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THE WORK OF GUSTAV OELSNER*

1. Who was Gustav Oelsner?

Gustav Oelsner, a German with Jewish roots, was born in 1879 in Poznan/Posen, Prussia. He graduated from Berlin Technical University with a degree in architecture in 1904. During this period he became a Protestant, because he wanted to become a functionary (*Beamter*) in an official position.

Between 1904 and 1911 he worked as an official in the Building Department of the Prussian city of Wroclaw/Breslau and he was responsible for hospital and school expansions. From 1911 until 1923 he became City Architect for Katowice (Kattowitz), leaving it when it became part of the 1. Polish Republic in 1923.

Subsequently he worked in the city of Altona, which was also part of the *Bundesland* Prussia. Altona in the meantime has become 1938 part and a suburb of Hamburg. However, his work as City Architect of the independent Altona was brought to an abrupt stop by the Nazi government in 1933 when he was expelled out of his duties. Fortunately he could emigrate in 1939 to Turkey with the support of his contemporary colleague, the architect Fritz Schumacher of Hamburg, who had also suffered under the Nazi regime because he too lost his job. Oelsner was appointed as a consultant to the Turkish government advising on housing and planning. In addition he became professor for town planning and architecture at the Technical University and School of Beaux Arts in Istanbul. About 1948 he was asked by the new Mayor of Hamburg, who had just returned from exile in America, to be a lead advisor for the rebuilding and planning of the war – damaged city of Hamburg. He returned 1949, where he took over his new job. Oelsner died in 1956.

* Wykład inauguracyjny prof. Petera Michelisa wygłoszony podczas otwarcia sesji naukowej poświęconej dziełu Gustava Oelsnera, towarzyszącej wystawie pt. „Gustav Oelsner – światło, powietrze, barwa”.

2. Oelsner's work in Altona – his conception and philosophy in architecture

As Head of Planning and Building Department in Altona, Oelsner was able to establish his own work program resulting in some outstanding achievements. Because he freed himself from the urban concepts and architectural standards of the pre-war time during the German Empire. His own interpretation of architecture could be called revolutionary, comparable with the work of the “Bauhaus”. His notion of architecture was influenced by the „Moderne”, or the so called „Neue Sachlichkeit” or „Neues Bauen”, and from the Dutch „De Stijl” movement, which represented a clear and functional new expression of architecture. Oelsner himself said of his work: “I am searching with my building design the expression of our time.” And in another relation, he expressed his philosophy in designing houses „I like the cube and the flat roof”.

3. Planning aims for Altona

From the outset Oelsner put in place an overall planning strategy for the metropolitan region of Altona, Hamburg, Harburg, and Wandsbek, and it was this that provided a framework for the future planning process. Responsibility for the harbour area was divided into three cities: Altona, Hamburg and Harburg. Three years later his plan, called the *Generalsiedlungsplan* became the basis for the formation of „Greater Altona”, uniting the industrial town of Altona with 11 villages set in the rural area above the north bank of the river Elbe. This beautiful landscape provided Oelsner with the opportunity to plan and promote three green belts within the boundaries of Greater Altona. They comprised a combination of farm land, wooded areas, and former private parks of rich merchant families who had lost their money in the great economic crisis 1923, and who had sold their parks therefore to the local authority. So many of the former parks extended to the banks of the Elbe, as a result of which, Oelsner could buy them by public money and after that he was able to incorporate a public footpath on the bank of the Elbe which continues to this day to be one of the most attractive walkways in Hamburg opposite the harbour.

For the working class families of the industrial town of Altona the greenbelts offered opportunities for a better climate in the industrial parts of Altona as well as leisure and relaxation areas for the inhabitants. With the improvement of public open space achieved by Oelsner, Altona became one of the greenest towns of Germany.

Max Brauer, the Mayor of Hamburg, proved to be the greatest stimulus for Oelsner's work in Altona. They were able to work together with an energy and enthusiasm that embodied both social consciousness and creativity. For eleven years the skills of the Mayor complemented the architectural creativity of Oelsner and would

significantly contribute to the architectural composition of the later “Greater Hamburg”, today “Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg”.

Historically Altona had been ruled by the kingdom of Denmark and became part of Prussia in 1866 after the so called “War of the two Duchesses”. Altona had developed then as a dense industrial centre, competing with Hamburg, but also suffering many social and urbanistic problems as a result.

Together, Oelsner and Brauer initiated the foundation of one of the first social housing companies in Prussia. The company, SAGA, was to build over 2000 dwellings during the period of economic hardship following the First World War, and particularly following the period of hyperinflation of 1923, see above. As a result of this crisis private capital markets had collapsed and there was effectively no private investment in housing. Only with the introduction by the German government of a special tax on housing and property did the economy begin to recover and it was with the assistance (hypothecation) of such taxation that the costs of the social housing could be covered.

4. The cooperation between Gustav Oelsner – Altona and Fritz Schumacher – Hamburg

Another important aim of Altona was the cooperation with Hamburg, the “competition city” since centuries. In Fritz Schumacher, the city architect of Hamburg, Oelsner found a perfect partner, with whom he collaborated until 1933 close together.

The base of this political background gave the contract between both cities of 1928, so called *Hamburgisch-Preussischer Landesplanungsausschuss*, which meant a better coordination between the cities dealing with the harbour in the river Elbe, the project of a common urbanistic planning and the organization of the public transport for instance. Both personalities had published already their studies about proposals for a common future planning in and round Hamburg and Altona as part of a greater region on both sides of the “lower Elbe” near the North Sea. So Schumacher had already written a paper called *Zukunftsfragen an der Untereibe* (Future Question Round Lower Elbe) and Oelsner was working in commission of Prussia 1924 on the *General-siedlungsplan* (masterplan) for the region around Altona and Hamburg. These plans didn't come to any realization, but the union of both cities in 1938 through a decree by Hitler based on both plans, mainly that of Oelsner.

The idea of the common economic cooperation was a political demand from the central government in Berlin, because up to today the different Länder in Germany are more or less independent in their planning aims and often don't respect the planning aims of their neighbours. But for the common using of the Elbe through the ship trade and traffic it was obvious to have the same using and responsibility of the river. Hamburg's harbour was the most important harbour for international trade and passengers and Altona for the fishing industry in Germany.

Oelsner and Schumacher both were workaholics. Schumacher in contrary to Oelsner wrote about 40 books about planning, architecture and arts, instead Oelsner not even one. His ideas and visions were published only in periodicals or official gazettes (this fact made the research about Gustav Oelsner very difficult). Both men were working close together in terms of a better cooperation between both cities and their collaboration became more and more a respectful regard between each other, which culminated in a deep friendship within and after the war, documented in their remained correspondence. Schumacher died 1947 while Oelsner was still working in Turkey.

A merchant of Hamburg sponsored 1950 an architectural prize, called “Fritz-Schumacher-Preis”, Oelsner was the first one who got it.

5. The social housing program

The planning and building of the social housing was to be Oelsner’s outstanding work. Designed mainly with 2 dwellings on each side of the staircase, and either 3 or 4 stories high, each family flat comprised 50 up to 70sqm and included 2 or 3 bedrooms, and a living room which incorporated a traditional German kitchen known as a *Wohnküche*. Only occasionally would his projects include a so called *Frankfurter Küche* designed by Schütte-Lihotzky in Frankfurt. This type of a kitchen reduced the kitchen to a functional area for cooking and cleaning only. Besides the rooms Oelsner designed for each flat a corridor with built in cupboards – unknown in Germany at the time – a bath, a pantry, and a loggia in front of the kitchen. The design also included transverse ventilation through the flat and windows to the east and west or south and north in order to get as much light, air and sunshine as possible into the flat.

As an architect for the housing Oelsner was able to carefully manage the SAGA building programme so that the living conditions satisfactorily met the needs of the lower income families. The monthly rent took a quarter of the monthly income of a family. Even so with the monthly rent for each flat climbing more and more middle class income families moved into the flats.

Having studied the writings of the Norwegian playwright Hendrik Ibsen whilst a student in Berlin, Oelsner had wanted to “Create homes for mankind”. This aim he has reached successfully. Even today Oelsner’s flats are considered comfortable and practical due to their good functional design.

6. Character of housing

Most of his housing constructions made use of gaps within existing mixed use high density estates built before the war. Oelsner opened up these blocks like lines and let air, light and sun into the yards and flats. Every courtyard got his playground for the

children, also new at that time. Coloured facades figured large. This was introduced through the use of coloured brick walls: I will tell more of these coloured bricks later.

One of Oelsner's first jobs when he started work in Altona was to expand a garden-city called „Steenkamp”, which was already built before the war but not yet finished. Oelsner had made good experiences in garden-cities already in Kattowitz for miners housing. However, his ideas for developing garden-cities was brought to a halt by the lack of public money, and after 1927, when the majority left wing municipal council of Altona decided that flats rather than terraced houses in garden-cities should be built. This however would not be to Oelsner's harm, because his multi-storey flats became very popular with its expressive coloured brick facades.

7. Public buildings

The most famous public buildings erected by Oelsner were his schools, not only from an architectural point of view but also because the functional design supported the philosophy of the great Swiss educationalist J. Heinrich Pestalozzi, in enabling pupils to develop self-confidence and independence during their stay in a school; the highest level of school education. One of these schools was called *Pestalozzi-Schule*, an elementary school in the poorest part of the historical town centre of Altona (which is no longer in use of a school because of the lack of children in that quarter, but converted into apartments.) Another outstanding school was the vocational school called „House of Youth”, one of the first schools in Germany built in a concrete-construction, looking like a factory, but excellent in its pedagogic functions. Also well-known is the “Job Centre”, another municipal building and one of the first of its kind to be built in Germany, see above.

Other public buildings, that had survived the 2nd World War, were however subsequently demolished in the 70s and 80s because they had fallen into disuse, or were in the way of other schemes. Examples include the hall on the site of the cattle market, demolished in order to enable a brewery to be extended; an exhibition hall was demolished for a new fair centre competed with that in Hamburg; the football and swimming stadium in the famous public park in Altona, demolished to make way for a modern football stadium for HSV; and last but not least many examples of smaller public utility buildings such as bus stations, newspaper kiosks and public conveniences.

8. The brick facades

Of particular note in Oelsner's architecture is his use of brick. As a building material brick has a long and illustrious tradition in north Germany due to the absence of other suitable materials, especially natural stone. Brick therefore became the typical

expression of the Hanseatic period in the Middle Ages of public buildings. Private houses were built in timber. It is seen at its best in the brick built churches and municipal buildings along the coasts of the Baltic Sea of the Hanseatic time. In Hamburg, parallel with Gustav Oelsner, Fritz Schumacher used brick in his public buildings to emphasize the revival of this Hanseatic tradition during his working period; a theme taken further in the architecture of Fritz Höger with Brick- Expressionism; the “Chilehaus” being one of his best examples, unique to Germany.

For Oelsner brick was also seen as typical for north Germany, but his influences came less from the Hanseatic tradition, than contemporary from the modern architecture and the famous housing estates of Amsterdam and Rotterdam in Holland which had been designed to accord with the principles of the „De Stijl” movement already mentioned.

The colourful bricks used by Oelsner also recall the coloured-plastered walls of the works of the progressive architect, Bruno Taut, one of the best known architects and protagonist of this short period of Expressionism, made in brick with his housing estates in Berlin and Magdeburg. Whether we can compare Oelsner’s coloured bricks with the painted facades of Taut, if Oelsner’s architecture also belongs to this period of Expressionism is a question, which I do affirm. Oelsner’s brick facades are however outstanding, they have the appearance of coloured autumn leaves and the protection of these masterpieces should be an obvious responsibility for the SAGA housing company today, which continues to operate. SAGA, however, recently demolished parts of these brick facades by applying thermo-plaster to them in order to save energy and obtain subsidies from public funds. Today not one of Oelsner’s houses has been listed as part of the national heritage and there is no control to prevent SAGA undertaking further work that would detract from the architectural appearance of the facades. Just as some of his very early work was disfigured under the Nazi regime in the 1930’s by the conversion of his flat roofs to a traditional “Aryan Germanic” roof, Oelsner’s architecture now faces a new crisis brought about by the indiscriminate application of green energy saving measures. In both instances misplaced popularity has been allowed to destroy architecture that should be conserved.

Tomorrow, prof. Walter, a chief architect from Hamburg will speak about how Hamburg is planning to save the outstanding brick facades in order that future generations will be able to enjoy their surroundings through the conservation of the best examples of his architecture.

9. Gustav Oelsner in Turkey

Gustav Oelsner threatened 1934 by a law against the Jewish people and Jewish culture, called *Nürnberger Gesetze*. Although he was converted into Protestantism he was in danger. By assistance of his colleague Fritz Schumacher, former chief architect

of Hamburg, he got the chance to be invited by the Turkish government, Ministry of Public Works. In September 1939 he emigrated in the Republic of Turkey, where he had become a responsible and respectable personality.

He was asked to be a consultant for the government in questions of urbanism and housing. Oelsner became chief of the upper permission board for these subjects. He provided a comprehensive knowledge even about the far east towns in Anatolia, and especially those, which had suffered by diseases and destroyed by earthquakes. Oelsner had studied these problems and had proposed consequences for better hygienic standards and house constructions to the government.

Otherwise Oelsner founded a standardized measurement in the country and its cities with the same dimension and technical symbolic. He succeeded in consideration of the local topographical situation, the rivers and brooks, flora and fauna, characteristics of the nature and the climate and very important for him, the consideration of the history of a village or town and its traditional buildings.

Oelsner was especially interested in the traditional construction and material in Turkish houses and their creation. He combined these studies with his knowledge of the construction of houses in Middle Europe, which means a more secure construction against earthquakes and means of a better hygienic and living standard. In this way he proposed for good dwellings and settlements a high standard of infrastructure and functions. For better and efficient housing he emphasized the necessity of non-profit making firms to cover the huge demand for housing by the majority of the population. In this connection he tried to convince the communal authorities to organize a communal plot policy for a successful further development of their towns, as he did in Altona successfully years ago. But Oelsner never has been a know-all, he was very aware of such an attitude, what was very much estimated by the Turkish colleagues.

1940 Oelsner has got a call to the Technical University of Istanbul and later to the School of Fine Arts. He introduced town planning and urbanism within the faculty of architecture for the first time in Turkey actually. As a professor, he became again involved in teaching and research studies. He earned much acknowledgement and popularity in this way, he taught about actual urbanistic problems in Turkish towns in connection with the theory of town planning, will say the combination between practice and theory as a common and integrative aim of studying urbanism.

I met one of his former students, who became follower of Oelsner, Prof. Aru recently in Hamburg and he told me, that he was the translator of Oelsner's lessons, who taught in French, which Aru translated into Turkish. Another pupil of Oelsner, the 90 years old architect Akkyol, whom I met in Hamburg too, emphasized his impression about Oelsner as very polite and modest man, but convincing in his argumentation, very popular by his students.

Oelsner himself estimated the Turkish people he knew and worked with very much, in the university, in his Ministry and in the towns. He even wanted to be buried in a Turkish town, called Borsa.

10. Gustav Oelsner in Hamburg

But his destiny was different. Because of the demand of his former Mayor of Altona, Max Brauer, who had become Mayor of Hamburg after returned from his America exile, Oelsner returned too to Hamburg in the year of 1949. This decision was quite difficult for Oelsner, to give up all his duties in Turkey. Here he was offered to run the Ministry of Building, but he denied and asked for a non-political responsibility as a consultant for the reconstruction of the destroyed city. In this case he worked on the first “Redevelopment Plan” (*1. Aufbauplan*) for Hamburg and especially for the creation of the inner city around the two lakes and in the organization of the first gardening exhibition in Western Germany after the war.

In the year 1954 he got the doctor degree from the Technical University of Istanbul. Retired since the same year he died 1956 in Hamburg and was buried besides his colleague Fritz Schumacher as an honourable person of Hamburg.

Oelsner died in 1956. Overshadowed by the better known work of the architect Fritz Schumacher of Hamburg during the hectic period of post-war reconstruction, Oelsners career and work in Altona has largely been forgotten since the last 40 years because of the reconstruction of the destroyed city. In 2002, in the Faculty of Architecture I began researching Oelsner’s work. My students worked enthusiastically on this project and research, which culminated in two diplomas, and two publications about Oelsner’s architectural life’s work. As a result several exhibitions have been held – including this wonderful exhibition in the City Museum of Gdynia – displaying 28 models of Oelsner’s different buildings for which he was responsible as an architect. These models are important not only to study them but also in the point of view, that the working a model is disappearing more and more in the time of digitalisation of architecture and sculpture during the education process of students of architecture unfortunately.

15 of these models, showing housing estates and schools together with historical and actual photos as well as the layouts and plans of each project are on show today in this museum to celebrate the remembrance of Gustav Oelsner, the outstanding architect of the 20s and the early 30s of Altona, one of the protagonists of *Die Moderne* in Germany.