

Architect Kurt Frick (1884-1963): Aspects of Interwar Creative Activity (East Prussia/Kaliningrad Oblast)*

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Abstract—The heyday of architect Kurt Frick’s creative activity (East Prussia, currently Kaliningrad Oblast) took place in the interwar years of the 20th century. He contributed greatly in the restoration of the province’s historical cities destroyed in World War I. During 1920s-1930s, the architect’s works were marked by stylistic diversity with notable Art Deco features. K. Frick worked in cooperation with sculptors, organically introducing plastic arts into the design of his buildings, which, in general, was uncharacteristic of the region’s architecture. K. Frick published a number of theoretical articles dedicated to his contemplation on the local architecture and the ways of its development.

Keywords—interwar period; East Prussia; styles; architect Kurt Frick; theoretical views

I. INTRODUCTION

The interwar period in East Prussia, a remote province of Germany, is characterized by the cooperation of a significant number of architects and the coexistence of various architectural approaches. Many of those, who started their careers in the capital city of Königsberg or in smaller East Prussian towns, later became famous architects. Such architects as Erich Mendelsohn (1893-1953), Hans Scharoun (1893-1972), Hanns Hopp (1890-1971), Kurt Frick (1884-1963), and others left their mark here.

Before World War I, East Prussia was among the most intensively developing provinces of Germany. The 1918 Versailles Peace Treaty had a negative impact on the political and economic situation in East Prussia. But, despite the shock and destruction brought by World War I, the region was restoring with to the central government’s help. The 1920-30s were a time of relative prosperity for East Prussia. The distant province was regarded as an important outpost of German culture in a remote area, a place where it

was possible to create a utopian “beautiful Germany”. The state’s significant financial investments into the economy of the province resulted in large-scale construction in cities and rural areas. Even before the war ended, the ancient cities destroyed in the warfare were being rapidly reconstructed, and new workers’ settlements were built by the example of European garden cities.

The typology of the interwar period structures has changed significantly compared to the previous period — private villas and estates, apartment buildings and churches were not so often to be built. A significant role was given to the design and construction of typical residential buildings for workers and the middle class, grouped into complexes, including administrative and public buildings for commercial, cultural, educational and religious purposes. While supporting local traditions of recreating medieval Gothic brick forms, the architects working in the province also turned to the artistic trends popular in those years, such as functionalism, Art Deco, and expressionism. However, the dominant style was the traditionalist “Protect the Fatherland” approach, promoting the forms of folk construction and architectural traditions “around 1800”, which implied the classicist architecture and the 19th century Biedermeier. The ideals of the times long gone were actively supported by German theorists Paul Mebes [1] and Paul Schultze-Naumburg [2].

II. THE BEGINNING OF K. FRICK’S CREATIVE CAREER

Among the architects who were active these years and combined traditionalism with the new trends of functionalism was architect Kurt Frick (1884-1963) from Königsberg, who went a long way from a bricklayer to the leader of his own architectural office and the head of the Academy of Fine Arts in Königsberg. He showed himself in all aspects of architecture — in urban planning, residential, public (religious and civil), and industrial construction. The heyday of his work came in the 1920s~early 1930s. A symbolic of recognition of K. Frick’s creative achievements was his election in 1924 as a member of the German Academy of Urban and Rural Planning. As a German architecture researcher of wrote, “Kurt Frick belonged to the

*This paper was funded by the Science and Technology Development State Program of the Russian Federation for years 2013-2020, Program of Fundamental Research of State Academies of Science for years 2013 – 2020, within Program of Fundamental Researches of Ministry of Construction, Housing and Utilities of the Russian Federation and Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences, the Research Project 1.2.23

well-known representatives of moderate modernism who saw their ideal in defending the traditions of the fatherland” [3]. His diverse heritage, with a few exceptions, remains almost unexplored today.

After graduating from the Royal Technical School of Construction in Königsberg, K. Frick went to Berlin, where he worked in the office of famous German architect, theorist and journalist Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927), one of the founders of the Werkbund — German creative and industrial union (1907). As T. Gnedovskaya writes in her book “German Werkbund and its architects. The history of one generation”, “when becoming members of the new union, all people participating in the process of artistic production made a commitment... to make it healthier and more refined..., and had to swear allegiance to Beauty and Quality” [4]. K. Frick was a member of this community; he shared the reformist views on the essence of the creative activity of architects.

K. Frick’s professional activity began in Hellerau near Dresden in 1911. The new village embodied the idea of a garden city, popular in the early 20th century Germany. Working with such masters as R. Riemerschmid, H. Muthesius and others, the young architect gained valuable professional experience, familiarized himself with important issues of complex housing construction. The small houses created by him are marked in the review of 1929 buildings as the architect's best pieces [5].

In 1912, K. Frick became an independent private architect. In 1915, he received an offer from Oberpresident of the Province of East Prussia, Adolf von Batocki, to assume the position of the head architect of the region, which allowed him to launch a large-scale activity to urgently restore the region. In the course of World War I, many towns and villages were destroyed in the warfare. According to statistics, “during the Russian offensive, 31896 buildings were completely destroyed, 28461 in 1900 rural settlements, and 3435 in 36 cities” [6]. The restoration began already in 1914, with the purpose of creating a part of the “new Germany — starting from city planning and up to the smallest corner” [7] in place of the East Prussian settlements devastated in the war. Polish researcher Jan Salm quotes an old source, saying that “the huge task of rebuilding East Prussia, which grew out of military necessity, makes it possible to carry out full-fledged and uniform reforms of our construction” [8]. The eyes of the whole country were drawn to the distant province; almost 500 architects expressed a desire to take part in its revitalization. The projects and structures created by them were exemplary objects that embodied the ideals of “simplicity” and “functionality” that were popular by the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century.

The priority task for K. Frick and his staff in the regional office was to carry out the reconstruction of East Prussian border towns of Stallupönen (today’s Nesterov), Eydkuhnen (today’s Chernyshevskoye village), Schirwindt (today’s Kutuzovo village) and adjacent suburbs. In small settlements restoration, the architect aimed at a high degree of unification of construction, which is explained by the need

for a rapid substitution for what was lost in the warfare. Unfortunately, due to the destruction brought by World War II, many of K. Frick’s buildings were lost. As noted in the review of K. Frick's works published in 1929, the towns of Stallupönen and Schirwindt “can be considered the most uniformly built cities of East Prussia” [9]. K. Frick’s buildings combined the simplicity of the exterior and the desire to emphasize the continuity of historical forms and techniques by introducing walk-through arched galleries of the lower floors, steep roof slopes and other motives that went back to old — medieval and classicist — roots.

III. STYLISTIC FEATURES OF K. FRICK’S WORKS

In 1919 K. Frick founded his own architectural office in Königsberg (today’s Kaliningrad), which existed until 1945. His workshop created various architectural and urban-planning projects — from the village for sea fishermen Wangenkrug near Neukuhren (today’s Pionersky), which included 16 semi-detached houses and maintenance buildings, own estate in Königsberg on Ritterstrasse (today’s Zakavkazskaya, 21), to meat processing factories, grain elevators, etc. in the capital of the province and smaller towns. The list of the architect’s works and their typological diversity are quite impressive, some of his buildings did not preserve, some of them were on the territory seceded to Poland after the division of East Prussia in 1945 [10]. Many of the architect’s buildings, which can now be seen in Kaliningrad and the cities of the Kaliningrad Oblast, bear the mark of functionalist novelty, supplemented by a restrained inclusion of ornamental, decorative and sculptural motifs and textured decorations made of stone, mostly light sandstone, which was new and unusual for the region’s culture and allows us to attribute many of the architect’s buildings to the style of Art Deco.

We can outline three parallel lines in K. Frick’s interwar period works, conventionally referred to by the author of this article as not belonging to any style (traditional), red-brick and decorative. The first includes low-rise buildings with a predominance of historically established forms that are characterized by simple planning and spatial solutions common for local buildings. The buildings have familiar steep gable roofs with an attic and are characterized by the presence of a stepped gable, finely fragmented vertical rectangular windows and the lack of decor.

K. Frick most actively developed the stylistic approach that consisted in the search for the expressive potential of brick — the traditional local material. As early as in the Middle Ages, certain features of monumental brick structures appeared on the Baltic coast. They were distinguished by moderate scale, obvious practicality, functional simplicity of plans and volumes, overall laconism of forms, complemented by the inclusion of decorative motifs in the form of glazed ceramics or white stone details. The emphasized appeal to the aesthetics of brick, highlighting the brickwork with light-colored joints, disturbing the smooth surface of walls with protruding rows of bricks, the introducing colored clinker and glazed bricks indicated the desire to bring color to the strict architectural rules of the 1920s. K. Frick made extensive use of clinker

and maiolica made at a factory that was famous for the production of these materials, located in the East Prussian town of Cadinen.

Most of the architect's interwar period buildings are concentrated in Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg). He decorated the four-story facade of the brick the Telegraph Administration building (today's Epronovskaya Street) with a combination of red bricks of the upper floors and dark burnt clinker used in the lower floor in the form of alternating rows of protruding bricks. Special attention is paid to the decorative emphasis of windows and doors. The windows are framed on the sides by rows of clinker bricks imitating shutters and looking like a kind of comb. The richness of brickwork is also demonstrated by the portals of the entrance openings.

In 1927-1929, after winning the design competition for the police department in Tilsit (today's Sovetsk), K. Frick began the construction of the building. I. D. Chechot, the researcher of the history of East Prussian architecture, said: "This is a firm multi-purpose building in terms of methods and techniques of construction, and you can place anything in it. It is devoid of charm, which is generally extremely rare to find in the architecture of Prussia, but has persuasiveness, a natural character, as if it grows out of the environment" [11]. The building is a combination of tradition and modernism, it is massive and ascetic. The idea of the building dates back to the type of Teutonic Order medieval castles, which are many in the territory of East Prussia. As in ancient times, the plan was based on a square, in K. Frick's design supplemented by a small ledge. Four three-story annexes form a square courtyard, now filled with some ugly sheds. Semicircular towers adjoin the outer corners of the building, at the same time evoking medieval associations and resembling constructivist three-dimensional compositions. Steep gable roofs have attic windows. The walls are faced with dark red clinker; the framing of windows and doorways is made of purple glazed bricks. The longitudinal rustication and concrete cornice "tighten" the massive volume of the building on a compositional level. The center of the main facade facing the street is spectacularly recessed at the level of the high ground floor, the walls smoothly leading to the entrance doors are rounded, and there is an almost palace-like two-march exterior staircase decorated with balls and ornamental gratings leading to the doorway. The well-lit interiors of the building are marked by constructivist aesthetics, clear functionality, and geometric clarity of lines set against small decorative details.

The third direction in the interwar period of the architect's work is associated with the inclusion of figurative sculpture and reliefs in the design of buildings. The innovative forms of the "leftist art" in combination with deliberate traditionalism of decorative solutions allow us to attribute these K. Frick's structures to the school of Art Deco. The widespread use of relief decorations in the facade has become the architect's showpiece for many years. Apart from to K. Frick, only architect Hans Hopp ventured to use the reliefs by sculptor G. Brachert (1890-1972) in the design of the monumental building of the House of Technology (1924-1925).

Thematic sculptural reliefs and figures made of stone, mostly light-colored sandstone, concentrated mainly around the entrance portals of public and residential buildings, emphasized the architect's buildings giving them originality. K. Frick designed the street facade of the four-story building of the "Pregel" public call office, highlighting its horizontal divisions (Königsberg, 1926). In 1928 the portal was decorated with a bas-relief "Communication of people via the telephone" by sculptor F.A. Treyne (1888-1965), with whom the architect collaborated for many years. The design of the now gone entrance portal of the Hydroelectric power station, which at that time was located on the Brodänkenstrasse on Kneiphof Island (Kant Island in Kaliningrad), uses a motif, originating from the Middle Ages, of symmetrical vertical female figures.

In the 1930s K. Frick was busy with administrative activities and didn't build that much. He was a member of the Nazi party and he was assigned to lead the reformed Königsberg Academy of Arts, which after 1933 became known as State Workshops of Fine Arts. He taught architecture here. Modern researchers emphasize that thanks to his skillful policies, this institution did not undergo any special changes in curricula or teaching staff [12].

IV. THEORETICAL VIEWS ON ARCHITECTURE

K. Frick was not only a practicing architect, but also tried to formulate new ideas in architecture in the written form. In the article "On New Buildings in East Prussia", published in 1930 in the commemorative compilation "700 Years of German Land East Prussia", the architect outlined his views on the development of local architecture. He wrote about antiquity and the superficial simplicity of the local construction tradition. K. Frick believed that the monuments of Teutonic Order times, as well as the fachwerk construction of the southern regions of East Prussia, wooden houses with roofs covered with thatch and reed of the lowland areas of the north of the province, fishing huts of the Curonian Spit presented unquestionable value. K. Frick criticized the art nouveau period works, saying that "the time from 1880 to the beginning of the war (World War I-I.B.) with its uncultured construction led to the systematic ruining of the urban environment" [13]. The author gave a rather contradictory answer to the question on what should be the architecture of East Prussia: "To build in our own spirit means to fulfill all the requirements and demands of modernity and preserve its originality..." [13].

V. CONCLUSION

The retrospective of K. Frick's creative activity shows that the architect evolved in accordance with the requirements and the spirit of the time. He supported innovative and progressive ideas in architecture, referring to current topics of modernity — to the utopia of the garden cities, the austerity of post-war reconstruction, and the decorative character of moderate Art Deco. The architect's contribution to the architectural culture of East Prussia (especially on the territory of Kaliningrad Oblast) requires further monographic research, since his buildings still to a

great degree determine the image of the present-day Kaliningrad and small towns in the region.

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