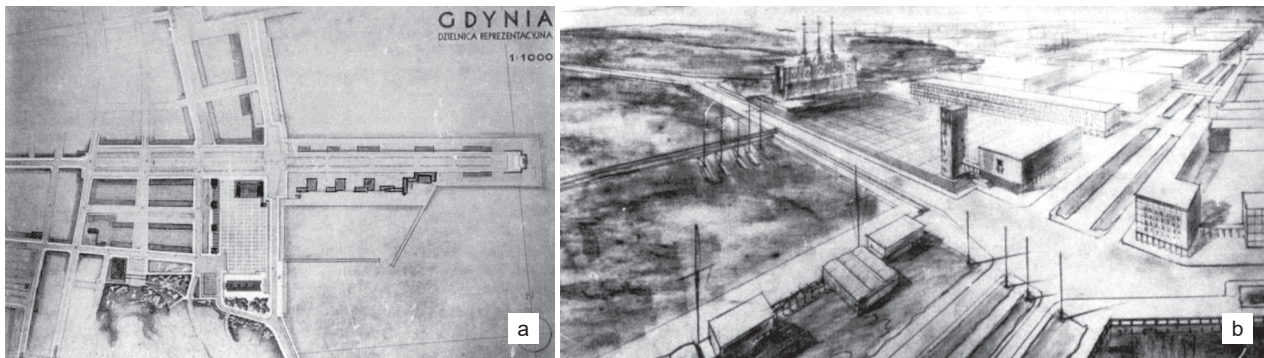


Fig. 9. Final concept of the Grand District of Gdynia, 1938: a) plan, b) perspective view (source: M.J. Sołtysik's archive)

Il. 9. Ostateczna koncepcja dzielnicy reprezentacyjnej Gdyni, 1938: a) plan, b) widok perspektywiczny (źródło: archiwum M.J. Sołtysik)

the *spirit of the place* had been created in Gdynia from the very beginning. Throughout the interwar period, efforts were made to give the layout of Gdynia City Centre a symbolic maritime identity that would set it apart from other cities – a strong spatial connection to the sea.

Even in the earliest plans for Gdynia's City Centre, the main compositional principle guiding the design of its grand, representative section was its spatial openness towards the sea. In the "Outline for the Expansion..." drawn up in 1926 by Feliński and Kuncewicz, the key feature was a broad avenue running along the line of what is now Jana Radtkego Street, culminating in a grand seaside square and a promenade running along the beach (cf. Figs. 4 and 6). Unfortunately, changes to the port construction plans introduced in 1927–1928 forced the abandonment of this concept.

At the same time, a new and highly inspiring opportunity to spatially link the City Centre with the sea was identified. The idea was to connect a key downtown axis – 10 Lutego Street and Kościuszko Square – with the southernmost port pier, the South Pier, which was designated as a passenger pier. In 1933, Jerzy Müller, head of the Development Department of the Government Commissariat in Gdynia, wrote that incorporating the passenger pier into the city [...] *would enable the creation of a monumental axis running along 10 Lutego Street – Kościuszko Square – to the Freedom Monument at the end of the pier, over 1,700 metres in length* (Müller 1933, 27). As a result, the South Pier, built in 1934–1935 and extending 630 m out to sea, was situated precisely as a prolongation of the main axis of the City Centre, 10 Lutego Street and Kościuszko Square.

The construction of the South Pier, together with the accompanying Sailing Basin, provided the impetus for the launch (in 1936) of a nationwide architectural competition for the "planning of the South Pier and adjacent areas"¹⁷. The final outcome of the design work was the definitive concept for Gdynia's Grand District (Representative District), drawn up in 1938 under the direction of Stanisław Filipkowski (Fig. 9a, b). Its main feature was a grand urban

axis running along 10 Lutego Street, Kościuszko Square and Avenue of the Unification of the Polish Lands (now John Paul II Avenue), culminating in the complex comprising the Sailor's House, the Maritime Station and the Monument of the Unification of the Polish Lands. This axis was linked to the spacious Maritime Forum Square at its base, where prestigious buildings were to be erected, including the Town Hall and the Maritime Basilica (Filipkowski 1938).

The design of Gdynia's Grand District represented a highly modern and original solution. In it, Filipkowski departed from the rule of compact, dense development that had hitherto prevailed in the City Centre, proposing instead a loose layout with wide vistas of the sea and free-standing public buildings. The entire development was also intended to feature a wide range of building heights, with the architecturally striking accents of the Town Hall tower and the towers of the Maritime Basilica. The architect thus introduced, for the first time in Gdynia, the avant-garde and modernist principle of designing open, volumetrically varied, asymmetrical and landscape-sensitive developments. In this sense, this concept represents a breakthrough in Gdynia's urban planning, placing Gdynia's Grand District within the avant-garde trend of interwar urban planning.

Although the construction of this complex, interrupted by the outbreak of the World War II, remained unfinished, a monumental design for a wide, elegant avenue running down the centre of the South Pier had nevertheless been completed by 1939. It was adorned with low, geometrically shaped greenery, a nice round fountain and, at the end of the complex, two architecturally striking buildings: the Sailor's House (now the Faculty of Navigation at the Maritime University) and the Maritime Station (now part of the Oceanographic Museum). To this day, the avenue along the South Pier remains the city's principal and symbolic compositional feature (Fig. 10), brilliantly combining the modernist ethos with Gdynia's maritime *genius loci*.

Summary of the research and conclusions: the Outstanding Universal Value of the urban layout of Gdynia City Centre

Built from scratch between 1926 and 1939, the Modernist Centre of Gdynia stands as an outstanding and conceptually unique example of the formative phase of Modernism.

¹⁷ The results of the "Competition for the layout of the South Pier and adjacent areas, and for a preliminary design of the Maritime Sailing Centre in the port and city of Gdynia", as well as the subsequent design of the Representative District, were discussed in detail by the author of this article (Sołtysik 1993, 297–305).



Fig. 10. The South Pier – the main architectural feature of the city
(source: Heritage Protection Department of Gdynia City Council, photo by B. Ponikiewski, 2022)

Il. 10. Molo Południowe – główny element kompozycyjny miasta
(źródło: Wydział Ochrony Dziedzictwa Urzędu Miasta Gdyni, fot. B. Ponikiewski, 2022)

It illustrates the most significant urban planning ideas of the early 20th century, and its structure combines traditional concepts of urban design with Modernist principles aimed at improving housing conditions. These features distinguish Gdynia both from old, 19th-century cities and from the avant-garde concepts emerging in the interwar period within the circles of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus. The Centre of Gdynia is, moreover, intrinsically and symbolically linked to the sea, brilliantly combining the coastal genius loci with the ethos of Modernism.

Based on the author's research, it can therefore be concluded that the urban complex of the Modernist Centre of

Gdynia possesses Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in accordance with UNESCO Criterion IV, as an illustration of a significant stage in human history¹⁸. On the basis of this criterion, the site "Gdynia Modernist City Centre" is nowadays the subject of its nomination for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

¹⁸ The ICOMOS report prepared for the July 2025 session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, which assessed the nomination submitted by Gdynia, confirms on page 240 that Gdynia meets Criterion IV for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List (ICOMOS 2025 Evaluations... 2026).

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Streszczenie

Modernistyczne centrum Gdyni jako światowe dziedzictwo urbanistyczne UNESCO

Tematem pracy jest modernistyczne centrum Gdyni jako światowe dziedzictwo urbanistyczne UNESCO. Został on podjęty w związku z przygotowaniem wniosku o wpis Śródmieścia Gdyni na Listę Światowego Dziedzictwa UNESCO. Celem badań przeprowadzonych przez autorkę w latach 2022–2025 było stwierdzenie znaczenia tego zespołu w dziejach światowej urbanistyki i architektury, a w szczególności sformułowanie i udokumentowanie orzeczenia o jego wybitnej wartości uniwersalnej (Outstanding Universal Value), wskazanie głównych atrybutów i zaproponowanie kryteriów wpisu na listę. Badania przeprowadzone zostały metodą historyczno-porównawczą, opartą zarówno na literaturze przedmiotu, jak i na własnych studiach analitycznych.

W wyniku przeprowadzonych prac stwierdzono, że modernistyczne centrum Gdyni jest wybitnym przykładem śródmieścia zbudowanego od podstaw w latach międzywojennych, przedstawiającym fundamentalne zmiany, jakie okres ten wniósł do epoki modernizmu. Stanowi to podstawę do ubiegania się o wpis na Światową Listę Dziedzictwa UNESCO w oparciu o kryterium IV, jako ilustracja znaczącego etapu w dziejach ludzkości.

Słowa kluczowe: UNESCO, Gdynia, śródmieście, modernizm, dziedzictwo urbanistyczne