

## **FACES OF MODERNISM – URBAN PLANNING OF THE SOCIAL HOUSING ESTATES IN GDANSK AND HAMBURG-ALTONA**

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# Introduction

- The paper aims to compare the modernistic social housing estates built during the interwar period in the Free City of Gdansk and in Altona, neighbour of Hamburg, currently its district.
- The International Exhibition “Gustav Oelsner – Light, Space and Colour”, held in April and May of 2011 in Gdynia, presented the work of the author of modernistic architecture and urban design in Altona.
- The exhibition inspired the present comparison of social housing estates in Gdansk and Altona.



# Research questions

The purpose of the comparison is to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent did the personalities of the designers and their ideological background and professional experience effect the formation of image in these cities?
- Had the political and economic situation of both cities significantly influenced the design decisions and the form of the cities?
- To what extent do the architecture and urban design draw on the German tradition despite the addition of ruling principles of Modernism and its universal language?



# Gdansk and Altona at the dawn of the 20th century

The urban development of Gdansk and Altona during the interwar period was similar in the majority of German cities.

## **Gdansk:**

- Spatial transformations were primarily connected with the development of housing programmes, mostly of a social character.
- In Gdansk, establishment of the Free City essentially impacted on economic changes.
- Huge areas were acquired for communal areas. The development of social housing estates for low-salaried residents was planned in a great extent.
- However, there was a lack of comprehensive vision and development plans for the entire city. Only fragmentary urban studies were developed and the growth of the city was disorderly.



# Gdansk and Altona at the dawn of the 20th century

## **Altona:**

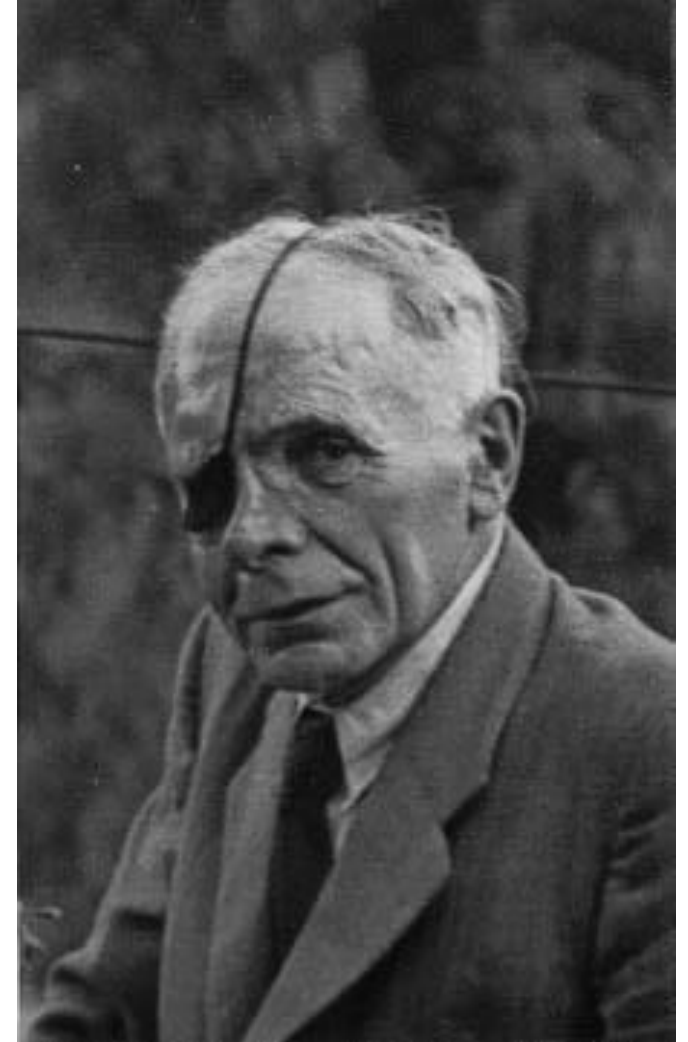
- Altona to the 19th century remained under the rule of the Kingdom of Denmark and developed as a competitor of the adjacent Hamburg.
- The Danish-Prussian War ended this significant position of Altona, moving it into the shadow of its great neighbour - Hamburg.
- After the World War I Altona had faced a big crisis. Its peripheral location relative to Hamburg and its proletarian character had affected its negative image.
- After coming to power, the Social Democrats implemented a policy for constructing communal and public buildings. In 1924 Gustav Oelsner, who was selected as city architect, took the goal on of improving living conditions through the development of social housing estates and a system of green urban areas.



# Activity of Hugo Althoff in Gdansk

The urban development of Gdansk and Altona in the interwar period was based on the work of two leading designers: Hugo Althoff and Gustav Oelsner.

- Hugo Althoff from 1929 worked in Gdansk as a Senator for construction.
- Earlier Althoff raised funds and realized numerous important public buildings: schools, sport facilities, nursing homes, hospitals and the experimental modernistic housing estate.
- His passion for social work led him to become involved in the problems of elderly and poor people.
- He cooperated with the heads of German architects like Ernst May and Walter Gropius. They all advocated for the typification and industrialization of residential buildings
- He developed the first complex urban plan for Gdansk and its new districts.

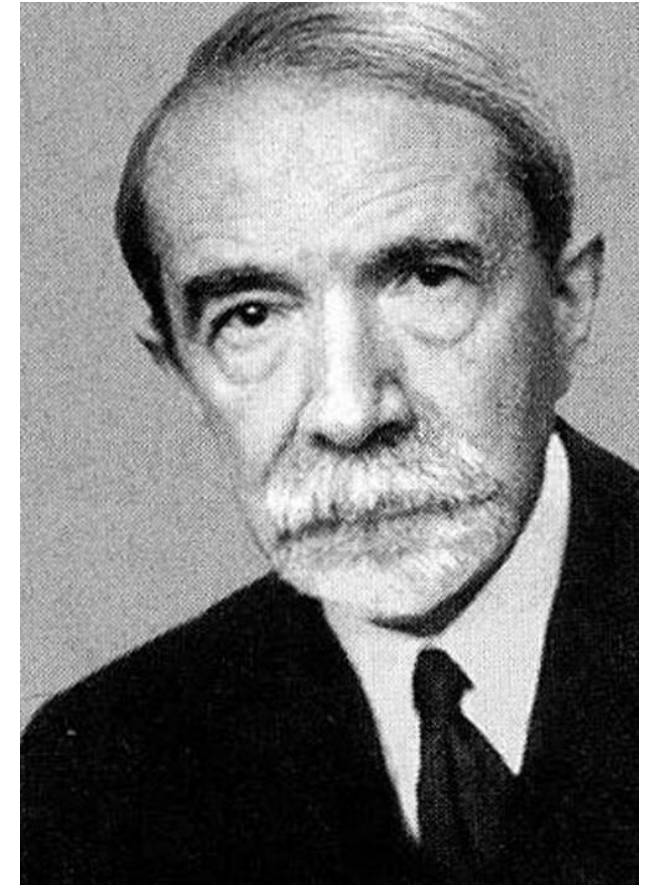


- The **Development Plan of Great Gdansk** (Bebauungsplan Groß-Danzig) consisted of plans for green areas, a zoning plan, and the detailed development plan of the Low Terrace.
- The spatial solutions evoked two great ideas to connect the centre of the city with the natural surrounding by a system of green corridors: Ebenezer Howard's "garden-city", and the basis of Charles Eliot's 1893 design for the green area system in Boston.
- After the Nazi party came to power in 1933, Althoff had to leave his position.
- The implementation of his Development Plan was stopped.



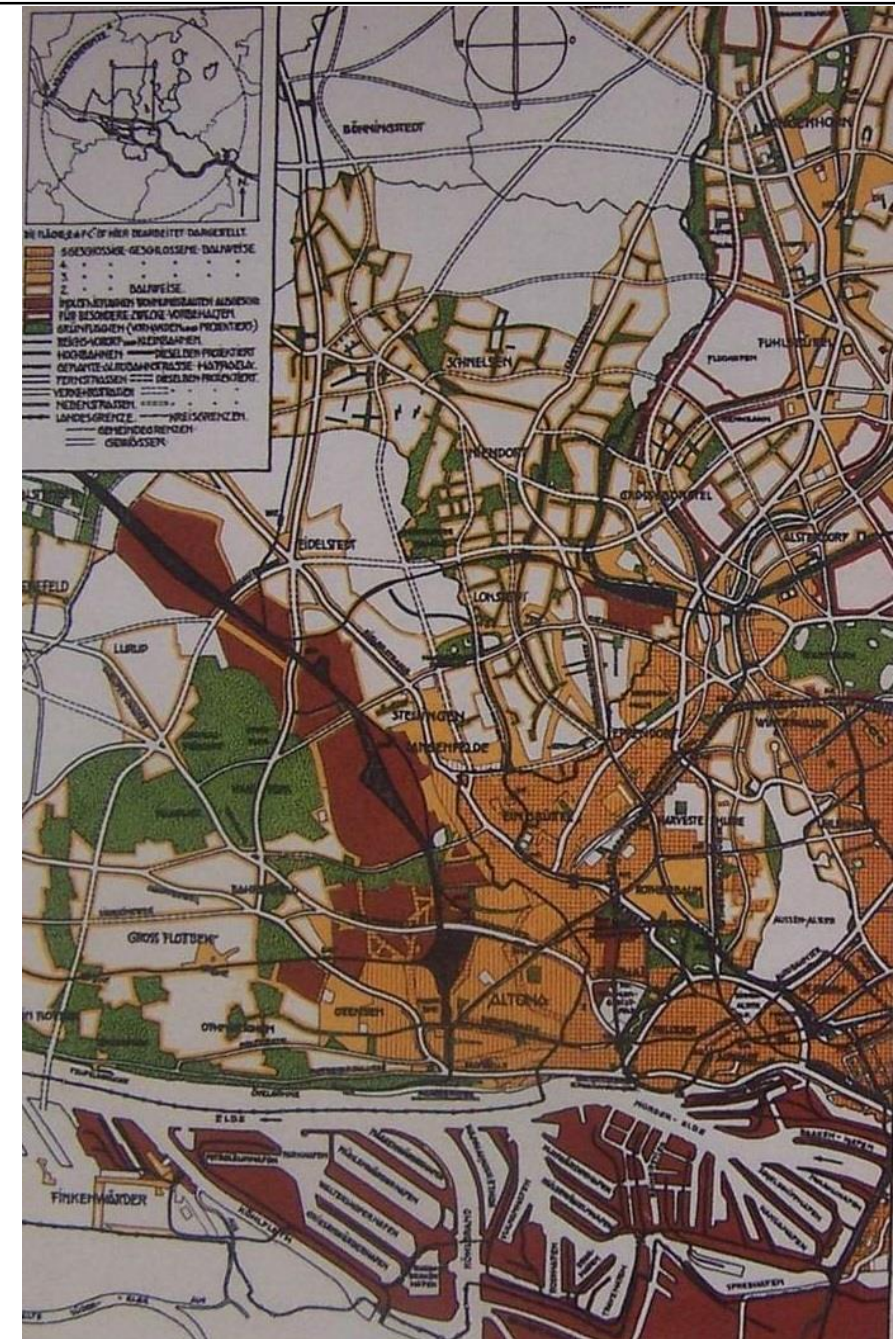
# Activity of Gustav Oelsner in Altona

- Oelsner was a city architect of Altona in the years 1924-33.
- Earlier he designed private and communal housing estates, public buildings of many scales and functions, green spaces, recreational and sports arrangements, technical buildings, architectural details, and also furniture.
- He cooperated with famous architects like Bruno Taut, Hans Poelzig and Fritz Schumacher.
- His *opus magnum* was the **urban design and architecture of the city of Altona.**





- Oelsner and Schumacher (a city architect of Hamburg) created a common urban plan of spatial development for both Altona and Hamburg.
- His main professional aim was to improve the quality of life in the industrial city of Altona. He supported communal housing and worked on the new architectural programme for social housing and the green urban areas.
- Oelsner achieved the creation of the first communal building company.
- Oelsner's principal aim of planning in Altona and Hamburg was moving the residents out of the dense city centre to the wide space full of sunlight and fresh air.
- The same as Howard, Oelsner considered the key social role of urban planning in the construction of single-family, row houses with private gardens.
- In 1933, due to his Jewish descent, Oelsner was forbidden to practice his profession and forced into exile.



Kościuszki Street (formerly Ringstrasse) – long, dense buildings line the streets, single family row houses in the quarters' interiors.



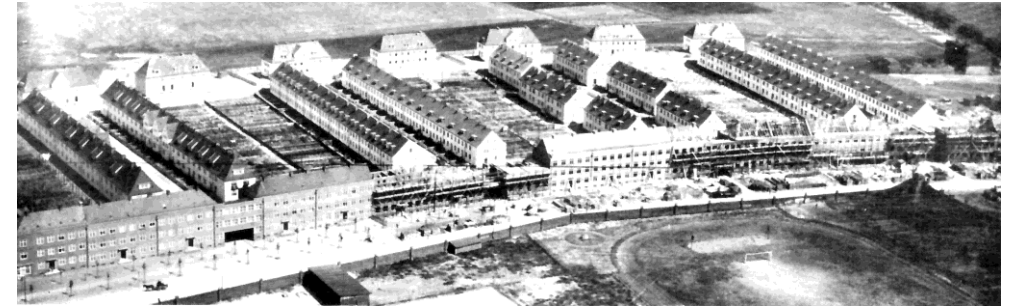
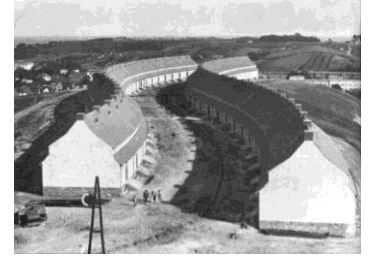
## Gdansk social housing estates

### General characteristics of the urban layout and architecture of Gdansk social housing estates:

- Long, compact buildings line the streets
- Within urban quarters single-family housing dominates
- Combined features of both traditional and modernistic urbanism can be observed
- The traditional approach is particularly seen in the formation of streets
- Along them the highest and densest buildings were located



- Corner houses were often higher and of different architectural form than the line housing
- The buildings were constructed with red bricks, often plastered, had steep roofs with ceramic tiles, and the ridges parallel to the street, which highlighted the relationship between the buildings and the course of the streets
- The most common features of this urban composition are: symmetry, alignment, composition axis, and rhythm
- estates from the 1920s realized the demands for healthy living in principle combined with the traditionally understood urbanism
- The estate at Kartuska Street partly refers to "hofs" characteristic for Vienna



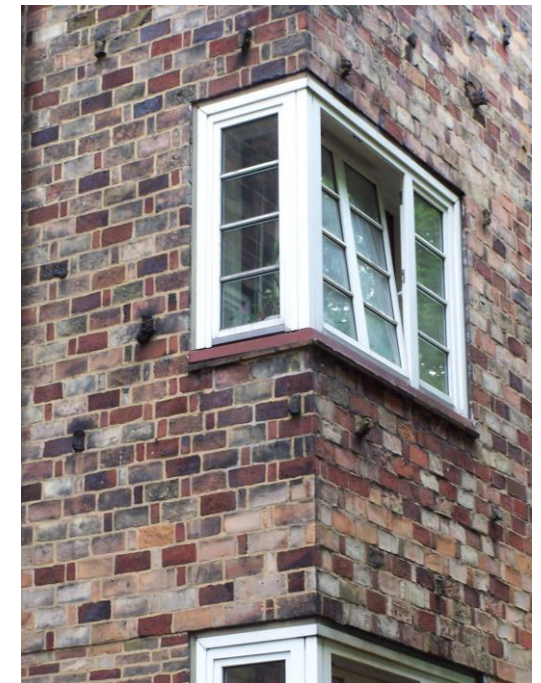
# Altona social housing estates

## Characteristics of the urban layout and architecture of social housing estates in Altona:

- Because of having the development plan under implementation, new social housing was rather completing the gaps than building on the greenfield
- It involved designing individual multifamily buildings, often in the form of an urban block with an inner courtyard
- Many of them have original forms, with semicircular convex or concave façades to catch much more sunlight than in the traditional quadrate urban blocks
- A certain part of them had steep roofs and a part – flat roofs



- The characteristic feature of Oelsner's architecture is the original use of the colourful clinker bricks, which creates the unusual, many-coloured mosaic
- The windows have horizontal divisions
- Thanks to these effects, Oelsner was able to achieve very vivid façade pictures with differentiated texture and an interesting play of colours
- part of the modernistic buildings in Altona were disfigured in the time of Hitler
- The flat-roofed buildings were built up with the additional stories and steep roofs in order to give them the "Aryan" features



# Conclusions



- The main distinction in formation of the urban layout of residential areas in Gdansk and Altona results from different levels of progress in urban planning
- Altona was developed more compactly, while Gdansk was developed more extensively
- What the social housing estates of Gdansk and Altona both have in common is their provision of healthy living conditions, and access to sunlight and fresh air
- They both realize the demands of Modernism while still preserving some features of German architectural and urban tradition
- As designers, both Althoff and Oelsner were characterised by their social awareness, aesthetic sensitivity, and a certain amount of vision that reached many years ahead.
- The social housing estates from the interwar period still enrich the city spaces of contemporary Gdansk and Hamburg as they constantly recall the value of the social function of the city.

Gdansk



Altona



Thank you for your attention.

