Jan Salm

Architecture and Urban Planning in East Prussia from 1933–1945

Defining Characteristics, Major Research Needs, and Research Themes

By definition, this article is different from other papers published in this book. My focus is on an area that was not incorporated into Poland until 1945, which is also the case for Lower Silesia or Western Pomerania. However, it also differs from the other two historic regions in that it is now partially in Poland and partially in Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast. Naturally, any elaboration on East Prussia has to account for those areas in the region that are outside of Poland and compare and contrast buildings and building complexes (surviving or not) from the Kaliningrad Oblast with those located in Poland's Warmia and Mazury Province.

To date, no separate study has been offered on the final years of East Prussia that would describe the region as a distinct yet thoroughly German area, together with its architecture and urban planning. Specialist researchers are yet to provide more comprehensive elaborations on the interwar years in East Prussia, let alone its architecture and urban planning. That said, several intriguing accounts have been offered on the complex history of the region.[1] Surely, these studies are pioneering in that they try to be impartial and avoid political propaganda. They may be addressing a whole range of topics; however, they make only few references to art and architecture. Sadly, in his monumental multi-volume publication on the history of Pomerania, Salmonowicz is yet to address East Prussia in the interwar period. Judging by previous volumes, however, East Prussia's architecture and urban planning in the years 1918–1945 (including the Third Reich) will be described as thoroughly as that of other periods.[2]

The fact remains that a comprehensive account of the architecture of East Prussia in the interwar years is yet to be published. To date, the issue has been addressed by Nils Aschenback's pamphlet and my article. Both texts, however, are preliminary investigations rather than complete monographs.[3] There have been virtually no depictions of East Prussia's architecture in the interwar years that would account for its different forms, most notably the elements that shape rural landscapes and townscapes in the region, e.g. public buildings such as offices and schools, residential housing such as housing estates and rural and suburban settlements, and finally sacred buildings, which may be few but still prominent. So far, only preliminary studies or suggestions for future research have been offered.[4]

East Prussia is an intriguing research topic also as an exclave of the Third Reich. One persistent question is this: did these peculiar geopolitical circumstances shape a distinct building style in the region? Or, despite being an exclave, was East Prussia able to adopt the styles typical of the rest of Germany?

So far, only few buildings that are representative of the time have been described in detail. The Town Hall in today's Szczytno [*Ortelsburg*] and its ornaments (described by Janusz Dobesz in *Architectus*) are a case in point.[5] (Fig. 1) The Railway Station in today's Olsztynek [*Hohenstein*], the *Thingstätte* [an open-air theatre] in today's Sovetsk [*Tilsit*], and several other buildings are also described in the journal.[6] Jürgen Tietz offers an exhaustive account of the Tannenberg Memorial, which was a unique structure in its own right, and the transformation it underwent under Nazi rule.[7] Other, rather rare, depictions of buildings in East Prussia under Nazi rule are interspersed throughout various publications which are often extremely valuable yet fragmentary and unable to paint a broader panorama.[8] This is very little given the scope and effect of the modernizing processes carried out as part of the East Prussia Plan.[9] The processes mainly affected rural areas, which saw the development of modern infrastructure as well as land reclamation and river regulation projects, which improved the availability of arable land in the region. State aid also included preferential loans and incentives for businesses. East Prussia's architecture, too, was transformed by a

Fig. 1   Town hall in Szczytno by K. Frick (1937-38), Photo: 2005

number of carefully planned projects (e.g. housing programmes providing settlements and residential estates in the suburbs and rural areas). This is best exemplified by the designs for the development of housing complexes in today's Elbląg [*Elbing*][10] and extremely daring visions for the development of today's Kaliningrad [*Königsberg*].[11]

Post-1933 housing projects were a continuation of previous activities which saw the rise of building associations that developed residential estates in towns such as today's Mrągowo [*Sensburg*]. These associations included East Prussian Home [*Ostpreussische Heimstätte; Ostpreussisches Heim*] and East Prussian Building and Housing Association [*Ostpreussische Bau- und Siedlungsgesellschaft*]. The actual scale of these activities is yet to be described. However, with much certainty, suburban housing estates featured prominently in the urban plans developed in the 1930s. Their spatial qualities also mattered. At the same time, preliminary studies suggest that the quality of architecture and composition in post-1933 housing estates was lower than that of pre-1933 building projects. That said, post-1933 housing projects were

probably much larger in scale, which is best evidenced by residential complexes in garrison towns such as today's Bartoszyce [*Bartenstein*], Braniewo [*Braunsberg*], Iława [*Deutsch-Eylau*], and Mamonovo [*Helligenbeil*]).

Based on cursory field studies and surveys of specialist publications and various archive sources, the following conclusion can be made: throughout the Nazi period (1933-1945), a large number of buildings were developed in East Prussia, each of which following a different variant of the same official style. At the same time, some of the solutions continued the trends that had proliferated in German architecture in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Public buildings followed the style that was promoted after 1933 (or even earlier) across the Third Reich. Most of the time, they combined Modernism with simplified Neoclassical forms.[12] This is particularly relevant for monumental architecture. Most of these buildings were erected in Königsberg, e.g. the *Luftkreiskommando* building, which was designed by Ernst Sagebiel.[13]

Another prime example of this kind is Erich Koch Square [*Erich-–Koch Platz*] in Königsberg. Completed in 1938, it featured a monumental stand and a pylon mounted with a sculpted eagle. The square is now part of the grounds of FC Baltika Kaliningrad.[14] Königsberg's fortified Haberberg-Ravelin [*Schlageterstrasse* / today's Kalinin Prospect] in turn saw the development of a Hitlerjugend hostel. Austere and devoid of any elevation details, the building was probably completed from 1935–1940. The designers of these construction projects are yet to be found.

Monumental architecture, too, would sometimes draw upon local tradition. In so doing, it deployed particular forms rather than particular details or materials. This approach is best exemplified by the Town Hall in today's Szczytno [*Ortelsburg*]. Designed by Kurt Frick in 1936/1937, the building has a composition similar to that of rectangular conventual Teutonic castles with a Bergfried.[15] The elevation facing the square was provided with a peculiar balcony that served as a lectern. Designed by the Königsberg-based architect Heinz (?) G. Berndt in 1938, a Nazi party complex in today's Mrągowo [*Sensburg*] (never completed) drew upon the legacy of monumental
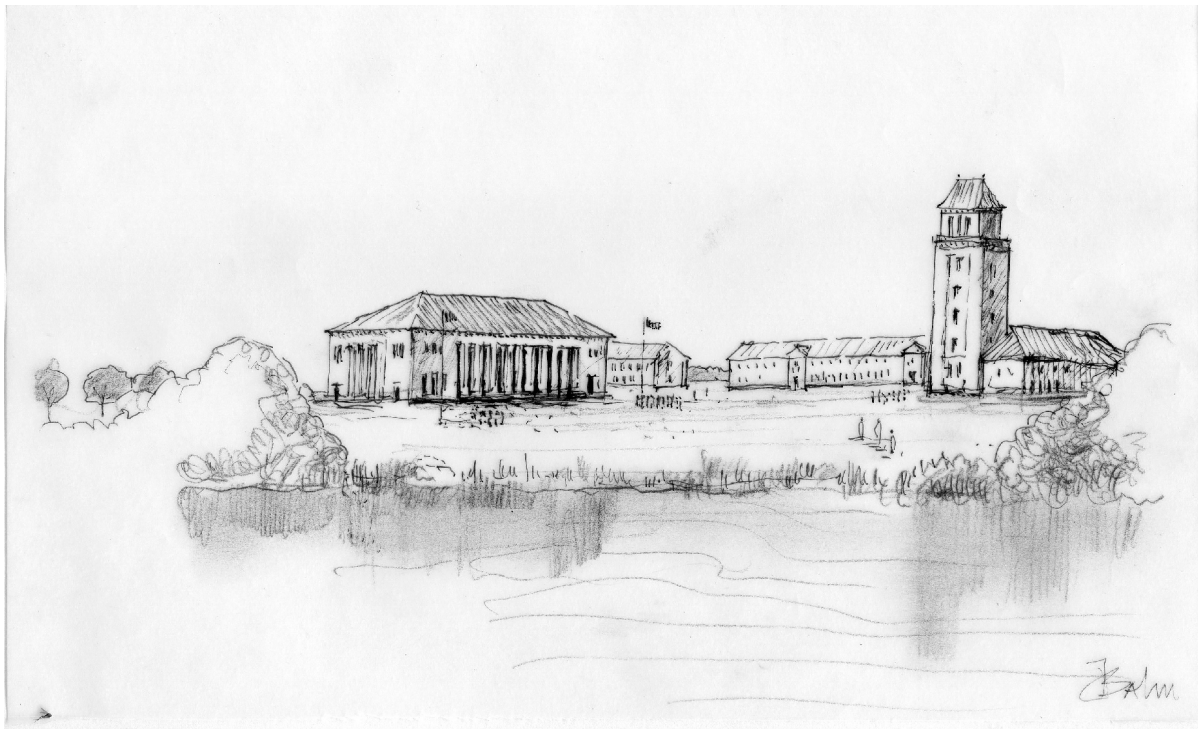
Fig. 2   NSDAP Headquarter in Mrągowo (unrealised project) by H.G. Berndt (1937), sketch made by author on the basis of the original document from collection of Congress Library Washington

Classicism as well as that of the Middle Ages. (Fig. 2) The Nazi Party Community House [*Gemeinschafts-haus der NSDAP*] in today's Neman [*Ragnit*] is completely different than other ideology-driven construction projects. While the building followed the style of early mediaeval models, its stone façade featured a monumental hammered metalwork depiction of an eagle carrying a swastika-emblazoned wreath in its claws. Both the designer and the construction date are yet to be established.

Another solution was that of simple and Modernist forms, which were virtually devoid of any ornaments. These are best represented by the former Courthouse [*Kreishaus*], in today's Pisz [*Johannisburg*], which was probably developed in 1937 (the building now houses the Pisz Municipal Office). Soaring tiled roofs were the only element that was actually steeped in local tradition. Similar formal solutions can be found in other buildings from the time. These included tax office buildings (today's Braniewo [*Braunsberg*], Lidzbark Warmiński [*Heilsberg*], Mrągowo [*Sensburg*], Szczytno [*Ortelsburg*]), post office buildings, e.g. today's Kętrzyn [*Rastenburg*] (Fig. 3), or banks and credit and saving societies, e.g. *Kreissparkasse* in today's Polessk [*Labiau*], designed in 1936/1937 by Kurt Frick.[16] At times, their regular and axially designed elevations would feature details such as gables at the entrance axis, stone portals, bossages at the corners, buttresses or plinths made of erratic rocks, and sometimes also decorative latticework. This approach is best represented by the former municipality building in today's Giżycko [*Lötzen*] (now the Police Headquarters in ulica 1 Maja).

At times, elevations that were covered with bright and lumpy plaster walls (brick elevations used only rarely) would feature architectural sculptures, e.g. the saving society building in *Ulmenplatz* in today's Chernyakhovsk [*Insterburg*] (ca. 1935), or frescoes, e.g. the ornaments of the Old Town Hall in today's Olsztyn [*Allenstein*] (after 1939).[17] Similar means were deployed to decorate school buildings both in towns and rural areas. Unique means were in turn used in the former Adolf Hitler Boys' School in Bartoszyce [*Bartenstein*] (1936) or the village school at Gratsevka [*Craam*] in Sambia (1938). In the former, the façade featured human figures from the history of East Prussia.

Fig. 3   Postoffice in Kętrzyn by unknown architect (1930's), Photo: 2010

Fig. 4   Village scholl in Skierki by unknown architect (1938), Photo: 2006

Fig. 5   HJ [Hitler Jugend] - Youth hostel in Malbork by K. Frick (1937)

In the latter, the gable façade was provided with a ridge turret with a clock, a decorative portal, and a symbolic fresco depiction of a sower.[18] Two more buildings are worthy of mention: schools in Polessk [*Labiau*] and Bolschije Bereschki [*Alt Lappienen*, from 1938-1945 *Rauterskirch*]. Designed in 1936/1937 by Walter Kuhrke, the school in Pollesk had an elevation ornamented with sculpted figures representing various Hitlerjugend specializations. The latter had a side turret and a façade ornamented with a large eagle motif. A similar architectural detail can be found in the village school at today's Skierki [*Wehlack*] near Kętrzyn. (Fig. 4) Developed in 1938, the building has survived until today. Almost all of these buildings call for further research, which may also account for their lay-outs and interior decorations.

The majority of the school buildings developed in East Prussia in the 1930s were built on a simple lay-out and with a restricted number of architectural means, e.g. today's Ozyorsk [*Darkehmen*] (1933). A separate group of buildings is difficult to define in terms of their style, albeit with apparent influences from Modernism, e.g. the School of Economics [*Handelshochschule*] in Königsberg (before 1935).[19]

The official style was also complemented by the *Heimatstil*, namely, the individual interpretations of regionalism that deployed a number of means deriving from German folk architecture. Piotr Krakowski described this phenomenon as "a trend deriving from peasant crafts," which is perhaps a bit of an exaggeration.[20] The use of "folk" motifs in architectural details and building techniques is apparent in some of the school buildings and tourist facilities in East Prussia, as well as railway stations. The use of timber framing and decorative woodwork is a case in point (albeit not always in its local form, which would literally be derived from the architecture of the region). The approach is best exemplified by the Tannenberg Krug complex near today's Olsztynek [*Hohenstein*]. Designed by Walter and Johannes Krüger in 1937, the tavern catered for visitors to the Tannenberg Memorial, which was a prominent landmark in interwar East Prussia.[21] Other stylized hostels of this kind were scattered across the region, e.g. the one in today's Tolkmicko [*Tolkemit*, known as *Galgenberg*). In one of his hostel designs, Kurt Frick drew upon the legacy of

Fig. 6   Buildings at the railway station square in Olsztynek designed by H. Conradi (?), (1939), Photo: 2014

Fig. 7   Evangelic church in Klon by unknown architect (ca. 1935-1937), Photo: 2010
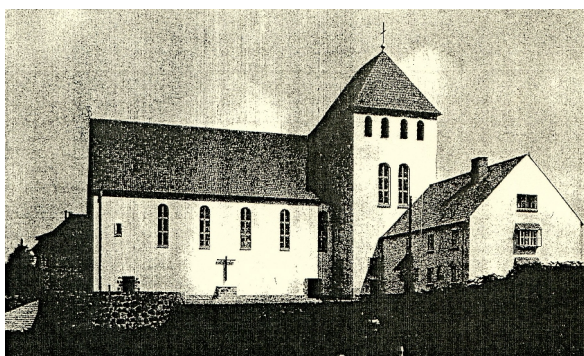

Fig. 8   St. Brunon church in Giżycko by M. Weber (1936-38)

brick architecture, e.g. that of today's Malbork [*Marienburg*] (Fig. 5). The Olsztynek railway station design, too, deployed a combination of means that were typical of the architecture of the Third Reich in East Prussia (Fig. 6). Thus, universal motifs, which defined the Nazi style of architecture, were juxtaposed with details deriving from folk architecture such as stylized woodwork and woodcarvings.[22] Given the time of the construction and the fact that the building served as a church for the Catholics from the local garrison, the façade was provided with a fresco depiction of the church's patron with a Teutonic knight and a soldier to his sides.

One task for future researchers is to compare and contrast sacred architecture (both Catholic and Protestant) in interwar East Prussia with that of other regions in Germany (Fig. 7, 8). As a matter of fact, other types of architecture call for a similar survey. The resulting fundamental issue is this: how does East Prussia differ from other regions in Germany in terms of the architectural means they deployed?

Under Nazi rule, East Prussia saw the development of a complex and partially inconsistent collection of buildings: public buildings, e.g. created for state apparatus and propaganda purposes, public offices, schools, monuments and memorials, and last but not least, massive-scale residential housing, including suburban estates and rural settlements. Military construction is also an intriguing topic to discuss (numerous garrisons or even garrison towns, e.g. today's Dolgorukovo [*Stablack*] or civil engineering facilities such as the former Königsberg – Elbing motorway, as well as bridges and viaducts.

Urban planning, which is yet to be thoroughly described, calls for a different treatment. This includes designs for the expansion of the major towns and cities, including today's Kaliningrad [*Königsberg*], Elbląg [*Elbing*], Gusev [*Gumbinnen*], Olsztyn [*Allenstein*], Sovetsk [*Tilsit*], and Chernyakhovsk [*Insterburg*]. All of these places saw the development of single- and multi-family housing of limited size and functional programme. Usually one or two stories high, they had gabled roofs and identical floor plans. Residential estates call for detailed research on their urban planning schemes and functional programmes of the buildings. An in-depth study must also be

devoted to the process whereby designers abandoned their aspirations for fully developed urban plans and compositions (which they had pursued back in the 1920s). Instead, they started to offer typical and generic designs, which was largely due to the economic circumstances and the progressing militarization of Germany.

Specialists on East Prussia may want to address several research needs. One such need is to identify and inventory the existing buildings from the time. Those buildings that were destroyed, and yet can still be identified, should be discussed. The focus should also be on the projects that never went beyond the design stage but are prominent enough to deserve a separate mention. A bigger picture such as this is necessary in the face of current transformations as well as previous demolitions and the makeovers of damaged buildings. The effort would produce a relatively complete and accurate database that is universal and amenable to different research approaches.

It may also be worth defining the research themes that are particularly important for particular regions and that call for more detailed studies. This may have some implications for the research on East Prussia. Several prominent issues come to the fore, all of them worthy of a detailed study.

One prominent issue is that of the region's capital Königsberg in the interwar years. This is an extremely difficult and complex topic given the utter destruction of the city centre and few and scattered sources available. The following themes must be examined: plans for the expansion of the city, architectural competitions, and major completed projects (public buildings and residential housing).

Another prominent issue is that of residential estates as well as rural and suburban settlements, which were developed across the region also after 1933. A future study would have to compare and contrast East Prussian concepts when under Gauleiter Erich Koch with similar ideas and concepts from other regions across the Third Reich. Its focus would be on the process (mentioned above) whereby individual designs for residential estates were abandoned in favour of typical and generic urban planning schemes.

A third prominent theme is that of the status and activity of East Prussian architects in the interwar years in particular cities across the region. Researchers should also develop a list of the active architects from the time and the officials in charge of architecture, urban planning, and spatial planning.

This is only a preliminary outline of research topics; these suggestions are open for debate. Emphatically, however, future studies will have to compare and contrast the architecture of East Prussia with that of other regions in Germany under Nazi rule. For this purpose, they will have to identify buildings or planning schemes that are representative of both. Hopefully, this will result in a shared reference framework that would facilitate successful and multifaceted research on the challenging issue of architecture and urban planning in the Nazi era.

Endnotes

1. Traba 2005, „Wschodniopruskość", p. 387–393; Kossert 2009, Prusy Wschodnie.
2. Salmonowicz 2002, Historia Pomorza.
3. Aschenbeck 2001, Moderne Architektur; Salm 2009, Modernizm w architekturze Prus Wschodnich.
4. E.g. Salm 2017, Protestancka architektura sakralna.
5. Dobesz 2009, Town Hall.
6. Salm 2015, Architektura spod znaku swastyki.
7. Tietz 1999, Das Tannenberg-Nationaldenkmal.
8. E.g. Dobry 1996, Architektura Malborka; Piotrowska 2005, Architektura mieszkaniowa, p. 54–68.
9. Kossert 2009, Prusy Wschodnie, p. 255–256.
10. Domino 2002, Kształtowanie przestrzeni, p. 228-233.
11. Gause 1971, Geschichte der Stadt Königsberg, p. 123; Podehl 2012, Architektura Kaliningradu, p. 123.
12. Tołoczko 2005, Architektura i społeczeństwo
13. Luftkreiskommando, 1938.
14. The designer of this building complex (built in 1936) remains unknown.
15. Liżewska, Szczytno – przewodnik, p. 15; 31.
16. Sahm 1942, Geschichte der Stadt Labiau, p. 24.
17. Sikorski 1999, Stary ratusz w Olsztynie, p. 69 and Fig. 19.
18. The school at Gratsevka has survived until today, its façade frescoes nonetheless obliterated. The designer and the date of the construction are yet to be established.
19. Die Handels-Hochschule, 1935.
20. Krakowski 1994, Sztuka Trzeciej Rzeszy, p. 56.
21. Eine neue Gaststätte, 1938; O.S.F. Der Tannenbergkrug 1939.
22. Conradi 1940, Die architektonische Neugestaltung, p. 389–397.

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Illustrations

1, 3, 4, 6, 7: Photo: by the author.
2: Sketch by the author on the basis of the original document from collection of Congress Library Washington, Prints and Photographs Division LOT 3905 (G) http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005678792/
5: G. Harbers, Die neue Jugendherberge in Marienburg (Ostpr.), Der Baumeister, vol. 37 No. 5, 1939, p. 141-149.
8: [No author] Zwei neue Kirchen von Martin Weber, Frankfurt A.M., Bauwelt, No. 51, 1937, p. 2.

Summary

This article describes best known realized and unrealized projects of Reichsgau East Prussia, region not incorporated into Poland until 1945, which is also the case for Lower Silesia or Western Pomerania. However, it also differs from the other two historic regions in that it is now partially in Poland and partially in Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast. Jan Salm discusses main questions that arise in the case of this area and proposes new ideas for further research.

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Title

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